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Trends. Libya, Iraq, and Sanctions-Busting through Common Decency

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In 1992 the United Nations (UN) placed sanctions on the Libyan government. The sanctions included forbidding Libyan aircraft to land on the territory of UN members and were levied largely because the Libyan government refused to surrender suspects connected to the 1988 bombing of a Pan Am aircraft in flight. The bombing killed 270 people.

In 1994 Libya violated the sanctions when a Libyan aircraft carrying Islamic pilgrims flew from Libya to Saudi Arabia for the annual pilgrimage to Mecca. This violation was followed by at least several others.

After the Gulf War--what the United States Government called Operation DESERT STORM--the UN placed a similar travel ban on the Iraqi government. Last spring Iraq violated the sanctions in a similar fashion.

Now The New York Times has reported the Arab League--consisting of UN members--has passed a resolution to allow, among other activities, Libyan flights for humanitarian and religious purposes. (Can an easing of sanctions against similar flights for Iraqi aircraft be far behind?)

Even though covert or clandestine or merely discreet violations of sanctions against Libya and Iraq have been occurring with the help of UN members for quite some time, the use of humanitarian and religious behaviors as the overt wedge factor in attenuating the content and consequences of sanctions has a very long history. In fact, sources from antiquity contain many examples of special allowances for women and children, for medicine, religious rituals.

An additional lesson, however, is that the humanitarian/religious overt wedge factor is dependent on the decency of the entity in power. In a 20th century containing horrors committed in the name of the Good, the True, the Decent, how reassuring can this be as we approach the next Millennium? (See Jehl, D. (September 22, 1997.) Arab countries vote to defy U.N. sanctions against Libya. The New York Times, p. A8; Rittenberg, S.M. (1995.) On thralldom: A psychoanalytic study of men enslaved to women. Journal of Clinical Psychoanalysis, 4, 25-42.)