

Sanctions Are War

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Global Research, May 05, 2021

[Antiwar.com](#) 4 May 2021

Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [Law and Justice](#)

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Broad economic sanctions are a form of warfare, and the U.S. is by far the most frequent economic belligerent in the world. Our government’s overuse and abuse of sanctions has increased by leaps and bounds in just the last two decades. Sanctions designations increased significantly during the Obama years, and then they [exploded](#) under Trump with 1,457 designations in the year of 2018 alone. Trump’s multiple “maximum pressure” campaigns represented a dramatic escalation of economic warfare against [Iran](#), [Venezuela](#), [North Korea](#), and [Syria](#), and so far Biden has kept all of them intact. In each case, the US chose to launch these economic wars to try to compel capitulation by the targeted states as if they were rebellious subjects that needed to be brought to heel rather than the sovereign and independent countries that they are.

Economic wars cause the preventable deaths of [tens of thousands](#) of people, and in the most extreme cases they have caused deaths in the hundreds of thousands. The death toll doesn’t fully account for the misery that economic warfare creates, but it reminds us that broad sanctions are coercive and destructive *by design*. The US doesn’t need to resort to military action to cause civilian casualties in unnecessary wars. It just abuses its great economic and financial power to choke intransigent nations when their leaders refuse to bend to Washington’s will.

Placing entire populations under a modern form of siege is intended to cause massive harm to the civilian population. Strangling the people economically is not an unforeseen or unintended “side effect” of an economic war. It is what the siege is supposed to do. Sometimes this is done for the sake of imposing collective punishment on a nation, and sometimes it is an attempt to foment regime change from within, but it always represents an attack by our government on the people of other countries for things they cannot control or change. Broad sanctions strike at every aspect of life. At a [recent event](#) hosted by the Quincy Institute on the [effects of sanctions](#), Prof. Asli Bali said,

“The economic consequences of broad-based sanctions affect health infrastructure, water and sanitation, the possibility of sustaining education, and access to critical foods....Sanctions that we present as ‘starving Assad’ are actually a form of collective punishment that are starving a civilian population.”

Sanctions advocates will often portray broad sanctions as “low cost” and an “alternative to

war,” but the costs they impose are “low” only to the policymakers that inflict the punishment. The people on the receiving end rightly perceive these policies as an aggressive assault on them and their country. Sanctions advocates then add insult to injury by feigning concern for the people whom they have chosen to [starve](#) and [impoverish](#).

Like other wars of choice waged by our government, economic wars against entire countries fail on their own terms. They inflict tremendous hardship and deprivation on tens of millions of people, and in the end they do not even achieve the political and policy goals that their supporters claim to have. Very much like our other wars, broad sanctions on a country never really end. Sanctions are politically easy to impose, and there is almost no pressure on political leaders to lift them. They are applied to so many different issues that even if a targeted state complied with Washington’s demands in one area they would still be sanctioned for other reasons. As we have seen in the case of Iran, a sanctioned government can fully comply with the requirements of an agreement endorsed by the Security Council and the US can still turn around and reimpose its own sanctions with impunity. The arrogant abuse of this power by the US has started to make other major governments look for workarounds to conduct legitimate commerce without suffering US penalties, but for the time being sanctioned countries have to adapt to the sieges and find their own ways to evade them.

Beyond the damage done to the lives and livelihoods of innocent people, economic wars tend to have pernicious political effects on the countries in question. Government officials and cronies tighten their grip on power and use their connections to enrich themselves off of smuggling while most of the population gets poorer, domestic hard-liners use the sanctions as an excuse for cracking down on dissent, and all the while the policies that the US opposes remain the same. In the case of attempted regime change, the targeted leaders become more entrenched, and they can use US hostility to their advantage by casting themselves as nationalist heroes. As with other kinds of war, the result is more authoritarianism and corruption in the government and less freedom for the people. Just as war is the health of the state, economic war is a boon to authoritarian rulers. Sanctions advocates often paint themselves as allies of the people, but their support for collective punishment shows their true colors.

Economic warfare against ordinary people is unjust, and it treats tens of millions of people around the world as our enemies when they have done nothing and could do nothing to us. Sanctions are not an alternative to war. They inflict indiscriminate death and destruction on another country, and in some cases the economic war is just a prelude to later attack. There are certain weapons and tactics that we consider inherently indiscriminate and unjustifiable, and we should apply the same restrictions to sanctions. Broad sanctions are indefensible and cruel, and our government should cease imposing them.

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