Sanctions in the Middle East: Against Iran, Iraq, Syria

Have Not Had the Result Desired by Those Imposing Them

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Sanctions are a blunt weapon used by the mighty against the weak to compel them to capitulate to political demands, but almost always put pressure on populations rather than rulers who concede nothing. Although sanctions have been liberally used in this region they have not had the result desired by those imposing them.

They have been employed since 1979 against revolutionary Iran by the US and later by the international community, since 1990 against Iraq, and since 2004 against Syria.

In all three cases, sanctions have had a destructive impact on local efforts to contain Covid-19, which has spread across the region and the world and will continue to spread as long as centres of infection exist.

As early as April, the British medical journal, The Lancet, reported that Iran's "capacity to respond to the virus is substantially impeded by unilateral economic sanctions re-imposed after the US administration withdrew from the nuclear deal in May, 2018". The Lancet criticised the Trump administration fop making a bad situation worse by ramping up sanctions in March of this year.

The Lancet continued, "Even before COVID-19, Iran's health system was feeling the effect of the sanctions. Their impact is now severe because they restrict the government's ability to raise funds or import essential goods," including protective gear, tests and medicines. The Lancet pointed out that of "the ten countries with the highest number of recorded cases [in April], Iran is the poorest". Iran cannot afford to fund "adequate prevention, diagnosis and treatment". The country cannot adopt measures to strengthen its responses to the pandemic, The Lancet said.

Sanctions on Iran were imposed long before Donald Trump withdrew from the 2015 agreement signed by the US, UK, France, Russia, China and Germany which limited Iran's nuclear programme in exchange for lifting sanctions. US sanctions on Iran were imposed in 1979 following the overthrow of Washington's ally and have been tightened and elaborated by US allies. This process has prevented Iran from exporting its oil, its main source of revenue, driving down the value of Iran's currency, and plunging it into negative economic growth.

Although food and medicine are meant to be exempted from sanctions, Iran cannot access essential supplies because the US controls international banking and finance and threatens

to punish any country or firm that deals with Iran. Consequently, for years Iran has not been able to procure medicine and medical equipment needed for cancer, heart, diabetes, and other common ailments and the country's health sector has been run down.

The pandemic took hold in Iran in February and has established its grip on the country since then. Latest figures show that Iran has had 387,000 cases with 22,293 deaths. While failing to deal with the virus early and mismanagement are largely responsible for this toll, sanctions have played a key role. Iran's failure to contain Covid-19 has led to the spread to the region and countries as far away as Norway and Canada.

Follwing Iraq's 1990 invasion of Kuwait, the international community imposed heavy sanctions on Iraq. Once again the US, this time under George W.H. Bush, was prime mover. Once again food, medicine and humanitarian supplies were meant to be excluded but were not. Following the US-led war that forced Iraq to withdraw from Kuwait, UN mediator Prince Sadruddin Aga Khan urged the victors to provide humanitarian aid to Iraq and prevent the collapse of health care which, at the time, was provided to 90 per cent of the population. This did not happen. Over the next five years, half a million Iraqi children died of disease and malnutrition and the country's national health system, the best in the region, deteriorated. Asked in 1996 about this terrible toll, US ambassador to the UN Madeline Albright responded, "I think that is a very hard choice, but the price, we think, the price is worth it." For the US, yes; for Iraqi families, no.

Although sanctions eased in 1996 with the introduction of the UN's oil-for-food programme, restrictions on oil sales and trade remained until well after the 2003 Iraq war was mounted by George W. Bush at a time Iraq had largely recovered from the 1991 assault. The second Bush war and subsequent occupation plunged Iraq into unending instability and chaos. The health care system collapsed. More than 20,000 doctors fled the country, leaving only 30,000. Today, Iraq has a serious shortage of doctors and health workers because it does not have the funds to employ medical graduates although Covid-19 has Iraq in its brutal grip. Iraqis have suffered 260,400 cases and more than 7,500 deaths. Among these victims are 44 doctors who died and more than 1,500 who have been infected.

Sanctions, initially introduced because of Damascus support for Palestinian opponents of Israel, were intensified after unrest erupted in 2011 and morphed into civil and proxy wars during the middle of that year. The Syrian national health system, which had provided primary care for the majority of Syrians, has been heavily impacted. Doctors have left the country. Widely used medicines have become unavailable due to sanctions. Covid-19 has put a huge strain on clinics, hospitals and staff. Worldometer reports that Syria has had 3,171 covid cases and 134 deaths but these could be underestimates due to difficulties in identifying and tracing cases in a country still beset by warfare, instability and sanctions-driven economic decline.

While lockdown was initially employed to contain infection, Syrians cannot afford prolonged periods of economic inactivity. Protective gear, test kits and medications are absent. Death notices are being posted in neighbourhoods and on social media. Doctors and nurses are among the dead. Danny Makki reporting for the US Middle East Institute argues that Syria cannot "get through this pandemic without some form of serious international medical support". Instead, the Trump administration has toughened sanctions on firms and individuals who deal with the Syrian government while the Western powers do nothing and insufficient supplies trickle in from the World Health Organisation and China.

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