Book Review Symposium: Introduction to Symposium on Economic Sanctions from Havana to Baghdad: Legitimacy, Accountability, and Humanitarian Consequences

By:

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In the West, economic sanctions have often been seen as a "middle route"—more substantial than diplomacy, but without the costs and risks of military intervention. At the same time, while there are in fact costs, these do not figure explicitly in the government's budget, at least not that of the sanctioning state; and sanctions offer political leaders an occasion to sound decisive in the face of a purported threat to peace and security. So it is not surprising that institutions of global governance, as well as states that wield significant political and economic power, would frequently turn to sanctions as an easily available tool of economic statecraft. In the US, which has imposed the majority of sanctions regimes since World War II, and currently imposes individual sanctions on thousands of persons and companies, these actions manifest as a stream of statutes and executive orders invoking terrorism, corruption, drug trafficking, and many other rationales, mostly involving strangers in distant lands.

During the Cold War, sanctions were relatively limited in their impact: if the US sanctioned a country, it could trade with the Soviet bloc, and vice versa; and the mutual veto power of its permanent members meant that the UN Security Council, and its capacity to impose global measures, was largely paralyzed. Because sanctions were never comprehensive, their humanitarian impact was never catastrophic. This changed when the Security Council imposed comprehensive sanctions on Iraq; coming on top of the massive bombing campaign of the first Persian Gulf War in 1991, these measures kept Iraq from rebuilding its crippled infrastructure, and contributed to ongoing and widespread malnutrition and epidemics of water-borne diseases.

The 1990s saw the emergence of a robust discussion of ethical and humanitarian concerns. Much of this was driven by the ongoing humanitarian crisis in Iraq, and the call for humanitarian monitoring, ethical standards, and legal accountability. The most visible policy response was the targeted "smart" sanctions movement. On its face, it seemed to address everyone's concerns: it promised to be more effective, while also limiting its impact on putative wrongdoers, without causing harm to vulnerable populations. While this narrative was widely embraced, at least in those countries doing most of the sanctioning, it was actually quite misleading. Targeted sanctions might sometimes have been imposed on individuals involved in terrorism and aggression. But they were also imposed as part of strategies to bankrupt states, trigger macroeconomic shocks, and cripple a nation's infrastructure. There may have been allegations of terrorism, human rights violations, and drug trafficking, but these were often based on little or no credible evidence, and the imposition of sanctions ran counter to international law, while circumventing due process in criminal law, with considerable frequency.

This volume, *Economic Sanctions from Havana to Baghdad: Legitimacy, Accountability, and Humanitarian Consequences*, published in 2026 by

Cambridge University Press, seeks to incorporate many of the perspectives that have been underrepresented in the academic discourse. This includes the work of scholars from sanctioned countries, such as Iran, Iraq, Venezuela, Cuba, and Syria. It also includes the perspectives of practitioners, such as attorneys and humanitarian aid workers. In addition, this volume addresses issues that are complex, but of great significance. For example, while sanctions often include humanitarian exemptions for food, the reality is that the regulatory regimes are so burdensome and unclear that private actors—banks, shipping companies, aid organizations, donors, insurers, and on and on—are driven away from engaging in even legal, humanitarian transactions.

Sanctions regimes have disproportionately been imposed on African states by the UN, US, and the EU. Additionally, the blacklists—individuals and companies designated as “Specially Designated Nationals,” whose assets are then frozen and their travel restricted—include persons and companies from across the African continent, further creating a sense of risk and causing banks and other actors to withdraw from not just particular countries, but from the entire region.

Economic Sanctions from Havana to Baghdad was intended to serve as a resource that can provide tools to analyze and respond to the many issues that may arise in the imposition of sanctions, including humanitarian impact, economic development, gendered impact, moral legitimacy, and compliance with international law. This symposium is intended to provide an occasion for scholars and practitioners to draw on the concepts and analyses contained in this volume in looking at several different contexts in Africa.

In the West, the sanctions imposed on Russia and Iran receive considerable public attention; and to a lesser extent, we might add Venezuela, Syria, and Cuba. But it is striking that, for the most part, there is far less media coverage and public discussion of the extensive sanctions imposed on African nations and individuals. In “Africa as the Most Heavily Sanctioned Region of the World: A Critical Overview,” Chukwuebuka Emmanuel Madu notes that of the 34 countries sanctioned by the European Union, 13 of those are African nations. Similarly, the UN Security Council has imposed sanctions on far more nations in Africa than in any other region. Citing Alena Douhan’s chapter in the edited volume, Madu argues that these measures have a significant social and humanitarian impact; citing Erich Ferrari's chapter, Madu notes that while a vast number of African persons and companies have been sanctioned by the United States, the process by which they are blacklisted has been criticized for the lack of even basic due process, and in many cases, the absence of credible evidence justifying the sanctions.

In "Legal but Illegitimate? Lessons for ECOWAS Law and Praxis in *Joy Gordon, ed., Economic Sanctions from Havana to Baghdad,"* Obiora Chinedu Okafor draws on the chapters by Douhan, Gordon, Ferrari, and Bull and Rosales to address the legality and legitimacy of the ECOWAS sanctions practice. In particular, he questions the measures imposed by ECOWAS on Niger, which required Nigeria to cut off electricity to Niger, as well as broadly prohibiting trade with other ECOWAS member states—measures that were both overbroad and indiscriminate in their impact.

Ndidi Nwaneri, Nathanael Tilahun, Miguel Cerón Becerra, and John Kafarhire each discuss different aspects of the humanitarian consequences of sanctions in regard to specific African nations.

In "The Chilling Effect Beyond Borders: Sanctions Compliance, De-Risking, and the Marginalization of Nigeria's NGO Sector," Nwaneri draws on "The 'Chilling Effect' of US Economic Sanctions on Banking and Financial Inclusion in Africa," by Charles Chilufya, S.J. and Fernando Saldivar, S.J., to look at how the sanctions imposed on various African nations and entities impact the operation of NGOs in that country. Even though Nigeria as a whole is not sanctioned, because there are sanctioned individuals, the country as a whole is nonetheless deemed to be "high risk." The result is that international banks are reluctant to engage or provide services. This in turn creates considerable costs and difficulties for NGOs operating in Nigeria, even though they are not themselves targeted by sanctions, and they are clearly engaged in humanitarian work.

In "Sanctions' Impact on Strategic Priorities of African Economies," Tilahun draws on the chapters "Sowing Discord: Iranian Wheat Imports under Sanctions," by Esfandyar Batmanghelidj, and Hazel Smith's "The Impact of UNSC Sanctions on Food Security in the DPRK," to demonstrate how food security in Africa can be severely disrupted by sanctions, given that government agencies are often a nation's major importers of food and agricultural products. Tilahun then draws on Rachel Barnes' and Ryan Dowding's chapter, "Caught in the Crosshairs of Sanctions and Anti-money Laundering Measures: Informal Value Transfer Systems and Civil Asset Forfeitures," to show how remittances to Africa have been reduced and disrupted by sanctions. As banking transactions are increasingly unavailable, family members abroad turn to informal value transfer systems; but these in turn are viewed as risky and suspicious, and may be subject to civil seizure on thin grounds.

Cerón-Becerra then looks at how remittances to Zimbabwe are affected by sanctions. In "The Effects of Sanctions in Zimbabwe on Migrant Care Workers and Transnational Family Relationships," Cerón Becerra discusses the role of migrants from Zimbabwe in the care sector in the United Kingdom, providing care for children and the elderly. Drawing on Chilufya and Saldivar's chapter on the chilling effect of sanctions on banking services in Africa, Cerón-Becerra argues that this chilling effect has substantially disrupted the ability of Zimbabwean migrants to transfer remittances to their families and to maintain those familial economic bonds.

John Kafarhire, in "Targeted and Economic Sanctions in the Democratic Republic of the Congo: Political Economy and Humanitarian Consequences," discusses the impact of the multiple sanctions regimes imposed on the DRC in regard to conflict and resource governance. While ostensibly targeting military and political actors, drawing on Chilufya and Saldivar's chapter, Kafarhire argues that the termination or reduction of international banking services has resulted in a shift toward illicit financial flows. Further, drawing on the chapter "Blacklisting: The US's Targeted Sanctions against Cuba, 1994–2021," by Barrera Rodríguez, Domínguez López, and Iturriaga Bartuste, Kafarhire shows how the sanctioning of individual persons and companies in fact affect whole sectors of the Congolese economy, including food security, paralleling the situation in Iran described by Batmanghelidj. Further, the sanctions have not resulted in greater transparency or political participation; rather, the space for civil society and likelihood of political transparency is diminished, as Dursun Peksen describes in his chapter, "A Global Analysis of Economic Sanctions and Civil Society Participation in Target Countries."

Finally, in “Unilateral Sanctions: The US-South Africa Bilateral Relations Review Bill of 2025,” Grant Tungay, S.J. and Peter Knox, S.J. introduce a different dimension. Drawing on Alena F. Douhan’s chapter, “Unilateral Sanctions and Emerging Issues of International Human Rights: Law,” as well as Chiufya’s and Saldivar’s chapter, Tungay and Knox discuss the introduction of legislation in the US Congress that seeks to review the US’ overall relation with South Africa. The purpose of such a review would be to identify leaders of organizations such as the African National Congress and the Economic Freedom Fighters who are believed to engage with actors US considers as malign, including Hamas, Iran, China and Russia. The bill anticipates that such a review would reveal corruption or human rights abuses, which the US executive branch would likely consider grounds to impose sanctions on South African political leaders.

In discussing African perspectives on chapters in my edited volume, and implications for how its concepts might be applied in various African contexts, each of these contributors offers valuable insights, and contributes much to the furtherance of the important work of addressing legality, legitimacy, and accountability in the imposition of sanctions.

In closing, I would like to thank the contributors to this symposium. Each of them invested considerable time and thought in their articles. It was my hope that Economic Sanctions from Havana to Baghdad would provide research and analysis that could be brought to bear in addressing the many consequences, direct and indirect, of sanctions. I am grateful to all of the contributors for their thoughtful and insightful contributions to this symposium.

I am also deeply grateful for the generosity of the AfronomicsLaw team. I would like to thank AfronomicsLaw for hosting this symposium, providing a venue for colleagues in the field to publish substantial articles engaging with this volume in the African context.