

## The Cruelty of Our Syria Sanctions

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Syria has been at war for more than a decade. Its agony continues, with the U.S. punishing the Syrian people for the sins of their rulers. As Syria's neighbors reconcile with President Bashar al-Assad's government, Washington officials are having a meltdown. They want friendly Arab states to continue following America's ostentatiously cruel yet ineffective sanctions policy.

Syria is an enormous tragedy, the greatest disappointment of the ultimately disastrous 2011 Arab Spring. Syria suffered traumatic civil war, jihadist depredations, and Turkish aggression. The Assad regime brutally suppressed peaceful protests. An armed insurgency emerged, dominated by radical jihadists. The Islamic State sought to establish an Islamist caliphate. The U.S., Europe, Gulf states, Iran, and Russia intervened on varying sides.

Washington had no serious security interests at stake but advanced a complicated, even exotic agenda. Successive administrations sought to simultaneously oust Assad, defeat the Islamic State, and expel Iranian and Russian forces. Along the way the U.S. aided radical insurgents including Al Qaeda's local affiliate, acquiesced to Gulf aid for jihadist forces, and supported Syrian Kurds while Ankara cooperated with the Islamic State and attacked Washington's Kurdish partners. This confused mess of policy pottage extended the catastrophic, multi-sided civil war. Hundreds of thousands of Syrians died.

The U.S. had one notable success: supporting local militias that defeated ISIS, which lost its final territorial stronghold in 2019. Otherwise, U.S. policies were a bust. Assad regained control over most of the country. Turkey secured a small opposition zone controlled by Islamist extremists. Ankara also threatened American troops and invaded Kurdish territory—with another round now possible. Several hundred U.S. personnel continue to illegally occupy a third of Syria, including its main oil fields, where they are regularly challenged by Russian and Iranian-backed forces. The latter recently struck a U.S. base with drones, killing a contractor. Washington's retaliatory strike triggered another attack.

Although President Donald Trump expressed support for leaving Syria, he bizarrely appointed hawks such as Never Trumper James Jeffrey, who actively resisted administration policies. To thwart Trump's withdrawal plans, Jeffrey and other officials brazenly misled the president about the U.S. troop presence in Syria and played to Trump's desire to loot Syrian oil. Congress doubled down by imposing the Caesar sanctions, which took effect in 2020. The measure further

immiserated the already impoverished Syrian population, earning enthusiastic praise from Jeffrey and another Trump envoy, Joel Rayburn.

This strategy was both inhumane and maladroit. Jeffrey openly treated the Syrian people as a means to an end, seeking to make Syria a “quagmire” for Russia. Rayburn took similar satisfaction from punishing the Syrian people, viewing their continuing hardship after more than a decade of civil war as a great victory.

The World Food Programme reported that, “following 12 years of conflict, an economy crippled by runaway inflation, a currency that has collapsed to a record low and soaring food prices, 12 million people do not know where their next meal is coming from. Another 2.9 million people are at risk of sliding into hunger, meaning that 70% of the population may soon be unable to put food on the table for their families.”

The supposed objective for this policy is to promote political reform. But how does impoverishing the Syrian population advance democracy? Sanctions enthusiasts evidently care little about the human cost. Washington’s policy towards Syria mimics the late Madeleine Albright’s infamous dismissal of the deaths of a half million Iraqi children from economic sanctions: “We think the price is worth it.” How convenient when someone else bears the cost.

Perhaps recognizing this P.R. problem, Jeffrey recently played the Ukraine card. Again, ignoring the plight of the Syrian people, he complained: “In year two of the Russian aggression in Ukraine, aided and abetted by Iran, to not care about a Russian-Iranian strategic victory in the middle of the Middle East—that’s the thing I can’t f\*\*\*ing figure out, man.” Actually, Russia and Iran won when Assad survived. Targeting the Syrian people will not reverse that result.

Yet President Joe Biden insists that he remains “absolutely” committed to the Syria occupation. Secretary of State Antony Blinken announced: “We are not going to be in the business of normalizing relations with Assad and with that regime.” Alas, the president and his aides haven’t explained how they plan to remove Assad.

In contrast, America’s Mideast allies and partners are now moving on. Syria’s collapse has expanded Iranian influence, enabled drug trafficking, and spewed refugees abroad. In response, neighboring states, including Saudi Arabia, the United Emirates, Jordan, and Egypt, have reestablished diplomatic ties with Damascus. Led by Riyadh, the Arab League recently reinstated Syria. Despite the discomfort of some members, such as Qatar, Assad received a warm welcome.

Equally significant, Russia has encouraged negotiations between Ankara and Damascus, which could result in a Turkish withdrawal and Syria regaining control over its border. There has been increasing talk of a *modus vivendi* between the Syrian Kurds and Assad government to reunite the country, preserve a degree of Kurdish autonomy, and reduce Damascus’s reliance on Tehran. Turkey’s presidential election slowed the diplomatic process, but newly reelected President Recep Tayyip Erdogan is expected to move forward.

No one wants to reward Assad, but most of his neighbors—U.S. allies all—are equally cruel dictatorships that care little about human rights. More importantly, sanctions are not working, unless the goal is simply to impoverish the Syrian people. After more than a decade of failure, Syria's neighbors have tired of America's diet of more of the same.

In response to these developments, the architects of today's failed policy are frantic. Some forty of the capital's usual suspects, naturally including Jeffrey and Rayburn, wrote the Biden administration demanding action to halt the normalization of relations. The *Washington Post's* Josh Rogin also weighed in: "This is an abdication of 12 years of U.S. commitments to hold Assad accountable for his mass atrocities. It is also a failure to implement U.S. law requiring sanctions on those who aid the Syrian dictator." Some thirty members of Congress—whose members believe they have been anointed by heaven to micromanage the entire world—are pushing legislation, approved by the Foreign Affairs Committee, to punish even allies if they deal with Syria.

Why do all these people believe preventing Syrians from recovering economically will force Assad to quit? Rogin, supposedly a serious journalist, wrote: "Exerting pressure on those funding Assad might be the only remaining way to deter them from helping Assad rebuild until he releases the thousands who are being tortured in his dungeons and stops the slaughter of those Syrians living outside of his forces' control."

Seriously? Assad survived a civil war that killed *hundreds of thousands of people*. He has been under tough sanctions for years. His nation is a wreck. Yet he remains firmly in power. Does Rogin expect Assad to finally feel ashamed of his people's plight, causing him to yield power and fly to The Hague for trial? Forget the sanctimonious rhetoric: the Caesar sanctions are an expensive placebo, intended to make U.S. activists and officials alike feel like they are doing something.

Rogin insisted that "the Caesar Act has never been properly used." But that is the excuse given by *every* advocate of *every* sanction. If only we were serious about sanctions on Syria, along with Cuba, Venezuela, Iran, North Korea, Russia, China, and a gaggle of other governments, these malefactors long ago would have crumpled, signed surrender terms, and become loyal American protectorates, carrying out Washington's every command. Democracy would flourish, human rights would reign. Their leaders would join hands with American statesmen to sing Kumbaya. Unfortunately, we are still waiting for the promised victories. Sanctions that have never proved tough enough to force other governments to do what we want aren't likely to prove tough enough to force Syria to do what we want.

Many Syrians, especially those driven from their country during the war, are understandably disappointed by Assad's growing rehabilitation. But the humanitarian concerns expressed by Washington officials are political theater. Uncle Sam has proved ever ready to kill promiscuously in pursuit of its own perceived interests.

In Syria, American officials worked with the local affiliate of Al Qaeda, whose terrorist attacks on September 11 sparked the invasions of both Iraq and Afghanistan. The U.S. continues to support Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, whose war against Yemen resulted in

hundreds of thousands of deaths. America's invasion of Iraq and incompetent occupation left hundreds of thousands dead. U.S. military campaigns elsewhere killed tens of thousands.

U.S. policymakers have repeatedly demonstrated that they have no idea how to bring democracy, stability, or peace to other nations, including Syria. That would be a good place for American policymakers to begin paring military interventions. Washington should reestablish diplomatic ties with Damascus. It is more important to communicate with adversaries than friends, and the U.S. already engages many other odious regimes, such as Saudi Arabia. Then sanctions should be dropped, other than those targeting oppressive state institutions.

Economic sanctions most hurt those with the least. Washington should allow the Syrians and their neighbors to begin working to forge a better future.

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