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In the aftermath of more than a decade of U.S.-orchestrated sanctions against Iraq, an economic blockade that set the stage for the U.S. invasion in 2003, a *60 Minutes* reporter asked U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright this question:

“We have heard that half a million children have died. I mean, that’s more children than died in Hiroshima. And, you know, is the price worth it?”

Albright replied, “We think the price is worth it.”

In 1990, a U.S.-sponsored and enforced UN resolution imposed financial and commercial sanctions against Iraq. The sanctions banned most foreign trade with Iraq, with supposed exceptions for food and medicine. The sanctions were branded an “alternative to war” and stayed in effect until the U.S. invasion overthrew Saddam Hussein in 2003.

During the 1991 Persian Gulf War, the U.S. not only targeted Iraq’s military, but also its civilian infrastructure, including power plants that supplied electricity for Iraq’s water system and hospitals. Sanctions stripped Iraq’s economy of oil income needed to rebuild that infrastructure and social services, and blocked equipment and materials vital to those systems. This resulted, most devastatingly, in crippling Iraq’s water system. Before the first U.S. war against Iraq in 1991, 96 percent of Iraqis had access to abundant supplies of safe drinking water through a national network of electrically powered pumping stations and treatment plants. Three years later, less than half had such access.

The scope of resulting malnutrition, disease, suffering, and death, particularly among children, is hard to document quantitatively, but by all accounts it was massive and horrific.

A report in the *Eastern Mediterranean Health Journal* in 2000 described results: “An estimated 1,910,309 children were suffering from other protein-, calorie- and vitamin-related malnutrition

in 1998. ... Particularly significant are the unacceptably high infant mortality rate and deaths of children under 5 years. Waterborne and foodborne diseases such as cholera, poliomyelitis and typhoid, vector-borne diseases such as malaria and leishmaniasis, and other bacterial diseases such as tuberculosis are on the increase ... The numbers of infants with low birth weight and women with severe anemia have also increased.”

And: “Unsafe drinking-water, polluted environment and poor sewage systems continue to endanger the health of large sections of the urban and semi-urban population.”

Revolution correspondent Larry Everest, who toured Iraq to investigate the impact of the sanctions, wrote: “In ward after hospital ward I saw hopelessly frail children slowly wasting away, dying the agonizing deaths induced by not enough food, clean water, or medicine, their mothers sitting helplessly beside them, their doctors denied the means to treat them.”

The question by the *60 Minutes* reporter, which Albright later said “amount[ed] to Iraqi propaganda” may have been referring to a statement from the head of the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF). In 1999, four years *before sanctions ended*

, UNICEF Executive Director Carol Bellamy said that if the substantial reduction in child mortality throughout Iraq during the 1980s had continued through the 1990s, there would have been half a million fewer deaths of children under five in the country as a whole during the eight-year period 1991 to 1998. She cited a UN report: “Even if not all suffering in Iraq can be imputed to external factors, especially sanctions, the Iraqi people would not be undergoing such deprivations in the absence of the prolonged measures imposed by the Security Council and the effects of war [first U.S. invasion].”

Denis Halliday, who had served as United Nations Humanitarian Coordinator in Iraq until 1997, resigned saying “I don’t want to administer a programme that satisfies the definition of genocide.”

Premeditated Mass Murder

Such massive disease and death among the Iraqi population is a ghastly and historic crime. It brought unimaginable pain and suffering to the everyday people of that country.

But there's more: The U.S. knew in advance that sanctions would kill children, old people, and sick people.

A study in 1991 by the U.S. Department of Defense “Iraq Water Treatment Vulnerabilities,” predicted that sanctions “WILL RESULT IN A SHORTAGE OF PURE DRINKING WATER FOR MUCH OF THE POPULATION. THIS COULD LEAD TO INCREASED INCIDENCES, IF NOT EPIDEMICS, OF DISEASE AND TO CERTAIN PURE-WATER-DEPENDENT INDUSTRIES BECOMING INCAPACITATED, INCLUDING PETRO CHEMICALS, FERTILIZERS, PETROLEUM REFINING, ELECTRONICS, PHARMACEUTICALS, FOOD PROCESSING, TEXTILES, CONCRETE CONSTRUCTION, AND THERMAL POWERPLANTS.” (Office of the Special Assistant for Gulf War Illnesses, United States Department of Defense. November/December 2001, all caps in original document.)

How can the U.S. sanctions against Iraq, carried out with the conscious knowledge that this “WILL RESULT IN A SHORTAGE OF PURE DRINKING WATER FOR MUCH OF THE POPULATION” that could “LEAD TO INCREASED INCIDENCES, IF NOT EPIDEMICS, OF DISEASE” be understood as anything but premeditated mass murder of civilians?

This deliberate mass murder and strangling of the Iraqi economy greatly weakened the hold of the Saddam Hussein regime over society, and served to prepare the ground for the U.S. invasion of 2003. When Albright said “the price is worth it,” she meant that the lives of half a million children were well worth the way the U.S. forces were able to quickly roll through Iraq to Baghdad and topple the regime (though the occupation of the whole country turned out to be much more fraught with difficulties for the U.S., and has led to the death of hundreds of thousands more in Iraq).

Once Again: The Lie that Sanctions Are a Diplomatic Alternative to War

The danger of a U.S.-Israeli war on Iran is escalating rapidly. The U.S. and its allies are ramping up their all-around assault on Iran, including new crippling sanctions, and openly threatening to attack. Ground is being laid daily in the headlines and statements by politicians of every stripe in mainstream U.S. politics calling for aggression against Iran—all justified by unsubstantiated assertions that Iran is pursuing nuclear weapons. (See [“U.S.-Israeli Assault on Iran Escalates: Danger of War Grows”](#))

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The latest move in the ratcheting up of pressure on Iran is a law, signed by U.S. President Barack Obama on December 31, 2011, imposing sanctions that would make it very difficult for Iran to sell oil on the world market. The U.S. is threatening to ban any country that has financial transactions with Iran’s central bank (which is how Iranian oil is paid for) from doing business with the U.S. or any financial institutions it controls. As with Iraq in the 1990s, Iran’s economy, including both its military and massive repressive apparatus but also its infrastructure (like water purification plants), food subsidies, healthcare and other essential services, are financed overwhelmingly by oil sales.

And, once again, we are being told that sanctions are an attempt by the U.S. to “avoid” war. In fact, sanctions would bring great suffering and death to civilians. As was the case in Iraq, the sanctions are aimed at weakening and destabilizing the Iranian regime, and to put it in as weak a position as possible in case the U.S. does launch a war on Iran. And sanctions would further back the Iranian regime into a corner from which it might well feel compelled to strike back, which would in turn be invoked by the U.S. as a justification for further U.S. aggression.

Any sanctions by the U.S. would overwhelmingly impact the masses of people in Iran, most viciously the poorest people, and would lead directly to massive disease and death among the civilian population, and would, *once again*, constitute unjustified, premeditated mass murder of civilians.

For a detailed survey of the impact of, and background behind the U.S. sanctions against Iraq, see: Oil, Power, and Empire: Iraq and the U.S. Global Agenda, by Larry Everest (Common Courage Press, 2003) especially Chapter 6, “Germ Warfare: America’s Weapon of Mass Destruction.”