

# افغانستان آزاد – آزاد افغانستان

AA-AA

چو کشور نیاشد تن من مباد بدین بوم ویر زنده یک تن مباد  
همه سر به سر تن به کشتن دهیم از آن به که کشور به دشمن دهیم

[www.afgazad.com](http://www.afgazad.com)

[afgazad@gmail.com](mailto:afgazad@gmail.com)

European Languages

زبان های اروپایی

Al Jazeera

## Sanctioning society: From Iraq to Iran

**Untargeted sanctions against a country is not an alternative to war, but a form of war in and of themselves.**

Murtaza Hussain

10/3/2012

After over three decades of service with the United Nations, working across the world on development and humanitarian assistance projects, in 1998 the UN Chief Humanitarian Coordinator for Iraq Denis Halliday turned in his resignation to the organisation. Upon spending years in Iraq and bearing witness to the results of the draconian sanctions regime which had **turned a modern society into one of the most impoverished on the planet**, Halliday wrote that he could no longer continue administering a programme which he said "**satisfied the legal definition of genocide**".

In later interviews he further explained **his rationale** for resigning from the organisation to which he had given over three decades of his life, and about the horrors that economic sanctions had visited upon the civilian population of Iraq:

*"My innate sense of justice was and still is outraged by the violence that UN sanctions have brought upon and continues to bring upon, the lives of children, families - the extended families, the loved ones of Iraq. There is no justification for killing the young people of Iraq, not the aged, not the sick, not the rich, not the poor. Some will tell you that the leadership is punishing the Iraqi people. That is not my perception, or experience from living in Baghdad. And were that to be the case - how can that possibly justify further punishment, in fact collective punishment, by the United Nations?"*

Today as the United States continues to intensify its international economic sanctions programme against Iran, it is worth revisiting the catastrophic harm which a previous sanctions campaign against Saddam Hussein's Iraq had upon that country. While the sanctions failed to remove Saddam from power and by many accounts **helped him solidify his grip on the country** by keeping the overwhelming majority of the population focused purely on subsistence, they took a calculatedly devastating toll on Iraqi civilians.

**Between 1989 and 1996 per capita income in the country dropped from \$3,510 to below \$450**, a drop caused primarily by the rapid currency depreciation of the Iraq dinar due to financial sanctions against the country's central bank. Prices of basic commodities soared, with staples such as wheat, sugar and rice increasing several hundred-fold in a matter of months. From having a relatively modern economy fuelled primarily by oil income, by the year 2000 over 60 per cent of Iraqis were reliant on food rations for their daily sustenance.

### **Financial sanctions in Iraq**

Over the course of 10 years of financial sanctions the Iraqi dinar suffered catastrophic collapse, falling from four dinars to one US dollar in 1991 to over 2,100 dinars to the dollar by 2001. **As the Director of the United Nations Centre for Human Settlements (UNCHS) said at the time:**

*"In the 1980s, the dinar was strong, families were okay. Now, people live on ten USD per month salaries. People are selling jewellery, carpets, air conditioners. The middle class is in poverty now; they have had to sell their houses, apartments, etc."*

The rapidly deteriorating economic environment due to sanctions had the necessary side-effect of severely undermining the Iraqi education system, which had been funded through oil revenues and had heretofore succeeded in **producing historically high literacy rates** among both the male and female populations.

**According to a study published just before the beginning of the second Iraq War**, an estimated one in five Iraqi children stopped attending school between the years 1990 and 1998, and the phenomena of child labour became widely prevalent despite being virtually non-existent just a decade prior. As families were forced into destitution by the country's faltering currency, the development gains of the previous decades were lost and as the report described it, "Iraqi society was put back by 50 years".

Compounding the devastation to the economy and to general human development within the country, the Iraqi healthcare system, **at one time considered to be the best in the Middle East**, was shattered by an embargo on medical supplies to the country. Infant mortality more than quadrupled, as doctors were rendered unable to provide care for easily treatable childhood illnesses.

Once-controlled diseases such as typhoid and malaria ran rampant as **the healthcare system continued its collapse** due to an acute and pervasive shortage of resources and equipment. The strain upon the collapsing Iraqi healthcare system was exacerbated as **simultaneous sanctions**

**against water treatment equipment** resulted in the breakdown and shuttering of desalinisation plants across the country.

A **UNICEF study published in 2000** showed that over half of all children in the country under the age of five suffered from diarrhoea due to contaminated water, a situation which proved fatal for huge numbers due to the closing of paediatric care facilities across the country. Indeed, it has been widely estimated that the sanctions programmes directly resulted in the deaths of over 500,000 Iraqi children over its first five years alone, a death toll which then Secretary of State Madeleine Albright stated was "worth it" in a **now infamous 60 Minutes interview** given in 1996.

Indeed the harmful effects of all these sanctions took a disproportionate toll on the young by simple virtue of the fact that the young comprised a disproportionate number among Iraqi society, with an estimated 45 per cent of Iraqis being under the age of 14 by the year 2000.

**In a bipartisan letter arguing for sanctions removal that year**, former House Democratic Whip David Bonior characterised the sanctions regime as being "infanticide masquerading as policy", while Denis Halliday's immediate successor at the United Nations tendered his resignation in protest of the sanctions while describing them as "a true human tragedy".

Fast forward a decade to the present and it would seem that that tragedy is being willfully replayed, only this time the target is the population of Iran. Intensifying sanctions against the country have sent the Iran's rial into an unprecedented free-fall, causing it to plummet in value by **75 per cent since the start of the year**; and, stunningly, **almost 60 per cent in the past week alone**.

Ordinary Iranians completely unconnected to the government have had their lives effectively ground to a halt as the sudden and unprecedented collapse of the financial system has rendered any meaningful form of commerce effectively impossible. In recent weeks, the **price of staples such as rice and cooking oil have skyrocketed** and once ubiquitous **foods such as chicken** have been rendered completely out of the reach of the average citizen.

### **Decimation of the middle class**

The effects of months of steadily tightening sanctions have also begun to take their toll on the Iranian healthcare system; and as in any case of warfare, economic or otherwise, it is the poorest citizens who have borne the brunt of the suffering. **Iranian doctors have already begun to report shortages in essential medicines** such as those used for cancer, heart and multiple sclerosis patients, and the situation is forecasted to get worse as financial sanctions make the purchasing pharmaceuticals from abroad an effective impossibility.

**In the disbelieving words of one Iranian woman**, a mother to 12-year-old boy with haemophilia who is now facing the amputation of his left leg and whose life doctors' say is threatened by continuous nosebleeds due to an acute national shortage of anti-clotting drugs, regarding sanctions: "no human beings can be so brutal to patients".

However, it would seem that far from being unforeseen externalities these impacts upon ordinary Iranian civilians are exactly what sanctions advocates had been hoping to engineer. In the words of a leading advocate and architect of the policy, Senator Mark Kirk (R-IL), the goal of the sanctions should explicitly be to **"take the food out of the mouths of the [Iranian] citizens"**.

Another leading proponent, House Representative Brad Sherman (D-CA), has said **"Critics of sanctions argue that these measures will hurt the Iranian people. Quite frankly, we need to do just that."** Kirk has also stated his position that the objective of the sanctions should be to collapse the Iranian economy until it **"becomes like North Korea"**, where millions have starved to death in recent years due to crippling food shortages and the breakdown of national infrastructure.

It would thus be readily apparent that the major proponents and advocates of sanctions against Iran are not wary of repeating the "mistakes" of Iraq, but rather see the devastating consequences which that country suffered as the ideally anticipated outcome for Iran.

In seeking to replicate a policy which its own UN administrator **at the time characterised as "effectively genocidal"**, those implementing and advocating for intensified and far-ranging sanctions against Iran are waging an indiscriminate war against the Iranian people, **despite the broad consensus and observable historical track record** that sanctions only serve to immiserate innocent civilians while consolidating the hold on society of the governing regime.

If, **as many US officials have publically said**, the goal of sanctions are to forcibly coerce Iranians to rise up and overthrow their government, the decimation of the Iranian middle class through the collapse of the economy will have only the opposite effect. The people of Iran will suffer potentially catastrophic harm as Iraqis did a decade earlier, while their state grows increasingly repressive and empowered relative to a poor and destitute population - a natural outcome within a command economy such as Iran's.

It is incumbent upon all those concerned that the grotesque crimes of the past not be repeated, and that the blanket, indiscriminate economic war against the Iranian people not continue in the name of political expediency. The blunt instrument of untargeted sanctions against a country are not an alternative to war but a form of war in and of themselves, even more pernicious in that the victims are always necessarily the weakest and most vulnerable of society.

If the **millions who had their lives destroyed and ended in Iraq** were not to have died in vain, the same crime against humanity which they suffered must not be repeated today against the people of Iran.