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The weaponization of Syrian civilians' suffering

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Disinformation peddled by the Assad regime and its supporters blames Western sanctions for Syria's economic woes. In reality, sanctions primarily target Assad's inner circle; it is the regime's own misrule that causes civilian suffering, writes Bente Scheller.

In Damascus, the Bashar al-Assad regime appears sure of its victory, after more than sixty percent of Syrian territory has been brought back under its control and talks continue with the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) for an arrangement on the areas east of the Euphrates River, where the PYD holds sway.

At the international level, however, things are not going quite as Assad planned. Demands for his removal may have diminished, but the regime is no closer to obtaining a genuine rapprochement with the international community, nor the asset it deems far more important: money for reconstruction. It has therefore set to work on one of the most crucial barriers to normalization, which is the sanctions placed upon it by the United States, the European Union, and others. In this endeavor, it has found willing supporters on both the left and right of the political spectrum in Germany and other Western democracies.

“Just another day,” **tweeted** the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) representative Christian Blex while visiting Damascus in 2018, “but the EU won’t deliver any baby milk, medical supplies, or prosthetics because of sanctions.” Members of Germany’s Left Party and the peace movement share the same view, and call for the removal of sanctions. Since December, the regime has publicized images to this effect, showing long queues of people in Damascus waiting for cooking gas and other essentials.

Humanitarian and medical supplies can be delivered, however, since they are not included in sanctions. The only potentially critical medical substances on the blacklists would be those that can also be used to produce chemical weapons. Yet these are subject to export controls, rather

than EU sanctions. What is it, then, that causes this myth to stick? And what are the real reasons for supply shortages in many areas?

First and foremost, sanctions target violators of human rights

The misconception that today's sanctions bring hardship to civilian populations has its roots in the sanctions imposed on Iraq in the 1990s. Since then, however, sanctions processes have developed and become much more targeted. The clear majority of EU sanctions, consequently, target members of the Syrian regime, and its accomplices, who have played a direct role in human rights violations in Syria. Their assets have been frozen, and they have been banned from traveling to Europe. This was the case with the sanctions recently adopted in January 2019, which included five companies and eleven businessmen who contributed to, and benefited from, the misery of the country's population as war profiteers. They have no relation to humanitarian issues. It is precisely for this reason that sanctions trouble the regime—they affect the small circle of its insiders and cronies.

Worse still: the Syrian regime knows exactly how to deploy the suffering of civilians as a weapon. Over the years, it has besieged millions of Syrians within confined areas in order to seize control of large stretches of land under the guise of "reconciliation." Pediatrician Annie Sparrow, alongside a research team at the American University of Beirut, has examined this in detail for *The Lancet* medical journal. She, among others, published an article in which she **denounced**

the regime's willful and systematic attacks on hospitals and medical personnel, as well as its withholding of humanitarian aid, as "biological warfare through neglect."

Of the aid convoys sent by the United Nations to support those in hard-to-reach or besieged areas, the Syrian regime has consistently let only a fraction through. Only a portion of those convoys admitted have made it to their destinations, while the others have been stopped at checkpoints. Furthermore, some aid supplies have been illegally siphoned off. This has particularly been the case for medical supplies, where sterile gloves and anesthetics have been removed almost invariably, as have medications for pneumonia and diarrhea. Even supplies for midwives continue to be taken: in 2015, one convoy alone contained 37 kits for midwives, which could have been used to help 1,850 pregnant women.

There could be no clearer demonstration that the Syrian regime is uninterested in protecting, let alone providing for, those in need than its choice to withhold fundamental, life-saving resources from heavily pregnant women, babies, and young children.

Willful neglect continues in areas reclaimed by the regime, as it does against internally displaced persons (IDPs). One of the most extreme examples is the Rukban camp near the Jordanian border, in which some people have already died of starvation. Despite the appalling level of provisions in Rukban, IDPs are not willing to pass to regime-held areas through the "refuge passages" opened by Russia, which has led the regime to cut off water and food supplies to the camp, so as to apply greater pressure.

Systematic attacks on Syrian hospitals

Such abuses are largely absent from reports on the alleged harm caused by sanctions against Syria. Equally absent is the question of why the regime's allies do not step in, if the crisis in regime-held areas is indeed so severe. Following the first European sanctions of 2011, regime representatives voiced the opinion that the sanctions would have little effect on Syria. "The world is not only Europe," said Syria's Foreign Minister Walid al-Muallim. "We will forget that Europe exists on the map. We will turn to the South and the East, to anyone who offers their hand to Syria." According to the Moscow Times, the government in Moscow spent up to \$4 million—daily—on the deployment of its military and air force. As for humanitarian aid in 2018, the UN Humanitarian Response Plan noted a contribution from Russia to Syria of just \$500,000—for the entire year. Nor do bilateral aid deliveries and Russian funding for UN sub-organizations make up for this extreme mismatch between military and humanitarian spending.

As well as humanitarian needs, medical emergencies are being pushed even further to the fore to demand an end to sanctions. 60% of Syrian hospitals have been destroyed or damaged, and almost 70% of medical personnel have been killed or forced out. In the face of such systematic attacks, it is simply ridiculous to palm the lack of medical care off onto sanctions.

A desktop search online reveals that the blame assigned to sanctions for deteriorating medical care in Syria originates largely from one source: Elizabeth Hoff of the World Health

Organization. Her statements in this regard have met with confusion among diplomats. If any medical provisions were being restricted by sanctions, they could be made exempt, yet concrete examples of such restrictions have not been given at any point. “We have offered for Elizabeth Hoff to review any negative or unwanted effects of the EU sanctions, and to correct them according to the appropriate humanitarian exemption regulations,” one European diplomat told this author. “She wanted to produce a report, and interview medical personnel in Syrian hospitals as part of it. But the Syrian regime refused access to the WHO for such an inquiry.” This despite Hoff’s effectively pro-regime stance.

One of the few UN Special Report contributors to whom the regime did permit access is Idriss Jazairy, who reported on the negative effects of sanctions on the civilian population. In his report, in which he falsely claimed that Syria “provides all citizens with free healthcare,” Jazairy also made the critique that businesses are hesitant to deliver products to Syria (despite possible humanitarian exemptions) for fear they will go against sanctions. Germany has already addressed the potential issue of excessive caution indirectly causing fewer deliveries than sanctions allow: the central Bundesbank has established a special authority for sharing information and accepting requests for exemption. The US Treasury Department has done the same.

“Economic warfare”

Regarding medical goods, another problem comes into

play, in that import restrictions on medical provisions applied in Syria even before 2011. The pharmaceutical industry was one of Syria's most important, one in which everything was done to promote exports, as well as seal off the import market. Such measures were already causing shortages in 2009 and 2010.

The fact that the Syrian regime is now crying out so vehemently against sanctions may also have considerably less to do with EU conditions than with what is potentially expected to come from the USA. The House of Representatives recently approved the so-called Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act, which explicitly includes punishments for those who help the regime, regardless of whether they are US citizens. The Senate is yet to vote on the Act.

If implemented, in the long-term this Act would hinder Assad's reconstruction plans, for which he is courting Arab investors. As long as the regime rants and rails against "economic warfare," there is a simple solution for the removal of all these restrictions: ending and taking action against the incalculable human rights violations committed in Syria.

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