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Sanctioning Arabia through the Caesar Act: Economic Violence & Imperial Anxieties in the “Middle East”

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Abstract

This paper appraises the regional impact of economic sanctions initiated by the United States against the Syrian Arab Republic by analyzing the ‘spillover effect’ of such measures elsewhere in the Levant. Specifically, this paper measures the impact of the ongoing American sanctions regime in Jordan and Lebanon. Excising the Syrian market from the regional economy has had -and will continue to have- ruinous consequences for Lebanese and Jordanian balance sheets. This eventuality redounds to the benefit of the United States, which seeks to extend its hegemony over a weak and divided Middle East. America’s ‘off-shore balancing’ act in the Syrian context should thus be analyzed through the lens of the realist school of IR theory. Using a hybridized research methodology incorporating qualitative and quantitative analysis, this article examines the myriad effects of the embargo while deconstructing the epistemological and theoretical frameworks underpinning the theory and practice of contemporary ‘liberal- interventionist’ discourse.

Keywords: Sanctions, Syria, Regional Economy, Hegemony, Liberal-Interventionism, Realpolitik

“The real challenge is not to get the humanitarian interventionists to stake a position, but rather to get them to maintain that position when events and processes go exactly counter to all their stated ideals...and when ‘protection’ becomes a mere fig-leaf for regime change.”

- Maximilian Forte (2012) in *Slouching Towards Sirte: NATO’s War on Libya and Africa*

Introduction

Any attempt to appraise the significance of western imposed economic violence, within the targeted polity or beyond its borders, must include a critique of the systems of knowledge and power underpinning the strategic vision of American policy makers. Seen from an American setting, humanitarian language is commonly used as a skeleton key to push open the doorway to international sanctions—or even to justify the occasional volley of cruise missiles. Action against Syria, for example, is curated for U.S. media consumption as an essentially upright, necessary, and just enterprise. Contemporary liberal-interventionism, which functions as an expression of

neocolonial western power in the international arena, relies on the same rhetorical devices and categories of analysis used by the ‘territorial imperialists’ of the 19th century Euro-American tradition.

While appraising theoretical and discursive expressions of imperial power, this article places the economic fallout of the Syrian crisis in its proper regional context. Serious analysts agree that the Syrian population stands to suffer terrible consequences as the American embargo intensifies. However, the broader regional ramifications remain relatively understudied in the literature. Despite the ruinous impact of the embargo within and beyond Syria’s borders, America and its European allies justify such measures as part of a broader campaign of isolation designed to “keep Damascus weak and poor” (Landis, 2017). In so doing, western policy makers hope to rob Russia, Iran, and Syria of an outright military victory.

The indiscriminate impact of the embargo, and the Caesar Act in particular, appears to have escaped serious scrutiny in the western academy, and in most western newspapers. The Caesar Act expands on the existing sanctions regime in that it explicitly targets Syria’s “domestic production of natural gas, petroleum, or petroleum products,” and any person or entity who “knowingly, directly or indirectly, provides significant construction or engineering services to the Government of Syria” (H.R.31, 2020). In practical terms, these new restrictions target the totality of the Syrian economy and reconstruction effort. Local reports reveal that Syrians with the means to do so have begun stockpiling essential goods, anticipating the catastrophic fallout of the Caesar Act (Syrian Autonomous Journalists, 2020). Ahmed, a Syrian employed in the private sector, remarked that “living has become more difficult, and what is available today may be lost tomorrow with the implementation of the law” (Al-Sharq Al-Awsat, 2020). According to Zain Al-Abideen Taraf, a beekeeper living in the Latakia governorate, operational costs have skyrocketed “due to the economic siege on Syria. Understandably, the ongoing Coronavirus crisis has taken the situation from bad to worse” (Al-Tamimi, 2020).

These experiences are typical; some Syrians have had to close their businesses completely or take multiple jobs. Many face serious and worsening food insecurity (Al-Dahan and Francis, 2020). At present, the average monthly salary in Syria only “buys slightly more than two watermelons, or if one really pushes the boat out, a kilo and a half of *mabrumeh*, a popular local delicacy” (Makki, 2020). The ongoing embargo has exacerbated these difficulties: American actions in Syria are emblematic of a strategy in the Middle East that will, by design, lead to “...instability, (and) turmoil” elsewhere. (Moussalanejad, 2017, pp. 20). At present, Syria represents the central axis upon which America’s security posture in the Levant rests; what happens in Syria will invariably affect the wider region. As American politicians accelerate the economic decimation of Syria, its neighbors—particularly Jordan and Lebanon²—look to the future with great trepidation and uncertainty.

When Lebanon Sneezes, Syria Catches Cold

Deep cultural, religious, political, economic, and familial ties define the connections between Syria and Lebanon. During the late 19th century, Beirut emerged as one of Ottoman Syria’s most profitable port cities, a critical gear in the Ottoman economic machine and a magnet for foreign direct investment (Henssen, 2005). Cotton, silk, and other high margin commodities destined for Europe departed on ships loaded in Beirut. Concurrent revenue inflows fed the growth of Beirut, while also stimulating the economy of the Syrian hinterland. As Jamal Wakim points out, “...the Damascene upper class...became partners of the Beirut mercantile elite in the transit trade coming from Beirut and passing through Damascus on its way to Jordan and the Arabian peninsula”(Wakim, 2013). The separation of Lebanon from Syria in 1918 drew the ire of many Syrian nationalists, although extensive political, social, and economic ties linking Damascus to Beirut remained unshaken.

The bureaucratic machinery of the French administration echoed the logic of natural Syrian-Lebanese collaboration. Until 1948, nearly 30 years after the colonialist partition of ‘Greater Syria,’ Syria and Lebanon used the same currency (Banque Du Liban, 2008). Additionally, “customs administration, together with a number of other departments...fell under the control of the High Commissioner...they were considered matters of common interest to all parts of the Mandate territories and could not therefore be wholly controlled by the governments of the different regions” (Seale, 1968, pp. 94). The relevant historical context deserves study as it has shaped the commercial nexus now between Damascus and Beirut. Thus, any fiscal strictures applied against Syria will also

have a cascading, adverse effect on the Lebanese economy. On the other hand, deteriorating economic conditions in Lebanon have also had a regional, rather than strictly national, impact.

Through the 20th century Syria continued to wield tremendous influence in Lebanon, culminating in Syria's intervention in the Lebanese Civil War. Syrian forces remained in Lebanon from 1975 until 2005³. This provided ample opportunity for Syrians to permeate the Lebanese financial sector and engage in interstate commerce through comparatively liberal Lebanese banks. This reliance on (and familiarity with) Lebanese markets and banks helped Syria overcome American sanctions prior to and during the early stages of the Syrian Civil War. But the recent economic crisis in Lebanon has had an outsized impact on overleveraged Syrian investors, especially those with large deposits held in Lebanese banks.

As a means of accessing global capital markets, circumventing sanctions, and procuring foreign currency, many Syrians have developed a preferred reliance on the Lebanese banking system over the years. This includes both private citizens and those investing on behalf of the Syrian state. With their commitment to banking secrecy and high rates of return (measured both in interest earned on private accounts and on the purchase of government bonds) Lebanese banks have for decades attracted investment from around the world (IMF, 2020)⁴. Syrian investors in particular have flocked to Lebanese banks, especially since the end of the Lebanese Civil War. For example, prominent Lebanese institutions such as *Blom Bank* owe their existence to substantial support from Syrian investors (Cochrane, 2019). Indeed, "a study prepared by Dr. Ali Kanaan, supervisor of the Department of Banking and Insurance at the Damascus University, shows that Syrian deposits exceed 25.4 percent of total deposits in Lebanese banks" (Al-Sharq Al-Awsat, 2020)⁵. Others estimate that nearly 80% of all Syrian savings invested abroad remains trapped in Lebanon (Corniche, 2019)⁶. For Syrians, the recent collapse of the Lebanese banking sector has effectively closed off one of the few remaining doorways to the global economy. Worse still, capital controls have effectively frozen Syrian deposits, rendering them inaccessible. Because the Syrian economy has become increasingly reliant on remittances, (Al-Watan, 2018) recent changes dealt a catastrophic blow to Syrian families who depend on money transfers from Lebanon (Advani, 2019). Such symbiosis helps underscore the difficulties in viewing these as independent economies, and how decoupling the Lebanese economy from that of Syria is not a practicable goal. The most recent collapse of the Syrian Pound, which coincided with the start of the *thawra* in Lebanon, reflects a tendency to link Syria's economic decisions to the Lebanese financial climate.

A myriad of issues accelerated Lebanon's descent into a deep economic depression, and the ramifications for Syria are highly significant. A bloated banking sector, rampant corruption, dependence on expensive imports, persistently large current account deficits, emigration, the Coronavirus pandemic and instability in Syria have all contributed to the collapse of the Lebanese economy (World Bank, 2019). While a closer examination of the ongoing economic crisis in Lebanon falls beyond the scope of this study, it is important to consider the impact of Lebanon's crisis inside Syria. Given the deeply intertwined economic ties linking Lebanon to Syria, the implementation of the ill-timed Caesar Act promises to wreak havoc on both countries at a moment when both Damascus and Beirut are especially vulnerable. As we shall see, the line between private trade and business with the Syrian government remains blurry even after nearly a decade of civil war.

For example, in 2019 Lebanon and Syria conducted public and private transactions amounting to over \$600 million (Al-Modon, 2020). This includes extensive Lebanese imports of electricity produced in Syrian power plants, amounting in 2019 to over 200 kilowatts (Yassine 2020). Additionally, 100 percent of Lebanon's overland trade must necessarily cross through Syrian territory; customs duties paid to the Syrian state would under the Caesar Act constitute a violation of the sanctions regime. One Lebanese observer pointedly argued that "if the law is applied without exceptions that take into account the interest of the Lebanese state and the needs of its citizens, Caesar's law will constitute the final blow to the Lebanese economy" (Al-Modon, 2020). Other Lebanese columnists have a similarly ominous outlook. Even if Lebanon were able to abide by the new restrictions on trade with its neighbor and third largest trading partner, "losing Syria would be debilitating for the Lebanese economy. Therefore, as it seems, Lebanon will, directly or indirectly, be badly affected by the Caesar Act" (Yassine, 2020). Aside from the ruinous impact such measures will have on Lebanese entrepreneurs, small depositors and government institutions, the Caesar Act also represents an existential threat to the 1.5 million refugees languishing in shanty towns and on the streets of Lebanon's urban centers.

Aside from providing a disincentive to return to Syria, the implementation of the Caesar Act will undermine the capacity of the Lebanese state to assist Syrian refugees. At present, “Lebanon hosts the largest number of Syrian refugees per capita, with a Government estimate of 1.5 million Syrian refugees” (UNHCR, 2020). While “Lebanon’s response to the arrival and protracted stay of such a large refugee population is unprecedented, having been recognized worldwide as a remarkable contribution to ‘public good’” (UNHCR, 2020), the costs shouldered by Lebanon have been enormous (Xinhua, 2020). While a variety of factors have prolonged the refugee crisis in Lebanon, the imposition of punitive economic sanctions on Syria has contributed to the delay in reconstruction and the resumption of normal economic activity. That the broader socio-economic impact of such measures would spill over into Lebanon should come as no surprise. With their country half-destroyed and languishing under a suffocating economic embargo, many refugees see little benefit in returning to Syria.

It is also worth highlighting the impact of the Caesar Act on Lebanese consumers and entrepreneurs. Beleaguered Lebanese small-business owners will soon face a myriad of obstacles due to trade restrictions targeting Syrians and Syrian firms. For the average consumer, this translates into higher prices and shortages. Despite existing sanctions and the upcoming implementation of the Caesar Act, some Lebanese companies continue to explore investment opportunities in Syria. 41 Lebanese companies attended the 2018 Rebuild Syria Exhibition held in Damascus; companies from South Korea, the UAE, India, Italy and Russia also participated (Alrifai, 2019). Responding to international, non-aligned investment in Syria’s reconstruction efforts, an expatriate Syrian think-tanker living in the United States argued that “the U.S. Treasury Department should pay closer attention to (these companies). In particular, it should monitor the activities of companies that may be violating U.S. sanctions orders. Washington should also push its allies and the wider international community *to hold off on full-scale reconstruction in Syria until true political transition has been achieved*” (Alrifai, 2020, emphases added). In light of the insurgents’ failure to seriously threaten the survival of the Damascus government during the climax of the conflict, the notion that withholding reconstruction aid – or worse, discouraging investment in Syria – might bring about a ‘true political transition’ seems dubious at best. Expressing his disdain for Syrian lives more openly, James Jeffrey suggested in 2018 that America should “make life as miserable as possible for that flopping cadaver of a regime...This status quo is not only acceptable but possibly favorable given the otherwise lack of overwhelming leverage to secure a better outcome” (Lister, 2018).

Such comments reveal American disregard for Lebanese interests, since a continuation of the status quo will certainly undermine efforts to get Lebanon’s struggling economy back on track. Some have even suggested that economic damage inflicted on Lebanon via the Caesar Act may be a feature (rather than a bug) embedded within the tranches of new trade restrictions. One prominent ‘expert’ at the Foundation in Defense of Democracies (FDD) succinctly summed up America’s preferred outcome, arguing that “Lebanon’s stability, insofar as it means the stability of the Iranian order and forward missile base there, is not, in fact, a US interest” (Badran, 2017). Unfortunately, the fallout of such measures also poses a threat to the economic future of Syria’s neighbor to the south: Jordan.

Amman’s Northern Lung: Sanctioning the Jordanian Economy

Aside from Lebanon, no country in the Arab world has been more profoundly impacted by the crisis in Syria than Jordan. Despite withdrawing its ambassador from Damascus in 2012, Jordan has maintained official diplomatic relations with Syria throughout the civil war (Jordan Times, 2020). Jordan’s recent appointment of a new *chargé d’affaires* to its embassy in Syria indicates a shared interest in promoting commercial engagement and collaboration on security issues. Syria was, after all, Jordan’s largest Arab trading partner prior to the outbreak of the civil war in 2011 (Al-Makahleh, 2019). The Nasib border crossing, Jordan’s largest overland trade artery, “provided \$1.5 billion (Dh5.5bn) in annual trade before the war” (Luck, 2019). Like Lebanon, Jordan also hosts hundreds of thousands of Syrian refugees, who “as a group and on an individual basis, (represent) the lowest-paid workers in Jordan” (Lockhart, 2019, pp. 16). Nevertheless, tensions remain fraught between Damascus and Amman. Contrasting sharply with Syria’s history of close relations with Lebanon, a tradition of mutual mistrust and suspicion has plagued relations between Jordan and Syria for several decades.

During the Cold War, Jordan's close ties to the United States placed it at odds with the pro-Soviet Syrian Ba'athist government. When the Jordanian monarchy violently expelled the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) in 1970 -an event known as Black September- Syria launched a limited incursion into Jordanian territory in support of the Palestinians. During the 1980s, Syria and Jordan found themselves supporting opposite sides in the Iran-Iraq War (Seale, 1988, pp. 462). During the period known as the 'Arab Spring,' King Abdullah II inserted himself in the debate surrounding Syria's political future, publicly calling for President Bashar Al-Assad to resign (Al-Jazeera, 2011). At the same time, Jordan was temporarily used as a training and logistic extending corridor in concert with the CIA under the codename Operation Timber Sycamore (Younes, 2016). The CIA eventually scuttled the program, but not before some armaments fell into the hands of *death squads* pejoratively named "Islamic fighters" or members of an "Arab-Islamic Caliphate" (Inowloki, 2017; Al-Kassimi, TBA). For some time thereafter, American intelligence officers based in Amman maintained close ties with "Islamist terrorists" who had once benefited from CIA largess; these include war criminals like Manaf Fahad Al-Deiri, among others (Al-Tamimi, 2020). Yet as the tide of the war began to turn, Jordan adopted a gradualist return to neutrality with the return of Syrian government troops to Daraa, Sweida, and Quneitra during the summer of 2018 and with King Abdullah II taking an unequivocal legal stance against the transgression of Jordanian sovereignty with foreign intelligence agencies using the Military Operations Center (MOC) in Amman as a launching pad and intel hub for "Islamist training". These developments foreshadow a renewed and quiet reconciliation between two vital Arab civilizational bastions – Amman and Damascus (i.e., Jund al-Sham and Jund al-Urdunn).

Political differences due to the civil war have at times obscured the myriad areas in which Syria-Jordan interests overlap in fundamental ways. As we analyze the regional impact of so-called 'targeted' sanctions directed against the 'Asad regime,' it is necessary to explore these arenas of possible cooperation and the role of western sanctions in undermining Jordanian political and economic interests. To that end, we must turn our attention to the state of Jordan's economy and its prospects for real organic growth absent a resumption of normal trade relations with Syria. Unfortunately, punitive sanctions directed against Damascus fail to take into account Jordan's economic health or Syria's natural role as Jordan's primary regional trading partner. The precarious state of the Jordanian economy and its overreliance on foreign aid left the monarchy vulnerable to external pressure, which has largely succeeded in undermining efforts to bring about a broader rapprochement between Jordan and its northern neighbor. Additional sanctions will continue to hamper overland trade not only with Syria but also Turkey and the European Union. It is this broader regional picture, and the consequences of western economic violence as experienced by Jordan and Jordanians, that deserves closer scrutiny.

While government troops swept through southern Syria during the summer of 2018, Jordan experienced a sustained period of civil unrest due to worsening economic conditions. These protests exposed the deep structural weaknesses plaguing the Jordanian economy, weaknesses which have been exacerbated by the fallout from the Syrian Civil War. The catalyst for the 2018 demonstrations was the passage of a controversial tax bill in the Jordanian parliament, one which included sweeping tax hikes as well as austerity measures targeting subsidies for food and energy (Al-Jazeera, 2018). It was believed that by cutting public expenditures, the Jordanian government could tackle its unsustainable debt crisis and stimulate economic growth. Jordan's debt to GDP ratio stands at nearly 99 percent as of 2019, while underlying economic growth remains negligible (World Bank, 2019). Some observers blamed the government for failing to address the stubbornly high unemployment rate. Others blamed the inflexible approach taken by the IMF, which essentially blackmailed the Jordanian government into passing painful austerity measures in exchange for badly needed aid⁷. By the summer of 2018 Jordan's unemployment rate climbed to over 18 percent; at the time of writing, nearly 1 in 5 Jordanians, or roughly 20 percent of the population, remains out of work (World Bank, 2019). Additionally, the ongoing refugee crisis, which costs the Jordanian economy billions of dollars each year, has had a ruinous impact on the Jordan's economic health (Malkawi, 2016). High unemployment, an out of control debt crisis, caring for nearly 700,000 Syrian refugees, and a dependence on handouts from foreign powers have collectively led to the virtual implosion of the Jordanian economy.

The available data seems to forecast a bleak future for the Arab Hashemite kingdom. Underlying structural weaknesses embedded within the foundations of Jordan's economy aside, the ongoing crisis in Syria has contributed to sluggish economic growth. The myriad effects of the war, ranging from the presence of refugees to the closure of critical overland trade routes, continue to plague an economy already teetering on the brink of collapse. According to the World Bank, "transit trade (through Syria) is large, accounting for about 11 percent of

Jordan's exports and 30 percent of its imports" (World Bank, 2013). Jordan's massive reliance on imports, especially given its weak industrial infrastructure, only serves to hinder future economic growth. Despite the reopening of the Nasib border crossing in 2018, overland trade has ground to a virtual standstill. Security concerns persist, as do anxieties related to ongoing and future sanctions directed against Syria, including the Caesar Act (Abdul-Jalil, 2018). In an effort to remain in the good graces of the United States, Jordan has thus far proven reluctant to revamp trade ties with Damascus. But in a recent interview, Jordanian member of parliament Qais Zayadin lamented America's handling of the Syrian issue, arguing that Americans "...are tens of thousands of miles away, you can afford not to have a relationship with Syria. We do not have this luxury" (Luck, 2019).

It is axiomatic that ongoing efforts to strangle Jordan's natural commercial ties to and through Syria represent a threat to Jordanian interests. Rather than promote regional participation in Syria's reconstruction, which would encourage refugee repatriation while opening new markets for Jordanian investors, the United States continues to erect barriers designed to undermine economic integration and inter-state collaboration (Al-Sabaileh, 2020). Faced with defeat in Syria after having failed to overthrow the government through proxy warfare and overt occupation, intransigent American rejectionism serves only to undermine the Jordanian economy while threatening regional peace and security. Considering the inherent weakness of Jordan's economy and the myriad challenges it faces, heaping on more pressure in the form of sanctions against Syria may eventually threaten the stability of the Hashemite kingdom.

Destroying what remains of the Syrian economy while effectively sealing off Syrian markets from regional investors has already had a reverberative impact elsewhere. America's callous disregard for Jordanian interests may belie a more sinister tertiary motive behind the imposition of current and future sanctions against Syria. For the United States, keeping Jordan hooked on handouts carries strategic advantages, whereas a healthy, independent Jordanian economy may empower its leadership politically and encourage a more activist foreign policy. As it stands, Jordan receives nearly 2 billion dollars each year from the United States (USAID, 2018). This desperately needed aid functions as a form of economic blackmail, leveraged by the United States as a means of purchasing Amman's political acquiescence. Setting aside the question of trade relations with Syria, consider Jordan's passive inaction in the aftermath of America's decision to open an embassy in Jerusalem. Settler-colonial expansionism and ethnic cleansing in southern Bilad al-Sham (i.e., *de facto* Palestine) are particularly sensitive issues for Jordan, especially considering the preponderance of Arab-Palestinians residing east of the Jordan River: over half of Jordan's population is of Arab-Palestinian origin (Human Rights Watch, 2010). Should Jordan take proactive steps to prevent the illegal and immoral seizure of Arab-Palestinian territory in the Jordan River Valley, for example, America may feel inclined to freeze its 'assistance.' This is manifest with King Abdullah II announcing in November 2019 his refusal to renew a 25-year deal allowing Israeli farmers to enter an area known as *Baquora* to harvest their crops including special provisions allowing Israeli farmers to work the land without visas (Khoury, 2019). It therefore stands to reason that propping up a weak, pliable government in Jordan furthers American interests far more than the emergence of a self-reliant and economically independent Jordan would. So long as the Jordanian economy continues to live hand to mouth on American 'aid' and the occasional cash infusion from Washington's surrogates in the Arab Gulf, Jordan's political passivity in regional affairs is all but guaranteed.

Deconstructing the Theoretical Transformation of Interventionist Discourse

Analyzing expressions of geopolitical tension in the Middle East necessitates a review of the narrative framing weaponized in defense of western imposed 'unilateral coercive measures.' As was the case a century ago, indiscriminate economic violence works in tandem with military occupation as a means of advancing the Euro-American imperial project. Both expressions of power were invariably clothed in the trappings of orientalist paternalism. In the intervening years, a reformulation of this rhetorical tradition emerged in conjunction with the birth of the post-World War II (WWII) liberal internationalist world order. Liberal-interventionist rhetoric, in other words, represents a discursive repackaging of the infamous *mission civilisatrice*. Acts of aggression and wars of conquest are invariably characterized as altruistic ventures, justified under the pretext of securing 'liberal values,' 'human rights,' and most importantly, 'free' markets. These rhetorical tools obfuscate the economic and geostrategic motives lurking beneath the superficial veneer of contemporary liberal-interventionist discourse and the doctrine of 'responsibility to protect' (R2P).

According to Immanuel Wallerstein's World Systems Theory, the modern world remains roughly divided between a dominant core and a structurally disadvantaged post-colonial periphery (Paul, 1997). This 'dominant core' survived the controlled demolition of old-line European colonialism through the institutional machinery of modern finance capitalism born out of the Bretton Woods conference. Built as they were by the United States with the tacit approval of other European colonial powers, these levers of coercion were built for the express purpose of locking in western (colonial) dominance within the world capitalist system. As a means of clarifying Wallerstein's globally oriented geopolitical perspective, Isa Blumi traces the legacy of the liberal- internationalist world system to its roots; namely, the political economy of colonial capitalism and its evolution following WWII. Blumi argues that the 'traditional territorial imperialism' of the 19th century spawned "a system of economic, political, and cultural domination that has reigned supreme since the conclusion of WWII (Blumi, 2018, pp. 9)." These geopolitical and economic forces have aligned themselves against the government of Syria and its allies.

Crucially, it is also necessary to reconsider the various categories used to describe Syria, Syrians and the political economy of governance and power in the post-colonial Middle East. For many western politicians and policy analysts, a recourse to essentialist reductionism is the discursive weapon of choice. All too often the complexities of the Syrian crisis are obscured by monolithic labels such as the 'Alawite' regime, the prototypical 'Middle Eastern dictatorship,' the hotbed of 'Islamic terrorism.' In the United States, analyzing so-called 'Shia militias' recently emerged as an accepted subfield of Middle East studies. In the arena of Syria 'analysis' these labels have, unfortunately, reinforced western misconceptions vis-à-vis the socio-economic and political ordering of society in the countries ostensibly being analyzed. For example, tensions between citizen and state are often reduced to sectarian affiliation, tribal allegiance, or membership in a particular ethnic group. Other contingencies are obscured or disregarded completely, as are other factors that determine one's allegiance to the 'evil regime,' the 'moderate rebels' or the 'terrorist' groups smuggling Syrian oil into Turkey. As was -and is- the case elsewhere in the post-colonial Middle East, 'ancient hatreds' between supposedly monolithic tribal or sectarian groups may explain conflict as well as collaboration.

What is lost along the way, particularly as such flawed analytical paradigms gain traction in the court of public opinion and in the literature, is a more nuanced approach to appraising continuity and change in Syria. According to Isa Blumi, "a major element of the problem stems from the heavy reliance on terminology often used to describe the Middle East...too often the reference to Yemen's social pathologies, in particular, is linked to 'tribalism' and 'sectarian rivalries,' and then used to explain group motivations and processes of change" (Blumi, 2010, pp.4). In the Syrian context, many contemporary 'experts' lean too heavily on orientalist epistemologies to frame events, explain behavior, and justify acts of violence. Conflicts and the structural schisms that catalyze them are simplified and misrepresented. Subsequently, post- conflict 'solutions' necessarily require western supervision, input, intervention and investment. In the new American crusade to plunder and dismantle the Syrian state, we are reminded that tensions between incorrigible tribes and 'ancient hatreds' pitting "Sunnis" against "Alawites" demand the heavy hand of western input. Accordingly, occupation and intervention are not only necessary to promote 'regional peace and security,' but also to promote the well-being of Syrians themselves. Essentialist categories of analysis thus contribute to the perpetuation of the liberal-internationalist world system and the inequality upon which it depends.

More importantly, Arabs conceptualized as being "objects" and/or "outside" of law because they violate the "standard of civilization" inevitably results in there being an absence of any legal limitations on the ability of Western sovereign states to commence war and/or be accountable for atrocities committed during "humanitarian sanctions" because domination and violence in the case of a war between a civilized and non-civilized peoples becomes essential in transforming lawless Arabia. Although theoretically pre-emption should apply to all states, the U.S. articulated the doctrine following 9/11 never intending to extend it to its declared enemies since under the logic of the doctrine, the attempts of U.S enemies to arm themselves could be interpreted by (realpolitik) defense strategists and (positivist) lawyers itself as an emerging threat or aggression, therefore, a *raison d'être* for declaring pre-emptive war (Anghie, 2004, 2009). Pre-emptive defense strategy (PEDS) is then a right reserved only for the most powerful with advocates of the doctrine claiming that PEDS is the U.S. essentially claiming "an assertion of

the right to review the policies adopted by the other government and to override them whenever the US finds it necessary” (Benvenisti, 2004:691; Anghie, 2009).

The uprisings of 2011 and more recently the economic sanctions imposed on Arabia through the Caesar Act reminded Arabs generally and Muslims particularly that international law continues to be animated by a civilizing mission adopting (neo)-Orientalist discursive representations claiming Latin-European epistemic knowledge structures as inherently democratic in contrast to Arab epistemology inherently being deficient in, and resistant to, democracy. Therefore, and more to the point, Arabs were reminded that (ratiocinative) Latin-European epistemology continues to fail in explaining developments in Arabia since they are legally constructed as embodying a philosophical theology that is a priori a necessary exclusion for the coherence of *jus gentium*. With the critique of culturalist discursive representations occupying an important place in the discipline of International Relations (IR) in the last few decades, the Arab uprising in 2011 and the subsequent economic sanctions are therefore interpreted by aligning with critics who claim that the foreign policy of the U.S. and Europe has for several centuries failed to articulate political visions that do not ascribe them as being a “redeeming” nation, with the telos of history being the transformation of Other places “into mirror images of its idealized self” (Borg, 2016:213; Al-Kassimi, 2018). The Arab uprising in metropole regions is interpreted as an event that reinforces an idealized version of Western/European Self with policies produced and articulated being influenced by a positivist jurisprudential conceptualization of foreign policy theorized as simply being constitutive of political community rather than the “external deployment of instrumental reason on behalf of an unproblematic internal identity situated in an anarchic realm of necessity” (Campbell, 1998:37; Borg, 2016). This is particularly true since realism is the traditional approach adhered to by Western sovereign figures informing foreign affairs and is directly indebted to positivism as a juridical school of thought. Realism during the 20th and 21st century has “rendered culture not merely epiphenomenal, but invisible and mute” (Mingst and Warkentin, 1996:171; Al-Kassimi, 2018) with a *realpolitik* lens deducing foreign policy *a priori* making “culture invisible by suppressing difference in favor of sameness” even though “culture is about difference” (as cited in Mingst and Warkentin, 1996:171)

Western sovereign figures imagining the “shade of culture” in Arab spaces as “uncivilized” or connotated by “Islamist tendencies” provides legal coverage to adjudicate legal principles constellating discourses surrounding “human rights”, “democratization”, and “good governance” decriminalizing extrajudicial “redemptive measures” such as indiscriminate bombing (i.e., Operation Inherent Resolve). These principles regulate and preserve the supposed unbridgeable cultural gap characterizing *jus gentium* claiming that a natural antagonism between a *Madīnian* and *Athenian* man necessitates a *realpolitik* zero-sum engagement because the former is constituted as an irrational mode of *Being*. The antagonism between Europe and Arabia legalizing extrajudicial practices (re)produces the colonial jurisprudence system of the 19th and 20th century (i.e., mandate system) asserting that cultural differences between civilized and uncivilized states decree that civilized states have the “sacred trust of civilization” – therefore the responsibility – to democratize and protect uncivilized Arabs from their Self through any (violent) means necessary (Al-Kassimi, TBA).

The privatization of violence through operation Timber Sycamore is crucial in revealing that while activities conducted by *death squads* are blamed on, and perceived as, a “natural” occurrence in a space furnishing Arab civilization attempting to adopt liberal-secular temporal coordinates accenting (Western) modernity, the war in Iraq, and more recently Syria, Yemen, and Libya reminded Arabs that the catalyst of *en-masse* Arab displacement and human carnage is directly linked to a “modern” puritan development of *war-machines* (i.e., *death squads* à la ISIS/ AQI/ Peace Companies/ Badr Organization/ Academi) engaging in barbaric acts rather than Arab epistemology being deterministically imagined as inherently averse to *reason* but receptive to *terror*. The inherent violence of (positivist) juridical concepts such as sovereignty and teleological narratives such as modernity reifying *ratiocinated* Latin-European philosophical theology is manifest with neo-Orientalist scholars – located in Northern and the Southern centers of knowledge – claiming that the uprising will *certainly* become an “Islamist Winter”⁸. The current Caesar Act inflicting *creative destruction* across Arabia by treating inhabitants of the Arab *Mashreq* and Arab *Maghreb* – according to neo-Orientalist imaginaries – as *Saracen* or *homo sacer* reminds us of the importance of being *anachronic* when reading to deconstruct legal-history thus realizing that the *present* terror engulfing the Arab world is not endemic to an Arab mode of *Being*, but rather is a familiar and necessary violence for the rejuvenation of a *jus gentium* founded on a *secular* idea claiming that the particular history of Latin-Europe

is the general history of the world, or put differently, that the *telos* of history is adhering to a Judeo-Christian rationalization of morality.

Conclusion

The economic fallout of the western war on Syria continues to inflict grievous harm on Syria's neighbors, particularly Lebanon and Jordan. New tranches of punitive sanctions have exacerbated the structural weaknesses of both countries' economies while simultaneously locking in absolute poverty within Syria itself. American policy makers are acutely aware of these regional reverberations, calculating that these measures do not undermine western efforts to secure hegemonic influence in the Levant. On the contrary, this study suggests that the regional economic crises engendered by American sanctions advance the neocolonial Euro-American hegemonic project, insofar as these outcomes may indirectly weaken America's rivals (Syria, Iran, and Russia in particular) while helping Washington consolidate economic leverage over its Arab allies. Several mutually reinforcing rhetorical devices work in tandem as a means of justifying unilateral coercive action directed against non-compliant polities in the Global South. Cosmetically, well-positioned 'experts' sell economic violence and military interventionism to western audiences through humanitarian appeals and the invocation of R2P. Such arguments represent an orientalist reformulation of the Euro-American 'civilizing mission.' This study highlights the myriad epistemological pitfalls plaguing the categories of analysis used by many of these 'experts,' which as we have seen are irredeemably contaminated by essentialist reductionism. While further study is required, this article suggests that any attempt to measure the significance of western imposed economic violence, within the targeted polity or beyond its borders, must necessarily include a robust critique of the systems of knowledge and power underpinning the contemporary liberal- internationalist world system.

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Notes

¹ The term was first coined by American naval strategist Alfred Thayer Mahan in 1902 before WWI to “designate the area between Arabia and India”. Later on, after WWII it was adopted by former US president Eisenhower in 1957 in his strategy known as the “Eisenhower Doctrine”. Unfortunately, the term continues to be used even though such cartographical categorization is “historically empty”. More accurate endogenous cultural terms would be the Arabian East, Fertile Crescent, Bilad al-Sham, Bilad al-Yamam, Levant, Arabian Peninsula, or Arabian Mashreq.

² It is important to note that the destructive explosion occurring in Lebanon on August 4th 2020 further exacerbates economic and social turmoil in Arabia especially when we consider that port in Beirut was discussed prior to the explosion as becoming the primary commercial hub utilized to import products required to rebuild Syria. It is also worth highlighting that countries and local Arab *comprador* elites coming to the “humanitarian aid” of Lebanon after the blast, are not only the same countries and actors who initiated and benefited from the “underdevelopment” of Lebanon since the neo-liberalization of the economy took place after 1989, but are also the same hegemonic political actors which advocated for the CAESAR Act. The consequences of the explosion included the almost complete destruction of the most important Mediterranean port (i.e. Beirut); preliminary numbers estimate over 200,000 homeless Arabs; property damages amount to over 15 billion \$USD, and finally, sites relating to Arab civilizational cultural heritage involving centuries of inter-civilizational encounters have also been damaged and/or destroyed. Further research concerned with the economic and social ramifications catalyzed by the destruction of the port in Beirut across Arabia will seek to demonstrate the moral issue with a “humanitarian logic” subsuming the technical and problem-solving solutions suggested by members of “International Civil Society” (i.e., France, U.S., Britain, etc.) supposedly vital in remedying the plight of Arabs.

³ The Taif agreement – approved by Lebanon’s parliament in November 4th 1989 – concluded the sectarian war inflicted in Lebanon because of internal and external forces in 1989 and legally addressed the importance of the Arab Syrian army remaining in Lebanon.

⁴ Asset managing corporations such as BlackRock and Lazard went as far as to suggest that the Lebanese banking sector is “bankrupt” even though it is well known that the Lebanese banking and finance sector is one of the most reputable in the world. Blackrock suggested that Lebanon should terminate its banking sector by only keeping 5 banks with a maximum capital of 200 million \$USD in each. Elie Firzli, current Deputy Speaker of the Lebanese parliament stated that the articulations of Blackrock and Lazard point to *Nifaq* (i.e., hypocrisy) of the highest rank especially since it is well known that Beirut’s banking sector has not simply consistently outperformed Tel Aviv’s banking sector, but that Lebanon’s debt is mostly internal rather than external. He also emphasizes that what is occurring with Lebanon’s banking sector is similar to the Intra Bank scandal in 1966.

⁵ The Caesar Act prohibits Syrian’s working in Lebanon to transfer Lebanese pounds to their families in Syria. Also, and more insidiously, Arab-Syrians in Lebanon are told that they can only transfer U.S. currency to Syria.

⁶ Frozen funds belonging to the Yemeni government are estimated to be around 1 billion \$USD, while funds for the Syrian government including Syrian citizen deposits in Lebanon exceed 35 billion \$USD.

⁷ It should also be noted that in tandem with the spill-over effect of the Caesar Act in Lebanon, for instance, the EU through a program called CEDRE and the U.S. through the IMF have offered an amount of around 10-12 billion \$USD in loans conditioned on the privatization and/or wholesale of the ports, airport, electric grids, and telecommunication sectors.

⁸ Using Islam and/or Arabness as “historical information” supposedly explaining the *cause of* chaos and violence informing Arabia is fundamentally the fictional and reductionist aspect of neo-Orientalist narratives. As matter of fact, *death squads* were not all genealogically from Arabia but rather came from over 70 countries whether from Europe, Africa, or North/South/Central America. In addition, some were not even Muslim, however, communication centers linked violence and chaos to Islam while generalizing all Arabs as Muslim thus developing the “Islamist figure” which dominated media centers after the Arab uprisings in 2011.