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European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

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10.07.2019

The Seizure of an Iranian Tanker and the Lethal Toll of Sanctions



Photograph Source: US Navy – Public Domain

The seizure of an Iranian oil tanker allegedly bound for Syria by British Royal Marine commandos off Gibraltar is the latest episode in the long and disastrous history of economic sanctions in the Middle East. The UK claims that it is implementing EU sanctions on Syria, but the act will be seen by Tehran – and most other states – as the British enforcing US sanctions on Iran that the EU said it opposes. An Iranian official said a British tanker should be seized in retaliation.

Jeremy Hunt, foreign secretary and aspirant prime minister, eager to show himself walking tall on the international stage, tweeted: “Swift action has denied valuable resources to Assad’s murderous regime.”

But that is exactly what has not happened. Economic sanctions in the Middle East and elsewhere have invariably been a collective punishment of an entire people while leaders and their security forces come through unscathed. UN sanctions on Iraq between 1990

and 2003 did not stop Saddam Hussein building luxurious palaces and giant mosques while ordinary Iraqis were reduced to selling their furniture and crockery in the streets.

I visited a village called Penjwin in mountainous northeast Iraq in 1996 which was in the Kurdish-controlled area, but still subject to UN sanctions. I wondered why so many people in the main streets had lost an arm or a foot. The explanation given to me by the villagers lives in my mind as a grisly example of the straits to which people can be reduced by the impact of sanctions on top of their many other burdens.

People in Penjwin said they were very poor and lived in the middle of vast minefields laid during the Iran-Iraq war. The one way they could make money was by defusing one particular mine, the Italian Valmara, and selling the aluminium wrapped around the explosives.

The Valmara is a lethal device with five khaki-coloured prongs at the top that looked like dried grass. If any prong is disturbed a small charge was detonated making the mine jump into the air to waist height and the main charge explodes, spraying 1,200 metal balls over a range of 100 yards.

“I defuse the mine with a piece of wire,” Sabir Majid, a middle-aged man who had formerly been a farmer, told me. “Then I unscrew the top of it and take out the aluminium around the explosives. When I have taken apart six mines, I have enough aluminium to sell for 30 dinars (about 75 pence) to a shop in Penjwin.”

He said this was just enough to feed but not to clothe his family. Few of those who made a mistake in defusing a Valmara survived, but it was surrounded by small, difficult-to-spot anti-personnel mines which looked like large mushrooms and could easily take off a foot or a hand.

At that time, the UN estimated that between six and seven thousand Iraqi children were dying every month because of sanctions. The education and health services had collapsed: visiting foreign doctors “witnessed a surgeon trying to operate with scissors that were too blunt to cut the patient’s skin”.

I wrote many articles about the devastating effect of sanctions on millions of Iraqis, but nobody appeared to pay much attention. Foreign governments, such as the US and UK, blamed the continuation of sanctions, whose ill effects on the mass of the population they downplayed, on Saddam Hussein for not coming clean about his Weapons of Mass Destruction (that turned out not to exist) and not giving up power.

Two UN Humanitarian Coordinators for Iraq resigned in succession in protest against sanctions, but it did no good. It is worth recalling the prophetic words of one of them, Dennis Halliday, as he left his post in 1998, keeping in mind that this was five years before al-Qaeda took root in Iraq. “What should be of concern is the possibility of more fundamentalist Islamic thinking developing,” he said. “It is not well understood as a spin-off of the sanctions regime. We are pushing people to take extreme positions.”

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Fast forward 20 years and compare Syria now to Iraq then. Three million people are trapped in Idlib province under Russian and Syrian government bombardment. There is a festering guerrilla war in the Kurdish-controlled but half-Arab area east of the Euphrates river.

All of Syria is subjected to economic sanctions by the EU and US, which a leaked UN internal report in 2016 said were causing extreme suffering among ordinary Syrians. Basic medicines and medical equipment could not be purchased and imported into Syria by foreign aid agencies. The report, entitled “Humanitarian Impact of Syria-Related Unilateral Restrictive Measures” – in other words sanctions –and leaked to the investigative publication *The Intercept*, quotes a European doctor working in Syria as saying: “the indirect effect of sanctions ... makes the import of medical instruments and other medical supplies immensely difficult, nearly impossible”.

The UN sanctions against Iraq used to target “dual use” items, such as pencils and tyres for ambulance because they could have a military as well as civilian application. Much the same thing happens with sanctions in Syria today with bans on drilling equipment and pipes for water supply and sanitation according to the report.

A more recent survey by a UN body coordinating humanitarian affairs in Syria published this May is ominously similar to the ones I used to read about Iraq 20 years ago. It says that at least 83 per cent of Syrians were living below the poverty line: “a monthly food ration with staple items costs at least 80 per cent of an unskilled labourer’s monthly salary and 50-80 per cent of a public service employee’s monthly salary”. It describes people trying to cope by eating less, avoiding medical treatment because there is no money to pay for it, child labour and child marriage, and being recruited as fighters to pay off debts.

In other words, a whole society is in meltdown. Part of this is the result of eight years of civil war, but sanctions exacerbate the suffering and prevent recovery. Least affected are those, both government and opposition, who command the armed forces to make sure they never lack for anything. The economic blockade of Iraq did not get rid of Saddam Hussein and the same is true of Bashar al-Assad in Syria.

The political equivalents of Jeremy Hunt in the 1990s claimed that the aid agencies' accounts of the misery inflicted on the civilian population by sanctions were phoney or exaggerated. Well-informed officials like Dennis Halliday, who protested about what was happening, could always be smeared as being soft on Saddam. Critics of sanctions in Syria can be similarly ignored or discredited as sympathisers with Assad, though rigorous sanctions have demonstrably failed to stop him tightening his grip on power.

Why are those who impose sanctions able to get their way despite past failures? To governments they are a soft option that avoids the risks of war. To many they may seem more humane because, unlike bombing and shooting, the process of destruction is slow. The casualties – the young, the old, the sick – die invisibly in their homes and there is seldom proof that sanctions had anything to do with their passing.

JULY 9, 2019