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Great power competition in Syria: from proxy war to sanctions war

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The New Struggle for Syria

Syria's conflict has metamorphized since the beginning of the 2011 uprising: firstly from non-violent protest to militarized civil war, and, in its most recent phase, roughly from 2015 to the current time, into a period when agency has largely passed from Syrians toward external powers: increasingly rival great powers are the ultimate shapers of developments, above all Russia and the US, but with China recently playing a greater role.

The competitive intervention of Russia and the US in Syria is seemingly driven by a belief that what happens in Syria matters for wider struggles in the region and beyond. It can be seen as the latest version of the "Struggle for Syria" of the late 1950s, famously depicted by Patrick Seale (1965), when regional and global great powers also intervened in Syrian politics to support clients, on the understanding that Syria's alignment choices would be decisive for the alignments of the whole region in the Cold War. Since the Syria uprising, a "New Struggle for Syria," as several writers, have depicted it, has been waged by rival powers. (POMPES 2011; Ryan 2012; Nerguizian, 2014; Phillips 2016; Gani J. and R. Hinnebusch 2022; Hamidi 2023). This paper examines the latest phase of the "New Struggle for Syria" when it initially took the form of a militarized proxy war over territorial spheres of influence and later evolved into a chiefly

economic sanctions war over reconstruction (Andersson and Waage 2021).

Much is at stake in this struggle. At the *state level*, at stake is whether the Asad regime be able to reconstitute authority over the country's territory and its reconstruction; or will the current partial state failure persist?; or will governance in Syria implode –with spillover to MENA and European neighbours? *At the regional level,* will the Iran-led "resistance axis" be broken or strengthened? At the global level, Syria is one of several tests as to whether the US weaponization of the world financial system can sustain its global hegemony or whether those promoting a multipolar order prevail, notably Russia and China.

This paper will give a macro-overview of some of the main features and developments of the current struggle, putting it in the wider context of great power competition at the global level. First, Russian and American foreign policy goals in Syria are outlined; next analyzed is how their intervention helped shape a semi-proxy war in Syria. Then the transition to a sanctions war over reconstruction is examined: the various phase of sanctions inflicted on Syria and their impact on it. Then the case of Syrian sanctions is located within the global battle between Washington's "sanctions hegemony," and rival great powers seeking a multipolar world, including a look at the impact of the Ukraine war on this contest and on the battle for Syria. Finally attempts at push back against US sanctioning of Syria by global and regional players are examined. The paper ends with a conclusion summarizing how the global struggle has affected Syria and how outcomes in Syria will affect the latter.

Russia-US Competition in Syria

What is driving Russian policy in Syria? Russia's military intervention in Syria, its first beyond the post-Soviet space, was meant to mark its return to great power status. Blocking what it took to be a US ambition to change the regime in Syria and

championing of the territorial integrity of the Syrian state were perceived as steps toward establishing the norms of the multipolar order in which state sovereignty is dominant over liberal norms such as "Responsibility to Protect." Russia saw the US policy of regime change as an emblem of its global hegemony and accused Washington of destabilizing the MENA region and encouraging Islamic radicalism, which was a threat to Russia itself. It represented itself by contrast to the US as a respecter of sovereign equality among states. At the same time, Russia's great power status was advanced by restoring a traditional ally/client to Russia's sphere of influence. This allowed it to establish bases from which it could project power in the Mediterranean to balance NATO. Other interests acquired in Syria included potential hydrocarbon resources and the opportunity to neutralize the threat from jihadists fighting in Syria originating—and likely to return to—the Russian Caucasus. Moscow's apparent foreign policy achievements in Syria also bolstered Putin's domestic power position since restoring Russia's global stature was a key part of his self-representation. Russian discourse went further in periods of conflict with the US, namely promoting the idea of Russia as part of a Eurasian civilization distinct from the liberal West whose liberal imperialism threatens the globe's civilisational pluralism (Blank 2011; Lo 2015; Rodkiewicz, W. (2017); Sogoloff (2017); al-Saadi (2015; Wilhemsen, 2019; Vorobyeva 2020).

Russia's 2015 military intervention transformed the military situation, saving the Asad regime, backing its territorial recovery and making opposition victory impossible, leading to exit of Gulf's opposition backers. As sponsor of the Syrian regime, Moscow made itself indispensable to the peace talks convened with the US at Geneva, later Vienna: thus, Moscow extricated itself from the diplomatic isolation incurred by its seizure of the Crimea. As Geneva stalled, Russia was also able to use its leverage over the rival parties in Syria to sponsor an alternative diplomatic venue at Astana that excluded the US. Russia sought at

Astana to broker a settlement among regime and opposition, Turkey & Iran, that would keep Asad in power with some minimal power-sharing; in parallel, Russia tried to use reconciliation agreements to forge a loyal opposition of fighters incorporated into Russian controlled military units to reinforce power-sharing on the ground. Russia, aimed to stabilize the country by strengthening state institutions' capacity to govern, especially in the security sector, in order to reduce the risk that it would, as Heydemann and Yazigi (2021) put it, "find itself in a quagmire, forced to keep a dysfunctional regime on life-support as the country continues its downward spiral." This included efforts to discipline and integrate diverse pro-regime militias into regular army formations, as many were predatory and out of control (Mardasov 2018; Kozhanov 2020).

Good relations with all the major regional states, including rivals in Syria--Turkey, Iran and Israel—also positioned Russia to restrain their rivalries. De-conflictization agreements with Turkey and Iran and the restraint Moscow placed on the Israel-Iran competition in Syria, were major factors in the partial freezing of the proxy war. However, Russia was unable to broker a peace settlement and lacked the resources to lead the reconstruction of the country, which would have to rely on investment from Europe, the Gulf and East Asia. This left it vulnerable to the machinations of its US rival. (Heller 2016, Laruelle 2019; Tokmajyan 2022).

What does the US want in Syria?

Syria was not heretofore considered a vital US interest, so its interventionist policy in Syria needs some explanation. The Obama administration had half-heartedly supported the opposition and deployed sanctions, calling for Asad to go, but had sought to avoid the involvement of US forces. The occasion for overt US military intervention was the war on ISIS but, under the Trump administration it quickly pivoted to obstruct Russian/Iranian ambitions. As, in 2018, ISIS's territorial control

rapidly contracted under Western air assault the competing powers raced to fill the power vacuum. Asad's forces with Iranian backing moved toward Deir ez-Zor and border crossing with Iraq at Abu Kamal in competition with the US backed Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) which, however, seized much of the Eastern provinces from Raqqa to Hassakah. The US attacked Syrian government forces three times to prevent Damascus from re-establishing control over its territory. This left the US and its proxy controlling much of northeast Syria, with its concentrations of oil, food and hydraulic resources. (Azizi, 2017; Hashem, (2017).

While the US claimed its presence in Syria was to prevent an ISIS resurgence, this would have best been prevented by allowing the reestablishment of government authority over Syria's territory while the current conflict situation provides a potential breeding ground for ISIS to revive. Although the US rightly claims the regime and its allies are guilty of war crimes in Syria, its own hands are not clean: indicative of how little the welfare of Syrians matter for the US is its refusal to help reconstruct Raqqa, the city destroyed by its aerial bombardment in the battle with ISIS (*Syrian Observer* 2021). The dominant US reasons for staying in Syria were exposed by the intra-Washington struggle between President Trump who wanted to withdraw and the Washington establishment. Trump declared the US would stay long enough to take control of Syria's oil but was otherwise keen to exit Syria which he famously declared contained only "sand and death" (Rogan 2018). The Syrian government had awarded Russia concessions in its oil fields which the US would prevent it from cashing in; instead US officials set up an oil company to exploit and export Syrian oil (This was said to be shut down by Biden but the Syrian and Chinese governments as well as the oil contractor Gulfsands charge that the US together with the Kurdish administration, is still looting Syrian oil (Tabler 2021; Zaman and Wilkofsky 2022).

For the Washington establishment under Trump staying in Syria would give the US strategic advantages; it was thought to be a major tool to force Iranian withdrawal and a key card to be depoloyed in political negotiations over power transition, i.e., for regime change. The establishment therefore evaded Trump's instructions to wind down the US presence. Fronted by Jim Jeffries, its discourse made no secret of its plan to keep Syria a quagmire for its rivals (Al-Monitor 2019; Bahout 2018; Allen 2019; Bandow 2021; Perry 2019). To Washington, a Russian-Iranian victory would have *shifted the regional power balance* against the US and Israel toward the "Resistance Axis" and validated Russia's restored great power status and the limits of US hegemony. Russia and Iran seemed to *militarily* win in Syria, but Washington would deprive them of the fruits of victory by blocking Syria's economic revival and reconstruction, thereby making it a vulnerability not an asset—a failed state draining their resources. Washington and Moscow seem to have agreed on one thing: who prevailed in Syria mattered because much more than Syria was at stake (Haaretz 2018; Detsch (2018; Kampeas 2018; Bandow 2022; Brennan 2020; Itani, F. and N. Rosenblatt 2018)

Syria's Proxy War

Spheres of Influence:

The outcome of the Russian and US interventions, coming after and overlaying those of regional powers, Iran and Turkey, led to a semi-proxy war characterized by competitive intervention of outside powers in Syria but also fostering and operating through Syrian proxy groups that fought each other and drove the division of the country into three rival spheres of influence. T*he regime now* ruled three-quarter of the population, but Iran and Russia deeply penetrated its political structures and society. *Turkey*, occupied large swaths along Syria's northern border, where governance and services were linked to Turkey and much of the opposition FSA incorporated into its military formations, (renamed the Syrian National Army); Turkey also exercised a sort

of protectorate over the jihadist enclave of Idlib; the *PYD dominated SDF* governed in the northeast, wholly autonomous of Damascus and under US protection.

Conflict Fronts:
This division translated into three conflict fronts. In the northwest, Turkey was protecting jihadist Idlib and parts of northern Syria under its proxy, the Syrian National Army, (previously Free Syrian Army) from the regime's periodic efforts to advance into the area, with Russia as balancer and restrainer. In the northeast Turkey and its Syrian proxies were ranged against the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces, that had US backing, with Russia and the Syrian government trying to exploit this conflict to detach both Turkey and the SDF from the US. In the south, Israel with US support, challenged Iran and its proxies. Iran's effort to forge a strategic corridor to the Mediterranean via key places including Deir ez Zor, the Iraqi border, and Lebanon and its proliferation of sophisticated armaments production as a deterrent against Israel led to regular confrontations with Israel using hundreds of airstrikes to obstruct this Iranian project. Russia sought to contain and use the conflict to get leverage over the conflict parties. Regular clashes still continued on all fronts, as the rival parties jockeying to improve their positions and increase the costs for rivals, via tit for tat escalations that could get out of hand. Yet, these fronts tended to be static, with the balance of power among the parties such that no side was able to defeat the other at acceptable cost, with Russian balancing helping to ensure this remained the case (Harmoon Center 2021; Stein 2021)

The Ukraine War: unfreezing Syria's frozen conflict?
The war in Ukraine threatened to reshuffle the cards in the Syrian proxy war. There was a risk the war could be re-ignited by a diminished Russian role in Syria which was pivotal to the balance of power and to broking of arrangements with the key rival actors such as de-conflictization agreements reached at Astana

that had helped freeze the proxy war. Russia, the one party that had good relations with to almost all the rival sides in Syria and the most potent military presence, positioned it to broker deals managing the conflict. Owing to the Ukraine invasion Russia's soft power was damaged, and there were reports it was reducing its hard power presence in Syria to bolster the fraught Ukrainian front. The rival parties seemed poised to exploit the Ukraine war to shift the balance of power in their favour or obstruct it turning against them (Soloman 2022; Tokmaiyan 2022; Yacoubian 2023; COAR 2022). Ibrahim Hamidi (2022) reported the Ukraine war was triggering a regional race to "fill the Russian vacuum."

Asad's Reaction to Ukraine: Asad welcomed the Russian attack on Ukraine as aiming to restore the world (bi-polar) power balance that had been upset by the collapse of the Soviet Union (TASS 2022). The war, however, also heightened the Syrian regime's insecurity which led it to revive ties with other Arab states and, at the same time, seek reassurance from its major allies, Iran and Russia. To show its loyalty to its Russian patron, Syria was one of only five countries to vote against the UN General Assembly resolution condemning the invasion. There were demonstrations in loyalist areas of Syria in support of Russia.

Turkey and the northern front: For a short time, it looked like the reshuffling of the cards would reignite the northern front, with Turkey moving to consolidate its position. Turkey had unfinished business with the Kurds in that its successive interventions aiming to push the PYD/SDF back from the Turkish border and create a buffer zone populated by its own Syrian proxies (FSA), remained incomplete. Erdogan also wanted to settle Arab Sunnis in these areas to relieve the pressure of refugees on the Turkish economy. Previously the US, Russia or both had conceded something but not all of what Turkey wanted, tolerating two early incursions by which Turkey took over wide areas along Syria's northern border; with the Ukraine war, Erdogan

threatened to militarily intervene to occupy the last border area—Membej and Tel Rifaat--needed to link up its multiple enclaves. Despite US and Russian objections, he seemed to feel Turkey had leverage over both the US, which needed his go ahead for NATO expansion, and Russia, which could not afford to push Turkey into American arms. Moscow expressed understanding of Turkey's security needs but also deployed forces, with the Syrian army, to deter Turkey. Doing nothing would have been a sign of weakness and alienate the Kurds who Russia was trying to pull away from their dependence on the US. As a substitute, Russia tried to broker a reconciliation (and normalization) of Turkey with the regime that would stabilize the security situation to the satisfaction of several parties (Farooq 2021; Kemal 2021; Chulov 2022).

In parallel, the regime and the jihadists who controlled Idlib, partly in alignment with Turkish backed FSA contingents, began to heat up their confrontation as the Russian-Turkish deconflictization agreements established in the area appeared to weaken. However, the Syrian opposition forces were too fragmented to unite against the regime; the regime continued to get Russian air support in the flair ups on this front, and Russia continued to restrain both the regime and Turkey and its clients.

Israel vs. Iran: It was the southern front—Iran vs. Israel--that proved most dangerous in the post-Ukraine period. Russia had tempered the Israel-Iran conflict in Syria by restraining both, but these arrangements seemed to be breaking down. Russian troops abandoned smaller outposts as part of a certain drawdown of forces from Syria and Iran filled the vacuum, taking over Russian bases and militia units and extending its influence on the ground into formerly Russian dominated areas such as Dera. This was seen as threatening by Israel. Russia had checked Iran's freedom of action against Israel; yet Iran had long sheltered behind the Russian presence and was now more exposed. Israel became increasingly aggressive in its attacks on Iranian targets. At

the same time, Russia and Iran, formerly both allies and rivals in Syria were thrown closer together by the Ukraine war by mutual need for arms the other produced and Russia seemed to green-light Iran's project to upgrade Syrian air defences. In parallel, the US, by assisting, albeit passively, Israeli operations in Syria, was drawn into tit for tat conflict with Iranian forces there. Washington and Tehran also seem ensnared in a tit for tat tanker war in the Gulf originating in the former's seizure of so-called sanctioned Iranian oil shipments. As such, a new very dangerous alignment was emerging pitting Russia and Iran against the Israel and the US that entailed serious risks of escalating the conflict (Kozhanov 2018; Azizi 2022; Iddon 2023; Szuba 2023; Gramer 2023; Gramer and Mackinnon; Nostrant 2022; Mandel 2022; Seligman 2021).

Despite this, a military balance of power continued to exist in Syria. This was in part because the anticipation of Russian withdrawal from Syria was premature. Syria, some argue, became *more*, not less, important to Russia than before Ukraine. Nor was its position substantially degraded. Russia-backed Syrian military formations continued to be deployed in defence of the regime, notably against the jihadists in Idlib, Russia still controlled the skies over much of northwestern Syria and it continued to try to diplomatically head off Turkish, Iranian and Israeli bids to up the ante. Hence despite regular tit for tat attacks, Russia's balancing presence was still partly operative and the inter-dependencies of the rivals kept all vulnerable to the other (Saoud 2022). As such, the territorial front lines of the proxy war remained largely frozen. This shifted the arena of struggle from the *military to the economic*—to a battle over reconstruction and sanctions (Lund 2018).

The Sanctions War over Syria

The first decade

The sanctions war went through several phases. Western sanctions on Syria had from the beginning of the uprising paralleled

the political and military contest. Sanctions were imposed by the US and EU, steadily escalating from targeting elites to the whole economy *indiscriminately* (notably ther EU oil boycott, and the US cut off from world banking system).

Yet, in roughly the first ten years of the conflict, sanctions failed in their stated goals, to get the regime to stop its repression and negotiate a power transition. The sanctioners' maximalist demands, amounting in practice to regime change—have never succeeded anywhere: the threat to Syrian regime from political transition was greater than from sanctions. Nor could the sanctions bring about regime collapse. The purpose of sanctions had been to erode the regime's base of support, but it continued to enjoy enough resources to sustain key sources of support. Security elites remained loyal as the costs imposed by sanctions were compensated for by opportunities for rent seeking from the war economy. Sanctions pushed crony capitalists closer to the regime while high profile sanctioned figures were replaced by new unknown second level operators. For a considerable period, the regime sustained a minimum of welfare via subsidies on bread and fuel and paying the salaries of civil servants even in opposition areas. Thus, sanctions just made people more dependent on the regime for their livelihoods.

The sanctions were blunted by several factors: Damascus had long experience of sanctions evasion and its few assets abroad were well hidden and mostly retrieved. It had accumulated large foreign currency reserves in anticipation of new sanctions. The regime learned how to capture a share of resource inflows such as humanitarian aid and remittances from Syrians abroad. The Center for Strategic and International Studies found that the Syrian government retained 51 cents for every dollar of humanitarian aid entering the country in 2020 (Fox 2022). Unilateral sanctions (as opposed to UN ones) encourage sanctions busting and Iran and Russia did so, compensating Syria for some sanctions damage, especially Iranian credit lines that ensured

delivery of such basics as food, medicine, and oil needed to sustain energy generation: sanctions just made regime more dependent on Russia and Iran. (Arslanian 2019; Mehchy and Turkmani 2021; al-Alawani and Shaar 2021; Fox and Shaar 2022). However, three developments escalated the power of sanctions against Syria around roughly 2020: the vulnerabilities of reconstruction; the US escalation to secondary sanctions; and a set of multiplier factors.

The New War of Sanctions: the struggle over reconstruction: The deployment of sanctions in the Syrian conflict entered an entirely new phase as the US turned to deploying them to obstruct regime-led reconstruction. Once the regime was no longer in danger from the armed opposition, it set out to consolidate its position via reconstruction. Its reconstruction strategy was designed to reward loyalists and allies and punish opponents. Regime loyalists, who had been encouraged to extract resources directly from the war economy, were now urged to channel their war profits into reconstruction schemes, thereby tightening their co-optation by the regime. Concessions of land and mineral resources compensated Syria's Russian and Iranian allies, thereby giving them a stake in reconstruction. At the same time, informal settlements which had been opposition strongholds were razed and property expropriated to make way for upscale secure housing zones for regime constituents.

Yet reconstruction would prove to be a point of vulnerability for the regime. Its allies (Russia, Iran), while military dominant on the ground, were geo-economically weak, while the US and its allies (Europe, Gulf) commanded the capital, and the US would deploy sanctions to prevent any reconstruction that would benefit the Asad regime, Iran and Russia. Moving the playing field from the *military to the economic* shifted the power balance toward the US. (Asseburg, an Oweis 2017; Arslanian 2018; Lund 2017; Berti 2017; Cochrane, 2017; Heydemann 2017, 2018; Yazigi 2017).

US escalation to secondary sanctions: However, the US, itself having no economic relations with Syria, could only acquire leverage over Syria if it could deter *others* with geo-economic power from doing business with Syria, e.g., notably China, India, and the Gulf states. Hence, the US escalated to *extraterritorial secondary* sanctions over Syria, threatening to punish with sanctions any company or state that invested or did business with Syria. This more powerful tool seems to have been much more effective than earlier sanctions. (US Congress 2018; Mansour 2019; McDowall 2018).

Multipliers: Finally, several other factors—multipliers--came together to magnify the sanctions effect on Syria. Syrians' ability to use Lebanese banks to circumvent sanctions was lost with the Lebanese economic collapse. The government's foreign currency reserves were finally depleted. Much of its resource wealth—both energy and food—had fallen under the control of the U.S.-backed SDF, thus, not available to the wider economy, and indispensable for but withheld from reconstruction. Syria's 2021 wheat harvest was the lowest in 50 years.

Impact of Sanctions on Syria

What has been the impact of the new wave of sanctions? The objective of sanctions is ostensibly to bring about a change in regime or at least a change in its behaviour; this would result either from a fracture in the regime over scarce resources or mass rebellion against it owing to economic immiseration at least partly brought about by sanctions. Neither has so far happened to the degree needed to change the political power balance.

The Regime under Stress: As intended, the Asad regime has been impacted. There is considerable evidence that the regime is under stress as resources become scarcer. The solidarity of the regime's elite core has indeed eroded, notably as indicated by the falling out between the Asad and Makhlouf families (Kasapoglu

and Kaya 2019). Rival alliances of businessmen, intelligence and military officers, fight over monopolies, with the backing of Russian or Iranian patrons. (COAR 2021)

Against this background, the regime has also become more predatory, squeezing even loyalist firms to extract revenues and alienating medium sized firms which cease investment or operations; this behaviour is self-defeating since it contributes to the increasing economic scarcity and is as powerful a deterrent to investment as are the sanctions themselves. Industrialists are exiting in large numbers (COAR 2021b). However, the regime found a substitute for the revenues lost from the sanctions squeeze, notably the drug grade. Maher Assad has allegedly turned his 4th Division into an armed drug cartel, controlling a trade valued at $5.7 bn/year. Drug proceeds, according to one analyst, have become *"the glue that binds Assad's regime together"* (Al-Hajj, 2022).

Immiseration at the societal level: At the societal level, the root cause of Syria's economic crisis is the cumulative impact of the civil war, and particularly the mass destruction visited by airstrikes and artillery deployed by the regime and its allies. (Montgomery, 2015).

But sanctions have contributed to the continuation and substantial deepening of economic damage: currency collapse, shortages of basics, massive unemployment; spiralling inflation are far worse than hitherto. Critical shortages of wheat and fuel caused prices to soar, such that only 1 in 10 families can afford essentials Impoverishment reaches 90%; 60% are in "extreme poverty." Sanctions, in particularly debilitating the state apparatus, inflict major misery on the many Syrians who rely on public salaries, services and goods like subsidized bread and fuel.

Food insecurity is a major dimension of the crisis. Syria ranks high among the 10 most food insecure countries: three out of five

Syrians suffer from food insecurity. 12.4 million Syrians are food insecure—a 50% increase over 2019; more than a million are "severely" food insecure (unable to survive without food assistance). 14.6 million Syrians are now dependent on humanitarian assistance, the highest ever recorded. This disaster has several causes. Drought ravaged the 2021 harvest, the lowest in fifty years, overlapping with disruption of wheat imports from Russia and Ukraine.

A second dimension of the economic immiseration was an energy crisis that hit at end of 2022, such that the whole economy came to a halt, with people unable to afford to go to work, businesses shuttering, and households getting a mere hour of electricity daily.

The role of sanctions can be identified both crises. While sanctioning states insist that sanctions do not prohibit humanitarian assistance, they do make it more difficult as banks and donors are made risk adverse for fear of getting caught up in sanctions. But what sanctions unquestionably do is make it difficult for Syrians to help themselves by restoring agriculture: they prohibit the import to Syria of, among many other things, key agricultural inputs such as fertilizer. Shipping companies—which Syria needs to deliver legitimate cargoes such as wheat—are deterred from dealing with Syria. And, despite a UN resolution legitimizing early recovery assistance, notably rehabilitating water infrastructure—sanctions "over-compliance" hobbles such efforts. As such, sanctions are contributing to the looming possibility of a man-made famine. (Heller 2021; Vohra 2020).

The energy crisis was a direct result of the disruption in Iranian oil shipments on which Syria is dependent. This disruption can be traced to Israel attacks and US seizure of Iranian vessels plus Iran's decision, prompted in part by its own sanctions-imposed economic troubles, to (temporarily it seems) double the price of oil to Syria (selling at market prices) and require prepayment for

the oil shipments (Yeranian, 2023; Chulov and Borger 2021; Sutton 2020; Scharf 2023).

Political Consequences: revolt? What has been the political consequence of mass immiseration? It is doubtless deepening disaffection. A measure of this is that even loyalist areas are disaffected, e.g., manifest in demonstrations and conscription evasion. Yet, the struggle for daily economic survival debilitates political agency; there appears to be no alternative to the regime as the opposition is divided, militarily impotent and opposition areas no better off. So far, the consequence is hopelessness -- even in Damascus, the most well-off area, 2/3 want to exit (Sowt al-Asima 2021; Alalwani and Shaar, 2021). Thus, as many scholarly studies have shown, regimes find ways to evade sanctions, particularly unilateral ones, while populations, having little defense, bear the costs and have no way out except exit from the country-- and this is clearly so in Syria. Indeed, "sanctions do encumber the regime's leadership and cronies, but they also see them as opportunities to turn a profit at the expense of Syria's poor" Jukhadar and Tsurkov (2020) The regime remains intact and disaffection remains localized, unable to translate into a regime-changing revolt (Mulder 2022; Lund 2018b; Aronson 2018); The Syria Report (2019), Where we Stand on the Syria Sanctions, 6 March 2019).

Even some anti-regime activists have come to believe that the current blunt sanctions should be redesigned to target the regime's revenue sources rather than the whole economy which attacks the living standards of ordinary Syrians. Overcompliance by banks is encouraged by Washington's arbitrary and harsh punishments. By their very nature, secondary sanctions are blunt, the reverse of "smart" or targeted ones (Schaer 2022).

The Global Level Battle of Sanctions: factors affecting the utility of sanctions in world politics.

Syria's story has to be put in the wider context of the global battle over sanctions (that began well before the Syria conflict) over, initially, US sanctioning of Iran and Cuba. Unilateral "secondary" sanctions in particular have not gone unchallenged, with possible consequences for their continuing use in Syria's crisis.

The global battle over sanctions has its origins in the US drive to "retool" its world hegemony and resist the move from a unipolar to multipolar world. Its hegemony had by roughly 2008 passed its peak in political, military and economic senses, but its continued dominance of the global financial system allowed it to "*weaponize global interdependence,"* as one study put it (Farrell and Newman 2019; Ahram, 2021). Today the US extensively deploys sanctions, with 24 countries under its sanctions. It seeks to use secondary sanctions to impose its foreign policy agenda on others by punishing any company or state that does business with the target. Ultimately this can involve cutting them off from the US market and technology, but more controversially, also from the dollar denominated *international payments system* which clears through US Banks. Even where that does not happen, the US Treasury been very aggressive in levying enormous fines on non-compliant foreign banks (Zibari 2022). No region has suffered as much as MENA from this weaponization of interdependence (Ahram 2022)

This practice relies on raw power and suffers from legitimacy and legality deficits that generate pushback. The legitimacy deficit is indicated by widespread condemnation of secondary sanctions by resolutions of multilateral bodies such as the UN General Assembly, G-77 and the Non-Aligned Movement. Secondary sanctions have also been likened to siege warfare in breaching human right law by targeting whole populations (Kanfash 2023). Indicative of this is the finding of the UN Special Rapporteur on Unilateral Coercive Measures and Human Rights that more than 90% of Syrians are forced to live below

the poverty line primarily due to the unilateral measures adopted by the West (Aji 2022; *al-Monitor* 2022).

Many legal scholars also consider secondary sanctions to be against customary international law in that they violate the sovereignty of other countries; in fact, key countries made sanctions compliance illegal for firms operating on their territory; thus, the EU blocking statute, made it illegal for European nationals to comply with US sanctions on Iran although loopholes and enforcement lapses rendered the statute fairly ineffective. The EU also tried to create a barter system to bypass use of the dollar system, but multinational companies would not risk US punitive sanctions by using it. Secondary sanctions appear also to be an illegal *restraint on trade* under GATT and the WTO. While WTO does provide for exceptions on security grounds, countries are not entitled to decide for themselves if this is justified and sanctions can only target threatening states, not innocent third parties. Indicative of the intensity of the controversy is the fact that even close US allies, the EU, Canada, Japan took the US to a WTO tribunal over secondary sanctions on Iran and Cuba; tellingly, the US waived the sanctions rather than defend its case in adjudication. When President Trump reimposed secondary sanctions on dealing with Iran, the US paralyzed the WTO tribunal by blocking appointments to it in order to head off the likelihood that secondary sanctions would be ruled illegal, thereby establishing case law deeply prejudicial to US practices (Mitchell 2017; Ruys and Ryngaert 2020; Meyer 2009; Drezner 2015; Lewis 2021).

To be sure, when it came to Syria, the EU joined the sanctions bandwagon, but, importantly, did not attempt to deploy secondary sanctions. Most recently Gibraltar did not heed a US request to seize a vessel transporting Iranian oil to Syria. China has adopted anti-sanctions policy under which discriminatory measures on Chinese companies will be met by counter-sanctions and boycotts. Apparently conscious of the risk that

sanctions overuse could stimulate retaliation and movement away from the use of the dollar, Biden's administration undertook a review to see if the US was overextending itself: if Washington can sanction any company for legal activity it doesn't like, China and others could do the same to U.S. businesses—making them uninsurable (Braw 2021). Biden waived sanctions on the Nordstream gas pipeline for fear of starting a trade war with Europe. The US congress has, however, no such inhibitions and--amidst a dense proliferation of foreign pressure groups keen to enlist the US in their conflict—has become a virtual sanctions factory.

The Ukraine war has exposed the potential and also the limits of sanctions when deployed against a great power. Russia' s invasion egregiously violated the norms it was promoting, sovereignty, hence its promotion of a multipolar world order and its defense of Syria sovereignty was damaged. The G-7 agreed sanctions against Russia demonstrated how much raw financial power still remained in the hands of the West where the role of sanctions—and the US sanctions hegemony--was legitimized by the Russian aggression. The EU joined with the US in its controversial weaponization of the world banking system: while the US and EU had every right, under customary international law to boycott Russian oil, they went further and confiscated Russian assets in their banks, without giving any judicial recourse and demanded that other countries follow suit.

On the other hand, the Ukraine war sharply deepened the global division over sanctions between the "West and the Rest," thereby accelerating pushback among US rivals and non-aligned states. To be sure, only four countries voted against the UN General Assembly resolution condemning the Russian invasion of Ukraine: sovereignty is a norm almost all countries can agree on. But over 100 countries refused to sanction Russia, unconvinced that it was wholly to blame for the war; they had a combined population greater than the West but possessed a fraction of the

latter's wealth. The non-Western countries denied the right of Washington and Brussels to tell the world who they can have economic relations with. Many states believed Western countries had forfeited the moral high ground from which they might demand solidarity against Russia by their own invasions of Iraq and Libya and tolerance of the Israel annexation of conquered Arab land. Egypt declared that the attack on the sovereignty of a state (Ukraine) was illegal but so also was imposing unilateral sanctions (al-Monitor 2022). Reflecting a similar sentiment, an African delegate declared: "The charter of the United Nations continues to wilt under the relentless assault of the powerful." (Kinninmont 2022; Stent 2022).

What carries particular implications for Syria is how even the closest US allies in MENA have declined to follow US policy toward Russia. The GCC, led by Saudi Arabia, refused to increase oil production to fill the energy gap from the Western boycott of Russian oil, instead sticking with the OPEC+1 agreement with Russia, enabling both to gain from booming oil prices. The acrimonious US reaction—threatening to punish Riyadh--precipitated a move by the latter to leverage its pivotal role as oil swing producer to renegotiate its strategic relationship with the United States, a major impetus to its acceptance of the Chinese negotiated détente with Iran. Another remarkable case is Israel which also did not apply sanctions, not wanting to jeopardize the agreements with Russia that enables it to strike Iranian targets in Syria. In short key US allies were unwilling to sacrifice their national interests to US demands (Hagedorn 2022; Salah 2022; Hamzawy et.al. 2022.)

Turkey is a exemplary case of a state trying to balance between and extract concessions from both sides, a tactic the non-aligned world see as possible in a divided world order with features of the bi-polarity which used to empower the "third world." Turkey sold drones to Ukraine that were used against Russia and closed the Bosporus and Dardanelles Straits to Russian warships and its

airspace to Russian flights to Syria; yet it did not impose sanctions on Russia and became a conduit for Russian money to avoid sanctions. The two economies are highly interdependent, notably Turkey is dependent on Russia for more than half its gas imports. Their experience in balancing their interests in Syria also allowed them to put aside their differences over Ukraine (Tastekin 2020, 2023).

The Ukraine case has also exposed how sanctions against a great power carry a high risk of a "Boomerang Effect." It shows how unilateral sanctions can boomerang and damage sanctioning states themselves, not to mention all other states who have no say over sanctions policy but are forced to pay the costs—in this case of the severe energy crisis and inflation boom unleashed by the economic warfare between the West and Russia. Their economic struggle inflicted severe pain on poorer countries, driving up food and fuel costs, and sparking instability. Significantly, fear of worsening the global economic crisis and sparking retaliation has restrained the US from applying secondary sanctions on major countries doing business with Russia, such as India and China.

A third phenomenon attendant on the use of sanctions in the Ukraine war is the acceleration of what has been called "de-coupling." In exposing how over-dependence on Western run financial system makes US rivals highly vulnerable to sanctions, the conflict has provoked moves at decreasing dependence on the dollar dominated international financial system. Notably, China has become the centre of what could evolve into an alternative financial infrastructure, with the Yuan promoted to reduce use of dollar in international trade and as a reserve currency; China is also develoing an alternative banking payment system. One reason the dollar is central to world trade is that *hydrocarbon sales are denominated in dollars,* hence everyone needs dollars to buy this indispensable source of energy. This is why the US saw a mortal threat when Saddam Hussein changed the sale of

Iraq's oil to euros. Significantly, Middle East and other oil producers are now moving to sell oil to China in yuan (Liu 2022b).

China has, however, played a balancing game between Russia and the US. It has purchased large amounts of Russian—and Iranian—oil. But it has refraining from sending arms to Russia and bigger Chinese banks stopped doing business with Russia, aware that China's alternative financial infrastructure is not yet able to substitute for the current dominant role of the dollar in international trade. China is still too highly integrated into and invested in the world economy, including holding large dollar reserves, to risk provoking Washington too much or to make abrupt policy responses to the sanctions regime. China's blocking law does mandates counter-sanctions and boycotts if the US deploys secondary sanctions on China, but the US has so far refrained from doing so. As a US Secretary of the Treasury warned, the "overuse" of sanctions risks the legitimacy of US global leadership (Demarais 2023; China File (2022).

While these moves toward "financial multipolarity" are just getting underway, they are more congruent with the world's existing political and economic multi-polarity than is the current financial unipolarity. Among those governments that most welcome financial multipolarity are those of Syria and Iran which are hoping sanctions on Russia will precipitate a "great decoupling" allowing their incorporation into an alternative world order immune to the US sanctions hegemony. Bashar al-Asad's depiction of the invasion of Ukraine as marking "a restoration of balance of the world that was lost after the dissolution of the Soviet Union" (Tass 2022) is indicative of the view of non-aligned states whose freedom to manoeuvre between world blocs was lost by the establishment of a US-led unipolar world and of their yearning for the establishment of a multi-polar world as a bulwark shielding them against US hegemony. It is telling that in the post-reconstruction period in Syria, China has increased humanitarian aid by 10-fold and appears to be investing in early

recovery projects; yet China's private sector is deterred by the high risks of investing in Syria, only partly due to sanctions and as much owing to insecurity and predatory regime practices that target private firms (Marks 2018; Mathews 2021; COAR 2022b)

The Syria Sanctions battle—episodes of regional level push back.

Several episodes of push back against US sanctions on Syria came from regional states and/or Syria's allies. These efforts aimed to negotiate an easing of sanctions, by pushing for some middle ground between the sanctioners—the US and EU—and the Syrian regime.

Bargaining over sanctions

An early instance of pushback was Russia's attempt to play the refugee card to get the EU to ease sanctions by warning of the prospect of a new wave of Syrian refugees if the Syrian state collapsed and if Syrians lost all hope; Moscow also held out the prospect of refugees' return if Syria was stabilized. However, the sanctioners dismissed this bid (Meyer and Delfs 2018).

Russia played the humanitarian card in the negotiations within the UN Security Council over keeping the Turkey-Idlib aid crossing open. In return for approving the continued use of the crossing, Russia extracted some concessions on behalf of its client, namely an increased share of humanitarian aid to be funnelled through the Syrian government and approval for early recovery/economic stabilization measures. In fact, these concessions did not substantially materialize in practice (Tabler 2021, Lynch 2021)

Iran tried to instrumentalize Lebanon's energy crisis by sending oil tankers to Lebanon's relief; this aimed to embarrass the US into aiding a friendly country and specifically to pressure Washington to approve an alternative energy arrangement by which Egypt would provide Lebanon with natural gas through a

pipeline crossing Jordan and Syria; this would allow Syria to reap transit fees and possibly a share of these hydrocarbons. Egypt and Lebanon, however, understood that, given the project's dependence on Syrian participation, it could not go ahead without a sanctions exemption from Washington. While the US seemed prepared to be flexible, the episode exposed how far sanctions hegemony compromised the basic norm of world order, namely states' sovereignty: two sovereign states, both friendly to Washington, could not conclude a mutually beneficial economic deal in their national interests without approval from a third party--the US (Hagedorn 2022; Syrian Observer 2022; Todman 2022).

The Battle over Regional Normalization

Several Arab states began pushing for normalization of relations with Syria on the grounds that the regime was staying, the people suffering and only Iran and Turkey benefited from Syria's isolation. For some of them, especially the UAE, which spearheaded normalization, the regime was seen as a bulwark against jihadism and Islamism while the state failure which sanctions were driving, was a breeding ground for such movements, which threatened to spill out across the region. Syrian isolation from the Arab world only strengthened its incorporation into the Iran-led "axis of resistance" against the US and Western-aligned Arab states (Alam 2021; Ghantous and Georgy 2019; Young 2019)

The Arab initiatives generally call for phased normalization, with economic incentives for the regime contingent on its concessions on issues bearing on the self-interest of the Arab states such as an end to the regime's drug trade, the return of refugees, and a reduced role for Iran. This approach was congruent with the UN special envoy's proposals for breaking the Syrian deadlock. Such concessions would however be threats to the regime; the drug trade is an essential survival lifeline for it, with key elites likely to fight tenaciously to keep their drug proceeds;

large refugee returns would be an economic burden and, given their likely anti regime sentiment, a security threat to the regime while Iranian support is essential and embedded in the fabric of the regime. Hence, it was highly unlikely it would accept such concessions without serious economic relief in return, which however, was obstructed by US sanctions (Sly and Dadouch 2021; Cornish 2021; Kepel 2023).

The UAE case exposes both the forces for and against normalization. The UAE has played a balancing game, e.g., in inviting Asad to visit in defiance of the US. Syrian regime businessmen use the UAE as a safe haven for their funds to evade sanctions and access global markets. Yet it adjusted its actual engagement in Syria constrained by fear of sanctions and, after US warning, confined itself to early recovery and humanitarian delivery, which are theoretically exempt from sanctions (Kreig 2023).

US Sanctions Ambiguity under Biden

There has been some ambiguity from the Biden administration on how far secondary sanctions would be deployed against Arab states engaged in economic activity in Syria. When the Arab states started considering normalization of relations with Syria, Biden threatens sanctions on Arab investment in Syria's reconstruction unless it was accompanied by "significant movement" toward a political settlement, in practice a code word for regime change. When the UAE invited Asad to visit US declared it was "a profound disappointment.

Yet the Biden administration's actual application of secondary sanctions has been relatively restrained and according to critics, among them former officials appointed to deal with Syria under Trump or in congress, this has implicitly given the green light for normalization. Congressional republicans have insisted that the Arab states have to be told that normalization or Assad's return to the Arab League are *unacceptable*. But the Biden administration message seems more compatible with the approach of the Arab states: said one senior US official in charge of Middle

East policy, "if you're going to engage with the regime, get something for that." So, the belief may be spreading that Arab normalization, and some measure of reconstruction would be tolerated, and the Arab states are likely to continue testing its limits. The earthquake of 2022 gave extra impetus to this. (Vohra 2021; Asharq al-Awsat 2021; Heydemann 2022; Rogin 2023)

Earthquake politics: Normalization Breakthrough?

The earthquake strengthened the regime's argument for the lifting of sanctions. It tried to improve its image by approving the opening of new access routes for aid to opposition areas while insisting most aid also be delivered via it networks, The US initially denied sanctions inhibited humanitarian aid but then eased them for six months. US critics charged this created "many avenues for sanctions evasion" that would benefit the regime and its reconstruction project (Adbulrahim 2023).

Indeed, earthquake assistance did constitute a breach of Syria's isolation. More than 30 states delivered humanitarian assistance through or to regime held areas, even though the majority of the damage was done in opposition-controlled areas.

Most aid came from Arab countries, especially Iraq and the UAE but also, in a major break, from Saudi Arabia and some European countries, such as Italy, put aside inhibitions against dealing with the regime to deliver aid. The regime managed to take its cut of this assistance, according to one estimate, about 50% of the total, thereby breeching the sanctions stranglehold (Daher 2023; Zaman 2023; Tharoor 2023; Lund 2023).

The China brokered-Saudi-Iran reproachment: backlash against US sanctions hegemony?

There is reason to believe the Chinese brokered Saudi-Iran reproachment was encouraged by a shared backlash in the region against US sanctions hegemony. Chinese mediation was welcomed in part just because China's approach to the region is so different. The perception is that, by contrast to the US, China

does not declare enemies, put countries on sanctions lists, interfere in other states' internal affairs, or undertake destabilizing interventions (Walt 2023; French 2023). China's new role also reflects the fact that China has displaced the US as the biggest regional economic partner, especially in regarding energy (Diez 2023).

Both Iran and Saudi Arabia welcomed Chinese mediation because of a shared discontent with the conduct of US hegemony in the region. Iran, facing a threatening US-Israeli alignment with the failure to renegotiate the nuclear deal, needed détente with Arab neighbours that would break its isolation and hence was ready to make some concessions. Some have speculated that the deal involved a tacit Yemen for Syria trade in which Iran would reduce or end its support for the anti-Saudi Houthis in return for Riyadh's ending its hostility to the Syrian regime.

Indeed, Saudi Arabia was keen to end the disastrous entanglement in Yemen. At the same time, Riyadh wanted to reduce its security dependency on US which it sees unreliable--as exposed by the 2019 US failure to respond to Iranian-inspired drone attacks on Saudi oil facilities. The Saudis were also looking to diversify their security dependency owing to several acrimonious clashes of interests with Washington, notably over the US demand to depress oil prices to weaken Russia after its invasion of Ukraine. Rather, the increased leverage over the West over oil prices that Riyadh has gained from the boycott of Russian oil and the expanding Asian markets for its oil exports, have put it in a position to balance between its old US ally and newly emerging one, China, in order to renegotiate its standing with the former (Millar 2023; Hamzawy 2023).

Is this precipitating a major realignment in MENA? Remarkably, the Saudis will join Iran in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, a body including China, Russia and formed to balance US hegemony and which now seems set to lead

development of an alternative to the dollar dominated world financial order. Indeed, the Syrian conflict and Ukraine war are bringing Russia, China, Turkey, Iran and now Saudi Arabia together in unprecedented ways, in opposition to the US, its presence in Syria and its secondary sanctions. (Essaid 2023, Liu 2023). This arguably reflects a regional understanding that they can best adapt to coming multi-polar world through strategic diversification (al-Abdeh and Hauch 2023)

Is this realignment encouraging Arab states to proceed in defiance of Washington over Syria? The agreement was immediately followed by a tectonic shift in the Saudi approach to Syria—from a break against normalization to a leader of the push for it. Syria's May 2023 re-entry into the Arab League, iconic of the regime's rehabilitation, was an outcome of explicit Saudi sponsorship which overwhelmed the objections of some other Arab states.

There are, however, many obstacles to turning a merely symbolic normalization into reconstitution and economic relief. For one thing, the regime seems in no hurry to accept the compromises on offer by the Arab states. If Saudi Arabia and the UAE follow up with sanctions busting undertakings will the US be ready to risk antagonizing allies that have so much leverage over world oil prices by sanctioning them? Both overt sanctions defiance by GCC countries and US application of sanctions against them would constitute "nuclear options,"-–potentially self-defeating—for both and, as such, they are likely to seek a compromise around a middle ground, such as agreement on deepening of early recovery.

Conclusion:

Plenty of scholarly studies (Phillips, 2016: 4-7) show that external intervention, especially if "balanced," escalates domestic conflicts into civil wars and prolongs these wars, especially if there are multiple external players that don't pay a cost for their

intervention, hence, have little incentive to negotiate or end the conflict. All of these conditions obtained in Syria. Moreover, when it comes to great power interventions in Syria, they were intensified by the belief that what happened in Syria mattered for the power balance across the region and beyond. What the Syrian case also demonstrated was that great power intervention can greatly elevate the levels of violence and destruction in conflicts in that they brought exceptional firepower to bear and resorted to aerial bombardment on a massive scale often in battles over cities, as in Aleppo (Russian bombardments) and Raqqa (US bombardments).

In the Syrian case, though, the two great powers had quite different interests and hence differential consequences for the intractability of the conflict: Moscow, "owning" Syria, acquired a stake in the end of violence and in reconstruction, while the US thought it benefitted from obstructing the latter and so played the "spoiler." This was because in the war of sanctions, the US not only paid no cost whatsoever for its economic siege of the country but believed sanctions to be a highly effective cost-free instrument of power in the global struggle with its rivals: indeed, the weaponization of global economic dependency is the last remaining arena in which Washington enjoys world hegemony. Syria is one key battleground in which the struggle against this hegemony is being played out and tested.

It is, thus, Syria's misfortune to be a battleground of warring global forces. The assumption that who wins in Syria matters for who wins in the region still seems to carry weight. In the original Cold War case Syria was caught between bi-polar alliances headed by the US and Russia that were competing for the non-aligned states In the Middle East, and which way Syria went, so, it was thought, would go the region: indeed, Syria's choice broke the Western hold over MENA and welcomed the Soviets as a

counter-balancing player that helped establish a global bi-polarity in which MENA states had much enhanced autonomy.

The current struggle is also about what sort of world order is going to prevail. US sanctions hegemony is the last manifestation of a unipolar world and if it prevails in Syria, it would indicate we still in a partly unipolar world. The US has reinvented itself as a *sanctions hegemon* deploying secondary sanctions as a seemingly cost-free instrument for sustaining its global hegemony. This has certainly constrained the sovereignty of MENA states. Yet, otherwise, sanctions are *blunt instruments*: they are bad at regime change and mostly good for creating failed states and immiserating populations. There are big risks from weaponizing economic interdependencies including the boomerang effect and the encouragement it gives to the development of alternative financial infrastructure. If this leads to a failure of the sanctions campaign against Syria, it will be an indicator that the world has moved more thoroughly to a multi-polar phase.

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