Iraq and the Domestic Political Effects of Economic Sanctions

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The recent veneration of the Iraq sanctions program as having prevented Saddam Husayn from obtaining Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) obscures important lessons regarding the program’s political failures. Through an examination of factors such as Iraq’s rationing system and flaws in the sanctions’ design, this article shows how the imposition of sanctions strengthened rather than weakened Husayn’s government. An analysis of the case of Iraq also may provide insights on how other governments have been able to survive lengthy international sanctions or trade embargos.

The debate over the efficacy of the economic sanctions program in Iraq (1990-2003) turned a sharp corner in 2004, as newly found admiration emerged for the program’s ability to penetrate the Iraqi state. First came the February 9, 2004 interview with Mohammed El Baradei in Newsweek, during which the Director General of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) cheered the United Nations Sanctions Committee (UNSC) for its ability to prevent Saddam Husayn from obtaining weapons of mass destruction (WMDs). Then, late that summer, an article appeared in the July/August issue of Foreign Affairs by George Lopez and David Cortright entitled “Containing Iraq: Sanctions Worked.” By October, the Iraq Survey Group released the “Duelfer Report,” which further boosted the arguments of those who had long supported the sanctions program. As a New York Times editorial — titled “The Verdict is In” — followed the report’s release, many began to make the argument that Iraq did not possess WMDs prior to the 2003 invasion because the sanctions program was a success.

In the years since then, both the international media and the American public have concerned themselves far less with the debate over the presence or absence of WMDs in Iraq prior to the 2003 invasion. However, the connection that was widely drawn in 2004 between the absence of WMDs and the overall success of the sanctions program has gone unchallenged — in spite of decades of contentious discussion.
among scholars regarding the efficacy of economic sanctions in general. Interestingly, the excitement which emanated from sanctions supporters upon discovering that Iraq did not have WMDs was neither met with recapitulations of earlier arguments against sanctions or more balanced re-evaluations of the program’s successes and failures. Instead, the absence of WMDs was viewed as new evidence that sanctions in Iraq had been successful.

This article argues that celebrating the Iraq sanctions program due to its alleged WMD-preventing effects should not overshadow the overall failure of the program with respect to its primary goal: to destabilize Husayn’s government. Given that this primary goal was emphasized by every American presidential administration since 1990, it is important to begin asking why the sanctions program failed in this crucial regard. Indeed, although preventing Husayn from obtaining WMDs was certainly an important — albeit lesser — goal of sanctions architects, the success of sanctions in one area does not cloud its failure in another. As this article strives to make clear, the case of Iraq can offer many lessons regarding the domestic political effects of economic sanctions. It would benefit both scholars and policymakers to begin crafting assessments of precisely what the Iraq sanctions program achieved and what it did not — and offer explanations why.

Although the domestic political effects of the sanctions program can be analyzed from different perspectives, this study specifically centers on how the sanctions program expanded the role of the Iraqi state and increased regime stability. After an overview of the sanctions program and the political goals expressed by American administrations, four elements that served to strengthen Husayn’s government are examined: (1) Iraq’s rationing system; (2) increased domestic ideological support and regional empathy during the sanctions; (3) the ability of sanctions to enhance state power and eliminate domestic political threats; (4) international political factors. For all of these elements, this article examines whether this new evidence is relevant to the political goal of sanctions,


political alternatives; and (4) flaws in the design and scope of the sanctions program. Throughout, it is argued that Husayn was able to capitalize on the social, economic, demographic, and emotional effects of sanctions to reap significant political benefits. This study concludes with a call for scholars and policymakers to begin examining the lessons that can be learned from the case of Iraq.

**ECONOMIC SANCTIONS AND POLITICAL GOALS**

On August 6, 1990, the United Nations Security Council passed Resolution 661, immediately implementing economic sanctions as a means of countering Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait just four days prior. While it would eventually take a United States-led military effort to remove Husayn’s army from Kuwait, the end of the First Gulf War and the military defeat of Iraq did not end the sanctions program that was targeted at the country. Extending beyond Resolution 661, the Security Council passed resolutions 687 and 688 in early April of 1991, which outlined additional UN demands upon Husayn’s government regarding weapons inspections, reparations to Kuwait, and the leader’s repression of Iraqi citizens during the post-war period. Though the sanctions program would be further modified over the years, these key 1991 resolutions inaugurated a 13-year period of sanctions that would last until the fall of Husayn’s government during a second United States-led invasion in 2003.

Fulfilling the requirements of the April 1991 resolutions, especially those which dealt with WMDs and weapons inspections, became the official focus of the UNSC. But while Husayn played cat and mouse games with UN weapons inspectors over the years, American administrations continued to express what they interpreted as the broader issue: the need for regime change in Iraq. To be sure, every American presidential administration since 1990 expressed this goal as justification for their willful support of the Iraq sanctions program. Although the UN would never formally include the American policy of pursuing regime change in the language of official resolutions, American leaders made clear to the international community their justification for the continuation of the sanctions program.

For example, on May 20, 1991, shortly after the end of the First Gulf War, George H.W. Bush outlined his administration’s policy toward the sanctions program in Iraq:

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6. Introduced on April 3, 1991, the fourth preambulary clause of Resolution 687 — often called the “Saddam Husayn clause” — refers to “the need to be assured of Iraq’s peaceful intentions.” This clause has often been pointed to as justification for applying sanctions for as long as Husayn remained in power.
“At this juncture, my view is we don’t want to lift these sanctions as long as Saddam Husayn is in power.”7 Under Bill Clinton, the United States government emphasized the same policy, although Clinton occasionally tried to make the distinction that American support for the sanctions program was more due to Husayn’s failure to comply with UN demands. Still, on March 26, 1997, Madeleine Albright put Clinton’s policy in line with that of his predecessor. In her first major foreign policy address as Secretary of State, she said: “We do not agree with the nations who argue that if Iraq complies with its obligations concerning weapons of mass destruction, sanctions should be lifted.”8 During George W. Bush’s first administration and nearly a year prior to the second United States-led invasion, Secretary of State Colin Powell highlighted the United States’ commitment to the long-term goal of using sanctions to remove Husayn from power: “Sanctions and the pressure of sanctions are part of a strategy of regime change, support for the opposition, and reviewing additional options that might be available of a unilateral or multilateral nature.”9

With the removal of the sanctions program in 2003, it is now important to begin assessing the program in light of this primary goal that was continually expressed by American presidential administrations since 1990. But as uncontroversial as this suggestion may seem, many have refrained from evaluating the sanctions program in terms of this goal because it was never an official, UN-endorsed requirement for the removal of sanctions. Yet, with the second invasion of Iraq and subsequent removal of Husayn now in the past, an assessment of the sanctions program in terms of all the consistently highlighted goals is essential for two main reasons: first, in order to craft an objective evaluation of the Iraq sanctions program as a whole; and second, for the purpose of generating a better and more nuanced understanding of economic sanctions as a tool of foreign policy. Below, the study begins with an examination of Iraq’s rationing system and then proceeds on to the other elements that contributed to stabilizing Husayn’s government.

IRAQ’S RATIONING SYSTEM

An analysis of Iraq’s rationing system is essential to understanding how Husayn used the sanctions program to expand governmental authority over the Iraqi population.10 It is also essential to understanding how the sanctions program failed to achieve the expressed goal of regime change. To say the least, the rationing system — established to distribute necessary food and supplies to the population once Iraq’s borders were closed to much of the world — was a totally inadequate system of provision for the Iraqi people. Even by 1992, it was reported that the system itself was allocating only two-thirds of the

amount needed to provide for the population’s daily caloric needs. But, despite some flaws in its design, the rationing system was completely essential to the survival of the Iraqi population and was, in essence, the only system that “saved the bulk of the population from starving.” In addition, it became one of the principal conduits through which Husayn would expand the role of the state and increase his authority over the Iraqi people.

At the outset, it should not be interpreted that the rationing system was established by Husayn as an instrument to exercise greater control over the population during the imposition of sanctions. Instead, the severity and duration of the sanctions program necessitated an authoritative system of allocation that Husayn’s government rationally provided. As a consequence, however, the rationing system reinforced Husayn’s rule by increasing the role of the state in the daily lives of most of the Iraqi population. Simply put, the difference between the average Iraqi’s life before and during the rationing system was that beforehand the people were not directly dependent upon Husayn’s largesse in order to eat. Thus, the imposition of the sanctions program fostered a new relationship between the population and the leader as the Iraqi people began to experience an increased level of subjugation to the state.

The Red Cross/Red Crescent Societies provide important details into how the rationing system operated:

Through government warehouses, silos and distribution points, [food and other] supplies are delivered to more than 50,000 retail agents. Each agent distributes rations every month to hundreds of families, with a nominal fee imposed on each recipient to cover transportation and administrative costs. The food basket includes wheat flour, rice, sugar, oil, pulses, tea, salt, soap, detergent and — for families with children under one — infant formula. Food rations typically last for an average of 20 days in the month, and so require significant supplementing from wages, trading, selling possessions, or community and family networks.

The report goes on to note that “Aid agencies have praised the Iraqi government’s achievements in creating a well-run national rationing system, which has helped to ensure that, despite delays and shortfalls, the vast majority of the Iraqi population has had access to at least a portion of the minimal food basket since sanctions were imposed.”

With Husayn’s government acting as the primary distributor of food and the level of the average Iraqi’s subsistence reduced to a minimum, the rationing system served as a formidable political weapon which gave the leader the opportunity to manipulate large sectors of the population.\textsuperscript{16} Although food riots and massive shortages occurred early on, and many Iraqis in the opposition (both in Iraq and abroad) were well aware that Husayn was capitalizing on the domestic situation that sanctions had created,\textsuperscript{17} a popular revolt was avoided. Scattered uprisings also took place in the months during and after the First Gulf War, but the presence of the rationing system was able to eliminate popular revolt as a viable option during these years. As Abdullah Mutawi explains, “the risk of having rations withdrawn [was] too high a price for dissent.”\textsuperscript{18} Geoff Simons also points out, “Control over food confers ultimate power: prevent people from eating for a few weeks and they will not cause you much trouble thereafter.”\textsuperscript{19} Indeed, even for Iraqis in the middle class that might have more effectively mobilized against Husayn’s government, immediate needs focused on daily survival and worked against an impetus to overthrow the government.

Once Husayn accepted the terms of the UN’s “Oil-for-Food” Program in 1996 — whereby the country was allowed to sell its oil on the international market in exchange for food, medicine, and other essentials — the original rationing system was replaced with a new one that increased the average Iraqi’s daily caloric intake by almost 50%. Although most Iraqis were now better off than before, these rations were subsequently deemed “inadequate and unbalanced” by the UN’s Food and Agriculture Organization/World Food Program after a 1997 mission to the country.\textsuperscript{20} Additionally, food and medicine still remained in short supply and the fundamental power structures that supported the rationing system were still in place. For that matter, the leader’s acquiescence to the UN’s proposal was not an acceptance of defeat or marked the ability of sanctions to force major concessions from Husayn’s government. Instead, the agreement came in sheer desperation after a low agricultural output nearly collapsed the country’s rationing system in 1994 and again in 1995. As the Iraqi economy was on the brink of failure, Husayn made a last-ditch effort to force the UN to immediately remove the sanctions by threatening to reinvade Kuwait. With the UN refusing to budge, Husayn accepted the Oil-for-Food resolution.

**EXPANDING STATE POWER THROUGH RATIONS AND IDEOLOGY**

The sanctions program and the government’s rationing system served as a constant reminder of the population’s dependence on the Iraqi state. To gauge the extent of

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the role that sanctions actually played in the daily lives of ordinary Iraqis, Denis Halliday, UN Humanitarian Coordinator in Iraq from 1997 to 1998, stated in an interview that “the sanctions regime … is paramount in everybody’s life and mind every hour of the day. It never goes away. The impact is constant.” While the UN sought to enforce the sanctions by trying to tighten borders and restrict the flow of goods into the country, Husayn continually attacked the sanctions program through a variety of methods. For instance, public speeches showcased anti-United States and anti-UN rhetoric and were combined with an overt display of nationalistic symbols to help rally the Iraqi population in support of his leadership against the West. Frequently utilizing Manichean imagery, Husayn continually sought to expose what he interpreted as the inherent hypocrisy and injustice of the sanctions program and portrayed the country as being pinned under a rock by a merciless international community. The ongoing imposition of the sanctions program was explained to the people through the Iraqi leader’s expositions on American imperialism, solidifying the connection between the two in the minds of many Iraqis at the time.

Indeed, as many analysts have remarked, Husayn was able to score major victories in the internal propaganda war. While the UN continually reiterated the notion that “it is Iraqi government policy, not sanctions, that is killing Iraqis,” the fact remained that the leader enjoyed a level of authority over and experienced a proximity to the Iraqi population that no Western nation or international organization ever could have. And like any rational ruler, he played to this advantage and utilized public speeches as opportunities to clarify who he viewed as the “real enemy” of the Iraqi population. For example, on August 5, 1991, Husayn addressed the Iraqi people:

They have imposed sanctions on us under the pretext of demanding our withdrawal from Kuwait. Now that we are out of Kuwait, why should the economic blockade continue? Look how much they hate you. How can man live if he does not eat? … There are organizations in the West for the welfare of cats and dogs, to protect and feed them … They are starving 18 million Iraqi people.

To be sure, it was important for the sake of maintaining political legitimacy for Husayn to convince the Iraqi people that sanctions were imposed because the UN — operating as an instrument of the United States — sought the demise of all Iraqis.

22. Here is an excerpt from a speech delivered in September 1996 after the US cruise missile attacks during the Kurdish civil war: “The free peoples of the world and the sons of our glorious Arab nation can rest assured that proud, glorious and defiant Iraq is safe. Iraq is as powerful as high mountains. It will not be shaken by the winds of evil; neither will it be frightened, God willing, by the hiss of vipers.” The “winds of evil” and the “hiss of vipers,” of course, refer to the attacks from the United States. “Transcript of Saddam Hussein’s Speech to Iraqis,” CNN, September 3, 1996, http://www.cnn. com/WORLD/9609/03/saddam.transcript/.
For himself and the Iraqi people, he invoked the image of martyrs who were unfairly singled out and perpetually vilified by the West. Husayn’s government highlighted this image through an increased display of Husayn paired with nationalistic symbols and an emphasis on the virtues of martyrdom and redemptive suffering during public speeches. Although it is speculation, Husayn may have consciously chosen the theme of suffering and martyrdom in order to directly appeal to the Shi’ite majority for whom these themes have particular religious and historical significance.

As an example of this, in a national address delivered on January 17, 1998, Husayn said:

Harm might be done to Iraq, and blood might be shed on its land in larger or smaller amount[s] than before, and cases of martyrdom increase among those who will be bitten by the snakes of perfidy and embargo, and the roll of the wheel of development might suffer to some extent and to a certain degree but, Iraq … will remain. What Iraq is losing as a result of the aggression and sanctions will be recompensed from the momentum it gains from steadfastness and resistance as well as from the spiritual lessons and meanings inherited in the history of humanity.

In this speech and throughout his public addresses, it was important for Husayn to work toward solidifying a symbolic link between his leadership and the population as long as the sanctions program was in place. Together, he would suggest, they would wage what he called a “grand jihad” for the lifting of the sanctions program. Psychologically as well, this link between Husayn and the population was solidified on no less than a daily basis through the rationing system.

While Husayn enjoyed significant domestic political gains directly due to the sanctions program, other forces at the time were working in his favor as well. For one, many Middle Eastern leaders experience a surge of popularity from large segments of the population when they invoke nationalism while vocally opposing any Western nations that are perceived to be meddling in their domestic affairs. As Tim Niblock argues:

If the [Husayn] regime has projected itself to the population through an ideology built around nationalism, where external powers (especially Western powers) are seen as imperialist crusaders intent on undermining local sovereignty and indigenous interests, then the imposition of Western-orchestrated UN sanctions will reinforce the regime’s central ideological message.

In a situation such as that offered by the sanctions program, one might also wonder if a government needs a well-articulated central ideological message to experience political gains. Especially for Husayn (who struggled with implementing a consistent political ideology throughout his rule), the imposition of sanctions and the pitting of the Iraqi nation against the West meant that he could move away from a combination of Ba‘th ide-

25. Invoking public images and rhetoric of martyrdom as a means of rousing nationalism and bolstering government legitimacy is a strategy that is obviously not unique to the Middle East. It is often invoked in Muslim countries because the virtues of martyrdom and redemptive suffering are important religious and cultural elements.

26. A number of Husayn’s speeches can be found at the website http://www.al-moharer.net.

als, Arab ethnicity, Iraqi nationalism, and Islam while retaining his political prominence and maintaining legitimacy. Though underlining the common denominators for most Iraqis (in particular, Iraqi nationalism and Islam) would lubricate the legitimating process, Husayn’s work was made easier due to the severity and duration of the sanctions program. Unlike many leaders in the region both past and present, Husayn did not have to practice a tenuous ideological balancing act. Instead, he could benefit from a “rally ‘round the flag” effect which was reinforced by blunt invocations of Iraqi nationalism and a common Islamic identity, peppered with denunciations of the United States and the UN.

The political opportunity brought about by the imposition of sanctions could not have occurred at a better time for Husayn. With his power base eroding during the late 1980s after a war with Iran cost the country hundreds of thousands of lives with no territorial or material gain, the constraints imposed by the UNSC became an opportunity for Husayn to focus on a different threat to the country. Through daily reminders of the powerful impact of the sanctions in the form of the ration, Husayn’s anti-West rhetoric was realized, and through it he was able to enhance his rule and reduce the chance of economic sanctions deteriorating support for his leadership. Importantly as well, it put the international community on the defensive and suggested that the UN’s initial intent in imposing sanctions were perhaps less humane than originally thought. With Husayn providing an effective spin, whatever altruism that was originally felt toward the Iraqi population by the sanctions’ architects in the West was completely lost in the reality of daily life under the sanctions.

The imposition of sanctions also allowed Husayn to locate additional allies beyond Iraq’s borders. Though some of this external support was indiscernible from the otherwise present opposition to any form of Western involvement in Middle Eastern affairs, the Iraqi leader did find ideological support among the citizens of many other regional states. As James Bill and Robert Springborg note,

> It is not often realized that the majority of citizens in several Arab countries – in-


29. Husayn’s “return to Islam,” observed since 1990, was witnessed by his added inscription of *Allahu Akbar* (“God is great”) on the Iraqi flag, news footage of him praying, and the placing of murals devoted to his image at holy sites such as the Mosque of ‘Ali. By emphasizing Iraq’s Muslim identity, Husayn not only drew a line of connection between himself and the increasing numbers of pious Muslims in Iraqi society, but also played to the familiar tune of a Muslim nation under attack from the West. Although some remarked that Husayn’s return to Islam contradicted the largely secularist principles of the Ba’th Party, the leader was pursuing a common strategy for governments when their legitimacy begins to erode. See Richard Dekmejian, “The Anatomy of Islamic Revivalism: Legitimacy Crisis, Ethnic Conflict and the Search for Islamic Alternatives,” *The Middle East Journal*, Vol. 34, No. 1 (Winter 1980), pp. 1-12.

30. As an example of how Husayn utilized both Islam and Iraqi nationalism to rally the population behind his government see his speech on January 17, 2003, delivered two months prior to the second United States-led invasion, available at http://www.guardian.co.uk/Iraq/Story/0,,877046,00.html.

including Jordan, Yemen, and those of Northwest Africa – identified with many of Saddam’s arguments and criticized the international coalition that rushed to the aid of Kuwait. Saddam appealed quite effectively to the ‘poor Arabs’ who lacked both financial resources and power, and to Moroccans, Algerians, and Tunisians, whose countries had experienced brutal treatment at the hands of French colonialism.32

Indeed, Husayn’s resilience appealed to many who had watched their own country undergo exploitative relationships with the West, and it should be understood that his overtly anti-West political posturing was more admired by individuals in the region than may first be assumed. In addition, it is important to recall that there was substantial international support to end the sanctions due to the humanitarian disaster that had rapidly unfolded as a result.33 For many, both inside and outside the region, the lengthy imposition of sanctions led to empathy for Husayn’s situation in addition to anger over his intransigence.

With respect to other governments in the region, as long as the sanctions program remained in place, Husayn was the embodiment of an unwavering animosity toward the United States that was not totally denounced by other Middle Eastern leaders. From the perspectives of other regional governments who were classified by the United States as “rogue states” during the 1990s — i.e., Afghanistan, Iran, Libya, and Pakistan — there was a need for someone like Husayn in the world because he represented a total resistance to the United States. In this way, Husayn was understood as a highly effective obstacle to increased Western (especially American and British) intervention in the region, and thus his presence as Iraq’s leader was tacitly supported by many regional states. It can also be argued that this wider support for Husayn gave him greater confidence in his broad opposition to the UNSC’s demands.

An indicator of the regional support for Husayn in the 1990s is found in the considerable number of governments and leaders — e.g., Jordan, Libya, Sudan, and Yasir ‘Arafat’s administration — that voiced support for him during the First Gulf War. Also, during the duration of the sanctions program, Iraq renewed diplomatic relations with Bahrain, Oman, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). For certain, the formal and informal support from regional leaders may seem odd because the Iraqi leader had a proven record of expansionism and aggression in the region. However, most countries in the Middle East after the First Gulf War were clearly not interested in investing the resources to try and forcibly remove Husayn from power. One might explain this as due to sheer military weakness or respect for Iraq’s national sovereignty, yet it can also be argued that three other mechanisms were at play: first, there was a general atmosphere of support among many Middle Eastern leaders for the bastion of anti-Western opposition that Husayn under sanctions represented; second, the imposition of sanctions in Iraq led to an immediate deepening of Iraq’s trade relationships with other regional

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states; and finally, Husayn was able to monopolize the United States’ antagonism and thus drew attention away from other states that were previously under Western scrutiny.

ELIMINATING POLITICAL ALTERNATIVES

The aftershock of the First Gulf War was followed by revolts of the Kurds and Shi‘ites, as well as fragments of Husayn’s own government. The Iraqi leader used excessive force to put down these movements successfully, and by 1992 Husayn’s leadership was largely stabilized. While it is clear that violent repression was Husayn’s main solution to any political opposition, it can be shown that the sanctions program had an additional effect of frustrating many potentially destabilizing movements in Iraq. Indeed, it is important to recognize that the sanctions program brought forth marked changes in the distribution of wealth and demographic composition of Iraqi society due to the new importance placed on the power to control the flow of necessary goods. Thus, while the sanctions program was helping Husayn by expanding his authority and increasing ideological support for his rule, it also eliminated the social forces that would have been necessary to destabilize the government.

The imposition of the sanctions program essentially divided Iraqi society into two main groups: those who were weakened by the sanctions and those who were strengthened by the sanctions. Those who were closest to Husayn’s government (in terms of social status and familial ties) were able to “escape the bite” of sanctions, while the bulk of the country suffered and largely subsisted at the margins. As this division of Iraqi society became more defined as the sanctions were prolonged, the country was essentially transformed back into the oppressive feudal state controlled by landowners and leaders that (ironically) the Ba‘th party had sought to liberate the country from during the 1960s.

The most immediate evidence of this process was with respect to members of the country’s recently urban unemployed and lower classes, who increasingly found themselves going back into the farming sector where jobs were more stable, higher paying, and subsidized by the government. However, this occupational shift became both an economic and political windfall for large landlords in the country, “[raising] their social and official status by restoring the administrative and financial powers they enjoyed before the 1968 Baathist coup.” Rationally, Husayn strove to bring these wealthy landlords into his fold and, unsurprisingly, these elites would soon become the

34. During the sanctions program, Iraq increased its trade with Bahrain, Egypt, Lebanon, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, and the UAE. In 2000, there were reported “signs of thaw or improvement in trade relations between Iraq and Jordan, Turkey, Malaysia, Pakistan, Indonesia, and other Arab and Muslim countries” (See “Iraq Woos Arab, European States to Walk Out of Isolation,” Xinhua News Agency, July 18, 2000). Also see Raad Alkadiri, “The Iraqi Klondike: Oil and Regional Trade,” Middle East Report, Vol. 220 (Fall 2001), pp. 30-35.
35. Removing the Iraqi military and government personnel from the Kurdish region in late 1991 further helped Husayn in this respect, given that he had violently clashed with the Kurds numerous times since coming to power.
36. See Niblock, “The Regional and Domestic Political Consequences of Sanctions,” p. 64.
most ardent supporters of his government.

A further, and more politically consequential, transformation of Iraqi society occurred when thousands of members of the professional middle classes dropped into the lower classes almost overnight. As the Iraqi dinar nose-dived throughout the early 1990s, the professional middle classes were decimated and those respected, educated, and essential members of a modernizing Iraqi state were reduced to taxi drivers or forced to work two or three full-time jobs to make ends meet. Thousands of engineers, doctors, and lawyers either fled the country, remained unemployed, or were forced to rely on family remittances to survive. Family savings were now worthless, salaries stagnated, and hyperinflation mounted. At the same time, the sanctions invented an entirely new class comprised of smugglers and distributors who played a role that was essential to the population’s survival. Thus, as the imposition of sanctions eliminated the political power of the country’s middle classes — what was described as “the foremost potential source of opposition to [Husayn’s] dictatorial regime” — while inflating the power of a few thousand landowners, smugglers, and those nearest to Husayn’s orbit, the Iraqi leader enhanced his power throughout the 1990s and prevented the emergence of any real opposition to the government.

Yet as William Kaempfer and Anton Lowenberg point out, the potential of economic sanctions to spur collective action among domestic interest groups and civil society is precisely the main avenue through which sanctions cause their desired political effects. This being said, Susan Allen recently has argued that “In autocratic states, economic sanctions can have the perverse consequence of strengthening the regime in power, increasing its ability to limit the activities of opposition forces.” In the case of Iraq, the social, economic, and demographic outcomes of sanctions clearly worked against the possibility of popular opposition emerging to contest Husayn’s government. Without a real fear of revolt post-1991, Husayn was presented with a situation whereby he had both the opportunity and the time to seek out ways in which to further bolster his authority and stabilize his government.

**FLAWS IN THE DESIGN AND SCOPE OF SANCTIONS**

It is also important to examine features of the sanctions program itself that were flawed. Principally, three characteristics were most relevant: (1) the comprehensiveness of the program; (2) the ill-defined demands that were made on the Iraqi leader; and (3) the prolonged duration of the program. Together, these characteristics of the sanctions program worked to hamper any destabilization of Husayn’s government and instead allowed the leader to reinforce his hold on power.

In the first respect, the sheer breadth of the sanctions program is part of the reason why it produced the direct opposite of its intended effects on domestic politics in Iraq. Initially at least, the sanctions program was applied as a strategy of total and com-

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plete economic asphyxiation pertaining to all imports and exports outside of meager foodstuffs and medicine. Once the UN announced the sanctions program, Husayn expressed outrage at their rigidity and demanded the complete dismantling of the entire program — a stance he maintained throughout its entire duration. But as inhumane as Husayn’s resilience in the face of a rapidly deteriorating Iraqi nation appeared to Western leaders, many scholars observed rationality in his behavior. Writing in 1994, Abbas Alnasrawi explains Husayn’s endurance:

Such demands are viewed as so stringent that the present regime cannot possibly comply with them and remain in power. The Baath regime seems to have adopted the position that after surviving the war, simultaneous rebellions in two-thirds of the provinces, and three years of sanctions, there is little reason to accept these resolutions now.

Consequently, until the Oil-for-Food Program in 1996, Husayn refused all sanctions resolutions and simply dismissed them as tyrannical, inhumane, and hypocritical. Yet as resolutely as the Iraqi leader denounced the sanctions, the UN, the United States, and Britain also remained steadfast. In spite of the numerous historical instances where sanctions programs with other countries fell short of meeting their desired political goals, the United States hoped that the resulting magnitude of economic devastation brought upon by asphyxiating sanctions would cause Husayn to bend. Although certainly clearer in retrospect, the United States and the UN’s approach to Iraq was asking far too much from a leader that had been shown in prior times to go to the limits when necessary — as was witnessed during the war of attrition with Iran that consumed the country during the 1980s.

To be sure, the blame for the failure of sanctions due to their comprehensiveness lies in the hands of policymakers who failed to consider the possibility that wide-ranging sanctions would not work and a military invasion would be the only means of removing Husayn from power. Aside from the many examples of the inability of sanctions to bring forth political changes in their targeted state, Gary Hufbauer noted to the United States Congress on December 19, 1990: “Policymakers often have inflated expectations of what sanctions can accomplish. Sanctions are seldom effective … in

43. On using “food as a weapon” during sanctions see Franklin Lavin, “Asphyxiation or Oxygen?: The Sanctions Dilemma,” Foreign Policy (Fall 1996), pp. 139-53.


45. Between 1970 and 1990, economic sanctions in which the United States took part were successful in just 21% of the cases. In cases where the sanctions were imposed unilaterally by the United States, the success rate was even lower, 13% (see Kimberly Ann Elliott, “Evidence on the Costs and Benefits of Economic Sanctions,” Speech given before the Subcommittee on Trade Committee on Ways and Means, United States House of Representatives, Washington, DC, October 23, 1997).


47. Lektzian and Sprecher provide quantitative evidence that the use of sanctions “significantly increases” the probability that a militarized dispute will follow between the sanctions sender and the targeted state. See David J. Lektzian and Christopher M. Sprecher, “Sanctions, Signals, and Militarized Conflict,” American Journal of Political Science, Vol. 51, No. 2 (March 2007), pp. 415-431.
Undoubtedly, the goal of regime change can be classified as the most difficult aspiration of an economic sanctions program — and yet, American administrations never refrained from using this ultimate objective to justify the continuation of the program.

Secondly, another problem was that the UN requirements to end the sanctions program changed over time and included highly specific demands alongside vaguely general demands. Indeed, many analysts at the time observed that the sanctions program was constantly “moving the goalposts.” Initially, the UN implemented the sanctions program in order to coerce Husayn to withdraw from Kuwait, but shortly after the United States-led invasion, the UN decided to up the ante to gain control over the post-war atmosphere as well as address additional concerns. During the 1990s, the UN added other terms under the sanctions program, specifically: (1) a payment of war reparations to Kuwait; (2) a cessation to Husayn’s aggressive activities in the region and within the country; (3) an end to the government’s holding of war hostages and political prisoners; (4) an end to human rights violations; (5) addressing the lack of democratic institutions; and (6) ending the country’s pursuance of WMDs, including chemical and biological weapons. Though UN and American leaders felt that all of these concerns were critical to address, many of them were immediately criticized as being both ill-defined and hypocritical — both in terms of the United States’ own activities as well as in comparison to the activities of other countries who were not subject to sanctions. For that matter, most of the terms were unrealistic. Halliday remarked in an interview that this constant alteration to the list of demands gives:

... [This sense that “whatever we do will not be enough”] is exactly the feeling among the ministers that I know and the technocrats in the ministries throughout Baghdad. They think it’s [the removal of sanctions] a lost cause, and there’s nothing they can do that will satisfy the US, which they recognize as the main proponent, so to speak, of this policy.

Quite possibly, demands that were more specific and not enforced under a discriminatory approach would have had a far greater chance of succeeding. Had the UN adopted a sanctions program that was more category-specific and providing greater incentives to Husayn, one could envision the Iraqi leader potentially coming to the discussion table. For example, the UN could have tied the removal of sanctions regarding non-military-related goods to Husayn’s agreement to furnish war reparations to Kuwait. For that matter, instead of trying to shut off the spigots of Iraq’s oil industry all at once, a sanctions program that was based on a series of step-wise agreements — that would open outside doors to Iraqi oil as Husayn agreed to more demands — would

49. For example, from Global Policy Forum: “Many at the UN have spoken of ‘moving the goalposts,’ but the metaphor of precise goalposts is itself misleading, since criteria [for the lifting of the sanctions] have never been clear,” http://www.globalpolicy.org/component/content/article/170/41947.html.
have had a chance of being more successful.

For certain, it is impossible to know if such approaches would have worked better, and it may be unlikely that any middle-order deal would have been struck. However, it must be recognized that Husayn was not completely averse to deal-making, even when it involved making considerable concessions on his part. Accepting the “no-fly zone” over southern Iraq, the reassignment of northern Iraq as a de facto American protectorate in 1991, and occasional compliance with the UN weapons monitors over the years indicate that Husayn was willing to comply at times with demands from the UN and the United States. Unfortunately, it was impossible to tell which issues Husayn would be flexible on. Yet implementing a more step-wise sanctions program that relied on incentives would have fostered, at a minimum, a more productive dialogue between the UN, the United States, and Iraq than that which persisted for over a decade. Indeed, a laundry list of demands that needed to be addressed before sanctions were to be removed was unlikely to have been acted upon favorably by any world leader.

Finally, the factor of time often can work against the achievement of sanctions’ goals, and in the case of Iraq this was clearly an issue. Richard Haass refers to the high likelihood of “sanctions fatigue” arising among nations, whereby the original gusto of the sanctions-imposing coalition weakens as innocent civilians suffer while the targeted country’s leaders escape affliction. Additionally, the possibility of slippage emerges as the country’s borders become increasingly permeable after a lengthy imposition of sanctions. In the case of Iraq, the influence of the United States prevented Haass’ concern from materializing; however, it is evident that the sanctions program’s lengthy time span did allow smugglers and middlemen to begin to play a valuable role in providing those goods that sanctions typically seek to target. With help from this vibrant underground market — alongside a great deal of ingenuity, adaptation, and simple resignation on the part of the people — the Iraqi population found ways to circumvent the sanctions program over time.

Survival on this kind of a level undeniably presented formidable challenges to nearly all members of the population — for the lower sectors of the population especially so. Even for those who had been used to life at the margins during the eight-year war with Iran, the sanctions program emerged as a particularly trying time for a nation that seemed perpetually in crisis. But for these marginalized individuals — who the United States hoped would represent a sector that potentially could be mobilized against Husayn — the sanctions failed to have any politicizing effect. In part due to the impact of the rationing system and the effect of sanctions on state-society relationships outlined above, even for a population that was experiencing a tremendous level of social chaos and economic deprivation over such a prolonged period, sanctions failed to stir a revolutionary movement. Indeed, the futility of the sanctions program began to be understood by UN authorities as the years went on, despite the maintained stance from both the American and British governments.

In the final analysis, it can be argued that the scope and design of the sanctions program contributed to the process of strengthening, instead of weakening, Husayn’s

53. During the late 1990s, two consecutive directors of the UN Oil-for-Food Program, Denis Halliday and Hans von Sponeck, as well as the Director of the World Food Program in Iraq, Jutta Burghardt, resigned in protest to the humanitarian disaster that sanctions had created.
government. Though the United States hoped that Husayn would cave in to their demands at some point during the economic and social decay, policy should have been altered after observing the unaffected attitude that Husayn’s government assumed just a few years into the program. Even at times when the Iraqi population’s deprivation was at its highest, Husayn continued to display acts of aggression and intransigence toward UN demands. Both Husayn’s 1996 attacks in the Kurdish city of Irbil and his frequent refusals to allow UN weapons inspectors into the country throughout the 1990s prove that sanctions had not weakened his government or altered his style of repression and unwillingness to acquiesce on certain issues.

**CONCLUSION**

In spite of the arguments that have been laid out above regarding the political failures of the Iraq sanctions program, some studies give a reason to be mildly optimistic about the ability of sanctions (or the threat of sanctions) to affect changes in targeted states. This being said, however, even these studies are also apt to point out the failure of economic sanctions in a case like Iraq, which emerges as a “highly atypical outlier.” While in many ways Iraq’s experience with sanctions can be regarded as unique, it also may serve as an important reference point for studies that examine the domestic political dynamics in other countries that experienced a lengthy imposition of sanctions, such as Libya, South Africa, and Cuba.

For policymakers, however, such studies do not need to be conducted before the cautionary lessons from Iraq are heeded. Although using “smart sanctions” to target states recently has been suggested as one alternative, there is still much skepticism that such sanctions can even be properly implemented. For that matter, the findings from Susan Allen warrant greater skepticism as to the possibility that economic sanctions targeted against strongly autocratic states, in particular, will result in bottom-up mobilization from the population. As the author notes, “If sanctions senders are hoping to inspire acts of discontent to threaten leaders, particularly autocrats, they are likely to be disappointed.” In a world where sanctions can become less a humane alternative to war than simply a different kind of war, the case of Iraq offers an important example of how sanctions can produce the direct opposite of their intended domestic political effects.

54. For instance, see Drezner, “The Hidden Hand” and Marinov, “Do Economic Sanctions Destabilize.” Drezner finds that the threat of sanctions is more successful in altering the behavior of states than the actual implementation of sanctions. Marinov finds in a panel study of 136 countries over 37 years that the imposition of sanctions in a given year makes the leader of the targeted state “significantly more likely to lose power in the following year.”


56. For a review of the literature on smart sanctions and critique of this particular policy alternative see Arne Tostensen and Beate Bull, “Are Smart Sanctions Feasible?” *World Politics*, Vol. 54 (April 2002), pp. 373-403. Also see Cortright and Lopez, *The Sanctions Decade*.
