

The Effect of Comprehensive Economic Sanctions on Mass Atrocities and Closely-Related Outcomes

Tools for Atrocity Prevention: Evidence Brief

The 1979 Report of the President’s Commission on the Holocaust, which led to the creation of the US Holocaust Memorial Museum, stated, “Only a conscious, concerted attempt to learn from past errors can prevent recurrence to any racial, religious, ethnic, or national group.”

The “lessons learned” project of the Museum’s Simon-Skjodt Center for the Prevention of Genocide is one way the institution seeks to carry out the charge to identify lessons from history that can potentially contribute to saving lives by preventing future genocides and related crimes against humanity.

To identify these insights, we reviewed academic articles and think tank reports, and interviewed experts. We then distilled this body of policy-relevant knowledge into an accessible, practical resource.

Read more about our approach at: www.ushmm.org/genocide-prevention/simon-skjodt-center/work/research/lessons-learned

Definition

Comprehensive sanctions are “coercive economic measures taken against a target to bring about a change in behavior” (CRS 2021, p. 1). Comprehensive sanctions “block the government and include broad-based trade restrictions” (Treasury OFAC).

Connection between comprehensive economic sanctions and atrocity prevention strategies

If comprehensive economic sanctions raise the costs on the commission of atrocities, they would reduce the likelihood or severity of mass atrocities. These costs can be material (e.g., by increasing the relative economic strength of the opposition), reputational, or political (e.g., by contributing to social upheaval) (Wood 2008, p. 491). In addition, if comprehensive economic sanctions degrade perpetrators’ capacity to commit atrocities by denying them or raising the costs of acquiring critical means, such as funds, arms, and other enabling technological goods, they would reduce the likelihood or severity of mass atrocities.

This tool supports the following strategies:

- Dissuading potential perpetrators from committing mass atrocities
- Degrading potential perpetrators’ capacity to commit atrocities

Overview

Our research review includes 29 reports: 3 that address the effects of comprehensive economic sanctions on mass atrocities and 27 that address the effects of comprehensive economic sanctions on closely related outcomes, such as civilian killings, human rights violations, and conflict recurrence. It found the following:

- A mix of findings as to whether comprehensive economic sanctions were effective in helping prevent mass atrocities or closely-related outcomes,
- Limited evidence on which specific factors contribute to the effectiveness of comprehensive economic sanctions in helping prevent mass atrocities, and
- Evidence indicating that comprehensive economic sanctions sometimes led to unintended, adverse consequences, such as corruption, humanitarian crisis, or a decline in respect for human rights.

Case Illustrations

Comprehensive economic sanctions were used in both Sudan and Iraq to help prevent or respond to mass atrocities. Read the brief illustrations below to learn how this tool was used in these cases.

Sudan (1997–2017)

The United States established comprehensive economic sanctions against Sudan in 1997 in response to Sudan’s designation as a state-sponsor of terrorism and for its harboring of known terrorists, namely Osama Bin Laden ([Giacomo 1997](#)). Specifically, [E.O. 13067](#) established a trade embargo and froze Sudan’s government assets. In 2005, [UNSC Resolution 1591](#) established international sanctions on Sudan, including an arms embargo, a travel ban, and asset freezes ([UNSC 2005](#)). In response to violence against civilians, President Bush added targeted sanctions via [E.O. 13400](#) in 2006, “blocking property of persons in connection with the conflict in Sudan’s Darfur region” ([White House 2006](#)). As the atrocities in Darfur continued, which the Bush administration had declared amounted to genocide, the administration announced it would “more aggressively enforce existing sanctions” and added additional targeted sanctions against perpetrators ([White House 2007](#)). The comprehensive economic sanctions against Sudan dating back to 1997, including sections 1 and 2 of [E.O. 13067](#), were lifted in 2017, while the targeted Darfur-related sanctions remained in place ([US Department of Treasury](#)).

Iraq (1990–2010)

Following Iraq’s 1990 invasion of Kuwait, the UN Security Council (UNSC) imposed comprehensive economic sanctions on Iraq through [UNSC Resolution 661](#) ([Welch 2002](#)). Although the international action was prompted to defend Kuwait’s sovereignty, almost immediately after Iraq’s August 2, 1990 invasion, atrocities perpetrated by Iraqi forces were reported ([HRW 1992](#)). Following the end of the Gulf War in 1991, [UNSC Resolution 687](#) expanded the scope and goals of the sanctions and outlined the continuation of sanctions as a means to pressure Iraq to disable “all of its chemical, biological and nuclear weapons capability” ([UN Peacemaker 1991](#)). The sanctions resulted in “prolonged economic strangulation” and a humanitarian crisis ([Alnasrawi 2001](#); [Cortright and Lopez 1999](#)). Five years after the initial imposition of sanctions, “as many as 576,000 children” were reported to have died with widespread evidence of malnutrition and stunted growth ([Crossette 1995](#)). Saddam Hussein actively evaded sanctions, including by exploiting the UNSC-established Oil-for-Food Programme, enriching himself while Iraqis starved. In 2010, the UNSC voted to lift most of the economic sanctions against Iraq ([BBC 2010](#)).

Selected informational resources on US government use of comprehensive economic sanctions

Reports on legislative authorities:

- Congressional Research Service [brief](#) (2021) on economic sanctions
- Congressional Research Service [report](#) (2020) about the International Emergency Economic Powers Act
- Government Accountability Office [overview](#) of economic sanctions

Example of country-specific comprehensive economic sanctions:

- [Iraq](#) - UN Security Council Resolution 661 (1990)

US government offices that implement comprehensive economic sanctions:

- See the [website](#) for the US Department of State’s Office of Economic Sanctions Policy
- See the [website](#) for the US Department of the Treasury’s Office of Foreign Assets Control
- See the [website](#) for the US Department of Commerce’s Bureau of Industry and Security

The Simon-Skjodt Center for the Prevention of Genocide

of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum works to prevent genocide and related crimes against humanity. The Simon-Skjodt Center is dedicated to stimulating timely global action to prevent genocide and to catalyze an international response when it occurs. Our goal is to make the prevention of genocide a core foreign policy priority for leaders around the world through a multi-pronged program of research, education, and public outreach. We work to equip decision makers, starting with officials in the United States but also extending to other governments, with the knowledge, tools, and institutional support required to prevent—or, if necessary, halt—genocide and related crimes against humanity.



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