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## U.S. FOREIGN POLICY

# The legacy of the Iraq sanctions regime is alive and well in US foreign policy today

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The economic sanctions imposed on Iraq by the United Nations Security Council, from 1990 to 2003, may well lay claim to be the worst humanitarian catastrophe ever imposed in the name of global governance. The unconscionable human damage done by those sanctions is routinely dismissed as the unintended consequence of a well-intentioned policy from the past, which has since given way to more nuanced and humane measures. But in fact, the Iraq sanctions program is the template for the systemic, devastating sanctions we see in place today applied in a subtler and more circuitous form — although Donald Trump’s “maximum pressure” campaign against Iran is neither subtle nor circuitous.

In August of 1990, Iraq invaded Kuwait. With the Soviet Union collapsing, the U.N. Security Council was no longer paralyzed by the mutual veto power of its permanent members — the United States, USSR, Great Britain, France and China — and entered a period of “activism,” where measures of unprecedented scope and severity were suddenly possible. The sanctions imposed on Iraq in U.N. Resolution 661 on August 6, 1990 were the first of these measures, prohibiting all imports and all exports with Iraq, with only the narrowest exemptions for medicine.

The sanctions alone would not necessarily have been catastrophic for Iraq. The government immediately implemented a rationing system, which was critical in staving off famine, as well as measures to increase agricultural production.

But then the bombing campaign of the Persian Gulf War of January 1991 destroyed much of Iraq’s infrastructure. An envoy from the U.N. Secretary-General [described](#) Iraq’s condition as “near-apocalyptic,” noting that Iraq had been reduced to a “pre-industrial age.”

For the next 12 years, the sanctions crippled the efforts of Iraq, as well as U.N. agencies such as the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and the World Health Organization (WHO), to restore electricity, transportation, health care, and food security.

The pattern that emerged throughout the sanctions period was that the United States and Great Britain, sometimes accompanied by other allies, consistently sought to maximize the damage done in Iraq, with the goal of destabilizing President Saddam Hussein’s regime. The United States and its allies would sometimes agree to humanitarian provisions, but would then vitiate them in some way. This practice continued throughout the presidencies of George H.W. Bush administration, Bill Clinton, and George W. Bush.

When Security Council Resolution 661 called for food shipments under “humanitarian circumstances,” the U.S. and its allies nonetheless successfully blocked all food shipments to Iraq for eight months, until the country had been reduced to rubble in the massive bombing campaign of the first Persian Gulf War. Only then was food allowed into the country.

But of course, what was needed to sustain the lives of the Iraqi people was much more than that: agricultural inputs, goods to repair or rebuild the roads, bridges, electrical generators, and water treatment plants that had been bombed. As U.N. agencies and international human rights organizations documented the severe hardship

