

Sanctions and Asylum

According to Richard Hanania, trade sanctions are “ineffective, immoral, and politically convenient”:

Sanctions have massive humanitarian costs and are not only ineffective but likely counterproductive. On these points, there is overwhelming agreement in the academic literature. Such policies can reduce the economic performance of the targeted state, degrade public health, and cause tens of thousands of deaths per year under the most crushing sanctions regimes. Moreover, they almost always fail to achieve their goals, particularly when the aim is regime change or significant behavioral changes pertaining to what states consider their fundamental interests. Sanctions can even backfire, making mass killing and repression more likely, while decreasing the probability of democratization.

He makes a convincing case, but this gets me thinking. When countries impose sanctions, they barely even *mention* consequences. Instead, they focus on the sheer evil of the targeted regime:

When the EU extended sanctions against Syria, they averred:

*The Council today extended EU **restrictive measures against the Syrian regime** for one additional year, until **1 June 2022**, in light of the continued repression of the civilian population in the country.*

Similarly, here’s how the Congressional Research Service rationalizes sanctions against Venezuela:

For over 15 years, the United States has imposed sanctions in response to activities of the Venezuelan government and Venezuelan individuals. The earliest sanctions imposed related to Venezuela’s lack of cooperation on antidrug and counterterrorism efforts. The Obama

Administration imposed targeted sanctions against individuals for human rights abuses, corruption, and antidemocratic actions. The Trump Administration significantly expanded economic sanctions in response to the increasing authoritarianism of President Nicolás Maduro...

Observation: If sanctioned regimes are so monstrous, then virtually all of their subjects have a good reason to fear them. In technical terms, this plausibly amounts to a “well-founded fear of persecution” – the essential legal ingredient for meriting asylum.

Which brings me to my modest proposal of the day. Namely: *If a country is bad enough for sanctions, it is bad enough to grant all of its citizens asylum.* For the U.S., this would at minimum include all citizens of Cuba, Iran, North Korea, Syria, and Venezuela.

If embraced, this norm would have two main effects, both good.

First, governments would be more reluctant to impose sanctions and more eager to end them, to avoid the responsibility to accept large flows of refugees. Per Hanania, this is a big win. Sanctions cause immense harm, and the “humanitarian” exceptions for food and medicine do little to mitigate this harm.

Second, all citizens of the very worst governments would suddenly have viable exit options. So even if sanctions make monstrous regimes go from bad to worse, they also almost automatically reduce the number of people who actually *live* under such regimes. Total oppression can easily go down as per-capita oppression goes up.

I’m not saying that the my modest proposal is going to happen. I’m saying it should. If Hanania is right about sanctions, the main reason sanctions persist is that politicians barely care about the well-being of foreigners. Alas, this also predicts that my modest proposal won’t happen. Sure, it would allow the world’s most oppressed people to find a better life. But who cares about them?