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The New Sykes-Picot: Imperial Geographies, Economic Violence and the Occupation of Northern and Eastern Syria

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Abstract

This article quantifies the socio-economic impact of Syria's territorial fragmentation, framing western efforts to partition Syria against the backdrop of a broader campaign designed to achieve regime change using economic violence. While some have attempted to quantify the impact of sanctions and trade restrictions on Syrian civilians, much of the extant literature fails to address the illegal occupation of Syrian territory north and east of the Euphrates River. Critically, the direct seizure of geographic space through the occupation of Syrian territory facilitates economic violence far more effectively than sanctions alone. In western capitals, the tacit embrace of such methods indicates a re-discovery of old-line traditional territorial imperialism and the rhetorical devices needed to promote it: advocating the illegal seizure of Syrian territory demands a reinvigorated orientalist public discourse designed to promote western saviorism and the moral necessity of western interventionism. Using a hybridized research methodology incorporating qualitative and quantitative analysis, this study appraises the tangible consequences of Syria's territorial fragmentation as experienced by Syrians while simultaneously appraising the role of orientalist, liberal-interventionist discourse in the promotion of empire.

Keywords: Syria, Occupation, Imperialism, Orientalism, Liberal-Interventionism

“My people and your people, my Syrian
Brother, are dead ... What can be
Done for those who are dying? Our
Lamentations will not satisfy their
Hunger, and our tears will not quench
Their thirst; what can we do to save
Them between the iron paws of
Hunger?”

- From Dead Are My People by Gibran Khalil Gibran (1883-1931)

Introduction

The Great Famine of Mount Lebanon, or *Maja'at al-Lubnan*, began shortly after the outbreak of the First World War. Bilad al-Sham found itself caught in the crossfire as rival poles of the colonial capitalist world system fought over “boundaries, colonies (and) spheres of influence...competing for Alsace-Lorraine, the Balkans, Africa, the Middle East” (Zinn, 2003). In their struggle with the Ottoman Empire, the Allied Powers blockaded Beirut along with the rest of the Syrian coastline. According to the American Red Cross, the resulting famine killed nearly 250,000 people (Ghazal, 2015). More recent studies, according to Elizabeth Thompson, support far higher casualty estimates; nearly half a million deaths from starvation and disease (Thompson, 2000). Throughout Lebanon, civilians suffered from severe shortages of fuel, food, medicine, and other basic commodities. As a result, “most spent the war in cold and darkness” (Thompson, 2000).

Critically, “the Allies had full knowledge that a blockade of the Ottoman Empire’s Mediterranean coast would produce food and supply shortages to the detriment of the empire’s civilian populations; however, this reality was understood as a necessary by-product of their wartime policies” (Cummings, 2015). As part of a broader campaign to destroy the Ottoman economy, France and Britain readily condemned hundreds of thousands of human beings to death by starvation in Mount Lebanon (Thompson, 2000). Indeed, internal memos from the French foreign ministry reveal that the British viewed “...the famine as an agent that will lead the Arabs to revolt [against the Ottomans]” (Thompson, 2000). The United States -keen to uphold the veneer of neutrality- did not initially participate in the implementation of the blockade. Ironically, the USS Caesar was dispatched by the American Red Cross to deliver medical supplies and foodstuffs. But unrelenting British pressure undermined the effort, the USS Caesar never delivered its cargo, and “with America’s entry into war in April 1917 the U.S.’s tenure as a neutral humanitarian actor came to a close” (Cummings, 2015).

The lessons of the early 20th century remain instructive for our purposes, both as valuable historical context and as an investigative lens through which we may more accurately track change -or lack thereof- over time. When confronted with inconvenient personal accounts and testimony highlighting the deleterious impact of sanctions on the typical Syrian household, some western experts audaciously argue that it would be a “mistake...to view the matter only from the perspective of the average Syrian” (Adesnik, 2020). Rather than consider the points of view of Syrians themselves, self-assured arbiters of truth and justice working for American think-tanks stifle subaltern voices while outlining the various means through which politicians in the imperial metropole might accelerate the implosion of the Syrian economy. Deviations from this mode of thinking are unusual in the rarified sphere of mainstream western journalism and professionalized Syria ‘expertise.’

As was the case during the Allied blockade of the Lebanese coast nearly a century ago, proponents of economic violence -applied in the contemporary Syrian context- anticipate massive civilian casualties, chaos, and widespread starvation. While publicly supporting the Caesar Act and praising it as an “opportunity” to achieve regime change in Syria, one Syria expert recently argued that the implementation of more sanctions at this juncture of the conflict ensures “even greater levels of destitution, famine, and worsening criminality and predatory behavior” (Lister, 2020). Indeed, think-tankers, academics, and journalists living comfortably in the imperial metropole regularly highlight the strategic utility of destitution, famine, and chaos. For these individuals, the appearance of bread lines and social unrest indicate ‘policy efficacy’ rather than the symptoms of a humanitarian tragedy, insofar as these outcomes may eventually ‘hurt Asad.’ By indiscriminately inflicting pain on the Syrian people, western powers and their surrogate regimes in the region hope to apply pressure from below as a means of (eventually) winning concessions from and forcing the capitulation of the Syrian government.

One British think-tanker provided a succinct summation of this strategic vision, suggesting that the Caesar Act “headlined a series of measures intended to prevent the return of normality to regime-controlled Syria, *to foment renewed crisis*, [emphasis added] and thus to turn Syria from an asset to a burden for both Moscow and Tehran” (Spyer, 2020). He then fallaciously argues that anyone drawing attention to the “difficult humanitarian situation in regime areas and call for a softening of restrictions” must necessarily be “regime spokespeople and apologists” (Spyer, 2020). By mischaracterizing criticism of the embargo as an expression of regime apologetics and

embracing both in principle and practice the use of economic violence, the architects of the Caesar Act (and those who support it) are following in the footsteps of their early 20th century colonial-imperialist predecessors. As was the case during the Great War, blockades, sanctions, and economic violence invariably impact ordinary civilians far more than those who govern them. In Syria, these tactics have been particularly damaging due to the illegal occupation of Syrian territory by the Euro-American coalition. The multivariate consequences of the occupation work in tandem with trade restrictions and sanctions, although much of the literature tends to focus on the latter while neglecting analysis of the occupation and its impact. To test the veracity of this claim, this article quantifies the collective impact of the occupation and embargo using the available statistics alongside testimonial accounts from locals. These and other sources reveal widespread shortages throughout the country, affecting the availability of foodstuffs as well as medical equipment, pharmaceuticals, and other essential goods. Further research will be required, especially as macro-economic conditions within Syria continue to deteriorate under the incoming American administration, which so far shows little interest in deviating from the Syria policy promoted by Donald Trump and Barack Obama.

Beyond Sanctions: Occupying Syria & the Weaponization of Wheat

The ongoing embargo directed against the people of Syria resembles a medieval-style siege, at least in the sense that basic necessities such as wheat, gasoline, cooking oil, and meat are prohibitively expensive and difficult to come by. 'Targeted' sanctions which in practice restrict access to a broad spectrum of basic commodities work hand in hand with more overt forms of coercion, namely the occupation of Syrian territory by (mostly) American troops. At present, American-led coalition forces occupy large swaths of Syrian territory despite never having received authorization from the U.N. Security Council (UNSC), the Arab League, or the internationally recognized Syrian government to do so. Absent any legal justifications of substance, purveyors of imperial propaganda instead rely heavily on crude western saviorism as a means of mobilizing public opinion in support of sanctions, airstrikes, and the illegal seizure of Syrian territory. Observers and pundits regularly invoke America's responsibility to protect Syria's supposedly monolithic Kurdish community, the need to secure (read: steal) Syrian oil, and the importance of 'holding Asad accountable' for war crimes committed during the Syrian Civil War. Some public figures, experts and analysts embrace these arguments at face value, accepting the premise that saving Syrians is the *raison d'être* underpinning the ongoing embargo and occupation.

These examples of disingenuous moralistic grandstanding are primary concocted for public consumption in the United States; they are not, in fact, an articulation of American interests or goals in the Syrian theatre. To be sure, a rather straightforward geopolitical calculus created the impetus for an indefinite American occupation of Syrian territory: for the government of Syria, any peace dividend or outright military victory must be denied as a means of undermining Russian and Iranian interests (Sills, 2020). As it became increasingly apparent that sanctions alone would not stop the Syrian government and its allies from winning the Syrian Civil War, a more aggressive approach was quickly adopted as a means of prolonging the conflict and undermining government efforts to rebuild the country.

Since the appearance of U.S. ground troops in Syria in 2016, the number of American soldiers has ranged from several hundred to several thousand, most of whom remained stationed east of the Euphrates River. The official tally remains a secret. A 2020 budget request issued by the American Department of Defense only refers to U.S. troop deployments in Iraq and Syria collectively, with the latest report identifying "7,200 (soldiers) in Iraq and Syria" (U.S. Department of Defense, 2019). A negligible number of European soldiers, mostly British, augment the U.S. force deployment inside Syria. Most American troops are stationed in territory controlled by the breakaway 'autonomous administration,' an area nominally governed by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and covering nearly 30 percent of Syria's total land area; this includes the vast majority of Syria's arable farmland and many of its largest oil and gas fields.

After Donald Trump's haphazard and incomplete withdrawal attempt in October of 2019, the mission ostensibly switched gears from fighting Daesh to 'protecting' Syrian oil fields. Syrian oil and gas reserves and the infrastructure needed to exploit them are mostly located on the eastern bank of the Euphrates River in the Deir Ez-

Zor and Hasakeh Governorates, although some oil wells are located elsewhere in the occupied Jazira region. American corporations and contractors, keen to exploit Syria's oil wealth, have since infiltrated the area in an effort to rob Syria blind while undermining government efforts to raise revenue for reconstruction (Petti, 2020). Only a handful of oil wells and gas fields remain in the hands of the central government. By occupying Syrian territory without UNSC authorization, U.S. forces and their European allies hope to starve the Syrian government of desperately needed revenue as a means of undermining reconstruction efforts (Stocker, 2019). Western powers hope that by illegally squatting on Syrian oil, Syria's natural resources may be used as a "bargaining chip" in future negotiations with Damascus (Diwan, 2019). While pre-war Syria was a modest oil exporter relative to its neighbors, Syrian oil reserves easily met domestic demand while accounting for nearly 20 percent of the state's annual budget revenues between 2005 and 2010 (Butter, 2015).

The loss of Syria's oil rich eastern territories to the American occupation has, alongside the ongoing sanctions regime, accelerated the precipitous collapse of the Syrian economy. While serious scholars agree that the ongoing occupation of Syrian territory constitutes an egregious violation of international law, the legality of the American occupation appears dubious even according to the domestic laws of the United States. Stephen Vladeck, a professor of national security law at the University of Texas (Austin), pointed out that "The U.S. is not at war with either Syria or Turkey, making the use of the 2001 AUMF (Authorization for Use of Military Force) a stretch." On the issue of occupying Syrian oil fields, he pointed out that legal arguments promoting an indefinite stay in eastern Syria may be "a bridge too far" (Baldor, 2019). Regarding the legality of the American intervention, which eventually paved the way for the seizure of Syrian territory but was carried out under the pretext of fighting Daesh, one observer argued that "Syria may have given implied consent" prior to the initiation of coalition activity inside Syrian territory. Yet in an apparent contradiction, this expert later conceded that "the theory of implied consent is not codified into international law and the theory is not widely accepted in the international legal community," while still maintaining that "the U.S. has a legal basis...to act within Syria's borders..." (Sloney, 2015). In reality, absent permission from the government of Syria or authorization from the UNSC, ongoing coalition operations taking place inside Syrian territory constitute a blatant violation of Syrian sovereignty and of international law.

In addition to the illegal Euro-American intervention in and occupation of Syrian territory east of the Euphrates River, American troops maintain a garrison at the border outpost of Al-Tanf in the Homs Governorate. This isolated pocket of occupied territory extends beyond the reaches of Al-Tanf into the surrounding desert on the Syrian side of the border, spanning a total area of 55 kilometers. The Syrian government has on several occasions asked the United States to withdraw from this area, although these requests have been ignored. In response, Syrian government troops have periodically tried to move into the Al-Tanf occupied zone -sovereign Syrian territory- as a means of persuading the squatters to pack up and leave. In one instance in May 2017, American fighter jets greeted these maneuvers with a barrage of airstrikes; dozens of Syrian soldiers were killed (Enab Biladi, 2018). The Syrian government condemned the attack, while Russia's deputy foreign ministry slammed the action as a "completely unacceptable breach of Syrian sovereignty" (Al-Jazeera, 2017). Such provocative actions beg the question: how does the occupation of Al-Tanf further American interests? There are not, after all, any large urban centers in the area filled with civilians in need of saving. Nor does Al-Tanf sit atop rich deposits of oil, gas, or other natural resources.

The value of the area lies in its geography, and its proximity to the main highway linking Damascus to Baghdad. The uninvited coalition presence at Al-Tanf has closed this highway for most trade and traffic between the two countries. Before the outbreak of the civil war in 2011, "Syria's trade with Iraq alone was valued at \$3 billion" (Esber, 2019). The loss of the Al-Walid border crossing located inside the town thus represented a devastating blow to not only the Syrian economy, but also that of Iraq (Khalel, 2021). The ongoing economic damage inflicted on Syria due to the seizure of Al-Tanf was hardly incidental, but rather a calculated strategic decision intended to complement the sanctions regime and isolate Syria from its allies, particularly Iraq and Iran.

It is important to note that in much of the western public discourse concerning the occupation, America's overt seizure of oil and gas fields tends to eclipse the de-facto theft of Syria's agricultural resources. Apologists for the sanctions regime invariably chalk up food shortages, if they acknowledge them at all, to corruption, mismanagement, or the general incompetence of the Syrian government. As a causal factor in the creation of

chronic food shortages elsewhere in Syria, the American occupation is rarely mentioned. The phenomenon of widespread food insecurity has, in other words, been decoupled from the illegal occupation of Syria's most fertile farmlands, thus absolving the imperialist coalition (and the United States in particular) of responsibility for the well-being of Syrians living in areas governed by Damascus.

Consider, for example, that over 70 percent of Syria's wheat, barley and mixed grain production depends on the efficiency of farms located in territory occupied by the United States (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2016). The occupation of Syria's breadbasket has subsequently forced the central government to buy its own wheat from the SDF (Christou, 2020). The opportunity cost of such transactions, considering their expense and the limited resources available to the Syrian Central Bank, should not be underestimated. The current state of affairs is all the more striking in light of Syria's pre-war status as a net exporter of many agricultural products, including fruits, vegetables, and cotton (U.S. Department of State, 2004). Additionally, according to a 2016 study "Syria exported the greatest quantity of cereals in the sub region (trailing only Turkey), valued at its peak in 2007 at \$240 million" (Regional Food Security Analysis Network, 2016). Underpinning Syria's impressive pre-war agricultural output was a prolonged period of state-driven capital investment steered towards the construction of grain silos, irrigation canals and hydroelectric power plants during the 1970s and 1980s (Seale, 1988). These investments in infrastructure development translated into high crop yields and the growth of the Syrian export market for agricultural products; by 2010, agricultural exports generated over 20 percent of Syria's total GDP (CIA World Fact Book, 2020). Thanks to the war, the occupation, and the resultant collapse of the Syrian pound (SYP), Syria must now import hundreds of thousands of tons of wheat just to meet domestic demand (Hamidi, 2020). The loss of Syrian farmland (first to *Daesh*, and more recently to the occupation) has crippled the agricultural sector, dealing a painful blow to Syrian farmers and consumers alike.

Agency and Popular Discontent in Occupied Syria

Among those residing in areas currently occupied by the American-led coalition, some hope to use the SDF as a vehicle for redressing grievances and preventing a return to the conditions which prevailed in Syria before 2011. On the other hand, some locals embrace the SDF and the American occupation as a means of accumulating personal wealth, power, and influence. The leader of the SDF controlled Deir Ez-Zor Military Council (DMC), for example, is emblematic of the latter phenomenon. Rashid Abu Khawla has at various times fought for the so-called Free Syrian Army as well as *Daesh*. According to Deir Ez-Zor 24, "he was frequently arrested for stealing motorcycles before 2011. After the war broke out, he allegedly started a gang that prowled the roads looking for drivers to rob" (Barfi, 2017). Protests against the SDF -and the rule of the DMC in particular- remain a persistent problem in the area, even as criminal activity and the re-emergence of *Daesh* threaten the stability of occupied territories (Faidhi, 2020). Despite these problematic partnerships the United States hopes to use SDF controlled Syrian territory as leverage in future talks with Damascus: thus a loose convergence of strategic interests links the fate of the SDF to the United States. Nevertheless, even some SDF officials have expressed concern over the Caesar Act, questioning whether it is being implemented with the best interests of the SDF in mind (Ahmado, 2020). After all, territories held by the SDF are tied to the SYP, and by extension the Syrian Central Bank (Al-Tamimi, 2020). As noted elsewhere, the SDF also depends heavily on the sale of oil, wheat, and other commodities to the Syrian government. It remains to be seen whether these and other transactions would run afoul of the Caesar Act. The knock-on effect of the sanctions regime and embargo threatens to aggravate the precarious humanitarian situation in areas under the jurisdiction of the SDF.

Such concerns are well founded. In many areas occupied by the United States, municipal services provided by the SDF fall woefully short of meeting the needs of the local population. Testimonial accounts collected from locals and SDF officials alike corroborate this appraisal of service provision and commodity prices in occupied eastern Syria, particularly in the Deir Ez-Zor governorate. For example, one official working under the auspices of the SDF-backed People's Municipal Office in Gharanij characterized the quality of service provision in the area as "very bad, for the area is not serviced at all as there is no electricity...the houses distant from the densely populated neighborhoods are completely deprived of electricity. And likewise water is present in the locality: three water stations, but they do not work well...so the people rely on buying water through its transportation in private

tankers, and they are at exorbitant prices” (Al-Tamimi, 2020). The depreciation of the SYP has contributed to rising prices in the area, “something that has struck the people with frustration and despair” (Al-Tamimi, 2020). The situation in Al-Basira -a town of around 35,000 located just south and east of Deir Ez-Zor city- resembles that of other localities in the area.

A media official affiliated with the People’s Municipal Office in al-Basira recently remarked that “the humanitarian situation was previously very good but after the rise of the dollar it has become bad.” Asked about the reverberative impact of the Caesar Act in the area, he revealed a latent “...fear (in) our areas from the impacts of the law...” (Al-Tamimi, 2020). In another interview, a spokesperson for the People’s Municipal Office of al-Dhiban painted a similar picture vis a vis service provision and infrastructure redevelopment. While pointing out that some “projects that have been submitted to the Autonomous Administration and they are under consideration,” he quickly made clear that “the area is suffering from a lack of basic services like electricity, whose delivery has been limited currently to the water stations” (Al-Tamimi, 2020). Only 35 percent of homes in the town receive piped water, and “sewage is limited to the main streets in the organizational plan for the locality” (Al-Tamimi, 2020). When asked to reflect on the impact of the Caesar Act, the official expressed anxiety and suggested that “people are currently living through difficult impacts after application of the Caesar law, while the rise of the prices and the pressing need for bigger projects are creating... [a] lack of availability of liquidity” (Al-Tamimi, 2020). As we have seen, the reverberative consequences of the Caesar Act (and the embargo more generally) have not been confined to government controlled territory alone. This is readily apparent in SDF-held northern and eastern Syria, where price hikes and stalled infrastructure projects are emblematic of a rudderless American strategy in Syria.

By using food as a weapon of war, the United States hopes to starve the Syrian people into submission as a means of pressuring Damascus. The weaponization of wheat represents a critical dimension of American policy in occupied Syria, with one think-tanker even arguing that “wheat is a weapon of great power in this next phase of the Syrian conflict...we [the U.S. and the SDF] have a significant stockpile of this wheat weapon” (France24, 2019). It is believed that by robbing Syrians of their daily bread, wheat “can be used to apply pressure on the Assad regime, and through the regime on Russia, to force concessions in the UN-led diplomatic process” (France24, 2019). In the meantime, nearly 10 million Syrians “are unable to meet their food needs, and [there are] a further 2.2 million people at risk of food insecurity” (Fleischer, 2020). This pervasive food insecurity, a crisis without precedent in Syria’s post-independence history, has already had a deleterious impact on living standards and public health.

Recent data compiled by the World Food Programme (WFP) indicates that the cost of food in Syria reached an all-time high well before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. In a recent interview with The National, the head of the WFP underscored the need for a sense of urgency in the ongoing struggle to alleviate the crisis. If the current trajectory holds in the weeks and months ahead, and if “Syria continues to deteriorate and the availability of cash, availability of food and supply chain disruption on a country that’s already devastated by 10 years of war, famine could very well be knocking on that door” (McElroy, 2020). At the time of writing, testimonial evidence reveals that an “increasing number of interviewed households reported reducing the number of meals they consume, from 3 to 2 meals per day” (U.N. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 2020). It is against this backdrop that our appraisal of the sanctions regime and occupation must be contextualized. The destruction of the war, America’s seizure of Syrian farmland in the northeast, and the implementation of new sanctions collectively pose a dire threat to the health and well-being of nearly 18 million Syrians, most of whom live in areas controlled by or economically linked to Damascus. To further appreciate the gravity of the crisis, and as a means of expanding the scope of our analysis beyond the question of food insecurity, we must turn our attention to the realm of service provision and infrastructure rehabilitation.

Electricity production throughout Syria depends heavily on the output of 11 fossil-fuel power stations located (mostly) in western Syria, “while hydroelectric power is a limited source with just three dams (Tishrin, al-Thawra, and al-Ba’ath) located on the Euphrates” (Diab, 2018). According to a 2007 World Bank estimate, government subsidies ensured that “99% of the population had access to electricity” (World Bank, 2007). Despite this, “the public sector’s capacity to generate electricity was outstripped by demand. This situation generated an electrical

load shedding that increased sharply from 2006 onwards” (Diab, 2018). After the government lost control over large swaths of territory during the first few years of the war, the gap between demand and service delivery widened significantly. According to the Public Establishment for Electricity Generation (PEEG), by 2015 Syria’s electricity production peaked at 5,590 megawatts, “while the total possible capacity of Syrian power plants was 7,994 megawatts” (Diab, 2018). Aleppo, Syria’s commercial capital and largest city prior to the war, was hit especially hard: the PEEG estimate reveals a “zero-megawatt power generation capacity for three (of Syria’s 14) power plants” (Diab, 2018). Aleppo’s power station was, in 2015, among the three knocked out of service as a result of the war. Replacing damaged units remains a persistent problem, thanks in part to the sanctions regime. While American politicians and think-tankers take great pains to emphasize the inclusion of vague humanitarian exceptions for essential goods and services, the fact remains that “NGOs may well be deterred from supporting much-needed small-scale rehabilitation projects amid uncertainty as to how U.S. authorities will define “humanitarian aid” or “reconstruction”” (International Crisis Group, 2019). This ambiguity hampers reconstruction efforts while simultaneously depriving ordinary Syrians of electricity, in addition to basic medical care.

The impact of economic violence on the availability of healthcare in Syria has been studied at length elsewhere, although further study will be required as facts on the ground change over time (Al-Faisal, 2013). As we shall see, the destruction wrought by the civil war and the concurrent implementation of western economic sanctions dealt a catastrophic blow to a country that “was known for being relatively self-sufficient in domestically produced medicines” (U.N. Resident Coordinator SAR, 2016). Indeed, data gathered in a 2009 study indicates that the availability and quality of basic healthcare in Syria improved dramatically from 1970 through the first decade of the 21st century. Life expectancy improved from 56 years in 1970 to 73.1 years in 2009; the infant-mortality rate fell from 132 deaths per 1000 live births in 1970 to less than 18 per 1000 by 2009 (Kherallah, 2012). Despite great discrepancies in care quality between urban areas from the countryside, the pre-war provision of basic preventative healthcare in Syria generally met domestic demand and was widely considered to be “comparable with other middle-income countries” (UNHRC, 2018).

However, since the start of the civil war in 2011 Syria’s health care system has experienced unprecedented degradation in both quality of care and the availability of basic treatments. As cities and towns changed hands, hospital buildings and their staff were frequently caught in the cross-fire. Fighting between the government and insurgent groups turned hospitals and clinics (along with factories, homes, power stations, water treatment plants, etc.) into piles of rubble: sanctions designed to hamper reconstruction ensure that they stay that way. As domestic productive capacity collapsed during the civil war, the World Health Organization (WHO) compiled a list of prioritized medicines and supplies in conjunction with the Syrian Ministry of Health. Unfortunately, “of the thousands of items and medicines identified by the WHO, many are subject to some level of EU export control or U.S. sanctions embargo” (U.N. Resident Coordinator SAR, 2016). Testimonial evidence reveals the pervasive challenges encountered by international investors, donors, NGOs and other entities attempting to provide desperately needed medical supplies to Syrians in need. For example, one anonymous European doctor lamented that:

“even though it should be possible in theory to procure medical equipment, the indirect effects of sanctions, especially the challenges it creates for Syrians to access bank accounts, makes the import of medical instruments and other medical supplies immensely difficult, nearly impossible. It also makes it far more expensive” (U.N. Resident Coordinator SAR, 2016).

The phenomenon of over-compliance frequently undermines procurement efforts, even when sought-after goods are not explicitly banned under the current sanctions regime. In practical terms, over-compliance occurs when companies (or aid agencies, NGOs, etc.) choose to avoid punitive fines or other penalties by withholding all services and investment out of an abundance of caution, even if such measures are not covered by existing trade restrictions. The knock-on effect of over-compliance invariably spills over into the wider economy, needlessly depriving civilians of exempted goods and services along the way. Idriss Jazairy, the U.N. Special Rapporteur on the negative impact of the unilateral coercive measures (in Syria) pointedly argued that “the chilling effect resulting from over-compliance with sanctions is forcing humanitarian and economic actors to find irregular payment mechanisms which increase costs, add delays, decrease transparency and in some cases make it impossible for

businesses to continue” (U.N., 2018). Testimony from one Syrian-American doctor working in Damascus underscores the extent of the crisis, pointing out that as a result of the embargo, “it becomes difficult to access medical up-grades, i.e., software updates, as these are not included on the U.S. list of allowed goods” (U.N. Resident Coordinator SAR, 2016). Elsewhere in Syria, the President of the Doctor’s Union of Aleppo bitterly expressed surprise that “the U.S. and U.K. talk about human rights but impose sanctions which deny treatment to people with cancer and other potentially fatal conditions” (Cox, 2018). Elizabeth Hoff, the WHO representative in Damascus, pointed out that “the impact of economic sanctions imposed on Syria heavily affected the procurement of some specific medicine including anti-cancer medicines” (Nehme, 2017). Crucially, sanctions prevent pharmaceutical companies from doing business with the Syrian Central Bank and its affiliates, and other government institutions (Alam, 2020). These restrictions have tightened significantly since the implementation of the Caesar Act in June 2020.

Inside government controlled territory, where the vast majority of Syrians live, the broader impact of the embargo reaches beyond the sectors of the Syrian economy explicitly targeted by the sanctions. Naturally, sanctions targeting the Syrian Central Bank have a cascading effect on the wider economic climate. Vendors are unable to do business with Syrian banks, Syrians are blocked from sending or receiving remittances, currency volatility harms consumers and producers, and investors remain unwilling to risk running afoul of new restrictions. The spillover effect of targeted sanctions leveled against Syria’s energy sector, for example, also undermines reconstruction efforts while depriving ordinary civilians of basic services. Moreover, the phenomenon of over-compliance has had and will continue to have a deleterious impact on the Syrian economy even after sanctions are eventually lifted. Investors will remain wary of Syrian markets for years to come, thus depriving Syrians of goods and services not explicitly banned under current trade restrictions.

Even in Syrian territory occupied by the Euro-American coalition, the embargo figures prominently in daily life. As we have seen, the impact of western imposed economic violence reaches far beyond the targeted territory, or those areas controlled by the Syrian government. Proponents of economic violence unconvincingly argue that the effects of the embargo can be compartmentalized or quarantined within a rigidly defined geographic space. But national and regional economies are inextricably linked; markets cannot be cancelled or closed by foreign powers without inflicting broader reverberative damage beyond the borders of the targeted polity. Thus the concept of targeted sanctions (which invariably include vague language, poorly conceived exemptions and stiff penalties) deserves to be reframed against the backdrop of real human suffering and the political realities of the post-conflict Syrian context.

Imperial Retrenchment & Contemporary Liberal-Interventionist Discourse

Several mutually reinforcing discursive devices work in tandem as a means of justifying unilateral coercive action directed against non-compliant polities in the Global South. Cosmetically, a well-positioned class of organic intellectuals (prototypical ‘true believers’ spreading the gospel of liberal-imperialism in American think-tanks, newspapers, political parties, universities, etc.) sell economic violence and military interventionism to the western masses through the weaponization of humanitarian rhetoric and the invocation of R2P (responsibility to protect). Aside from the fact that such arguments represent a nakedly orientalist reformulation of the Euro-American civilizing mission, directed exclusively against the ‘oriental despotisms’ of the Global South, we must recall that the categories of analysis used by many of these experts are irredeemably contaminated by essentialist reductionism.

As a means of justifying multivariate forms of western intervention in the Global South, think-tankers, journalists, and many academics point to the supposed existence of ‘ancient hatreds’ pitting different tribal, ethnic or sectarian groups against each other. This is particularly true of how conflict, social organization, and productive relations are understood by some studying Western Asia. The implication here is that in the face of ‘persistent hatreds’ and ‘ancient enmities,’ transcendent westerners have a moral obligation to mediate and modernize. Consequently, complex patterns of social organization and interaction are haphazardly repackaged to fit within monolithic ‘taxonomies of imperialist knowledge’ (Blumi, 2010). As a result, think-tank pieces and newspaper articles frequently reduce the identity of the subject to their religion or ethnicity. In contemporary Syria, the blind

evocation of these essentialist categories of analysis reinforce Eurocentric perspectives, obscure nuance, and silence local stakeholders.

Flawed as they are, arguments which posit western intervention as some sort of charitable, moralistic endeavor should not be accepted at face value. Among those concerning themselves with human rights compliance in Syria, many unwittingly “promote an absolutist view of human rights permeated by modern western ideas that westerners mistakenly call “universal”” (Kinzer, 2010). Nor are these intrinsically Eurocentric moral criteria applied evenly or consistently. Begging for aggressive ‘humanitarian intervention’ in Syria while simultaneously facilitating the destruction of Yemen and the ethnic cleansing of Palestine belies the notion of western sincerity insofar as human rights compliance and ‘democracy promotion’ are concerned. Tokenistic criticism of Israel’s siege of Gaza are mostly limited to Twitter handles and newspaper articles; no one suggests sanctioning the Tel Aviv regime or hitting illegal Zionist colonies in the West Bank with drone strikes. Given these hypocritical inconsistencies in application, and the epistemological pitfalls plaguing the analytical substructure of interventionist discourse, it is incumbent on serious observers to challenge the moral economy of liberal-interventionism and the language used to promote it.

Setting aside the blatant hypocrisy and orientalist essentialisms underpinning the logic of interventionist rhetoric, we must recall that attempts to frame interventionism as an altruistic endeavor serve a functional purpose in the broader promotion of empire. Moral self-assurance is, according to Edward Said, the linchpin of orientalist thought and the racist psychology of othering that nurtures it. In the case of Iraq, Libya and Syria, such arguments have also expedited the delegitimization of institutions designed to uphold international law. Wanton disregard for the principle of national sovereignty in western capitals has, unfortunately, robbed post-colonial polities of their independence and paved the road for direct neocolonial reconquest. Having failed to impose a political transition on Syria through proxy warfare, western powers have instead opted for Syria’s destruction (Massad, 2021). As discussed above, this necessitated Syria’s territorial disaggregation through direct occupation. Manifestations of this include but are not limited to the seizure of Syrian territory east of the Euphrates River, and in the southern reaches of the Homs Governorate.

For countries aligned with the North Atlantic axis of empire, it is not necessary to obtain UNSC authorization before partitioning a country, occupying its territory, or destroying its economy. It is axiomatic that continuously unchecked violations of international law by any country or countries will, inexorably, undermine the legitimacy and relevance of international law and the global institutions ostensibly there to enforce it. Consider the position of the United States and the former colonial powers that currently occupy Syrian territory. American soldiers and corporate contractors are not in Syria at the invitation of the internationally recognized Syrian government. The government of the United States did not seek or receive authorization from the UNSC or the Arab League before deploying its forces inside Syrian territory. Nor did the security council or U.N. General Assembly approve of any sanctions directed against Syria. In light of America’s problematic relationship with international law, its close alignment with serial human rights abusers elsewhere in the Middle East, and the disastrous aftermath of western misbehavior in Iraq, Libya and Yemen, we must reconsider whether the west possesses the moral or legal authority to dictate the terms of Syria’s future.

Conclusion

Attempts to cancel Syria’s sovereignty have generally been well received by western audiences. In the United States, left-liberals and conservatives alike remain ambivalent to -if not outright supportive of- the illegal occupation of Syrian territory (Pew Research, 2019). The previous Republican president boldly mocked international law by repeatedly asserting America’s right to “keep the (Syrian) oil.” (Finnegan, 2019). Far from representing a break from Trump, the Biden administration has already taken steps to reinforce the occupation. This decision, to maintain and possibly expand the size of America’s military footprint inside Syrian territory, indicates a de facto willingness to plunder Syria’s natural resources and destroy what remains of the Syrian economy. According to the legal and moral parameters of the U.S. dominated unipolar world order, sovereignty is a privilege, not a right. World leaders residing in western capitals may with the stroke of a pen authorize the

occupation of Syrian territory, the theft of Syria's natural resources, and the seizure of Syrian assets invested abroad. Countries less than a century removed from colonial exploitation and occupation have once again found themselves subjected to unrelenting pressure and interference, often emanating from the same cast of western antagonists. It is also true that some Syrian expatriates heap scorn upon those who dare scrutinize western interventionist discourse, while at the same time begging western leaders to bomb, starve and isolate what remains of their country. Remarkably on the utility of the 'native informer,' Hamid Dabashi points out that "for the American imperial project to claim global validity, it needs the support of native informers and comprador intellectuals...supported only by white men and women, the project would not have the same degree of narrative authority" (Dabashi, 2011). Therefore, when analyzing the impact of economic violence directed against Syria we must recall that "neocolonialism is not just about western agency, but also that of local collaborators and upholders of western power" (Forte, 2012).

Nevertheless, Syrians continue to rely on their own strength and resources as the reconstruction phase of the crisis gets underway. While this study prioritized in-depth analysis of the western embargo and occupation of Syrian territory, one would be remiss not to mention the agency of the Syrian masses in the face of hardship. Manifestations of Syrian self-reliance, resistance and resourcefulness are a critical piece of this narrative. At the national level, examples range from sanctions busting, seeking out alternative (read: non-western) avenues for foreign investment, reigning in corrupt stakeholders, streamlining the delivery of goods and services, and liberating occupied areas which possess economic value. It must be emphasized that Syria enjoys the legal right to liberate occupied territory and resist the illegal coalition presence by force of arms if it so chooses (ICRC, 2002).

For their part, when aid from the revenue starved central government is not forthcoming, many Syrians have taken ownership of reconstruction in their respective communities. Others rely on external arteries into the global financial system to support themselves, and their families. For those living in areas currently occupied by American soldiers, everyday acts of resistance include throwing stones at passing American convoys, and occasionally burning American flags (Al-Masdar, 2020). In other words, Syrians are not passive victims but agents of real, transformative change within their communities. Future contributions to the literature discussing sanctions, the occupation, and the impact of both on local stakeholders must highlight these stories of local resistance and grassroots ingenuity while simultaneously emphasizing the ruinous impact of economic violence imposed by western powers against the Syrian state and society.

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