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# Sanctions on North Korea Will Not Lead to Peace. Just Ask Iraqis.

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published by [Common Dreams](#) (<https://www.commondreams.org/views/2018/02/26/sanctions-north-korea-will-not-lead-peace-just-ask-iraqis>)

As the world turns its attention away from the goodwill of the PyeongChang Olympics, the Trump Administration is doubling down on its hostility towards North Korea — this time in the form of **aggressive new sanctions announced on Friday** ([https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/trump-administration-to-impose-largest-ever-set-of-sanctions-against-north-korea/2018/02/23/42e1afb8-18a8-11e8-92c9-376b4fe57ff7\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.3c5cbca99aca&wpisrc=al\\_news\\_alert-world--alert-national&wpmk=1](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/trump-administration-to-impose-largest-ever-set-of-sanctions-against-north-korea/2018/02/23/42e1afb8-18a8-11e8-92c9-376b4fe57ff7_story.html?utm_term=.3c5cbca99aca&wpisrc=al_news_alert-world--alert-national&wpmk=1)) that target that country's ability to carry out trade.

When the threat of nuclear war looms large, as it does now, it's imperative that we find another way forward. But sanctions are not the peaceful alternative that they seem, and what's more, they're ineffective.

Just ask Iraqis about what sanctions did to them in the 1990s. The organization I lead has partnered with grassroots women's organizations there for decades, and the evidence of those years shows clearly that sanctions are not the answer.

First, there is a clear moral argument against sanctions. When a country is under economic assault, it is the poorest and most vulnerable citizens that bear the burden, often with disastrous humanitarian consequences. Right now, UNICEF estimates that **60,000 children** (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-northkorea-missiles-un-children/60000-north-korean-children-may-starve-sanctions-slow-aid-unicef-idUSKBN1FJ1FL>) in North Korea are suffering from severe malnutrition and starvation — a problem that risks worsening under US sanctions.

Meanwhile, elites – including those close to the sanctioned government – can insulate themselves from the impacts. Economic sanctions usually make targeted governments stronger by enabling them to control markets, establish monopolies, and rally support from their populations against countries that are imposing the sanctions. Starving the people of North Korea only proves that the US is the hateful villain Kim Jong-un claims we are.

When sanctions were imposed on Iraq in the 1990s, we heard firsthand from local women's organizations that women and families were struggling. We learned of clinics unable to stock their shelves with lifesaving medicines and of families desperate to find enough food rations to feed their children. Even the most conservative estimates of children who died due to the sanctions [number in the hundreds of thousands](https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/A2E2603E5DC88A4685256825005F211D-garfie17.pdf) (<https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/A2E2603E5DC88A4685256825005F211D-garfie17.pdf>). And Saddam Hussein was able to use these hardships as part of a propaganda bonanza, casting himself as defender of the people.

Sanctions are not only unethical; they don't work as a diplomatic tool. Data gathered throughout the so-called "sanctions decade" of the 1990s, when the UN Security Council imposed sanctions on more than a dozen countries, including Iraq, shows that they were not effective at changing state behavior. But they did decimate national economies and cause sickness and death.

There is one scenario in which sanctions can be both effective and ethical, and that is when a critical mass of civil society from a sanctioned country supports the sanctions, as was the case in South Africa in the 1980s. This worked because people were pushing from within for a change from their own government – and it was ethical because people willingly endured the economic hardships. The current sanctions on North Korea meet neither of these qualifications.

So what can we do now to act against sanctions and foster real peace with North Korea? Here are three lessons we must learn from the experience of sanctions and the march to war on Iraq.

First, we need to find concrete and effective ways to build unity across borders. When sanctions were imposed on Iraq in 1990, women from the US and the Middle East joined forces and mobilized together. We drove a convoy of trucks from Amman, Jordan to Baghdad and hand-delivered ten tons of milk and medicines to Iraqi doctors and nurses. It was an act of solidarity, uniting people of conscience here in the US with the people of Iraq.

Second, we need to fight back against abstractions. In Iraq, we had to unmask the brutality behind language like "shock and awe" or "collateral damage." Now, in North Korea, we need to expose Trump's aggressions for what they really are and stop using euphemisms, like "bloody nose" strike, to describe them. What's more, we have to recognize that, behind the label of sanctions, there are children and families in North Korea who are starving, freezing, and dying. You'll be hard pressed to find people who actually believe that holding a civilian population hostage with threats of starvation is legitimate foreign policy. Yet these sanctions do just that.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, we need to organize across movements and stop treating North Korea as a siloed issue. When local Iraqi rights activists paired with US veterans to demand the [right to heal](http://righttoheal.org/) (<http://righttoheal.org/>) from war, their power and reach was multiplied. Now, we have an opportunity to ask ourselves key questions. For instance, how we can learn from the climate justice movement about helping people confront an existential threat, like nuclear war, without overwhelming them with fear? Or what can we learn from racial justice organizing about how to undo the dehumanization of North Koreans?

Women peace activists have been at the forefront of building and applying these lessons. While we remain systematically marginalized and excluded in policy making, it is women who are the experts on the hard realities of war. It is women who are responsible for the survival of society's most vulnerable people during wartime, and women who will provide a lifetime of care for the traumatized, bereaved, disabled, and displaced.

Peace is still possible for Korea. A coalition of women peace activists is already leading the way, drawing from lessons across time and place to reject false solutions – like the economic warfare of sanctions – and press for real engagement for peace. It's time for all people of conscience to join in.

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