

Better Than War?

An Exchange about UN Sanctions

Sanctioning Death in Iraq

Joy Gordon

When Iraq invaded Kuwait in August 1990, the consequences were felt well beyond those two countries. The attack took place at a critical juncture in the history of the United Nations—at a moment when there was an unprecedented potential for the abuse of power within the Security Council. The events that followed would devastate Iraq’s own population, and bring into question the moral legitimacy of the United Nations Security Council.

Under Saddam Hussein’s regime, Iraq had used chemical weapons against the Kurds and against Iranian soldiers in the Iran-Iraq war. Hussein’s political enemies were subjected to torture, and they and their families were summarily executed. Iraq had spent years trying to develop a nuclear weapon, and invaded Kuwait without justification. In the early 1990s, the Soviet Union was replaced by Russia, which was in no position to take on the Western powers within the Security Council. Now it was suddenly possible for the Council, at the behest of the United States, to impose a kind of punishment on Iraq that had never been seen before in the history of global governance.

The massive bombing campaign of the 1991 Gulf War devastated Iraq’s entire infrastructure. The allied forces, led by the United States, bombed roads, bridges, electrical generators, water treatment plants, and factories. A UN envoy wrote that Iraq had been reduced from a sophisticated modern nation with a robust middle class and a highly educated population to a “preindustrial condition.”

But if the bombings are what reduced Iraq to this state, it was the sanctions authorized by Security Council Resolution 661 that kept it there. Following the war, Iraq’s economy collapsed, its annual GDP declining from \$66 billion to \$11 billion. In 1995, the Security Council and Iraq agreed to the Oil for Food Program, which allowed Iraq to sell a limited amount of oil, the proceeds of which could be spent on food and other humanitarian goods. This was the only legal means for Iraq to generate income. Thirty percent of the proceeds from those oil sales were used for reparations, primarily

to Kuwait for losses related to Iraq’s invasion. In 1999, the ceiling on oil sales was lifted, but other factors—primarily the condition of Iraq’s oil industry and pricing restrictions imposed by the Security Council—prevented oil sales from returning to prewar levels. By the end of the sanctions regime, a total of \$27 billion in goods had actually been delivered to Iraq. Another \$20 billion of income from Iraq’s oil sales had been in paid reparations to Kuwait, while \$5 billion worth of humanitarian goods, primarily for generating electricity and other infrastructure, was being blocked. In the end, the total amount of humanitarian goods the Security Council actually permitted Iraq to import under the Oil for Food Program came to \$204 per person annually—or about one-half the per-capita income of the poorest countries in the world. Investigations after 2003 found that the Hussein regime had skimmed a total of \$2 billion over the eight years of the Oil for Food Program, and that, outside of that program, there had also been a total of \$10 billion of trade with neighboring countries over the thirteen-year course of the sanctions. As brutal and corrupt as Saddam Hussein was, the structural devastation to Iraq was so great and the financial limitations so severe that it would not have been possible for his government or any other to restore Iraq’s ability to meet the basic human needs of its people.

In responding to aggression, breaches of peace, and threats to peace, the UN Security Council may use economic and diplomatic measures, but it can also use force. These are the provisions of Chapter VII of the UN Charter. When the Council acts under Chapter VII, every member state of the UN—virtually every country in the world—is obligated to participate in the enforcement. Moreover, the Charter provides that if there is a conflict between enforcing a Chapter VII measure and a nation’s obligations to abide by any other treaties, those treaty obligations are to be overridden. Finally, there is no appeal. No action can be brought against the Council before the International Court of Justice, or any other court. With the USSR’s disintegration not long before the Persian Gulf War, the Security Council was no longer paralyzed by the Cold War—and there were no clear limits on the exercise of its extraordinary powers.

The humanitarian crisis in Iraq after the sanctions took effect caused enormous tensions within the United Nations.

UNICEF and other humanitarian agencies documented the skyrocketing rates of malnutrition and child mortality in frequent reports. The secretary general called for sanctions reform. The Human Rights Commission condemned the situation. Two UN humanitarian coordinators in Iraq—both of them senior officials—resigned their positions with the United Nations on the grounds that the UN had become complicit in genocide.

The United States had a significant role in bringing about this devastation. In the view of the U.S. government, if Iraq were permitted to restore its electricity, water treatment, transportation system, or anything else needed to sustain a modern industrial society, that would mean it had the capacity to rebuild its military, which would allow it to present a security threat to the region. The consistent policy of the United States, therefore, was to maintain the devastation the bombing had caused, regardless of the effect this had on the people of Iraq.

If the effects of the sanctions are well known, what was occurring at the time within the Security Council itself is less well known. The formal meetings of the Security Council are public, but that is rarely where any real debate takes place. The bitter conflicts and blunt exchanges more often occur behind closed doors, and there are usually no official records of what is said at these informal meetings. There is only the testimony of the participants, subject to the vagaries of memory and to dispute by others with their own competing interpretations.

The case of Iraq was different. There was a committee of the Security Council established by Resolution 661 to oversee the Iraq sanctions. This committee, known as the 661 Committee, consisted of representatives of the same fifteen countries that sat on the Council. Like the informal meetings of the Council itself, the 661 Committee met behind closed doors. Unlike the Council, however, this committee did keep careful records—minutes of its meetings, documentation of what the committee members knew and when they knew it. These records provide a rare window into the internal workings of the Security Council. They offer an extraordinary glimpse at what happens behind closed doors when officials believe their words and actions will not become public.

The 661 Committee's documents were highly restricted. Many of them, including the minutes, were not distributed even to all committee members. Still, bit by bit, many of

the documents have emerged, some deposited in obscure archives, some "shared informally" with researchers or journalists. Sometimes the diplomats and UN officials who made them available did so for strategic reasons. But others acted out of a sense of anguish and fury at witnessing the U.S. government's efforts to prevent child vaccines or antibiotics from entering Iraq at the same time that aid agencies were reporting widespread malnutrition, escalating child mortality, and the collapse of health care and education throughout the country.

The fundamental conflict was between humanitarian concerns and security interests: What happens when the Security Council, invoking its mandate to respond to security threats, adopts measures that cause damage to a civilian population?

In the end, through the veto and other means—and often without the support of even Britain, let alone any other country on the Council—the United States unilaterally determined the outcome of the conflict between security interests and the welfare of the Iraqi people. And it invariably resolved this conflict in favor of security interests, however speculative and slight they were, and however substantial or probable the resulting humanitarian damage was.

This could be seen vividly in the procedures to grant exemptions both before and during the Oil for Food Program, which ostensibly

allowed Iraq to bring in goods to meet the urgent humanitarian needs of the population. While these exemptions were allowed in theory, in practice each one required the agreement of every member of the Council. If the United States simply withheld its consent to the exemption, then the committee would report that "no consensus had been reached," and the goods would not be allowed in.

The results of this practice were appalling. Before the embargo, Iraq had imported two-thirds of its food. So it was not surprising that the abrupt prohibition on food imports created an immediate crisis. There followed numerous attempts to seek exemptions for food imports because of "humanitarian circumstances." In the fall of 1990, shortly after the sanctions were imposed, a Bulgarian company sought permission to deliver a shipment of powdered milk that Iraq had ordered before the sanctions were imposed. The U.S. delegate refused, commenting that it was "regrettable that hardships would be imposed." When Russia and other countries urged the U.S. delegates to allow Iraq to buy food, they refused, saying there was "no need for an urgent decision." The U.S.

When Yemen would not vote for the resolution imposing sanctions on Iraq, a U.S. diplomat told Yemen's ambassador, "That will be the most expensive 'no' vote you will ever cast." Three days later the United States cancelled its \$70 million aid program to Yemen, one of the poorest countries in the Middle East.

delegation did not relent for eight months—and then only in response to the political pressure that followed a report from the Secretary General’s envoy to Iraq, who described the situation as “near apocalyptic.”

Requests for even the most innocuous humanitarian goods were routinely denied, often without reasons. UN agencies and the other members of the Council pressed the United States to approve materials for agriculture and food production, water treatment, goods for children and infants, materials for primary and secondary education, medical equipment, and civilian clothing. But the U.S. government used the consensus rule to block water pipes, material to make diapers, equipment to process powdered milk, and fabric for civilian clothing. For years, U.S. officials described everything from plywood to shoe leather as “inputs to industry,” and so refused to allow them into Iraq. Other nations on the Council were vocal in their opposition, but U.S. diplomats routinely dismissed their objections with thinly veiled contempt. On one occasion, other members of the 661 Committee asked why the United States had blocked a request from Turkey to export a shipment of glue to Iraq. The U.S. delegate replied that “his delegation objected to the request in the interest of saving horses.”

Once the Oil for Food Program began in the mid-1990s, the United States invoked the risk of “dual use”—the possibility that goods could be used for both military and civilian purposes—as its reason to deny exemptions. But of course almost anything that could be used for civilian purposes—trucks, electrical generators, fabric, ambulances—could also be used by the military. And U.S. officials applied the most extreme possible interpretation of “dual use”: cheese making equipment might be used to incubate biological agents; the Iraqis might use irrigation pipes as cooling devices for a nuclear reactor; the hydraulic lift on a dump truck might be used to position a missile for launch. According to the U.S. delegates, the Iraqis could use goat vaccines to produce biological weapons and household refrigerators to store biological agents. As one diplomat put it, the U.S. position was that “two pots of yogurt in a basement” could be used to manufacture weapons of mass destruction.

U.S. officials often claimed that opposition to their efforts came only from Arab countries, or from countries with economic ties to Iraq, such as France and Russia. In fact, the positions of the United States were frequently contested by small countries from the developing world, countries that had nothing to gain from alienating the United States and a great deal to lose. When Yemen would not vote for the resolution imposing the initial sanctions on Iraq, a U.S. diplomat told Yemen’s ambassador, Abdullah Saleh al-Ashtal, “That will be the most expensive ‘no’ vote you will ever cast.” Three days later the United States cancelled its \$70 million aid program to Yemen, one of the poorest countries in the Middle East. When the U.S. delegation to the UN blocked proposals to allow Iraq to import food, representatives from Canada, Colombia, Cuba, and Yemen challenged the United States,



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arguing that the restrictions on something as fundamental as food “should not be interpreted inhumanely.”

So France, Russia, and China were not the only countries opposed to the U.S. position on sanctions. Equally vocal were elected members of the Security Council with no connection to Iraq, many of them from the developing world: Finland, Canada, Brazil, Ecuador, India, and many others. Behind the closed doors of the Council’s meetings, these countries questioned the morality and the legality of the U.S. government’s policy.

When the Council passed a resolution allowing humanitarian agencies to deliver food to the Iraqi population, the United States insisted on the narrowest interpretation of the resolution, permitting only UN agencies to participate. Other nations on the Council challenged the U.S. delegation on this matter, and asked for an opinion from the UN’s legal counsel. The U.S. delegation then fought to prevent the Council from hearing the legal opinion—which held that food could be delivered to the Iraqi population by a much broader range of humanitarian organizations. The delegates from Malaysia, China, and Colombia pressed the issue again and again, and the Colombian delegation ultimately threatened to walk out.

All that was largely invisible to the public. Apart from a few documents leaked to the press, there was no way to know that one member of the Security Council was overriding the will of every other nation that sat on the Council—at a terrible cost to an entire civilian population. Publicly, U.S. officials insisted they were deeply concerned with the welfare of the Iraqi people. The State Department declared, “We will...continue our efforts to increase humanitarian relief for the people of Iraq, over the obstructions of the regime.” And former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright said, “I care more about the children of Iraq than Saddam Hussein does.” But behind the closed doors of the 661 Committee and in private interviews, U.S. policymakers gave little weight to the impact of their decisions on the Iraqi population. Peter van Walsum, the Dutch ambassador who chaired the 661 Committee in 1999 and 2000, pressed U.S. officials to reconsider their extreme positions:

I wondered whether it would not be possible to weigh the proliferation risk against the humanitarian impact in such a way that a very remote dual-use potential might be winked at if the impact of an extended hold on, for example, the public-health sector would evidently be disastrous...but the [U.S.] officials were not prepared to let humanitarian considerations override the principle that in the Iraq context even the slightest risk of proliferation was unacceptable.

Within the U.S. process, responsibility was so diffused it was difficult even to identify who was responsible for particular decisions. The paperwork was circulated among

dozens of people at numerous agencies, including the State Department, the Department of Defense, and the CIA. The weapons experts looked for any way that imports could be misused, and the political officers had little credibility to override the technical experts even if they had wanted to. There was a pervasive sense that “Saddam needed to be pressured to the max,” and there was no one to point out that depriving the Iraqi population of electricity was quite different from causing hardship to Saddam. From the level of ambassador down to junior desk officers, the singular pre-occupation was the potential military threat posed by every item to be imported, however slight or improbable that was.

One of the central technical experts in the U.S. review process, Robert von Tersch, an Army biochemist who worked for the State Department, was known for taking the most extreme of these positions. On one occasion, von Tersch was opposed to allowing the Iraqis to import eggs “because the eggs could be used to grow viruses for biological weapons.” On another occasion, a weapons expert from the Department of Defense attended a meeting of U.S. and British officials with a vial of cat litter, which, he informed them, could be used “to stabilize anthrax.”

In the internal discussion among U.S. officials, the human damage caused by these policies was excluded from consideration almost entirely. According to one State Department official, considering the humanitarian consequences “was not our job. It was not part of our skill set.” It does not seem that there was any particular hatred toward Iraqis on the part of these bureaucrats. But there was no one who actually cared very much about the well-being of Iraqi civilians, and this was partly because there was no one whose job it was to care.

The sanctions against Iraq raised another problem related to the fundamental legitimacy of the Security Council itself. The machinery of Chapter VII had been used to achieve a purpose that was antithetical to the UN Charter, and to international law: regime change. The Charter recognizes the sovereignty of all member states. Endorsing a longstanding principle of international law, the Charter stipulates that no nation may use force or the threat of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of another nation (Article 2), although the Charter is silent on whether the Security Council itself may violate a nation’s sovereignty.

Regime change was precisely the goal of the United States throughout three administrations: Saddam Hussein must be removed from office. It was not a goal shared by the rest of the Security Council; nor was it ever adopted in any of the Council’s resolutions. To the contrary, the Security Council resolutions consistently acknowledged Iraq’s sovereignty, and required only that Iraq withdraw from Kuwait and comply with partial disarmament. But the U.S. government was committed to the removal of Hussein from power, and used the machinery of the Security Council to pursue this objective, regardless of the will of the rest of the Council, the international community, or the principles of international law.

One of the primary devices used by the U.S. delegation

to accomplish this was the “reverse veto.” Any of the five permanent members of the Security Council can veto any resolution for any reason. When, as in the case of Resolution 661, there is no explicit time limit built into a Chapter VII measure, a second resolution is needed in order to terminate it. But any one of the permanent members can veto that second resolution, in effect forcing punitive measures to remain in place indefinitely. The United States would not agree to lift the sanctions as long as Hussein was in power; and this, in effect, became the policy of the Security Council as a whole, against the will of nearly every member of the Council.

Other than the veto, the unchallenged power of the United States within the Council did not continue for long. It lasted from 1990 until about 1993. After that, there was a gradual shift. While few countries could afford to confront the United States openly, there was a growing unwillingness to rubberstamp its demands. In the case of Iraq, by the mid-1990s China and Russia were lobbying to remove the sanctions altogether, and in 2003, the Council refused to accede to the United States demand to authorize an invasion of Iraq. Now, the pendulum has swung back to somewhere near the middle: the United States still has inordinate influence within the Council, but at the same time must make compromises to win support for its proposals.

Without reform of the Security Council, however, there remains the possibility of future abuses of power—the possibility that one of the permanent members of Council will once again hold so much political and economic sway that none of the other members will be in a position to challenge or resist it. When this happens, as it did in the case of Resolution 661, the Security Council risks becoming a tool for the implementation of one nation’s foreign policy, undermining the Council’s legitimacy as a critical tool of global governance.

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Better Than War

Margaret O’Brien Steinfels

Joy Gordon’s article joins a controversy that began in August 1991 when Iraq invaded and annexed Kuwait. The UN Security Council responded by imposing sanctions that were lifted in 2003 when Saddam Hussein was driven from power by the U.S. invasion. Criticism of the sanctions grew over time, but for much of the 1990s, the controversy was not about sanctions or no sanctions, but about sanctions or war.

Joy Gordon does not acknowledge the tough choice be-

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tween sanctions and war, nor does she credit the persistent threats that Saddam Hussein made against his own people as well as his neighbors—a good number of which he carried out before, during, and after the first Gulf War.

On August 6, 1991, the UN Security Council imposed sanctions by a 15–0 vote as an inducement to draw Iraqi forces from Kuwait; Saddam refused to depart and war broke out. After the rout of the Iraqi army and the liberation of Kuwait in February 1992, sanctions persisted for two reasons: the Arab-Western alliance was unwilling to continue to Baghdad to oust Saddam, and no one believed that Iraqi aggression would end with defeat in Kuwait. Indeed stories of pillaging and rape during the occupation were a vivid and continuing reminder of Saddam’s ruthlessness. The sanctions were meant to contain him and to enforce the cease-fire agreement that included reparations for Kuwait and an agreement on the Iraq-Kuwait border.

The rapidity with which Iraq fell to U.S. forces in 2003 obscures the widely held view that Saddam remained a powerful and unpredictable adversary in possession of weapons of mass destructions (WMDs) and a formidable army. (The quick defeat obviously demonstrated that the sanctions had succeeded in eliminating the WMD and hollowing out Iraq’s army; “The sanctions *worked*,” as George Lopez and David Cortright famously wrote in *Foreign Affairs*.) Still, examples of Saddam’s adversarial intents and deeds are legion.

From 1980 to 1988, he pursued a war with Iran, deploying chemical weapons and bombing civilian areas (as did the Iranians). About half a million Iranians and Iraqis died. That conflict ended in stalemate, and Saddam turned on Iraqi Kurds, destroying whole towns and villages. He gassed Halabja, where thousands died and many thousands were maimed. These attacks against the Kurds continued through the 1990s, even with the U.S. no-fly zone in place. Saddam

attacked Shiites in southern Iraq both before and after 1990, and was at war in the southeast with the Ma'adan, who were finally driven from their lands when he drained the marshes that provided their livelihood. Even after his defeat in Kuwait, Saddam continued to threaten his neighbors. He once again massed troops on the Kuwaiti border in 1994, tested the no-fly zone established by the United States and Britain, and thwarted the UN arms inspectors commissioned under the Kuwait cease-fire to destroy his stockpile of WMDs. This catalog of horrors could go on; it explains why the sanctions imposed in 1990 lasted until Saddam's downfall in 2003.

Saddam's neighbors feared him, no one trusted him, and yet no one wanted the war that would end his reign. Was Saddam's departure, though not authorized by UN Resolution 661, a justifiable goal? Gordon argues it violated Iraqi sovereignty and that maintaining the sanctions for that purpose made them illegal and immoral because they devastated its civilian population.

Heretofore secret minutes from UN's 661 Committee, which was charged with overseeing the sanctions, are the centerpiece of Gordon's book *Invisible War: The United States and the Iraq Sanctions*, and the basis of her essay here. These minutes describe American members of the committee as regularly blocking humanitarian aid, such as food and medicine, preventing the repair of water systems, electrical grids, roads, and bridges, and prohibiting dual-use goods (civilian and military), such as chlorine and refrigerated trucks. Those blocks, which were known about in the '90s (though not with the detail Gordon provides), were regularly criticized by sanction opponents. (It is a curiosity of these "secret" minutes that the heartless remarks of the American committee members are singled out, which raises the question of whose minutes they are, and why and how they have emerged.)

On the basis of these details, Gordon indicts the U.S. government for callously refusing the exemptions that she believes would have saved Iraqi lives. But were the sanctions responsible for thousands, if not hundreds of thousands, of Iraqi deaths? That conclusion was in dispute at the time and remains so.

Before one can assess responsibility for the sanctions' impact, one must take account of widespread smuggling into and out of Iraq, which brought an array of goods into the country outside the sanctions regime. Then there were the misdirected resources the Iraqi government devoted to maintaining its military and Saddam devoted to constructing presidential palaces—resources that should have gone to the Iraqi people. Insofar as there was a humanitarian crisis, Saddam was responsible for it. Furthermore, some of the conditions Gordon attributes to the 1991 bombing of Iraq were the outcome of the Iran-Iraq war. That extended conflict had demoralized the Iraqi population, killed hundreds of thousand of young men, depleted the country's resources, diminished its oil exports, and put development on hold. First-hand accounts of Iraq, whether in 1990 or 2003, give

evidence of Saddam's oppression before, during, and after Kuwait. Gordon downplays those realities, as well as the endemic corruption of Iraq's elite and its government and the subversion of the sanctions by Iraq's neighbors, especially Jordan, Syria, and Turkey, and over time by larger and more important trading partners such as France and Russia.

Gordon concludes that the UN's strict enforcement of the sanctions, at the behest of the United States, was inhumane and immoral. The role of sanctions in international relations was and is a troubling and complex issue. It is doubtful that the Security Council would approve such a sanctions regime again even for a limited time. But the alternatives are also troubling: doing nothing as in Syria and Zimbabwe or going to war as in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya. The bogus evidence deployed by the second Bush administration to justify the 2003 invasion of Iraq was a scandal putting in stark relief the manipulation of intelligence and diplomacy. But such manipulation and disinformation was also an issue with the sanctions. Now that the Iraq war is over and we see its gruesome and wasteful course, isn't there good reason to ask whether maintenance of sanctions might have been a more humane and moral policy?

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Smart Sanctions Work

George A. Lopez

The ink was hardly dry on Security Council Resolution 1970, adopted last February 26, when the first criticisms of the sanctions it authorized started to appear. Some critics questioned the sanctions' likely effectiveness: how could a set of asset freezes and travel bans on Muammar Qaddafi's family and a few cronies end the tyrant's assault on the Libyan people who were rebelling against his forty-year rule? Others doubted the precision of these so-called smart sanctions: could they really reach Qaddafi's inner circle while sparing ordinary Libyans, who had already suffered so much? These humanitarian concerns intensified as the United States and the European Union passed even more severe sanctions. When the UN Security Council imposed the no-fly zone on March 17 (Resolution 1973), it expanded the individuals and entities exposed to financial sanctions and declared an arms embargo.

Six months later the Qaddafi regime fell, in part due to the success of those smart sanctions. The humanitarian impact of the sanctions was negligible. According to current estimates, \$36 billion in Libyan funds were locked down in the first week of sanctions. By cutting off nearly half of Qaddafi's usable funds, the international community immediately denied the dictator the money he needed to

import heavy weapons, hire mercenary soldiers, or contract with elite commando units. It was because of those funding constraints that Tripoli was not destroyed in an all-out battle.

Undoubtedly the fall of the Libyan regime would not have occurred without an armed rebellion and NATO's military support. But sanctions played a considerable role in degrading both the regime's firepower and its support among Libyan elites. The conflict between Qaddafi's forces and the rebels would have been longer and deadlier without the sanctions.

Joy Gordon has argued, here and elsewhere, that both the design and the implementation of sanctions have often been determined by global power politics, and that sanctions are seldom aimed at an equitable peace based in justice. I think her scholarship regarding the political manipulation of the UN Iraqi sanctions—as well as her writing on the humanitarian crisis created by those sanctions—is first-rate. But the power of her argument about that particular case can easily skew considerations of the ethics and efficacy of the kind of sanctions imposed on the Qaddafi regime.

Academics and activists are not alone in extending the Iraq example further than it really reaches. The diplomats who staff the national missions at the United Nations often evince little knowledge of the success of recent sanctions, or of the relationship between sanctions and other instruments used by the United Nations to maintain peace and protect civilians. Just as disturbing, they seem largely unaware of the dramatic changes—in design, implementation, and monitoring—that have made sanctions both more humane and more successful during the past decade.

Rather than recognize that it was precisely the Iraqi case that led to smarter sanctions—or that their real complaint about what happened in Libya has to do with NATO bombing, not UN sanctions—a number of influential states have become openly critical of sanctions in the past year. The so-called BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) consider the imposition of sanctions to be a triumph of the strong countries that make up the Security Council over weaker ones.

Thus, the demonstrable success of recent multilateral sanctions seems to matter less to many diplomats and pundits than the bitter memory of what happened many years ago in Iraq. One might not guess that the success rate for sanctions narrowly targeted on people considered threats to peace hovers around 50 percent. Such sanctions have been most effective when they have involved coordinated efforts by the UN Se-

curity Council, the European Union, and the United States.

Unlike the clumsy comprehensive trade sanctions that the UN discarded in the mid-1990s, smart sanctions offer the international community a wide array of instruments for constraining brutal regimes. These include freezing overseas financial assets of both the government and individual members of the regime; suspending credit, aid, and loans from international financial institutions to government officials; denying dictators access to overseas financial markets; controlling luxury goods, weapons, computers, and high-value commodities; imposing flight restrictions on airline companies and travel bans on members of the targeted regime; and, finally, denying travel and educational opportunities to members of a dictator's extended family.

Last year the Arab League took an unprecedented action by levying heavy financial, travel, and investment sanctions on Syria. These will dramatically constrain the short-term financial flexibility of the government and the country's economic elites. The sanctions virtually end Syria's role in regional banking, and they make it clear to investors that there is no point in pouring money into Syria as long as the Assad regime remains in power.

The freezing of the personal assets of high-level officials and an embargo on commercial flights—a combination that had a strong effect on Libya—now poses a moment of decision for Syrian elites. It may be becoming clearer to them where continued support for Assad's dictatorship will lead. Not surprisingly, a vast majority of the Syrian people protesting in the street these

past months have welcomed these sanctions against the Assad regime. The Arab League action was complemented by a new round of EU financial sanctions on December 1.

As the cases of Qaddafi and Assad illustrate, megalomaniacs are often immune to ordinary diplomatic pressure, and they cling to power desperately—all the more so now that there's a system of international law through the International Criminal Court that can reach them in exile. This leaves sanctions as the only method short of armed intervention for bringing harsh repression to an end. Critics of older, cruder sanctions, such as those imposed on Iraq in the early 1990s, should acknowledge that things have changed since then. ■

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