



17. sanctions against iraq

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At a meeting on Wednesday 14 October 1998, freelance journalist Felicity Arbuthnot spoke of the effects of sanctions on the people of Iraq. Present were: Christina Arber, John Brierley, Wael Hussein, Bob Overy, Michael Randle, Carol Rank.

Presentation - [Felicity Arbuthnot](#) [2]

Felicity began by reminding the meeting that more bombs had been dropped on Iraq during the 1991 war than had been used during the whole of World War II. The country's infrastructure had been devastated, including the water filtration plants, electricity generating stations and other vital facilities. In addition, it had subsequently come to light that missiles and bullets used by US and allied forces had been cased not in titanium as in the past but in depleted uranium (DU) waste from the nuclear power industry. On impact these left a residue of radioactive dust and their use was being linked to the dramatic increase in birth deformities in Iraq and to a six-fold increase in childhood cancers. From a military point of view, the advantage of depleted uranium waste over titanium was that it was harder, burned at a higher temperature, and was far cheaper and readily available.

Sanctions had to be seen against this background. They represented a continuation of the war by other means directed against the civilian population of the country. Felicity had first visited Iraq early in 1992 and seen the effects of war and sanctions at first hand, particularly on Iraq's children. Doctors, especially in the south of the country, were bewildered by the birth deformities they were encountering, though at that time it was not known that explosives encased in uranium had been used. Hydrocephalus, 'thalidomide' limbs, webbed fingers and toes were among the common deformities; more and more babies, too, were being born with cancers. It was only a year later that someone told her that this new generation of weapons was being used. At first, she had found it hard to believe. Not even the arms industry, she thought, could be that feckless. She then phoned the UK Atomic Energy Authority who confirmed the story and said they had been asked to do a report for a client in the run-up to the Gulf War about the effect of these weapons. The client, it has since emerged, was the Royal Ordnance. However, the UKAEA were so shocked by their findings that they sent a copy of their report to the government. They estimated that if 50 tons of the residual dust was left in the region there would be half a million extra cancer deaths by the end of the century. Yet some experts now reckoned that between 700 and 900 tons of the contaminated dust had been dispersed.

There was now an epidemic of cancers among children. Doctors said that prior to the war they came across such cases on average about once a week; now there were hospitals with six, seven, eight cancer wards for children - and they only took in the most severe cases. Yet the UN vetoed the import of materials to treat the cancers - by means of chemotherapy, radiotherapy and so forth - under the dual-use clause of the embargo. Their argument was that these materials contained minute quantities of radioactive material which might be extracted to produce nuclear weapons.

There was an appalling shortage, too, of other essential medical supplies. Hospitals did not have painkillers or drips, for example. Nor were there books or any kind of distraction for the children. You went into these dreadful wards in what used to be flagship hospitals, some of the finest in the Middle East, and there was not even a television set. There was no treatment and no distraction. She recalled two small children in one ward she visited in 1995, aged two and five. Because of internal bleeding they were in severe pain and covered in bruises from blood leaking from capillaries. The younger one lay absolutely still. His eyes were filled with tears but he had taught himself not to cry because he knew this would rack his body even more. As she left the ward she leaned down and touched the five-year-old who, with great effort, grasped her hand and gave her a look she would never forget. It was the spontaneous reaction of a child responding to affection, but perhaps also an appeal for help to an outsider visiting the hospital. Such visits were rare as visas were difficult to obtain. All she could do was stand outside the hospital door and wish the ground would swallow her up.

In the schools today when a child fainted from hunger teachers now hardly bothered to enquire why. The answer



invariably was 'It's not my turn to eat today'. This was the country where, before the war, there was 93% access to clean water, according to World Health Organisation (WHO) figures, 92% access to free, high-quality, medical care, and a high quality of education. There used to be a tendency to obesity because food was so cheap and plentiful, yet now families were reduced to eating in rotation. The import of pencils had been vetoed because of the graphite they contain. The import of exercise books and course books were vetoed on the grounds that they were non-essential. This applied also to erasers, pencil sharpeners, colouring material, chalk, blackboards - all the things you needed in a school.

The result, in the judgement of some child psychologists, was one of the most traumatised child populations on earth. The trauma was getting worse as children got older because there was absolutely no escape. Toys were vetoed, and most children born after 1990 had never tasted chocolate. There had been two further bombings since the 1991 war resulting in the destruction of one of the few working water reservoirs. She had met one child who got physically ill if he saw blue jeans because during the 1993 bombing he had been wearing a pair sent to him by an uncle in the US. Another girl, now about ten, had to be forced to drink because her special school friend who was killed in a bombing raid used to carry a bottle of water with her and always gave her a drink before drinking herself.

Felicity recalled being in a shop one morning and witnessing a boy of about five buying one egg. In this poor part of town it would have cost the equivalent of a family's earnings for a week; a tray of 30 eggs would cost the equivalent of a university lecturer's monthly salary. Then as the child reached the door, he dropped the egg. Immediately he burst into a flood of tears, knelt on the floor and tried to scoop up the yoke, the white, and the shell with his hands. He was inconsolable and would never forget that egg. The incident was a metaphor of the situation in Iraq - the collapse of everything. Fortunately in this case, as Felicity was looking in her pocket for money, the shopkeeper gave the child another egg to replace the one he had broken.

In 1993, Dieter Hannusch of the World Food Programme wrote a report saying that he had been in the aid business for nearly 30 years, starting with Biafra, and never thought he could be shocked by anything any more. But he was stunned by what he saw in Iraq. In 1995 the WHO stated that time was running out for the children of Iraq, and the following year UNICEF reported that one third of all surviving children were suffering from stunted growth and/or impaired intelligence - this in a country where one third of the population is under 15. In 1993, also, it was found that many mothers were too malnourished to breastfeed. And because then, as now, milk was prohibitively expensive babies were being fed on sugared water or tea and displaying all the symptoms of severe malnutrition including spindly legs and arms and bloated bellies. Doctors referred to them as 'the sugar babies'. Most of them died.

It was a catalogue of disasters. In August 1997 the Iraqi Ministry of Health estimated that between August 1990 and August 1997, 1,285,000 children had died, mainly in the 0-5 age range. The number was equivalent to three times the population of Kuwait. Moreover, these figures were likely to be on the conservative side because although one of the UN agencies was supposed to record the death of every child, many children died without getting as far as a hospital and their distraught parents were unlikely to hang around waiting for an official from the UN to arrive and declare their child dead. Another poignant fact was that most of the parents who had lost children in recent years did not even have a photograph of them because films were almost unobtainable and developing fluid was on the embargo list. Even shroud cloth was vetoed by the Sanctions Committee.

Over the past number of years wealthier people had been selling their possessions to obtain essentials. There was a pattern to this selling. They started off with items like their marriage gold, followed by their furniture, and eventually pots and pans. You had people living in beautiful houses in Basra and parts of Baghdad who sold the glass from their windows, then the bricks. Some sold their whole home around them and lived in one room. Then when there was literally nothing left to sell, whole families committed suicide. In the hospitals, doctors were faced with the tragic situation of not having the drugs and medicines with which to treat the increasing number of children with cancer. Perhaps one drug in a whole list of requirements would be available and even that would be in such short supply they would only be able to administer half the required dosage. When she was visiting a hospital, parents would approach her and beg her to take their child back with her so that they would have a chance of survival. They were actually prepared to give their own child to a complete stranger, not even knowing which country she came from. In 12 visits she hadn't come across a single case where a sick child in hospital had survived - apart from little Marian Hanza whom the MP George Galloway had arranged to bring to this country for treatment.

Three cases stood out in her mind from her last visit. One was of a beautiful 17-year-old who was inconsolable, and cried for days on end, because she desperately wanted to go home and renew her studies but knew this was



impossible and was aware that she was dying. Another was of a lively three-year-old in the hospital whose uncle sold all his possessions to buy 500 grams of a particular medication and ran into the hospital to hand it over to the doctor. When he left, the doctor shook her head and told Felicity that what the child needed was 700 grams of the medication per month. The third case was of a 13 year-old boy in the same ward called Jassim, who told her he was going to be a poet when he grew up and produced an exercise book from under his pillow in which he had written his poems and ancient sayings he had collected. He read her one of his poems entitled 'The Identity Card' - a title taken from a poem by Mohamed Darwish:

The name is love
The class is mindless
The school is suffering
The government is sadness
The city is sighing
The street is misery
And the home number is one thousand sighs.

She promised to incorporate this into articles she wrote and to bring him copies of the publications when she came back or when anyone she knew came back. About six weeks previously she sent several articles of hers which included Jassim's poem with a friend who was visiting Iraq so that she could deliver them to him at the hospital. Tragically he died just three days before her friend arrived so he never did see his poem in print. Jassim's story seemed to her to encapsulate all the lost childhoods and lost dreams in that tragic situation.

On another occasion Felicity was at the prestigious UNICEF building talking to a senior official when a woman rushed in with a note from a hospital to say that she had lost three of her children in as many days following severe sickness and diarrhoea and asking if UNICEF could supply the medicine to help save her remaining two children who were also suffering the same symptoms. The official turned to the receptionist and said: 'Tell her that UNICEF is not in the business of giving out medicine. It is here to provide statistics and write reports on the effects of the embargo.' While Felicity was arguing with the official and telling him he should put his hand in his pocket and give the woman the \$10 she would need to buy the medicine on the black market, the woman disappeared. She and her driver tried to find her but without success.

Cholera, typhoid and all the water-borne diseases had risen because of the lack of clean drinking water. The health hazards were multiplied by a big increase in the number of flies after fly-spray had been put on the prohibited list. Most hospitals lacked re-hydration equipment. There had been a great deal of publicity about a UN drive to ensure the availability of clean water. Yet in the last two years the UN had vetoed the supply of spare parts for water purification. Dennis Halliday, the former UN official until recently in charge of the oil-for-food programme, estimated that to get Iraq's water supply just the right side of clear throughout the country would require \$30 billion - and that would only be a patch-up job.

Statistics concerning the effects of sanctions, she concluded, were known. It was crucial now to bring home to people the human tragedy that lay behind them.

NARP discussion

Invasion of Kuwait

Andrew said that the 'world community' would respond that the answer to the problem lay with Iraq - that this regime started the war with its invasion of Kuwait in 1990, and had brought the disaster upon its own people. The regime itself was probably benefiting from sanctions in terms of controlling the black market. He wondered if Felicity had got any sense of whether there was resentment against the regime. He had no disagreement with her about the immorality of sanctions and their sheer ineffectiveness, but it was one of the most oppressive regimes in the world and this disaster didn't just happen. Felicity agreed about the nature of the regime. It had been responsible for some quite horrendous things - like the beheading of the 14-year-old son of a government minister who left the country. (Later the ex-Minister returned and was himself executed.) However, her argument was that neither the nature of the regime, nor its invasion of Kuwait, nor concern over the price of oil, justified starving children to death.



Failure of sanctions to weaken the regime

Answering a further question, Felicity said her impression was that as a result of the bombing and sanctions people were more solidly behind the regime than they had been a few years back. In 1992-3, a cross-section of people would say to you that the regime had to go. Today, however, Iraqis saw the West as far more threatening than the regime ever was. And the statistics were there to support them. Figures from WHO, UNICEF and other bodies showed that prior to 1990 Iraq had clean water, ample food, a good standard of living. It was often argued that if supplies to Iraq were increased these would simply go to the regime. But that would only be true if shortages continued. If there was ample food and medicine, the ordinary people would benefit. A central problem was the fact that the UN kept moving the goalposts for the removal of sanctions. The emphasis on this despot, this pariah 'Hitler regime', was itself a sidetrack because it reduced the whole country to this one person and justified anything the outside world decided do. Little Jassim, or Marian Hanza, had not contravened UN resolutions or bombed Kuwait, yet they were the ones who were suffering and dying. The policy being pursued contravened the Geneva Convention, the Genocide Convention and the Rights of the Child.

Those in authority in Iraq did not go hungry and were still driving around in their cars even if these were a little more battered than they used to be. The regime benefited too from a widespread feeling - not only in Iraq but generally throughout the Middle East - that Saddam was the only Arab leader standing up to the Americans. Moreover, 6,000-6,500 children were dying every month as a result of sanctions. Saddam had never done that, and previously Iraq had an infrastructure they were proud of.

Andrew said that one of the axioms of advocates of nonviolence was that regimes could not survive without the cooperation of people, whether willing or forced. Regimes, in other words, could not last forever on brute oppression. Yet since coming to power in 1979, Saddam had dragged the country into twenty years of wars which he had not won, and still somehow he survived. The instruments of repression were so powerful, and so tightly controlled, that this had been possible. Felicity testified to the ubiquity and efficiency of the security forces.. Wherever she went to in Iraq, even if she had told the driver on the spur of the moment to go to a particular district, there was always someone who would come up to them as soon as the car stopped and ask politely where they would like to go and whom they would like to see. They were of a particular type and clearly the lynchpin of the regime in that area - the Baath Party rep, so to speak.

Internal opposition and Saddam's Security apparatus

Regarding internal opposition to the regime, Felicity said this would have to be entirely clandestine; people would be afraid to declare themselves openly. The West had of course encouraged the Shia Muslims in the South, and the Kurds in the north to rise up just after the Gulf War. The result, especially in the South, was a blood-bath. Having encouraged the revolt, the West then left the insurgents without support. Given this she did not anticipate any major opposition within Iraq in the foreseeable future. You were now getting individuals defecting to the West and declaring their opposition to the regime, but you could never be sure who was who. For instance, there were a lot of people doing business on the black market who claimed asylum but returned to Iraq once they had got a European passport. The emigré opposition was also divided whereas, in contrast, the Baath Party in Iraq was tightly controlled

The opposition in exile, she said, was weak and divided, and was now scrabbling for the \$97 million which the US Congress had recently voted to be made available to train and arm an opposition army with the objective of invading southern and western Iraq and bringing down the Saddam regime. (The 'Iraq Liberation Act'). Perhaps if the West had supported the uprisings in 1991 after the Gulf War something might have changed. But now when even the rich were having to sell off their possessions the last thing people were thinking about was an uprising.

Wael said the opposition groups needed organisation and outside support – financial and probably military - to fight the regime. But the powerful Iraqi security services made organisation difficult, and the necessary outside support was not there. Moreover, the general Iraqi population did not trust the opposition parties - and with good reason. The Kurds were in a stronger position, being partially free from the Iraqi regime, and they might be used to topple it. But many Iraqis felt that the West did not really want Saddam to go because if he did so they would no longer have a justification for keeping forces in the Gulf area. Felicity added that there had been reports, some of them at least



quite credible, that the West had tipped off Saddam about a number of planned coups. Wael said his information was that, certainly in the case of the most recent plot, the CIA had informed Saddam about it, and that as a result those involved were arrested and executed. If Saddam was to be overthrown, the West would prefer this to be the result of an army coup rather than a popular uprising because they feared the instability which might follow from the latter, - for example if Iran gave support to the Shia Muslims in the south.

Sanctions: an alternative to war or continuation of it?

Michael said that when Iraq invaded and annexed Kuwait he and others who opposed going to war advocated sanctions as the alternative approach. But their assumption was that these could be applied discriminately and would not result in starving the population or depriving them of medicines. Did Felicity think there was still a role for discriminate sanctions, not only in the case of Iraq but more generally, as a way of responding without military force to acts of aggression? Felicity said she thought there could be a total embargo on importing weapons or anything that could be used for making weapons - though without going to the extreme of vetoing pencils because of their graphite content. UNSCOM had stated at one point that with the monitors they had in place they could not miss anything. Even Richard Butler, Executive Chairman of UNSCOM, stated at that point that their job was nearly done. But only ten days later the goalposts were moved yet again.

Bob said if you looked at North Korea, Cuba, and Vietnam there was a similar phenomenon. These sanctions were not an alternative to war but a low-level continuation of it to punish the country in question and to prevent it from becoming a threat again. Andrew added that many pacifists would argue that sanctions were worse than war because in war soldiers were killed on the battlefield whereas with sanctions the soldiers were the last ones to suffer. Sanctions attacked the weakest members of the society. Michael said that nonetheless most of us had supported sanctions against South Africa - to which Felicity responded that these sanctions had mainly affected big business rather than the ordinary people and in any case were called for by the opposition there.

Andrew said that if Felicity was right in saying that the Iraqi people were blaming the West for their plight, the right policy would be to get rid of the sanctions altogether, flood the country with food, rebuild the schools and so forth - and then the people would turn on Saddam. Clearly, however, the West was not going to pursue that course.

Saddam's responsibility for the continued embargo

Michael referred to an article in the Guardian by Robin Cook during the February crisis in which he argued that Iraq could have all the medicines it wanted but that Saddam was refusing to accede to deals that would permit this. In other words it was Saddam, not the West, who was responsible for the fact that children were starving. Andrew said Saddam had turned down deals on the grounds that Iraq was a proud country - which suggested that he was benefiting from the situation and that the sanctions suited him. Medical supplies, for example, had been offered, but always the response was that the offer was humiliating.

Felicity said that during the February crisis, medicines had been delivered by Voices in the Wilderness and other agencies and governments. But, as an Iraqi doctor had remarked to her, the problem then was that people in the West were apt to conclude that the crisis was over. But of course for 20 million people the quantities involved were minuscule. On another occasion a US agency had taken in a large plane-load of supplies and on their return announced that the effects of the sanctions had been greatly exaggerated. It later emerged that the agency was a CIA set-up. But national pride was certainly part of the equation. This was an enormously proud people.

John asked whether in the case of the Food for Oil programme it was Saddam or the West that was setting the limits. Felicity said the West had offered to raise the amount permitted to \$5.2 billion every six months. Iraq responded that it had the capacity to pump oil to the value of \$4.6 billion - and then only when repairs had been carried out to the oilfields. Moreover, 48% of the revenues had to be paid over for UN monitoring - for UNSCOM and so forth. Revenues were paid into an escrow account and the UN decided what Iraq could import from the list it sent in. And again there were administration charges for this. Thus the figures were not what they seemed. The Sanctions Committee were also continuing to play games. Medicines that could be swallowed or injected were permitted under the rules and recently Iraq received a large consignment of injectable antibiotics, and inoculation material. However, the request for syringes and canulas was turned down on the grounds that you could not



swallow them! The effect was that the other consignment was wasted. It also took about nine months for any request to be approved.

Bob suggested that the sanctions policy, however terrible its consequences for the people of Iraq, was effective from the point of view of Western governments. It neutralised Saddam and meant they did not have to worry quite so much about this part of the globe. Blockades, once they had stabilised, resulted in a stalemate which allowed the powers imposing them to turn their attention to other problems.

Singling out Iraq

Regarding the insistence on disarming Iraq, Felicity said the question which any Iraqi in the street would put to you was why it was all right for Israel, Syria, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Turkey and so on to have weapons, but not Iraq. As far as they were concerned, they needed weapons in order to protect themselves. Andrew said the answer that the rest of the world would make was that - with the exception of Israel - these other countries had not invaded a neighbouring country. That was what made Iraq a special case. Wael said that Syria had invaded Lebanon, Turkey had invaded Northern Iraq, Israel had invaded and occupied southern Lebanon, yet none of these were treated in the way Iraq had been. He thought the invasion of Kuwait was not the real issue but rather a pretext.

One of the principal reasons, he suggested, for the continuing attacks and embargo was Iraq's opposition to the Israel-Palestinian peace process. The objective was to keep Iraq out of the equation while an agreement between Israel and the Palestinians was concluded. Andrew agreed that Israel was open to criticism on many issues. If Saddam's building of a poison gas plant upwind of Baghdad showed how much he loved his people, was not Israel open to the same criticism when it built a poison gas plant outside Tel Aviv? Israel had its nuclear capability so one could understand why Iraq, potentially the most powerful state in the Northern bit of the Middle East, felt it needed its weapons. However, the question was how to develop politically a critique of Israel which was not at the same time excusing the inexcusable, namely Saddam Hussein's regime.

Felicity said that one of the things which concerned her was that the terrified, traumatised children of today who managed to survive would become the Saddam Husseins of tomorrow because they would know nothing except the suffering heaped upon them by the West. Andrew said this was a point made in a statement by Denis Halliday, the former co-ordinator of the UN Oil-for-Food programme in Iraq who recently resigned his post in protest at the sanctions policy. (See Middle East Realities briefing dated 5 October distributed to the meeting by Andrew). Halliday said that in the past many Iraqi citizens travelled and studied in the West but that now a generation was growing up isolated from the outside world and suffering a deep sense of injustice and alienation. This was driving them in an extremist, fundamentalist direction which boded ill for the future.

Depleted Uranium

Felicity returned to the issue of explosives cased in depleted uranium. The US had named 15 countries to whom it had exported these weapons and acknowledged that it had done so to several others which it was unwilling to name for security reasons. The named recipient countries included Indonesia, Sri Lanka, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait. During the Senate Investigation into Gulf War Syndrome the man who was heading it, Doug Rosker, tied himself in knots trying to run away from the depleted uranium question. One of the people who gave evidence was Asaf Durakovic, one of the world's experts on radiation, a nuclear physicist and physician who served as a colonel in charge of a medical unit in Saudi Arabia prior to the Gulf War. He told the Senate Investigation Committee that in the run-up to the war their unit had supposedly rehearsed all the possible scenarios of trauma injuries and things they might encounter but were never even informed that these weapons would be used. He only found out about it in August 1991 when 24 Gulf War veterans were referred to him because they appeared to be suffering from radiation-related problems. He found residues of depleted uranium in all the tests he ran, and 14 of the patients died within a relatively short time of his seeing them. After he gave his evidence he was barred from his job and there were several attempts on his life. Brent Scowcroft, former Security Adviser to President Bush, told the Senate Committee that at the time of the Gulf War they had taken the best available advice about the use of these weapons but that it now seemed that perhaps the advice was wrong. Manuals published respectively by the US Army Environmental Policy Institute (AEPI) in June 1995¹ and the General Office of Statistics (GOA) in January 1993² had section after section on how depleted uranium



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waste needed to be treated and how people must be decontaminated if they came near it. The AEPI publication stressed the fact that it was radioactive material and must be disposed of as one would with any radioactive material. So what did the authorities do? They put it on missiles and bullets.

Role of Peace Movement

Finally there was a discussion about the role of peace and radical movements in this situation. Several people commented that the public protests back in February, especially the large demonstrations in the US, probably had influenced the US/UN decision not to proceed with the threatened new round of bombing. It was much more difficult to mobilise public support against the steady drip of sanctions than against war and military intervention, even though the sanctions were causing suffering and death on an even larger scale. However, there were now organisations, like Voices in the Wilderness in the US and this country, who were having some success in mobilising opinion against sanctions and bring home to people their devastating consequences for the civilian population of Iraq.

Notes:

[1. Health and Environmental Consequences of DU use in the US Army](#), AEPI, June 1995

[2. GAO/NSAID 93/90](#)

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[Return to 'challenge to nonviolence' table of contents](#) [3]

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[1] <http://civilresistance.info/sites/default/files/17-Iraq.pdf>

[2] <http://civilresistance.info/challenge/preface#Felicity>

[3] <http://civilresistance.info/challenge>