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## ***Time to End the Sanctions on Syria...and Everywhere Else***

The horrific February 6 earthquake in Southern Turkey and northern Syria has shined a spotlight on the broad-based economic sanctions that the US has imposed on countries with supposedly “hostile” governments. It is not a pretty picture.

In Syria, the US has been promoting regime change for decades. Since 2012 it has spent \$billions to arm opposition forces, often including Islamic militants who are otherwise the enemies of the US and its allies as well as the Syrian government. The US has imposed brutal economic sanctions on Syria, which have further immiserated a population which was already reeling from 10 years of proxy war imposed on the country. At the same time, the US military and its allies occupy broad swaths of Syrian territory in the east and south, denying Syrians access to crucial oil and wheat resources. Turkey and local Syrians who are now effectively Turkish mercenaries illegally occupy much of northern Syria. And Turkish troops protect a NW Syrian enclave in the province of Idlib which is ruled by Al-Qaeda and its allies.

Sanctions are claimed to support the Syrian people – which would be laughable if it weren’t so tragic for the lives of millions in Syria. The openly-stated US policy is to prevent any reconstruction in Syria as long as it continues to be governed by a regime which our elites disapprove. This has nothing to do with democracy, rather it is because Syria opposes and resists US hegemony in the Middle East and is hostile to Israel’s attempts to dominate the region.

Recent events have also exposed the lie that Syrian humanitarian relief has been exempt from the US sanctions all along. After the recent earthquake, the US announced a

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temporary loosening of Syria sanctions to allow rescue supplies and funds to enter the country without triggering US retaliation. Before that, countries and organizations wishing to provide humanitarian relief to Syrians faced the daunting task of trying to obtain licenses from the US State Department, which was costly, uncertain and time consuming. Most international banks simply refused to allow transactions relating to Syria out of fear of US sanctions, even for humanitarian purposes. As one [report](#) states:

“While sanctions do not formally prevent humanitarian aid, they do prevent certain financial transactions leading to issues of over-compliance and the so-called ‘chilling effect’ both of which have consequences on the humanitarian sector” (more details [here](#)).

Even before the earthquake, US-imposed sanctions had been severely punishing ordinary Syrians. According to UN statistics, [food insecurity](#) affects at least 12 million people in Syria, with an estimated 90% of the population now living in poverty. Fuel shortages, exacerbated by the US occupation and control of Syrian oil fields, have meant that most Syrians can expect no more than an hour or two of electricity per day, while people are forced to shiver in [most homes without wintertime heat](#). The sanctions have also caused the Syrian currency to freefall, further undermining peoples’ access to vital supplies.

Syria’s public healthcare system, which was once the envy of the region, has been [especially hard-hit](#) and is now near collapse:

“Diagnostic equipment, such as MRI and CT scanners, are failing or missing vital parts. Ventilators and laboratory equipment are lacking. Cardiologists told me that endoscopes, cardiac catheters and coronary stents, along with renal dialysis facilities, are all suffering due to sanctions. Even private hospitals that can afford repairs cannot get them, as companies do not want to sell them the required equipment for fear of repercussions. Essential equipment and medicines are affected by sanctions in terms of supply, manufacturing and importing. Banks are refusing to open credit for importing urgently needed healthcare goods amid fears that sanctions may affect their business.”

Vital medicines, and treatments, which were once free in Syria, are now either unavailable or priced out of reach for most people. Tragically, the recent earthquake threatens to totally [overwhelm](#) a medical system already weakened by years of US sanctions.

(I reported first-hand on some of the consequences of US sanctions against Syria during visits in [2018](#) and [2022](#), long before the earthquake.)

The claim that the punishment of Syria has anything to do with promoting democracy is transparently bogus. US allies in destabilizing Syria include authoritarian Turkey and the Gulf monarchy-dictatorships — as well as Israel which, in defiance of international law

and numerous UN resolutions, rules millions of Palestinians who have no rights whatsoever. These same governments have been allowed to purchase tens of \$billions in US armaments, or in the case of Israel, weaponry is given free of charge amounting to hundreds of \$billions over the years.

The unrelenting sanctions on Syria would be bad enough, but the US also imposes punishing unilateral economic sanctions on numerous other countries. Accompanied by frequent direct or indirect military interventions, economic sanctions have long been the knee-jerk US policy around the world. Current targets include Cuba, Iran, Venezuela and Russia. Narrower sanctions have been imposed on persons or groups in a dozen or more other countries. These US sanctions are even more insidious because the centrality of the dollar and US financial institutions in the world economy allows Washington to threaten and intimidate third party countries from trading with targeted nations, even if they themselves have imposed no sanctions.

Even if one allowed, for argument's sake, that the human cost of unilateral US sanctions to pressure foreign countries were justified by some legitimate policy purpose, history shows that sanctions are ineffective in promoting democracy or even achieving regime change. Instead, they are a form of punishment against populations who happen to reside in countries whose governments are not subservient to US interests.

Cuba still survives – though at a steep cost – after 60 years of US sanctions. The Venezuelan government maintains its legitimacy with most of its population and the international community. The Islamic Republic of Iran has remained (for better or worse) intact as a US and Israeli adversary since 1979.

The sadistic intent of US economic sanctions were perhaps most vividly exposed when the US imposed a near total blockade against Saddam Hussein's Iraq after the first Gulf War in the 1990's. Madeleine Albright, Secretary of State in the Clinton administration, when confronted with UN statistics which showed that perhaps 500,000 Iraqi children perished as a result of US sanctions, responded simply and brutally that "It was worth it."

Sanctions do not work, even as intended, unless perhaps as a warning to people in countries likely to be targeted by the US in the future. Otherwise, they are nothing more than sheer cruelty masquerading as policy. Even if sanctions are nominally aimed at alleged or actual bad governmental actors, it is innocent multitudes in their countries who are made to suffer and die from the economic punishments imposed by the US. How many more millions will be victimized by these immoral sanctions? That is up to us and all the citizens of conscience in the US.

*Demand and end to US sanctions against Syria and the removal of US troops by [using our easy tool to contact Congress](#).*

*For further background on the situation in Syria you can watch webinars Jeff Klein presented for MAPA in [2021](#), [early 2022](#) and [six months ago](#).*

*People of good will who want to donate to Syrian earthquake relief without political restrictions, including in government controlled areas of the country, can [donate to the Syrian Red Crescent](#) or support [the work of Oxfam in Syria](#).*

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