National Research Journal of Social Sciences ISSN: 2348-473X
Volume-11, Issue-1, January-June 2026 Peer Reviewed & Refereed Journal (IF: 6.95)
PP: 850-860 Journal Website: www.nrjss.in

ECONOMIC SANCTIONS AS A TOOL OF STRUCTURAL POLITICAL VIOLENCE: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF SYRIA, IRAN, AND VENEZUELA

Arpit Shukla

Research Scholar
Department of Political Science, University of Delhi

Pooja Tripathi

Research Scholar
Department of Political Science, University of Delhi

ABSTRACT

Economic sanctions are conventionally presented as a peaceful, rules-based alternative to armed conflict, deployed to enforce international norms and deter aggression without recourse to physical force. This paper interrogates that narrative by situating unilateral economic sanctions within the framework of structural political violence. Drawing on Johan Galtung's theory of structural violence, Hannah Arendt's distinction between power and violence, and critical and Third World Approaches to International Law (TWAIL), the paper argues that sanctions regimes, particularly those imposed extraterritorially by the United States and the European Union, function as an institutionalised and normalised form of coercion that disproportionately harms civilian populations while evading the accountability structures that govern conventional warfare. Drawing on the existing literature and documentary evidence relating to Syria, Iran, and Venezuela, the paper traces how sanctions regimes have produced currency collapse, medical shortages, and infrastructural decay, even as their strategic objectives have gone largely unmet. It further examines the discursive strategies through which sanctions are legitimised as humane and precise, and the gaps in international law that permit unilateral coercive measures to persist with minimal oversight. The paper concludes that reframing sanctions as structural political violence carries significant implications for international law, humanitarian ethics, and the future regulation of economic coercion in global governance.

Keywords: Economic sanctions, Structural violence, Political violence, International law, Humanitarian crisis

INTRODUCTION

Economic sanctions have become one of the most widely used instruments of contemporary foreign policy. Framed by policymakers and by much of the mainstream international relations literature as a peaceful alternative to war, sanctions are routinely justified as tools to enforce international norms, deter aggression, and coerce behavioural change in target states. Governments describe them as a measured, reversible, and precisely calibrated way of registering disapproval and applying pressure without the human and political costs of armed conflict. This framing has proven remarkably durable, shaping both public discourse and legal scholarship for the better part of a century. Yet it obscures the deeply coercive and injurious character of sanctions, particularly their consequences for civilian populations and the social infrastructures on which they depend. This paper re-interprets the conventional understanding of sanctions as non-violent instruments of statecraft by situating them within the framework of structural political violence.

© Copyright @ Authors

ISSN: 2348-473X
Peer Reviewed & Refereed Journal (IF: 6.95)
Journal Website: www.nrjss.in

Hannah Arendt, in On Violence, distinguishes violence from power, characterising violence as instrumental, immediate, and destructive, and power as something rooted in collective legitimacy rather than force (Arendt, 1970). Arendt's own definition of violence is confined to physical force; a sanctions regime, on its face, involves no soldiers, no weapons, and no direct physical confrontation. This paper extends her framework by asking whether economic instruments, when systematically applied to deprive populations of resources and security, constitute a more latent but equally coercive form of violence, one that operates through the withdrawal of the conditions of life rather than through direct physical harm. Carl von Clausewitz's axiom that war is the continuation of politics by other means offers a further theoretical anchor (Clausewitz, 1832/1976). Arendt and Clausewitz invite a reading of economic sanctions as an extension of geopolitical contestation conducted not through kinetic force but through the deliberate disruption of economic life: a means by which states pursue objectives that, in an earlier era, might have required military action.

This reading is reinforced by scholarship on political violence that increasingly recognises its structural and symbolic dimensions, rather than confining the concept to direct physical confrontation. Bosi and Malthaner (2015) argue that political violence must be understood not only through direct expressions such as terrorism or armed rebellion, but also through its embeddedness in institutional mechanisms and asymmetries of power that operate gradually, cumulatively, and often invisibly. Read through this lens, economic sanctions appear not merely as foreign policy tools but as politically motivated actions that inflict suffering, marginalisation, and social disintegration, even where no single actor intends a specific harmful outcome. This paper draws on these insights, together with Johan Galtung's (1964) theory of structural violence, to argue that sanctions constitute a form of structural political violence: a dispersed, normalised, and legally ambiguous form of aggression that pervasively targets civilian life in the name of international order and governance.

The stakes of this reframing are not merely semantic. If sanctions are properly understood as a form of violence rather than as a peaceful alternative to it, then the legal, ethical, and political standards that should govern their use shift accordingly. War is subject—at least in principle—to the laws of armed conflict, to proportionality requirements, and to mechanisms of accountability for civilian harm. Sanctions, precisely because they are not classified as violence, largely escape this scrutiny: they are debated in terms of strategic effectiveness and diplomatic signalling, rarely in terms of the humanitarian law standards that would apply to a comparable use of force. This asymmetry in how the two instruments are governed is itself part of what this paper seeks to interrogate.

The paper proceeds in four parts. The following section reviews the existing literature on sanctions, political violence, and structural harm, tracing the tension between mainstream statecraft accounts and critical reinterpretations of sanctions as coercive and injurious. The next section identifies the specific gap in this literature that the paper addresses. The paper then develops an integrated analysis, applying Galtung's structural violence framework, critical international relations theory, and Third World Approaches to International Law (TWAIL) to the sanctions regimes imposed on Syria, Iran, and Venezuela, before turning to the discursive and legal mechanisms that sustain the conventional framing of sanctions as peaceful statecraft.

In pursuing this argument, the paper does not claim that all economic sanctions are equally violent, nor that sanctions are never a defensible response to serious violations of international norms such as territorial aggression or nuclear proliferation. The claim is narrower and, this paper contends, more defensible: that the conventional binary between "peaceful" sanctions and "violent" war obscures a wide range of coercive practices whose humanitarian effects can be severe, sustained, and structurally

© Copyright @ Authors

ISSN: 2348-473X
Peer Reviewed & Refereed Journal (IF: 6.95)
Journal Website: www.nrjss.in

produced, and that this obscuring has consequences for how sanctions are debated, legally constrained, and held accountable.

The role of economic sanctions as a tool of political violence is a subject of significant and growing scholarly debate. Early discourses often portrayed sanctions as a humane and strategic alternative to the brutality of armed conflict, a framing that dovetailed with the broader post-war project of building a rules-based international order in which economic pressure would substitute for military confrontation. Critical scholarship has increasingly questioned both the ethical legitimacy and the practical effectiveness of sanctions, particularly when employed unilaterally or without robust multilateral oversight. Central to this emerging critique is the recognition that sanctions may not only fail to achieve their intended objectives but may also inflict disproportionate harm on civilian populations, thus functioning as a form of structural political violence.

POLITICAL VIOLENCE AS STRUCTURAL AND EMBEDDED

The study of political violence has increasingly come to incorporate not only direct physical violence but also institutional and structural systems of harm operating indirectly. Bosi and Malthaner (2015) contend that political violence must be studied through its embedded forms, which operate within pre-existing systems of power and which tend to blur the line between legality and coercion. Rather than treating political violence as a discrete event—an attack, a riot, an assassination—this approach treats it as a condition that can be sustained over time through ordinary institutional operation: budgets, regulations, licensing regimes, and, crucially, financial restrictions. The application of economic sanctions, which knowingly withhold access to vital resources such as food, medicine, financial services, and strategic infrastructure, is a paradigmatic example of such embedded violence. Where Clausewitzian statecraft theory conceives sanctions as tools designed to influence an adversary's behaviour (Clausewitz, 1832/1976), this review instead treats them as instruments of domination that disproportionately target the most vulnerable segments of society, precisely because those segments have the least capacity to absorb economic shocks. Arendt's (1970) distinction between violence and legitimate power is especially relevant here, since sanctions frequently circumvent both democratic authority and international consent, inflicting harm without a corresponding locus of responsibility that a court, an electorate, or an international body could hold to account.

GALTUNG'S STRUCTURAL VIOLENCE AND ITS APPLICATION TO SANCTIONS

The claim that economic sanctions constitute political violence is considerably strengthened by Johan Galtung's (1964) theory of structural violence. Galtung describes structural violence as the persistent denial of basic needs and opportunities produced by social or political structures, insisting that violence need not be physical but can be latent in institutions and policies that generate avoidable suffering. Crucially, Galtung's definition does not require intent: a structure is violent if it produces an actual level of physical or psychological realisation of human beings below their potential realisation, regardless of whether any individual actor intends that outcome. This is significant for the study of sanctions, because sanctioning states rarely intend the specific humanitarian harms that result from their measures; the harm instead emerges from the cumulative interaction of designation lists, financial compliance behaviour, and the underlying vulnerability of the target economy. The imposition of sanctions that produce widespread poverty, food shortages, or the collapse of health infrastructure—as observed in Iraq, Syria, and Venezuela—resonates strongly with Galtung's definition: damage inflicted not by conventional weaponry but by policy instruments that restrict access to the basic resources required for survival (Galtung, 1964). This framework allows scholars to hold a sanctions regime responsible for its foreseeable structural effects even where no individual official can be shown to have intended civilian suffering as such.

© Copyright @ Authors

ISSN: 2348-473X
Peer Reviewed & Refereed Journal (IF: 6.95)
Journal Website: www.nrjss.in

THE STATECRAFT TRADITION AND ITS INTERNAL CRITIQUE

Mainstream international relations scholarship, by contrast, has long treated sanctions as strategic instruments of economic statecraft, to be judged principally by their success or failure in achieving stated policy objectives. Drezner (1999) examines the conditions under which sanctions succeed in altering the behaviour of targeted regimes, concluding that effectiveness depends heavily on the domestic political environment, the character of the sanctioned government, and the cohesion of the sanctioning coalition. Crucially, Drezner also observes that sanctions frequently fail, and can even entrench authoritarian regimes by allowing them to consolidate power and externalise blame for economic hardship onto a foreign adversary. This paradox, that sanctions are intended to produce change yet routinely fail to do so, and may even harden the very behaviour they are meant to correct, illustrates how complex, and at times counterproductive, their political effects can be.

The empirical case against the effectiveness of sanctions is made still more forcefully by Pape (1997), whose re-examination of the Hufbauer, Schott, and Elliott's database, long treated as a cornerstone of pro-sanctions scholarship, finds that only a small fraction of the 115 cases surveyed can plausibly be regarded as successful, once cases are corrected for confounding factors such as concurrent military threats. Pape identifies several recurring reasons for this failure: the rise of nationalist sentiment in target states, which converts external pressure into a rallying point for the regime rather than a source of internal opposition; the availability of alternative trade and financial networks that allow targeted states to circumvent formal restrictions; and the strategic manipulation of civilian suffering by ruling elites seeking to entrench their own power by controlling the distribution of increasingly scarce resources. Jones (2015) reaches similar conclusions, arguing that sanctions regimes frequently strengthen the very state structures they aim to weaken by enabling target governments to control scarce resources and reward loyalist networks, effectively converting economic pressure into a tool of internal political consolidation. Read together, Drezner, Pape, and Jones do not simply criticise sanctions as strategically ineffective; they identify a structural tendency for sanctions to redistribute hardship downward, from the elites who are formally targeted to the populations who are not, precisely because elites retain disproportionate control over whatever resources remain.

This internal critique raises an uncomfortable question for the statecraft tradition: if sanctions so frequently fail to achieve their stated objectives, why do sanctioning states continue to impose and renew them, often for decades at a time, as in the cases of Iran and, before 2011, Syria itself? Drezner (1999) suggests part of the answer lies in the domestic political economy of the sanctioning state: sanctions offer visible evidence of resolve to domestic audiences at a far lower cost than military action, regardless of their external effectiveness. Pape (1997) similarly notes that policymakers often persist with sanctions not because the evidence supports their efficacy, but because abandoning them would be read as a concession to the target regime. This dynamic matters for the present analysis because it suggests that the humanitarian costs documented by the structural violence literature are not merely an unfortunate side effect of an otherwise rational policy tool, but a cost that is, in practice, discounted against a domestic political benefit that has little to do with the sanctions' stated humanitarian or security rationale.

HISTORICAL ACCOUNTS OF SANCTIONS AS ECONOMIC WARFARE

Historical scholarship sheds further light on the coercive origins of sanctions and challenges the assumption that they were ever conceived as a humanitarian innovation. Mulder (2022) demonstrates that sanctions did not emerge as a humane substitute for war but as a deliberate instrument of economic warfare, first codified by the League of Nations in the aftermath of the First World War as a mechanism for mobilising the collective economic power of member states against an aggressor.

© Copyright @ Authors

ISSN: 2348-473X
Peer Reviewed & Refereed Journal (IF: 6.95)
Journal Website: www.nrjss.in

Institutionalised in the early twentieth century and later developed into a central instrument of post-war foreign policy, sanctions—Mulder argues—were engineered from the outset to mobilise the economic capacity of liberal democracies for geopolitical domination, not to spare civilian populations the costs of conflict. Rather than being neutral, sanctions have reshaped the international order by targeting not only states but their civilian economies, thereby embedding economic violence within the tools of international regulation (Mulder, 2022). Davis and Ness (2021) extend this historical-materialist reading, situating contemporary sanctions regimes within a longer history of economic warfare and arguing that the language of "peaceful" statecraft has consistently masked the coercive, often lethal, effects of economic isolation—effects that, in scale if not in mechanism, can approximate those of the sieges and blockades that international humanitarian law has long sought to constrain.

SANCTIONS AS STRUCTURAL VIOLENCE: DIRECT APPLICATIONS

Hofer and Kanfash (2024) provide one of the most direct reinterpretations of sanctions through Galtung's structural violence framework, contending that sanctions—typically presented under the cover of international norms and peacebuilding—necessarily produce avoidable suffering by withholding access to food, medicine, water, and energy. Their analysis of Syria demonstrates how sanctions have contributed to acute food insecurity and the breakdown of essential infrastructure, producing a humanitarian crisis that has long outlasted the stated objectives of the sanctioning parties. They further emphasise that the legal ambiguity surrounding unilateral sanctions creates a normative vacuum in which sanctions are imposed without clear mechanisms of accountability, enforcement, or reparation for the civilian populations who bear their heaviest costs. Friberg Lyme (2012) offers a complementary empirical account of the Syrian case, mapping the economic and socioeconomic repercussions of the sanctions imposed since 2011 in granular detail and showing how measures nominally targeted at regime figures rapidly diffused into the wider economy. Peksen (2021) extends this line of inquiry cross-nationally, providing evidence that sanctions are frequently associated with increased political repression and violence within target states, as embattled governments respond to economic pressure by tightening domestic control rather than liberalising—a finding that complicates the claim that sanctions promote human rights or democratic outcomes even on their own terms.

COMPARATIVE AND EVERYDAY-LIFE PERSPECTIVES

The comparative literature broadens this picture beyond the single-country case study, showing that the structural effects identified in Syria are not idiosyncratic to that case. Bajoghli (2023) examines the everyday effects of sanctions in Iran, showing how sanctions reconfigure daily life, labour, and household survival strategies well beyond their intended macroeconomic targets, and arguing that the true measure of a sanctions regime's impact lies less in aggregate economic indicators than in the accumulated, often invisible adjustments that ordinary households are forced to make. Palestini and Villarroel (2024) interrogate the legitimacy of sanctions imposed against Venezuela amid its democratic breakdown between 2014 and 2019, revealing sharp disagreement among foreign policymakers themselves over whether such measures are a defensible response to authoritarian backsliding or an unaccountable exercise of external power—a disagreement that itself suggests the absence of a stable normative consensus underpinning sanctions practice. Kirkham (2023) situates these debates within a broader political-economy framework, emphasising that the capacity to sanction is unevenly distributed across the international system and concentrated among states that control reserve currencies and dominant financial infrastructure. Simons (1999), in a deliberately provocative intervention, asks whether sanctions should be understood as a legal remedy or, in their most extreme applications, a genocidal tool, a framing that anticipates much of the subsequent structural violence literature.

© Copyright @ Authors

THE CONVERGENCE OF STRUCTURAL CRITIQUE AND STRATEGIC SCEPTICISM

The convergence of Hofer and Kanfash's (2024) structural critique and Pape's (1997) strategic scepticism points to a deeper tension in the contemporary discourse on sanctions. On one hand, sanctions are legitimised as non-violent, rules-based tools of international order; on the other, they often operate through mechanisms that resemble economic siege warfare, undermining both ethical norms and political outcomes. While Pape is primarily concerned with the strategic ineffectiveness of sanctions, his findings inadvertently reinforce the moral and legal concerns raised by critics who view sanctions as a form of collective punishment. In both perspectives, the civilian population emerges as the primary casualty, either as a tool of pressure or as an overlooked victim of systemic coercion. Moreover, both perspectives highlight the gap between intent and impact in the use of economic sanctions. Sanctions are frequently justified as targeted and proportional responses to specific violations of international norms, such as human rights abuses, nuclear proliferation, or territorial aggression. Yet, as Hofer and Kanfash (2024) demonstrate, the cumulative design of these measures often leads to broad and diffuse socio-economic damage that undermines precisely the values they claim to uphold.

Together, this body of scholarship converges on a common conclusion: sanctions are not neutral policy instruments. Whether approached through Galtung's theory of structural violence, Drezner's and Pape's critiques of their strategic effectiveness, or Mulder's history of their development as instruments of economic warfare, sanctions exist within larger systems of power and coercion that frequently carry severe humanitarian consequences without reliably achieving their strategic ends. This paper builds on that critical literature to argue that economic sanctions, particularly when applied unilaterally and extraterritorially, should be conceptualised as a form of structural political violence, strategically normalised, legally ambiguous, and systematically harmful to civilian populations.

Despite a growing body of empirical research and academic critique documenting the humanitarian impact and strategic shortcomings of economic sanctions, prevailing international relations theory and international legal discourse continue to characterise sanctions as peaceful and neutral policy instruments. This gap is not simply a matter of scholarly lag; it reflects a deeper structural feature of how sanctions are debated. The statecraft literature (Drezner, 1999; Pape, 1997) and the structural violence literature (Galtung, 1964; Hofer & Kanfash, 2024) have largely developed in parallel, addressing different questions rather than being brought together into a single analytical account of how a policy instrument can simultaneously fail on its own strategic terms and succeed, almost mechanically, in producing civilian suffering.

Comparatively little research systematically analyses the mechanisms through which sanctions operate as a normalised form of political violence embedded within global power structures, as opposed to treating structural harm and strategic failure as two separate lines of critique. In particular, the discursive strategies that sustain the framing of sanctions as "smart," "targeted," or "humanitarian-compliant"—despite mounting case-study evidence to the contrary—have received less systematic attention than either the humanitarian impact literature or the effectiveness literature individually. Existing legal frameworks, moreover, remain unclear on the regulation of unilateral sanctions, such that these measures continue to operate beyond the classical definitions of coercion or war codified in the UN Charter and international humanitarian law, leaving affected populations without a clear avenue for accountability or redress.

This gap calls for a deeper investigation into the normative, structural, and operational logic of sanctions, not merely as instruments of statecraft to be evaluated for their success or failure, but as sustained mechanisms of violence within global governance whose harms and whose legitimating

© Copyright @ Authors

discourse must be analysed together. The analysis that follows takes up this task directly, integrating the structural violence and statecraft literatures with the discursive and legal dimensions of sanctions practice, using Syria, Iran, and Venezuela as illustrative cases.

This analysis draws on three complementary theoretical perspectives to conceptualise economic sanctions as a form of structural political violence. First, Galtung's (1964) theory of structural violence provides the foundational lens for understanding how sanctions, while non-kinetic, inflict indirect harm by systematically denying populations access to basic needs such as food, healthcare, and economic security. Second, critical international relations theory and post-structuralist approaches in particular underpin the analysis of how sanctions are discursively legitimised as neutral, rules-based instruments of statecraft, illuminating the power asymmetries and ideological constructions that conceal their coercive and punitive character. Third, Third World Approaches to International Law (TWAIL), together with elements of legal realism, offer a critique of the selective enforcement and regulation of international legal norms, emphasising how dominant states exploit legal ambiguity to deploy unilateral sanctions with minimal accountability, disproportionately affecting states and communities in the Global South. Applied together, these three frameworks allow the harms identified in the literature review, the discursive strategies that obscure them, and the legal gaps that permit them to persist, to be read as parts of a single, mutually reinforcing system rather than as separate phenomena.

STRUCTURAL HARM IN PRACTICE: SYRIA, IRAN, AND VENEZUELA

Syria has been subject to one of the most extensive unilateral sanctions regimes in the contemporary international system. United States sanctions predate the 2011 conflict but expanded dramatically thereafter, culminating in the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act of 2020, which imposes secondary sanctions on foreign entities engaging in reconstruction, energy, and financial transactions connected to the Syrian government. The European Union has maintained a parallel and overlapping regime targeting the Syrian financial sector, oil exports, and state institutions since 2011. Friberg Lyme (2012) documents how sanctions imposed in the initial phase of the conflict rapidly extended beyond the individuals and entities formally designated, disrupting the broader economic and social fabric of the country. The cumulative effect of these overlapping regimes has been the near-total isolation of the Syrian economy from the international financial system. Even transactions formally exempted for humanitarian purposes—the import of food, medicine, and medical equipment—have been constrained by the reluctance of international banks to process payments connected in any way to Syria, a phenomenon widely described as "over-compliance" or de-risking. Hofer and Kanfash (2024) argue that this dynamic exemplifies structural violence in Galtung's sense: harm produced not by an intent to injure civilians directly, but by a policy architecture whose foreseeable and cumulative effect is the systematic denial of access to food, medicine, water, and energy.

The mechanism by which formally targeted measures transmit into diffuse civilian harm is worth making explicit, since it is this mechanism rather than any single designation decision that the structural violence framework is best equipped to explain. Contemporary sanctions regimes rely heavily on secondary sanctions and correspondent-banking restrictions: a foreign bank need not itself be designated to face serious legal and reputational risk for processing a transaction connected, even indirectly, to a sanctioned jurisdiction or entity. Faced with this risk, and with the significant compliance cost of verifying that any given transaction falls within a humanitarian exemption, banks and insurers rationally choose to withdraw from the jurisdiction altogether rather than to engage in case-by-case screening. This single, entirely predictable institutional response, de-risking, is what converts a designation list naming specific government officials, entities, or economic sectors into a

© Copyright @ Authors

ISSN: 2348-473X
Peer Reviewed & Refereed Journal (IF: 6.95)
Journal Website: www.nrjss.in

near-total exclusion of an entire national economy from the international financial system. Once that exclusion occurs, its effects reach households that have no connection whatsoever to the conduct the sanctions were originally designed to address, which is precisely the pattern that Galtung's (1964) definition of structural violence anticipates: harm produced by the ordinary, foreseeable operation of a system, without requiring any actor within that system to intend the resulting suffering.

Iran offers a comparable pattern operating through a different sanctions architecture. Sustained and escalating unilateral sanctions since the 1979 revolution intensified sharply after the United States' 2018 withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action and the reimposition of sanctions under a declared policy of "maximum pressure," targeting Iran's oil exports, banking sector, and access to the SWIFT international payments system. Bajoghli (2023) shows that the effects of these measures are best understood not only at the macroeconomic level but through their reconfiguration of everyday life: household budgeting strategies, labour patterns, and access to imported medicines and medical equipment have all been reshaped by sanctions pressure in ways that extend far beyond the government and security institutions formally targeted. Venezuela follows a similar trajectory. United States sanctions escalated substantially from 2017 onward, targeting the state oil company PDVSA and, subsequently, the broader financial and banking sectors, in response to the Maduro government's consolidation of power. Palestini and Villarroel (2024) show that sanctions on the oil sector, Venezuela's principal source of foreign currency and fiscal revenue, coincided with a collapse in public services, food and medicine shortages, and one of the largest displacement crises in the contemporary Western Hemisphere.

These three cases reveal a recurring structural pattern rather than three isolated national tragedies. Sanctions regimes formally directed at governing elites, state enterprises, or strategic economic sectors nonetheless transmit severe harm to civilian populations. In each case, the targeted government has demonstrated considerable capacity to survive, and in some respects to entrench its position, by controlling access to scarce resources and attributing hardship to external aggression, precisely the dynamic that Pape (1997) and Jones (2015) identify as characteristic of sanctions failure. This convergence across three cases with different sanctioning instruments, different regional contexts, and different stated policy objectives suggests that the harm is not incidental to poor design in any one instance, but a structural property of how extraterritorial financial sanctions interact with globally interconnected banking systems.

DISCOURSE AND THE LEGITIMATION OF SANCTIONS

The persistence of sanctions as a putatively peaceful instrument of statecraft depends substantially on the discursive framing through which they are presented to domestic and international audiences. Terms such as "smart sanctions," "targeted measures," and "maximum pressure" perform significant legitimising work: they suggest precision, proportionality, and a clear separation between culpable elites and an innocent civilian population, even where the practical effects of a given regime demonstrate no such separation, as the Syrian, Iranian, and Venezuelan cases each illustrate. Sanctions are typically presented within a broader narrative of rules-based international order, in which the sanctioning state positions itself as the enforcer of shared international norms rather than as a self-interested party to a geopolitical dispute.

This framing obscures the power asymmetries that determine which states can impose sanctions and which are subject to them. TWAIL scholarship emphasises that the states most frequently targeted by unilateral sanctions regimes are concentrated in the Global South, while the states most able to deploy sanctions—by virtue of their control over reserve currencies, correspondent banking networks, and dominant financial institutions—are concentrated in the Global North. Kirkham (2023) situates this

© Copyright @ Authors

asymmetry within a broader political economy of sanctions, showing how the capacity to sanction is itself a function of structural position within the international financial system rather than a neutral entitlement available equally to all states. The discursive construction of sanctions as humane is further sustained by the diffusion of responsibility discussed above: because the harm produced by sanctions is mediated through banks, insurers, and shipping companies exercising their own risk-averse compliance judgments, the sanctioning state can present the resulting humanitarian consequences as an unintended by-product of private-sector caution rather than as a foreseeable effect of its own policy design.

LEGAL AMBIGUITY AND THE LIMITS OF ACCOUNTABILITY

The legal architecture governing economic sanctions was designed principally around Security Council-authorised measures under Article 41 of the UN Charter, a framework that presumes multilateral deliberation and a collective determination of a threat to international peace and security. Unilateral and extraterritorial sanctions regimes, the dominant form of contemporary sanctions practice, as the Syrian, Iranian, and Venezuelan cases each illustrate, sit uneasily within this architecture, and international law provides limited, contested, and often underenforced constraints on a state's ability to impose unilateral coercive economic measures against another state.

This legal ambiguity produces a corresponding accountability gap. Where sanctions produce demonstrable humanitarian harm, there exists no clear international mechanism through which affected populations, or the states in which they reside, can seek redress, compensation, or even an authoritative determination of unlawfulness. Humanitarian exemptions, intended to permit the flow of food, medicine, and other essential goods, have proven difficult to operationalise in practice because financial institutions, facing the risk of substantial penalties for inadvertent violations, frequently choose to over-comply by refusing all transactions connected to a sanctioned jurisdiction rather than undertaking the case-by-case due diligence that exemptions formally require. Simons (1999) poses the resulting question provocatively but seriously: at what threshold of humanitarian harm does a sanctions regime cease to be a legitimate legal remedy and become, in substance if not in intent, an instrument of collective punishment. None of the reforms occasionally proposed, expanded UN monitoring of unilateral measures, dedicated humanitarian payment channels, or clearer proportionality standards, would resolve the underlying tension identified throughout this analysis: that sanctions remain attractive to policymakers precisely because they offer the appearance of decisive action at a lower domestic political cost than military intervention, regardless of their record of strategic success (Drezner, 1999; Pape, 1997). But such reforms would begin to close the gap between the legal and rhetorical treatment of sanctions as peaceful statecraft and their documented operation as a structurally violent form of political coercion.

It is instructive to compare this accountability gap with the legal treatment of analogous harms produced by armed conflict. International humanitarian law imposes proportionality requirements on the conduct of hostilities, prohibits the starvation of civilians as a method of warfare, and establishes mechanisms for investigating and, in principle, prosecuting violations. A blockade that produced the scale of food insecurity documented in Syria, or the medical shortages documented in Iran, would attract sustained legal scrutiny if imposed by military means. Because sanctions achieve comparable effects through financial and regulatory instruments rather than through blockade or siege in the classical sense, they largely escape this framework, even though the resulting harm to civilian welfare may be functionally similar. This asymmetry is precisely what the structural violence framework developed above is designed to expose: the harm is real, foreseeable, and structurally produced, but it

© Copyright @ Authors

ISSN: 2348-473X
Peer Reviewed & Refereed Journal (IF: 6.95)
Journal Website: www.nrjss.in

is not currently recognised by international law as the kind of harm that requires proportionality analysis, accountability mechanisms, or reparation.

CONCLUSION

This paper has argued that economic sanctions, particularly when imposed unilaterally and extraterritorially, are best understood not as a peaceful alternative to war but as a form of structural political violence. The analysis has shown how sanctions regimes directed at Syria, Iran, and Venezuela have produced severe and sustained harm to civilian populations through currency collapse, banking de-risking, and the erosion of access to food, medicine, and essential infrastructure while achieving, at best, an uncertain record of strategic success (Jones, 2015; Pape, 1997). These findings support the paper's central claim on two counts. First, sanctions systematically undermine the socio-economic rights, livelihoods, and well-being of civilian populations in targeted states through mechanisms, principally financial de-risking, that operate independently of any sanctioning state's specific intent. Second, the legitimising discourse surrounding sanctions, expressed through terms such as "smart sanctions" and "maximum pressure," obscures this coercive reality by framing sanctions as norm-enforcing, precise, and humanitarian-aligned, a framing sustained by the diffusion of responsibility across designating governments, compliant financial institutions, and target-state authorities.

These conclusions carry implications for international law, ethics, and global governance. They suggest that continued reliance on Article 41 of the UN Charter as the principal legal reference point for sanctions is increasingly disconnected from the reality of unilateral sanctions practice, and that meaningful reform will require both new mechanisms of humanitarian protection and a broader normative reckoning with whether unilateral economic coercion can be reconciled with the human rights obligations that sanctioning states themselves claim to uphold. Future research would benefit from primary interview data with humanitarian actors, sanctions compliance professionals, and affected communities, as well as from comparative attention to sanctions regimes beyond the three cases considered here, in order to test the generalisability of the structural violence framework across a wider range of geopolitical contexts.

REFERENCES

1. Arendt, H. (1970). On violence. Harcourt.
2. Bajoghli, N. (2023). Introduction: Studying the impacts of economic sanctions in Iran: Everyday life, power, and foreign policy. Humanity: An International Journal of Human Rights, Humanitarianism, and Development, 14(2), 248–261. https://doi.org/10.1353/hum.2023.a916999
3. Bosi, L., & Malthaner, S. (2015). Political violence. In D. della Porta & M. Diani (Eds.), The Oxford Handbook of Social Movements (pp. 440–451). Oxford University Press.
4. Chimni. (2006). Third World Approaches to International Law: A Manifesto. International Community Law Review, 8(1), 3-27. https://doi.org/10.1163/187197306779173220
5. Clausewitz, C. v. (1976). On war (M. Howard & P. Paret, Eds. & Trans.). Princeton University Press. (Original work published 1832)
6. Davis, S., & Ness, I. (Eds.). (2021). Sanctions as war. Brill. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004501201
7. Drezner, D. W. (1999). The sanctions paradox: Economic statecraft and international relations. Cambridge University Press.
8. Friberg Lyme, R. (2012). Sanctioning Assad's Syria: Mapping the economic, socioeconomic and political repercussions of the international sanctions imposed on Syria since March 2011 (DIIS Report No. 2012:13). Danish Institute for International Studies.

© Copyright @ Authors

ISSN: 2348-473X
Peer Reviewed & Refereed Journal (IF: 6.95)
Journal Website: www.nrjss.in

9. Galtung, J. (1964). A structural theory of aggression. Journal of Peace Research, 1(2), 95–119. https://doi.org/10.1177/002234336400100203
10. Hofer, A., & Kanfash, M. (2024, June 17). Sanctions as violence. E-International Relations. https://www.e-ir.info/2024/06/17/sanctions-as-violence/
11. Jones, L. (2015). Societies under siege: Exploring how international economic sanctions (do not) work. Oxford University Press.
12. Kirkham, K. (Ed.). (2023). The Routledge handbook of the political economy of sanctions (1st ed.). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003327448
13. Mulder, N. (2022). The economic weapon: The rise of sanctions as a tool of modern war. Yale University Press. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv240df1m
14. Palestini, S., & Villarroel, Y. (2024). 'What gives you the right?' Foreign policymakers' perceptions of the legitimacy of sanctions against democratic breakdown in Venezuela (2014–2019). Cambridge Review of International Affairs, 37(5), 665–689. https://doi.org/10.1080/09557571.2024.2351847
15. Pape, R. A. (1997). Why economic sanctions do not work. International Security, 22(2), 90–136. https://doi.org/10.2307/2539368
16. Peksen, D. (2021). Economic sanctions and political stability and violence in target countries. In Research handbook on economic sanctions (Ch. 9). Edward Elgar Publishing. https://doi.org/10.4337/9781839102721.00016
17. Simons, G. (1999). Imposing economic sanctions: Legal remedy or genocidal tool? Pluto Press. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt18fsbnn

© Copyright @ Authors