

Topic: Economic sanctions on Syria are described by experts as some of the “most complicated and far-reaching sanctions regimes ever imposed.” They have resulted in devastating consequences for the civilian population. Explain how the use of sanctions increases human rights violations in targeted countries.

Since the Arab Spring in 2011, civil war has ravaged Syria and, in the process, attracted many severe and extreme economic sanctions. Whilst on the surface these sanctions seem like a positive way to fulfil moral obligations, by deterring and punishing the Syrian regime’s policies that violate human rights, there has been no changes or reforms in government and within all of this, it seems that it is the Syrian citizens that have faced the consequences.

The war and sanctions have exacerbated the diminished welfare of the country and its citizens as the basic necessities and essentials such as food and safe water have become increasingly difficult to gain access to. Mortality rates have increased significantly over the years and in a report conducted by UNICEF in 2022, 33% of children were suffering from chronic malnutrition with 245 thousand children under 5 acutely malnourished. Unfortunately, the sanctions imposed also included medical equipment and medicine that is no longer available to the public. With the demand for medical services increasing, augmented by the war, many citizens have to go on without treatment eventually resulting in the worsening of the injury and even death. Disease has also been a prevalent topic when it comes to health. Approximately 8.1% of Syria's population were vaccinated against Coronavirus in 2022, nearly a third of all primary health care centres and a fourth of all hospitals could not facilitate the growing health requirements. Other diseases include polio, a virus that causes paralysis, which UNICEF is working hard to combat by vaccinating children under 5. Damaged infrastructure has resulted in many displaced citizens and the removal of social services including hospitals and schools. Even if there are still working facilities, they are most likely to be without electricity, preventing most services from achieving their full potential.

The intricacies of Syria's social welfare situations are also tightly linked to the country’s economics. Before the war, Syria had made significant progress, overcoming multiple calamities like the financial and food crises, by operating in the agriculture, oil, and manufacturing industries. This helped the country climb the GDP ladder reaching its peak in 2010. Their economy was stable and thriving and it was estimated that 28% of Syrians were living below the poverty line. As of 2023, that number has risen to 90%. Job unemployment and falling wages have been fuelled by the lack of businesses operating as sanctions and restrictions instil fear of breaking the law. This disincentivises businesses like exporters, insurance companies, banks, transportation companies, general goods and service industries, etc. to stop doing business with Syria. On top of that, the Syrian currency is rapidly devaluing further aggravating social welfare initiatives. Currency devaluation inadvertently results in inflation, so already scarce resources are further made inaccessible to those who don’t have the money, and also made a burden for those who have to take out huge amounts of their life savings for simple necessities- life savings that would eventually deplete. This fear of breaking sanction restrictions has also extended to aid organisations, which has prevented much needed humanitarian care. With the increasing amount of starving people and children, sanctions are depriving them of vital assistance. Even if these sanctions are lifted and the war stopped tomorrow, allowing the government to focus all its energy on repairing the county, there still wouldn’t be enough resources to supply everyone with their basic needs and restore Syria back to its original state, further proving the need for humanitarian aid. These are the reasons why civilian exemptions do not work. Because of all these other factors, the minimal amount of products imported under ‘civilian exemptions’ is simply not enough to supply the Syrian population.

Whilst war is a direct cause for the majority of these problems, the extremely harsh sanctions are the reason that they aren’t able to be solved. In fact, Syria isn’t the only example of sanctions not working.

The reality is that most sanctions, especially harsh ones, don't work or are less effective, as it puts further economic pressure on its citizens more than the targeted government. Taking North Korea as an example, in the duration of the 18 years that sanctions against the country have persisted, there have been no government reforms. Most targeted countries have government systems that ensure that they stay on top. In North Korea resources are controlled and distributed by the government, and in this system corruption is inevitable. It results in a system where the limited resources are rationed out unevenly with members of higher positions getting more than enough and the rest of the population getting less than they need to survive. Targeted countries are also less likely to care for international law, hence not minding in breaking them by participating in activities surrounding the black market to gain profit in order to sustain their lifestyle. Therefore, it is evident that sanctions intended to improve humanitarian conditions by trying to combat different oppressive governments into changing policies have ironically helped deprive citizens of the targeted country their basic human rights.

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