Sanctions – Tool for Non-Violent Coercion or Economic Weapon?

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"*It is not the hunger of women, children and the poorest and weakest that troubles the war-making elements. The well-to-do, the powerful, and the army will always have enough even under a blockade famine."* Emily Balch, Women's International League for Peace and Freedom,1924, opposing sanctions use.

Amongst those who care about situations of injustice and conflict around the world, in our church and the broader community, there can be a quick reflex to call for sanctions on the offending party, whether they are a military aggressor or a human rights-abusing regime. The following sheet is to invite caution before supporting calls for sanctions. The most detailed analysis of the use of sanctions by governments suggests that they contribute to the intended impact on the target approximately one-third of the time. However, the rate of success is impacted by many factors, as outlined below.

In almost all cases, the use of sanctions causes unintended harmful impacts. At the most extreme end, sanctions can result in the mass murder of hundreds of thousands of vulnerable civilians through starvation, denial of clean water and denial of health care. They can also cause ruthless backlash against those in the target country that oppose the regime. When considering support for sanctions, it is definitely a case of "be careful what you wish for."

Effective sanctions are overwhelmingly a coercive tool used by powerful governments to force smaller governments or regimes to bend to their will. The median Gross National Product (GNP) of countries applying sanctions is 105 times that of the target countries. As Nicholas Mulder outlined, those who advocated the development of modern sanctions after World War I believed that total war would be necessary and that sanctions were an economic weapon that allowed an entire population to be targeted, holding that population responsible for the actions of their government.[1]

When do sanctions work

Researchers from the Peterson Institute for International Economics reviewed 174 cases of governments and multilateral bodies using economic sanctions from World War I to the 2010s in their work "Economic Sanctions Reconsidered". They argued that sanctions were more likely to work when:[2]

- The aim is modest, such as freeing political prisoners (where the success rate was 50%, compared to the average rate of 30%);
- Threats of military action or war back them up;
- The target government had a friendly relationship with the government applying the sanctions. Less than 20% of cases of the use of sanctions worked where the government imposing the sanctions previously had a hostile relationship with the government being targeted;
- The target government is a democracy;
- The sanctions are applied as harshly as possible right from the start, rather than ratcheting them up over time, more like a sledgehammer than a thumbscrew. Sanctions that are ratcheted up over time are less likely to work as they allow the target government to find alternative suppliers, build new international alliances and rally support in the country, appealing to national unity against outside interference. Generally, sanctions are less likely to work the longer they are applied for; and,
- Those applying the sanctions do not seek unnecessary support from other countries to apply the sanctions. Seeking support for sanctions from reluctant allies can lead to watering down the sanctions and weakening their effectiveness.

The Peterson Institute for International Economics found that "smart sanctions", those that seek to only target leaders in the target regime and their cronies without harming vulnerable civilians, are generally a symbolic signalling device to express disapproval, but typically fail to provide coercive pressure.[3] For example, sanctions targeted at Russian oligarchs who support Putin after the invasion of Ukraine failed to create any detectable pressure on Putin. When the oligarch Oleg Tinkov criticised the war on Instagram, he was forced by Putin to sell his $13 billion bank at a fire sale price and go into hiding.[4]

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[1] Nicholas Mulder, "The Economic Weapon. The Rise of Sanctions as a Tool of Modern War", (2022).
[2] Gary Clyde Hufbauer, Jeffrey KJ. Schott, Kimberly Ann Elliott and Barbara Oegg, "Economic Sanctions Reconsidered", 3rd Edition, (2019), 158-177.
[3] Ibid., 138-139.
[4] Bruce W. Jentleson, "Sanctions: What everyone needs to know", (2022), 100.

Examples of Brutal Sanctions
The most brutal use of sanctions in recent history was those imposed by the UN Security Council against the civilian population of Iraq in the 1990s. They were estimated to be responsible for the mass murder of up to 1.5 million Iraqi civilians, including 750,000 children aged under five years old.[5]

During World War I, British and French sanctions were responsible for the mass death of 300,000 – 400,000 civilians through starvation and illness in Central Europe. A further 500,000 civilians were murdered through British and French sanctions applied to Ottoman Syria provinces in the Middle East, representing 18% of the civilian population of the region.[6]

Israeli Government sanctions were applied to Gaza from 2006 after Hamas won the Palestinian elections, including cutting off revenue. Annual per capita income in Gaza fell from $2,050 in 2005 to $1,450 by 2015. A UN report in 2016 described Gaza as "effectively unlivable". An Israeli Government official stated the main aim of the sanctions is to cause civilian suffering, so there is no prosperity or development.[7] The sanctions have been supported by Egyptian Governments and the Fateh-led Palestinian Authority, which have sought to have Hamas give up the reins of government in Gaza.

Examples of Successful Sanctions
The sanctions applied to South Africa from 1962 to 1993 that ended Apartheid are the gold standard of a sanctions success, being used to back up a broad-based non-violent civil resistance movement.

Other successful examples include:
- US sanctions against the UK, France and Israel in 1956 to force them to withdraw from Egypt after they seized the Suez Canal; and,
- The 1973 OPEC oil embargo targeted at the US and the Netherlands, which resulted in the US applying pressure on Israel to make some concessions towards peace with the Palestinians.

Examples of Failed Sanctions
There are a large number of cases where sanctions have failed, such as:[8]
- Sanctions to force Pakistan not to develop nuclear weapons. Pakistani Prime Minister Nawar Sharif responded that the people of Pakistan would "eat grass" before Pakistan would give up its nuclear weapons;
- US sanctions to force regime change in Iran and Cuba, despite inflicting harsh suffering on the people of both countries; and,
- US sanctions to force North Korea to give up its nuclear weapons program.

Reading List
- Jan Van Aken, "How Wars End: A Hopeful History of Making Peace", (2025) has a chapter on the use of sanctions for those with more limited time.
- Bruce W. Jentleson, "Sanctions: What everyone needs to know", (2022) is an accessible and comprehensive guide to sanctions and the key governments and multilateral organisations that have used them giving numerous examples of success and failure.
- Gary Clyde Hufbauer, Jeffrey KJ. Schott, Kimberly Ann Elliott and Barbara Oegg, "Economic Sanctions Reconsidered", 3rd Edition, (2019). The book provides a detailed statistical assessment of the use of sanctions from World War I to the 2010s.
- Nicholas Mulder, "The Economic Weapon. The Rise of Sanctions as a Tool of Modern War", (2022), is a detailed work that covers the development of the use of economic sanctions from 1914 to 1945. He makes the case that sanctions applied to fascist Italy and Japan accelerated the world towards WWII.
- Edward Fishman, "Chokepoints: How the Global Economy Became a Weapon of War", (2025). Mr Fishman worked for the US Government in the implementation of sanctions against Iran and Russia. The book covers the US use of sanctions against North Korea, Iran, Russia and China and provides advice on how the US can use sanctions to maintain its global dominance.

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[5] "Report of the Ecumenical Relief Services Program to the Middle East Council of Churches VII General Assembly", 27-30 April 1999.
[6] Nicholas Mulder, "The Economic Weapon. The Rise of Sanctions as a Tool of Modern War", (2022), 5, 57-58.
[7] Dov Waxman, "The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict: What everyone needs to know", (2019), 197-202.
[8] Bruce W. Jentleson, "Sanctions: What everyone needs to know", (2022), 22-23.