

Are sanctions better than war? Iraqi students respond

Claire Schaeffer-Duffy | Jul. 9, 2012 NCR Today

After reading the debate in *Commonweal* about the sanctions imposed on Iraq from 1990 to 2003 ("Better than War?" Feb. 10), eight Iraqi students, ages 18-23, responded. The students belong to the [Iraqi Student Project](#) [1] and are in Damascus, Syria, for nine months of preparation in hopes of gaining undergraduate scholarships to U.S. colleges. As guests of Syria, where more than a million Iraqi refugees now reside, they are ironically living once again under sanctions.

The July 2 issue of *Commonweal* published excerpts from three students' responses to the articles by Joy Gordon, Margaret O'Brien Steinfels and George Lopez. Well-written and forceful, the students' reflections describe the human consequences of a policy that we blithely imposed, clueless of its import. Their accounts are especially relevant given the current use of sanctions on Iran.

Here's an excerpt from what a student, identified as Hasan, wrote:

Reading the original UN Resolution 661, I would have signed it myself to stop the Iraqi aggression on Kuwait. The resolution's original aim was to force the Iraqi government to leave Kuwait, and that's when it received acceptance from the thirteen countries that voted for it in the Security Council. The question then was: Would it be war or sanctions? War did happen. And war accomplished the objective of the nations that voted for resolution 661: to force Iraqi troops out of Kuwait. The sanctions role was over once their purpose was met. Nonetheless, the sanctions persisted and were markedly exploited by the United States -- and maybe other countries too.

Margaret Steinfels writes that 'the quick defeat obviously demonstrated that the sanctions had succeeded in eliminating the WMD and hollowing out Iraq's army.' But the Iraqi army was not a robust and threatening force even before the sanctions. In the decade prior to the sanctions, Iraq fought an eight-year war with its neighbor Iran. Most of the time, the Iranian forces were on the offensive, while Iraq struggled. So what should we expect from a war against the world's superior military power, a country with ten times its population- a war fought with antiquated tanks and weapons largely ineffective against high-tech American weaponry?

The sanctions were utterly ineffective in ousting Saddam. He still lived in palaces, was well fed, and had a fleet of armored Mercedes vehicles. He misdirected resources that should have gone to the Iraqi people. Nonetheless, even if these resources had been divided equally among Iraqis, the sanctions would have left each Iraqi with only \$204 a year. Saddam was not responsible for the humanitarian crisis; his irresponsibility only increased it.

It was clearly stated in the UN resolution that the sanctions would not affect food imports or humanitarian aid. In reality, the sanctions hit poor, middle class, and even wealthy Iraqis hard. Unemployment skyrocketed. Factories closed. Raw materials that could create jobs or help industry were blocked. Teachers received salaries as low as \$2 a month. My father, a retired officer, received about fifteen cents a

month in pension. People had no food to eat. My family lived for months on bread and yogurt, tea and dates. The rate of malnutrition soared. So did death rates, especially among children. Simple medications were being held off, as they were somehow magically connected to manufacturing weapons. Education deteriorated. Our schoolbooks were torn and overused. University lab experiments came to a stop.

Saddam failed to use diplomacy to solve his country's economic downfall. America failed to use diplomacy to restrain him and to protect the Iraqi people. The sanctions, whatever their purpose, only caused harm to the population. Therefore they were absurd, not smart, sanctions.

The full story [can be read here](#) [2]. (Note: You must be a *Commonweal* subscriber to read the whole article.)

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[1] <http://iraqistudentproject.org>

[2] <http://commonwealmagazine.org/what-sanctions-did-iraq>