

Sanctions Against Iraq: A Utilitarian Justification

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TIMOTHY WILLIAMS, OCT 24 2013

“If Iraq’s Nuclear Programme Had Even a Five Per Cent Chance of Resulting In a Regional Nuclear War and Nuclear Winter, Then On a Utilitarian Calculus, Sanctions Against Iraq May Well Have Been Justified.” Discuss.

“The Security Council is guilty of intentionally sustaining a regime of killing that can only be termed genocide” (Halliday 2000: 231). These were the words used by Denis Halliday, former UN Assistant Secretary-General, to describe the UN’s economic sanctions against Iraq in the 1990s. He suggested that these sanctions were responsible for between 1-1.5 million deaths (Siegal 1999) because they led to “death, malnutrition and deprivation of millions of ordinary Iraqi people” (Halliday 2000: 229). Although clearly a very regrettable cost, the potential harm caused by a nuclear winter, which could have resulted if Iraq acquired and used nuclear weapons, could far outweigh these costs. This essay will argue that using a utilitarian calculus, the sanctions against Iraq can be justified because they may have prevented a far more deadly future of a regional nuclear war and, consequentially, a nuclear winter.

There are many who have considered the sanctions levied on Iraq to be both unfair and immoral. This view has been expressed very clearly by John and Karl Mueller in their article *Sanctions of Mass Destruction*. They suggest that the threat posed by any potential Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMDs) possessed by Saddam Hussein was not enough to warrant such stringent sanctions imposed upon the whole of Iraq. The economic sanctions themselves were far more damaging than traditional WMDs. These sanctions alone had caused more deaths than all of the WMDs used before (Mueller and Mueller 1999: 51). This view, however, does not take account of the greater risk created by a nuclear armed rogue state and the potential to use the weapons in the future.

Douglas Lackey created a very important measure for deciding the best action to take when having to consider the risk of something happening and the consequences of not taking action. He suggests that running the risk of causing harm to many people is equal to actually causing harm to a smaller number of people. To understand this, a demonstration follows thus: if one has a small chance of causing harm to a certain number of people, then one needs to multiply the expected harm caused by allowing an action to happen, by the likelihood of it happening. This will produce the equivalent harm that would happen if one measures it against the chance of it happening. Therefore “to take risk seriously [...] is to treat the infliction of risk as morally akin to the infliction of harm” (Lackey 1986: 637). Using this equation can help to simplify the calculation:

Harm Caused By Imposing a Risk = Potential Harm Caused × The Likelihood Of The Action Occurring

Using this risk calculation will determine that the risk of allowing Iraq to possess WMDs, with the potential to start a regional nuclear war and subsequently this turning into a nuclear winter outweigh the cost of sanctions upon Iraq. To do this the following equation is used:

Harm Caused By Not Acting Against Iraq = Potential Harm Caused By a Regional Nuclear War × The Risk Of a Regional Nuclear War

Assuming that Iraq managed to attain nuclear weapons, we can estimate that they would aim for an arsenal of between 50-100 warheads. An arsenal of this size is roughly equal to the arsenals of Israel, Pakistan, and India

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(Norris and Kristensen 2010: 78), and would ensure that Iraq had a second strike capability, thus an effective deterrent. We can therefore use the assumption that if a regional nuclear war were to occur, then it would involve about 100 Hiroshima sized nuclear warheads. A regional nuclear war on this magnitude could cause huge damage, both to the region and possibly to the global climate.

By utilising the predicted environmental impact from a regional nuclear war, as modelled by Robock and Toon, we can then use this to analyse the relative risk from Iraq. They envisaged a comparable nuclear war between Pakistan and India, which involved 100 Hiroshima sized nuclear warheads. This would result in about 5 million tons of smoke being lifted into the atmosphere, therefore reducing the amount of sunlight that penetrates the lower atmosphere. This would cause significant changes to the global climate including a drop in temperature of about 1°C, 10 % global drop in precipitation, with the largest losses in the low latitudes due to failure of the monsoons and a reduction in global growing seasons by about two to three weeks (Robock and Toon 2012: 70).

This would severely affect agriculture and could threaten the lives of up to 1 billion people already undernourished, as well as some currently adequately nourished (Helfand 2012: 1). The figure of 1 billion suggests the number of lives put at risk from a regional nuclear war, but does not guarantee that these people would all die. There would however be a significant risk to their lives and, as this paper equates the infliction of risk to the infliction of harm, this is justified. If this figure is combined with the likelihood of Iraq starting a nuclear war as 5 per cent, then we can calculate the harm caused by not placing sanctions on Iraq:

Harm Caused By Not Acting Against Iraq = 1,000,000,000 × 0.05 = 50,000,000

This calculation therefore suggests that the imposition of risk caused by Iraq having nuclear weapons is equivalent to killing 50 million people. However, this figure is premised upon a worst case scenario for failures of the global food market. Were markets to function normally, although this is unlikely under the circumstances due to hoarding, then the number of lives put at significant risk due to starvation is 215 million (Helfand 2012: 1). This risk calculation has also been carried out with the figure of a fully functioning global food market at a time of reduced production:

215,000,000 × 0.05 = 10,750,000

This figure of 10,750,000 lives put at risk by a nuclear armed Iraq, compared to the number of deaths caused by sanctions placed upon Iraq of between 1-1.5 million, then shows there is a stark difference, of 1000%. So many deaths are, by no means, a good thing; yet the risk of not preventing an Iraqi nuclear capability far outweighs the lives of these people when using a utilitarian calculus.

The harm caused by the imposition of risk by allowing Iraq to have a nuclear arsenal and subsequently the potential for a nuclear winter, is far greater than the actual harm imposed upon Iraq by sanctions if the risk of Iraq starting a regional nuclear war is 5 per cent. Therefore, viewed through a utilitarian lens, decisions to impose sanctions against Iraq were clearly justified.

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