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Paul Timmermans on Invisible War: The United States and the Iraq Sanctions. By Joy Gordon. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010. 359 pp.

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Abstract

A review of:

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Keywords

Human rights, United Nations, United States, Iraq, Sanctions, Sovereignty, Oil production, Food security, Access to water, Blockade, Economics

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Invisible War: The United States and the Iraq Sanctions. By Joy Gordon. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010. 359 pp.

Joy Gordon tells the story of how the United Nations became complicit in the “legalization of atrocity.” She visualizes the impact of the UN Security Council’s indiscriminate sanctions against Iraq, which never achieved their desired effect: regime change. Extensively documented, Gordon’s distressing story reveals how three successive US administrations were “hijacking” an anonymous Security Council committee established under Resolution 661 (230; 48). This committee maximized restrictions on Iraq’s capacity to import goods while it minimized any possible humanitarian exemptions, thereby begging the question whether the plan to remove Saddam Hussein was ever worth it.

Who should be held responsible for what was done to Iraq? On the premise that the US foreign policy establishment bears general responsibility for having tilted the scales of international justice throughout and after the 1990s, Gordon details why American members of the 661 Committee specifically were not just “poorly suited” for their task of giving the UN sanctions a humanitarian face (49). They were also too conscientious in neutralizing Hussein as they violated his country’s juridical sovereignty. This book suggests the Committee became exceedingly active in gathering instructions from dozens of technical experts—such as those at the State Department’s Nonproliferation Bureau—in order to maximize their own leeway in minimizing the number of possible exemptions.

Gordon starts with the facts. The 661 Committee blocked requests for refrigerators and yogurt-making equipment, as well as materials such as cement, water treatment equipment, and household detergents (rationale: chlorine can be extracted from soaps, so it might end up in a chemical weapon). One expert at the Nonproliferation Bureau, Von Tersch, advised the 661 Committee against allowing Iraqi people to import chicken eggs: these posed a “WMD risk.” The eggs were deemed too likely to serve as “a growth medium, in which [Iraqis might] ... cultivate biological strains” (196; 235). Eventually, the Committee as a whole refused to block this oil-for-food contract, probably to help the American member save face. Yet the United States continued to place indefinite holds on numerous other import requests. This devastated Iraq. Between 1989 and 1996, the country’s GDP crashed from \$66 down to \$11 billion. Before the 1991 bombardments, Iraqi oil revenues alone had been \$10 billion. Afterwards, they represented a trickle (91).

The 661 Committee’s legitimate aim was to support the Security Council in disarming Hussein’s military forces. But its lesser-known, illegitimate aim must have been to “bankrupt the nation as a whole” (4). The problem with this second gambit was that Iraq’s head-of-state never received any incentives to comply with the “forces that sought his political (or personal) elimination” (241). Gordon presents the case that Hussein was given no choice but to cling to his power, and that innocent people were collectively punished for it.

Gordon then answers the responsibility question. While examining US attitudes towards the UN, she mentions the US stopped assessing the possibly harmful impact of the sanctions. After 1998, Washington chose to no longer rely on UN Special Commission inspectors or other such

“intelligence sources.” Nonetheless, government officials would repeat outdated intelligence data to other UN member states in order to justify their placing more holds on Iraq’s import requests (195; 203). Long after scientists found that some holds, such as those on spare parts needed to repair water systems, had directly contributed to “the deaths of some 500,000 children under the age of five,” Washington opted to continue to withhold these parts—a decision causing additional deaths from “nutritional deficiencies.” US administrations cannot have acted unknowingly; they must have had a motive in maintaining the 661 Committee’s “incoherent policies, secrecy, [and]...lack of accountability” (255, n. 82; 218; 107). If they had a moral motive to prolong the blockade, then they nonetheless ended up delegitimizing the UN.

The eleventh and twelfth (final) chapters conclude that the Security Council holds the right to supervise the disarmament of a defeated state, but should never again be used as a legal shield in targeting an entire society. Even after reputable UN personnel had demonstrated why imports were direly needed, *and* why Iraqis could not possibly use them to produce weapons, the US establishment continued to follow oil-for-food procedures to the letter. With moral support from Britain, and an occasional wink from China, it continued to do so *after* it had been told it was thereby inflicting collective punishment.

Many have understood that the UN oil-for-food program amounted to a hunger blockade. Even in the US Senate, the program was ultimately attacked—both for its immorality and for disallowing farmers to sell wheat to Iraq and thirty-four other nations (161; 309, n. 138). Also, the 661 Committee itself never cited any concerns over Iraq’s possible overpricing of food imports and oil exports, or over any possible kickbacks. This indicates Washington was hardly alarmed by Baghdad’s alleged self-enrichment (179). Washington knew both that children were starving and that no one could be accused of war crimes. This book suggests actual juridical responsibilities for the blockade were being diffused while US foreign policy circles blamed only Baghdad. The sanctions thus amounted to “failure[s] of international law,” as the Security Council never displayed “the intent required for [a verdict of] genocide or crimes against humanity” (221). The author does not ask whether particular officials could be found guilty in lieu of the UN Committee—even if by a hypothetical Baghdad tribunal. Finally, the book could be strengthened by connecting the UN committee with the US strategic interests in Iraq and the Middle East. For example, she neither mentions the peak oil issue nor the American-managed military bases along the Iranian border. Although the book is about economic warfare, the purpose of the sanctions must have been geopolitical rather than strictly economical.

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