

“What Right Does the United States Have to Starve Civilians to Achieve Political Goals?”

Sanctions are Destructive, Illegitimate, and Totally Bipartisan

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What right does the United States have to starve civilians to achieve political goals? Despite its obvious importance, this question is largely absent from mainstream discourse. Through economic sanctions, or economic warfare, the U.S. can unilaterally collapse economies and generate famine in foreign countries. The civilian death toll from sanctions is often equal to—and sometimes [greater than](#)—the toll from conventional warfare. Yet on both sides of the aisle, it is taken for granted that we have the “right” to impose destitution on civilian populations in order to advance our interests.

What are Sanctions?

The U.S. administers [two types of sanctions](#): primary and secondary sanctions. Primary sanctions cut off economic relations between targeted foreign entities—states, individuals, industries, or corporations—and the American economy. Secondary sanctions, also known as “extraterritorial sanctions,” are more pernicious. Secondary sanctions impose sanctions or other penalties on third parties not under the jurisdiction of the U.S. if they refuse to cease economic relations with the entity under primary sanctions. For example, the U.S. imposed both primary and secondary [sanctions](#) on the Central Bank of Iran (CBI). Therefore, the U.S. prohibits American citizens and corporations from conducting business with the bank (primary sanctions), and imposes sanctions on any foreign state, individual, or corporation that chooses to work with the CBI (secondary sanctions).

Many legal [scholars](#) and [most of the world](#), including the [European Union](#), maintain that these secondary sanctions clearly violate well established principles of international law, interfere with the sovereignty of foreign governments, and are ultimately illegitimate.

However, due to the threat of being cut off from the American economy and the dollar, nations are often forced to comply, regardless of their legal or moral qualms.

Sanctions and Civilians

Through sanctions, the U.S. can, in effect, collapse foreign economies with the stroke of a pen, inflicting punishment on civilian populations. The [current sanctions on Syria](#), for instance, established in the “[Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act of 2019](#),” bar foreign entities from participating in Syria’s desperately needed reconstruction effort and obstruct the flow of humanitarian aid and other basic necessities. The sanctions were ostensibly enacted to punish the Assad regime and to promote human rights, but instead have devastated Syrian civilians.

Sanctions are About Politics, not Human Rights

Our political leaders consistently claim that we impose sanctions in order to protect civilians and [promote human rights](#).

Despite this rhetoric, it is clear that the imposition of sanctions is totally inconsistent with these alleged values. Rather, like other tools of American foreign policy, sanctions are correlated with the interests of American elites. States that align themselves with the interests of the U.S. are spared from sanctions, and states that refuse, or choose to align themselves with an American adversary, are not. Defiance is a much better predictor of whether sanctions will be levied than a state’s human rights record.

Sanctions and Bipartisanship

Despite international condemnation and the devastating toll and human suffering caused by sanctions, criticism in mainstream circles is scant. These sanctions are, unfortunately, totally bipartisan. The Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act of 2019—which is currently threatening Syrian civilians with mass starvation—was [introduced](#) by Democratic Representative Eliot Engel, passed with [bipartisan support](#), and then was signed into law by President Donald Trump. The 2017 [bill](#) which drastically increased sanctions on Iran—and subsequently sharply increased poverty and a lack of access to basic, lifesaving medicines—was passed in the Senate by a 98-2 vote. Only Senators Bernie Sanders and Rand Paul [voted against the bill](#).

Establishment politicians from both parties have routinely campaigned on their support for sanctions, most prominently Hillary Clinton. Despite [widespread criticism](#) of the Clinton Administration’s devastating sanctions policies on Iraq in the 1990s, Hillary Clinton campaigned both in [2008](#) and [2016](#) on the promise to drastically tighten sanctions on Iran. Moreover, Clinton’s 2016 campaign website [boasted](#) of the fact that she “oversaw significant accomplishments” while Secretary of State, including “building a global coalition to *impose crippling sanctions against Iran*,” creating the “toughest sanctions regime in history.”

Only Bernie Sanders, Rand Paul, and a handful of congressional democrats have ever defied the bipartisan consensus and [expressed full-throated](#) opposition to sanctions. In the mainstream liberal establishment, it is fully accepted that the U.S. has the right to impose these sanctions, regardless of the terrifying humanitarian toll. It is assumed, without question, that the U.S. should be allowed to collapse economies, generate famine, and drive civilian populations into destitution to achieve political—not humanitarian—goals.

But how would we feel if this assumption was universal, and we were the victims of this type of economic warfare?

Here, a thought experiment may be revealing. While unrealistic due to the immensity of American power, imagine if, in response to the unlawful American invasion and destruction of Iraq, the international community enacted broad sanctions on the U.S. Imagine that these sanctions—like the sanctions we impose—collapsed our economy; caused a severe shortage of lifesaving pharmaceuticals; increased hunger, unemployment, and destitution; and directly led to the deaths of thousands, hundreds of thousands, or even millions of Americans. To those who support sanctions as a tool of American foreign policy: would this hypothetical outcome be just?

To say yes is utterly callous. But if we say no, we are equally callous, but also hypocrites.

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