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Starve or Surrender: Sanctions as a Siege Warfare Strategy in the Syrian Conflict

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Introduction

Despite facing substantial criticism for being a blunt coercive instrument that causes anguish and suffering for targeted populations, sanctions have proliferated in the post-Cold War order as a tool of choice to respond to international foreign policy issues ranging from the proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction to terrorism and human rights violations. More than 800 million people, or 12 percent of the world's population, live in countries under sanctions.[1] Following the Iraqi debacle and given their notorious impact on targeted populations, a reform movement engendered a move from comprehensive to 'targeted' sanctions. The aim of 'targeted' sanctions was to mitigate sanctions' 'collateral damage', and, in contrast to comprehensive sanctions, focus 'coercive pressure on those responsible for wrongdoing' (Cortright and Lopez 2002,2). This, however, was a bubble and not a long-term shift with the last decade witnessing the return of quasi-comprehensive (Prezas 2021) or de-facto comprehensive sanctions (Moret 2021) with all their accompanying negative consequences for civilians.

Syria is the paramount case in point. External actors seeking to influence the outcome of the Syrian conflict deployed sanctions extensively. A coalition of Western and regional countries imposed 'targeted' sanctions against Syrian individuals and vital sectors in the early stage of the conflict. As the conflict progressed, and as the initial sanctions proved ineffectual, Western

policymakers escalated their efforts by expanding the scope and intensity of sanctions to make them more punitive hoping to increase their chances of success. A decade after the outbreak of the conflict, and with guns falling largely silent, sanctions have become the main tool of the US and its western partners working to constrain the Syrian government and deny it and its allies a total victory.[2]

Sanctions on Syria, while allegedly smart and targeted,[3] come close to that of a comprehensive sanction regime. Scholarly analysis have shown that US's sanctions on Syria are akin to a total embargo on all trade,[4] while the EU's sanctions that are levied against Syria are 'unprecedent' (Portela 2012,152). Furthermore, there is a consensus that collectively, sanctions against Syria are one of the 'strictest and most complex collective regimes in recent history' (Daher, 2020:22) and the 'most complicated and far-reaching sanctions regimes ever imposed' (Walker, 2016:6). These sanctions are quite punitive even in comparison to other heavily sanctioned contexts (ibid: 26). For instance, Syria does not have anything similar to the 'Green List' of Iraq or the 'Basic Human Needs' list that can be used to export goods without a licence from the U.S government to otherwise embargoed countries, such as Cuba. Despite being unilateral measures and not approved by the United Nation Security Council and hence non-binding internationally, sanctions on Syria function effectively as though they are global due to the US's extraterritorial application of sanctions and global reach of US dollar.

Recent studies have surveyed the technical impact of sanctions on various aspects of life in Syria and how they negatively impact, among others, the economy, and operations of the aid sector; however, the full set of humanitarian consequences associated with employing sanctions against Syria have only recently begun to be understood in these fields. To date, however, no research has investigated sanctions in the Syrian context as a

'form of violence' emanating from their use as a warfare strategy. Throughout the conflict the use of unprecedented violence captured the attention of the academic community. However, this focus on exceptional atrocities has seemingly crowded out comparable interest in the systematic violence of sanctions that is perpetrated on a daily basis. The suffering and anguish caused by sanctions remained to a great degree subordinate to that caused by other forms of physical violence and is overlooked and understudied.

Conceptualizing sanctions on Syria as a form of modern-day siege, this article demonstrates that sanctions, as a form of violence and a tool of warfare, have exacerbated the suffering of innocent civilians and, in cases, inflected pain and damage comparable to that caused by other lethal policies while escaping public outcry and official scrutiny. More specifically, the article demonstrates how sanctions, in a manner similar to that of sieges, have damaged the welfare of innocent civilians and undermined their access to food, water and medical care. This article draws upon various data to present a cohesive, albeit not comprehensive, picture of how sanction run contrary to their originally stated goals, and that, contrary to the claim of sanctioning countries, the humanitarian exemptions are largely ineffective.

This article is based on interviews with practitioners and experts, media analysis as well as review of available literature including official reports, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and United Nation (UN) specialized agencies reports. It is structured in four sections. The first section presents the academic discussion on sieges and sanctions as their modern-day equivalent. The second section introduces the various sanctions regimes imposed on Syria. The third section addresses the impact of sanctions by exploring how they impact food insecurity as well as access to health and water. The fourth section provides concluding

remarks on the use of sanctions as a 'tool of violence' in the Syrian case.

Sanctions as the modern siege warfare

This article conceptualizes comprehensive sanctions as a form of modern-day siege. To untangle the comparison, the article departs from the work of Michael Walzer, the author of Just and Unjust Wars, on sieges. Walzer (2015:160) writes that siege is 'the oldest form of total war.' According to him, sieges, or blockades for this matter, are a form of 'total war,' in which 'non-combatants are exposed and are in fact more likely to be killed than combatants given that the goal of siege is 'surrender, not by defeat of the enemy army, but by the fearful spectacle of the civilian dead.' The slow enfeeblement of a country by siege, Walzer explains (ibid 162), entails the actual death of citizens. In Sieges, the first to succumb are the very young, the sick and the elderly. This is far from incidental and constitutes an integral part of the siege warfare strategy as it increases pressure on political elites to submit or surrender.

Ethicists and sanctions scholars agree that, in certain aspects, 'sanctions are the obvious version of modern siege warfare,' as they both involve the 'systematic deprivation of a whole city or nation of economic resources.' Functioning like sieges, 'sanctions reduce individuals to nothing more than means to an end by using the suffering of innocents as a means of persuasion' (Gordon 1999a). Here, damage to civilian population and harm to resources indispensable for survival is 'necessary and instrumental' and is utilized to 'influence political elites by triggering political pressure or uprising of civilians' (Gordon 1999,397). In both sieges and sanctions, the strategy is to inflict harm while presenting the targets with the option to 'starve or surrender,' at remarkably little cost to the sanction senders or besieging forces.

The enforcement of sanctions and sieges varies, but the outcome aims at the same effect. Sieges warfare 'enfeeble countries' by

restricting the economy of the entire community, creating shortages of food, water and fuel, while sanctions operate towards the same objective through international pressure and international institutions' (Gordon 1999,394 and Early and Schulzke 2019). This, in a sense, according to Gordon (1999,399), makes "sanctions a bureaucratized, and internationally organized form of siege warfare."

While usually presented as a 'middle range of policy alternatives that is stronger than diplomatic, but less coercive than the application of military force' (Damrosch 1994, 73), sanctions, similar to sieges, are inherently an 'instrument,' [5] and a 'form of violence with actual human costs' (Gordon 1999,388). A 'blunt instrument,'[6] which inflicts suffering on vulnerable groups that could potentially reach that perpetrated in a genocide,[7] sanctions entail a broad collection of adverse consequences for civilians as they harm their physical well-being and cause massive human suffering among those least able to survive shortages and disturbances to the general welfare. Like the pain and suffering of besieged populations, which is usually hidden behind the walls of a besieged locality, the suffering caused by sanctions, usually statistical and abstract, remains invisible to the outside world and rarely stirs public protests.

Statistics shed extra light on similarities between sanctions and sieges and how they are especially detrimental to civilians. On sieges, Walzer calculates that 'more civilians died in the siege of Leningrad than in the modernist infernos of Hamburg, Dresden, Tokyo, Hiroshima, and Nagasaki, taken together' (160). In Iraq, sanctions had a comparable impact. Mueller and Mueller found that 'economic sanctions may well have been a necessary cause of more people dying in Iraq than have been slain by all so-called weapons of mass destruction throughout history' (1999). The trend is not different globally. In his seminal work on the history of sanctions as an economic weapon and a tool of modern war, Mulder (2022) finds that from the beginning of the twentieth

century until the dawn of the Second World War 'deaths by economic isolation were the chief man-made cause of civilian death.'

Laying siege to the den of the lion: [8] Sanctions on Syria

The oppression of civilian protesters by the Syrian government forces in response to the 2011 uprising shocked people and governments across the world. In response, international and regional policymakers resorted to sanctions to 'signal' their disapproval of the Assad's policies and then as a tool of coercion to compel the Syrian government to undertake reforms. The rationale and objective of sanctions evolved later as they aimed to force the Syrian government to concede power only for that aim to shift again later towards symbolism and constraining (Arslanian 2020). Sanctions were framed as a 'response to the Syrian government's repression of civilians during the Syrian uprising,'[9] as a punishment to persons 'responsible for the commission of human rights abuses' or as a tool to deprive the Syrian government of the resources it needs to inflict violence against civilians and to pressure the Syrian government to allow for a democratic transition.[10]

Alongside the US's primary and secondary sanctions,[11] the EU,[12] Australia, Canada, Japan, Norway, Switzerland, Turkey, UK and the Arab League imposed sanctions on Syria.[13] Furthermore, several Jihadist groups operating in the country are subjects of UNSC resolutions[14] resulting in a very complex counter-terrorism compliance environment. The various sanction regimes in place are similar, though not uniform, and are complex and lack clarity. They all placed restriction on individuals as well as engagement in vital sectors such as banking, oil and power production. The cumulative sanctions on Syria amount to an embargo on all trade and financial ties with Syria, with limited exceptions. Sanctions effectively cut off Syrian banks from the global financial system and, directly and indirectly, block the country from accessing commodity and services markets leading

to financial exclusion, and difficulties accessing essential goods and services.

The impact of sanctions has been further magnified by widespread 'de-risking' or 'over-compliance' as well as their 'chilling effect' on legitimate businesses. As a high-risk jurisdiction, banks and private financial entities are very reluctant to engage in any activity in Syria, including those of humanitarian nature, in a process that is termed de-risking or over-compliance, rendering the country virtually 'un-banked' with only four banks willing to transfer money to the country after extensive delays.[15] Sanctions have also triggered the 'withdrawal of humanitarian organizations, as well as private sector actors for fear of technical violations of sanctions.

The severity of sanctions and their cumulative negative impact have warranted calls for their overhaul (The Carter Center 2020),[16] but to little avail. Throughout the conflict, sanctioning states have refused the claim that civilian suffering is caused by sanctions or that this is part of their strategy and continue to point to their generous aid contributions. While lamenting the damage of sanctions, they refuse responsibility for civilian suffering and point the fingers of blame to the Syrian government. Nonetheless, the recent sanction review by the U.S and several Guidance notes release by the EU represent an tacit acknowledgment of the direct harm of sanctions.[17]

Manifestly, sanctions are not solely responsible for the suffering of civilians in Syria; however, they do play a significant role. Scholars working on Syria argue that sanctions have debilitated the state (Hinnebusch 2020) and materially contributed to the partial state failure making the conflict intractable (Arslanian 2020). The semi-comprehensive sanctions on Syria are accompanied by a military occupation of the country's richest region in terms of natural resources and agricultural production, northeast Syria, by the US, UK, and French forces.

Punishing the violator, harming the victim: Tracing the impact of sanctions

While appearing justifiable and appropriate because they are framed with the goal of minimizing harm to civilians and promoting peaceful transition to democracy, sanctions on Syria have imposed significant costs and negative effects that are difficult to account for quantitively. Given the general conflict situation, and because the impact of sanctions is dispersed across society, largely socially imperceptible and not captured by conventional reporting, the full scale of the sanctions' impact has not been quantified yet and evidence remains qualitative. Nonetheless, this section draws a picture of how sanction hurt the wellbeing and welfare of the civilian populations with a specific view on food insecurity as well as access to health and water, respectively.

Sanctions and food security

Sanctions and food insecurity are inextricably linked in the Syrian context and nowhere is their negative impact more evident than in this area. In the past decade, Syrian civilians have suffered from a severe and unprecedented food insecurity crisis. The population is suffering hunger at a historic level and is faced with the risk of starvation and famine[18] with half of the Syrians being food insecure.[19] A survey conducted by the United Nations World Food Programme conveys the picture more clearly. The survey indicate that half of the surveyed households consume poor or borderline food, while 60 percent of interviewed households reported a reduction in the number of meals consumed per day. 47 percent of the surveyed households reported reducing food consumption by adult members to prioritize their children's food consumption needs.[20]

Sanctions are not solely responsible for the food insecurity in Syria and no reports indicate that civilians have starved to death because of these siege-like sanctions. Nonetheless, millions of women, children and the elderly are reported to suffer from mass

malnutrition that can be reasonably linked to sanctions. Sanctions harm the food security of Syria's citizens by hindering access to food as well as the availability and stability of food items in the country. In addition to causing high inflation, they do so by impeding access to international markets, undermining the agricultural sector's productivity, and hampering civilians' access to international remittances.

Sanctions, inflation and remittances: As observed in other states under sanctions (Peksen and Son 2015), sanctions against Syria were accompanied by a currency crisis and high inflation that immiserated millions of people across the country and delivered a devastating blow to the economic welfare of civilians. Sanctions hindered the ability of the state banking sector to control foreign exchange markets resulting in a considerably weakened Syrian pound. While inflation started early in the conflict, it accelerated parallel to the escalation of sanctions. In 2019, when the so-called Caesar Act was imposed, the Syrian pound depreciated to historic levels reaching 4600 pound per dollar, from 45.5 pre-conflict.

Subsequently, high inflation and decrease in consumer purchasing power undermined food accessibility for hundreds of thousands of households,[21] as well as their ability to meet their daily dietary requirements. The report of the UN food agency explains this more plainly. The survey shows that 73 percent of the surveyed households resorted to borrowing food or borrowing money to buy food,[22] while seven of the ten interviewed households at the national level reported that they bought food on credit.[23] In numbers, there was a 236 percent increase in the average of price of a food basket in December 2020 in comparison to December 2019, 29 times pre-conflict cost.[24] With the imposition of the Caesar Act in 2019, food insecurity rose from 6.5 million to 12.4 and 13.4 million in 2020 and 2021, respectively (FAO and WFP 2019).[25]

Sanctions have further undermined the welfare of Syrian civilians and their purchasing power by disrupting access to remittances from abroad, which serve as a vital lifeline to hundreds of thousands of households and are used to buy basic needs such as food. Financial sector over-compliance, the blacklisting of banks and private transfer companies have significantly reduced the available venues for sending remittance and contributed to a high rise of transaction costs.[26] This in turn limited the ability of Syrians abroad to support family members in the country and cut millions of civilians from one of their main sources of income and survival.[27]

Supply chain disruptions: While the conflict has rendered Syria dependent on food imports, sanctions disrupted the supply chains on which the importation of food depended. Few insurance and logistics companies are willing to service Syria, while only four banks continue to provide 'corresponding banking channels' to service the humanitarian sector in the country.[28] While technically all sanction regimes allow for the import of food, the restrictions on the banking and shipping sectors have made the process very difficult,[29] prohibitively expensive,[30] and contributed to delays or cancellation of grain, rice and sugar-import tenders.

Sanctions have hindered the ability of the state's main grain buyer, Haboob, to secure tenders for staple food such as sugar, flour, rice and wheat. These tenders were to be paid for by frozen Syrian assets, which theoretically could be used for the purchase of food and medicine. However, the 'chilling effect' of sanctions meant that international bidders shied away as the transaction would have required exemptions and could potentially involve technical violations.[31] The problem persisted throughout the conflict. In 2020, the country failed to find bidders for its food tenders and several rounds closed without any contract awarded.[32] Challenges such as transferring money, the possible reputational damage and need for technical legal knowledge

were the main reasons for international bidders to shy away from these deals.[33]

Sanctions and agriculture: In addition to hampering food imports, sanctions exacerbated the food insecurity crisis by hindering the recovery and full functioning of the Syrian agricultural sector. Sanctions bars the imports of machinery and equipment to Syria. It also places restrictions on the import of items identified as having 'dual use.' For example, sanctions prohibit the import of fertilizer, pesticides and herbicides.[34] To name one consequence of this prohibition, the limited availability of these products has impacted the prospects for large-scale agriculture, all the while damaging small-scale agriculture because of the spread of disease carrying pests.

Sanctions, according to Unruh (2021), further impact agriculture by placing bans on the imports of spare parts for machinery such as irrigation pumps and canal cleaning units or equipment that is used for processing agricultural products. Sanctions, he elaborates, further undermine the agricultural sector by placing redlines on any meaningful rehabilitation work or interaction with the state technical apparatus as well as by debilitating the state institutions' capacity to properly supply essential resources such as seeds, fodder, and fuel to famers, which negatively impacted the agricultural sector's productivity.

Sanctions and access to medical care

Another vital area where the impact of sanctions on Syrian civilians is starkly evident is the health sector. Sanctions against Syria harm the health and welfare of Syria's citizens, despite the theoretical availability of exemptions for pharmaceuticals and medical supplies. Sanctions degraded the national health care system's ability to treat common conditions and chronic diseases, such as cancer and dialysis, and engendered shortages and delays to the importation of some desperately needed medicines,[35] or simply prevented their importation outright. For

instance, sanctions prevent the imports of products such as nitrous oxide, which is necessary for anaesthetics and hence surgical operations, and helium, a chemical element used for cooling MRI scanners, both of which have a potential dual-use purpose.[36]

Sanctions also prevent the import of spare parts for the maintenance of medical devices or software for upgrades, [37] which causes regular breakdowns of operations across the country with very serious consequences. Available reports show that the inability of the country to obtain repairs for European dialysis machines has culminated in about 10 percent of people dependent on dialysis dying of kidney failure.[38] In a similar manner, the main Cancer Treatment Center in Damascus, a destination for people from across the country, Al-Bayrouni University Hospital, was unable to import radiation treatment devices, despite several attempts to acquire new ones.[39] Another example is maybe less lethal, but has a long term impact. Until 2020, the inability to import machines and spare parts has led to the closure of the main Infertility Treatment Center in the Department of Obstetrics and Genecology in Damascus University.[40]

Sanctions have also affected the availability of medicine by undermining the pharmaceutical industry in the country. Major European pharmaceutical companies, which previously patented Syrian medicines and provided raw materials and licenses, have withdrawn from the Syrian market because of restrictions on banking transfers and fear of reputational damage for operating in a highly sanctioned context. Fear of technical violations, due to practical difficulties of carrying out reliable verification of transactions beneficiaries, and challenges in making banking transfers have driven companies away, leading to cancellation of licences and shortages of raw materials (Ghisn 2020).

Sanctions have further rendered the Syrian health system dependent on the UN Health Organization (WHO), which works with the Syrian government to identify needs and draw up lists of 'Essential Medicines,'[41] 'Hospital Supplies and Equipment,'

and 'Supplementary Medicines Requirement.' Nonetheless, previous research has shown that even through the WHO, attempts to procure certain medicines were unsuccessful due to sanctions. This included lab test kits and consumables which are needed by the Public Health Labs (Walker 2016:21). The enforcement of the Caesar Act in June 2020 has further curtailed the ability of the UN health agency to import medicine and medical supplies. In addition to making financial transfers even harder, WHO reports that the number of vendors able and willing to ship essential supplies to Syria has decreased due to complex administrative procedures and increased risks.[42]

Sanctions and access to water:
Another vital area that is considerably affected by sanctions is access to (clean) water. For example, items such as sodium hydrochlorite, a chemical treatment used to ensure proper chlorination of water for safe human consumption, is prohibited by sanctions as it falls under the 'dual-use' articles. Consequently, the country has been entirely dependent on the support of UN organizations to fulfil its needs.[43] Water pipes that are needed for the reconstruction of the network are also potentially prohibited under dual use restrictions,[44] which hinders major work on the network. Another direct impact of sanction is the prohibition imposed by the US, and to a lesser degree by the EU, on reconstruction or rehabilitation of infrastructure. Not only is engaging in 'significant' reconstruction or engineering work in Syria sanctionable,[45] but also the language of the various sanction regimes is not clear on what constitutes reconstruction and rehabilitation which impedes the work of humanitarian organization.

Conclusion

Conceptualizing sanction as a form of siege warfare, this article is an early attempt to analyse sanctions in the Syrian context as a tool and form of violence. The article shows that while initially imposed and framed as a tool to protect civilians and punish human rights violators or as a tool to promote democratic

transition, sanctions against Syria gradually shaped into a full-scale economic warfare that is analogous in many purposes and effects to a siege warfare. In their current form, sanctions represent punishment and retaliation against the entire population.

Since the suffering of civilians is an integral part of siege warfare, the article has placed civilian suffering at the center of analyses. The article tangibly associates sanctions with a myriad of negative consequences impacting innocent civilians and demonstrates how sanctions have exacerbated the suffering of the civilian population, and, in cases, inflected extensive pain and damage comparable to that caused by other form of lethal physical violence. While each one of these impacts is not necessarily as quantitively lethal as other forms of violence or even in small combination do not pose the same danger, in their sum, the impacts of sanctions are as damaging as that of other forms of physical violence.

The article has exposed the fundamental conflict between the stated goal of using sanctions to respond to the human rights violations of the Syrian government, and the civilian suffering and human rights violations that are then caused by the sanctions. It shows that while utilizing sanctions, an inherently violent instrument and a form of violence, as a tool to protect civilians is superficially attractive, sanctions can be counter-productive and have the potential to make circumstances considerably worse for innocent civilians in the target country. Despite humanitarian exemptions that are in principle built-into sanctions regimes, the article shows that they fall short of their intended task and should not be realistically considered as able to mitigate the negative impact of sanctions.

While terms such as ‘tools of economic statecraft’ and ‘tools of economic coercion’ confer some sophistication and elegance on sanctions and their use, they hide their true nature. This article demonstrates that sanctions need to be effectively analysed as a

tool of violence and a form of warfare. As argued by Joy Gordon, ethicist and professor of Social Ethics, sanctions should be judged by the same standards that other kinds of harm are judged against because, as in the words of Prof. Gordon, "hunger, sickness and poverty which are ostensibly inflicted for the benign purposes affect individuals no differently than hunger, sickness and poverty inflicted out of malevolence" (1999-399).

Lastly, and given the proliferation of sanctions and their use, the evidence of the negative impact of sanctions on innocent should prompt questions about accountability for the 'crimes of sanctions.' The extent of the harm and damage caused by sanctions and multiplicity of actors that could be held responsible may render criminal accountability unattainable, especially given other contributing factors in the conflict. However, this should not mean that inquiry into this should be shelved or that other forms of political accountability, such as reparation, and reforms to the current sanction regimes should not be pursued.

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