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Why Sanctions Don't Work

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Even as the U.S. continues to levy sanctions with increasing frequency, the results are clear. Economic sanctions are simply not working. Policymakers utilize sanctions to portray themselves as crusaders fighting to punish bad actors, while their actions work against American interests. With years of evidence, American sanctions against Syria and Venezuela have proven incredibly ineffective. The Assad and Maduro regimes are no closer to falling, and the middle- and lower-class citizens of these nations have handled the brunt of these economic sanctions. Meanwhile, armed groups in Syria and both governments have maneuvered to ensure these sanctions work to their benefit.

The idealistic goal of economic sanctions is certainly worthwhile. American policymakers wish to punish bad international actors without resorting to military action. Unfortunately, the method in which American sanctions are currently levied is both haphazard and counterproductive. This paper analyzes how American sanctions not only result in unintended consequences for civilians, but actively work to undermine American interests. Unilateral sanctions against Syria and Venezuela have had devastating results for regional allies such as Lebanon and Colombia and have in increased tensions with our European allies.

A more pertinent strategy would include annual strategic reviews of sanctions, as well as an increased emphasis on cooperation with our European allies. Targeted sanctions against individual bad actors would also serve to avoid increased suffering for innocent civilians. A significant change of course for U.S. sanctions policy is long overdue. The Biden administration's review of sanctions is a good first step, but the ultimate result is merely an admission of serious missteps that need to be corrected. If the Biden administration is serious about improving sanctions policy, serious steps for reform are necessary.

Sanctions Are a Policy Tool Which Act Against U.S. Interests

Sanctions have long been a tool utilized by the U.S. government. However, sanctions have been utilized with increasing frequency and strength over the last three decades. In the multipolar era of the Cold War, nations sanctioned by the U.S. could simply turn to the Soviet Union for economic engagement. The fall of the Soviet Union brought on a period of increased American dominance, meaning that American sanctions carried much more weight and potential damage for sanctioned nations and individuals.[1]

Consequently, the U.S. has increased its use of sanctions dramatically since the end of the Cold War. These sanctions carry dramatic consequences for the nations and individuals targeted by the U.S. As the holder of the world's global currency and the premier financial power, the U.S. wields massive economic might. Sanctions levied by the U.S. effectively cut targeted nations off from the global financial system.

As a result, these nations face serious difficulties both importing and exporting crucial goods, resulting in devastating food and medical shortages. These sanctions inherently lead to significant economic difficulties, such as high inflation and depleted foreign currency reserves. While this undoubtedly causes widespread humanitarian suffering for civilians, the results of these sanctions also damage American national interests both at home and abroad.

In fact, sanctions have often benefitted the very same groups the U.S. is attempting to punish, while wreaking havoc on nations' middle and lower income citizens. As a result, these citizens become even more reliant on the state for basic necessary goods. If, as is often the case, the stated aim of American sanctions is to create an environment conducive to regime change, these sanctions are counterproductive, and in fact have an abysmal track record of success.

Ultimately, comprehensive economic sanctions are ineffective, counterproductive to US national interests, and cause great harm to civilian populations whenever they're utilized. Sanctions have become the go-to tool for policy makers to boost their egos while portraying themselves as crusaders taking action against bad international actors. Yet the act of doing something for its own sake should not be lauded, and in this instance is harmful to the American interests. Instead of constantly resorting to sanctions as a tool of first option, the U.S. government should instead seek to prioritize diplomatic engagement and the various economic carrots at its disposal to achieve its global aims, while resorting to targeted sanctions only when strictly necessary.

There is a wealth of literature on the impact of sanctions on civilians. The case of comprehensive United Nations sanctions against Iraq during the 1990s brought global attention to the devastating impact sanctions can have on civilian populations, especially after the perceived success of sanctions against apartheid South Africa. While preventing unnecessary civilian suffering is an incredibly important topic, the focus of this paper will instead analyze how sanctions in fact work counter to American national interests. In many instances, civilian suffering in targeted nations does in fact harm American national interests, but this will not be the primary focus of this paper.

Utilizing the cases of Syria and Venezuela, this paper will instead delve into how sanctions prop up regimes and other groups targeted by sanctions, while also alienating crucial allies and harming American economic interests. By analyzing what groups benefit from, and who are harmed by, American sanctions, this paper seeks to paint a picture of how economic sanctions often bring about unintended consequences, many of which are harmful both to innocent civilians and American interests.

Sanctions Aren't Working

According to the Congressional Research Service (CRS), sanctions are described as "coercive economic measures taken against a target to bring about a change in behavior."[2] Secondary sanctions, which will be the focus of this paper, are utilized to ratchet up the pressure on targeted entities by penalizing "third parties engaged in activities with the primary sanctions target that undermine or evade the purpose of the sanctions regime."[3] As previously mentioned, secondary sanctions levied by the U.S. can be particularly devastating, effectively cutting nations off from the global financial system. As for the sanctions on Syria and Venezuela, the CRS report describes these sanctions as crucial to the strategy of how to "end the conflict" in Syria, and "stabilize and support democratic institutions in Venezuela."[4] With these guiding principles, the question is now: how effective are these sanctions at achieving these stated aims, and what are they actually accomplishing?

Meet the New Boss, Same as the Old Boss

Before even entering the White House, the Biden administration announced a comprehensive review of American sanctions policy.[5] After four years of the Trump administration's heavy-handed use of sanctions, most notably on Cuba, Iran, Venezuela, and Syria, this move could have been viewed as a potential change of course for American sanctions policy. While the Biden administration has been in power less than a year, the early returns signal that President Biden's sanctions strategy remains primarily the same as his predecessor.

In fact, the Biden administration has largely stayed the course, despite the Trump administration's significant break from precedence in its sanction policy. During his four years in office, President Trump broke records in American sanctions policy, levying more than 3,900 "distinct sanctions actions," which amounts to around three times a day.[6] For context, no previous administration had taken more than 700 sanctions actions.[7] While the Biden administration has taken some steps to alleviate sanctions on Iran during the renewed JCPOA negotiations, the vast majority of the Trump administration sanctions have remained.

The Caesar Act, a primary source of sanctions against Syria, was enacted by Congress, meaning that a repeal of these sanctions would be both politically and structurally complicated. However, the sanctions against Venezuela were largely implemented through executive action, so President Biden could act on these sanctions whenever he sees fit. That a new administration, one that so publicly and clearly denounced the foreign policy of the previous, has made so little adjustments to an unprecedented sanctions policy, highlights the inflexibility of American sanctions. Once sanctions are levied, they are quite difficult to remove. Further, the use of sanctions remains a bipartisan issue, with administrations from both parties persevering with many of the same strategies without much introspection or strategic review.

An Underwhelming Sanctions Review

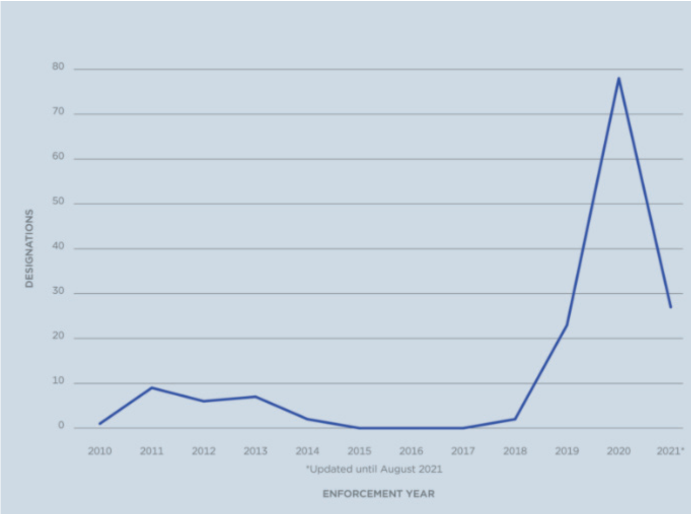
While the announcement of the Treasury's review of American sanctions policy marked a potential departure from the status quo, the eventual published review did not offer much in the way of original or new ideas. However, there were some noteworthy takeaways. As the review itself states, sanctions "became a tool of first resort to address a range of threats" in the post-9/11 era.[8] However, the review never goes on to truly question if this is an appropriate strategy.

Perhaps more concerning is that several of the review's recommendations are tactics that a competent sanctions strategy should already include. If the U.S. government is not already "adopting a structured policy framework that links sanctions to a clear policy objective," then what exactly are policy makers considering when they decide to implement sanctions?[9] That the U.S. is not already "calibrating sanctions to mitigate unintended economic, political, and humanitarian impact," or "ensuring sanctions are easily understood, enforceable, and adaptable" should be a major cause for concern for everyone involved.[10]

The Biden administration should be commended for taking the initiative to conduct this review. Unfortunately, the published document is noteworthy not for its groundbreaking solutions, but rather for illuminating the haphazard and uncoordinated manner in which U.S. sanctions policy is conducted. With such an uncoordinated strategy, that U.S. sanctions result in numerous unintended consequences should come as no surprise.

The Impact of Secondary Sanctions

The U.S. Treasury has numerous methods for implementing sanctions, including trade embargoes, import and export restrictions, and primary and secondary sanctions.[11] Secondary sanctions, by the nature of U.S. economic might, serve as a powerful tool that can severely damage nations' economies. Primary sanctions serve to prevent American citizens and business from engaging economically with sanctioned individuals, corporations, and nations. Secondary sanctions are much wider in scope and seek to prevent non-American entities from engaging with the sanctioned targets. The power of the U.S. dollar and the American economy make secondary sections incredibly damaging for nations who are sanctioned by the U.S. Treasury. The U.S. dollar is involved in around 88 percent of all foreign exchange transactions worldwide, underscoring the crucial role that the dollar plays in the global economy.[12] By levying secondary sanctions, the U.S. is effectively telling non-Americans "do business with the United States or with the sanctioned target, but not both." [13]



Source: Center for a New American Security, [https://www.cnas.org/publications/reports/sanctions-by-the-numbers-u-s-secondary-sanctions.](https://www.cnas.org/publications/reports/sanctions-by-the-numbers-u-s-secondary-sanctions)

The usage of secondary sanctions spiked in 2018 and 2019, although they have declined since President Biden took office (see chart above). In addition to cutting sanctioned nations off from the global financial system, secondary sanctions have also received notable criticism and raised tensions with American allies.[14] As the *New York Times* reported in March 2021, the European Union (EU) in particular has grown frustrated with the frequency of American secondary sanctions.

EU foreign policy chief Josep Borell Fontelles publicly stated he was "deeply concerned at the growing use of sanctions, or the threat of sanctions, by the United States against European companies and interests."[15] As members of the EU have recognized their vulnerability to U.S. secondary sanctions, some are even seeking to grow the role of the euro to rival the dollar. Borrell himself wrote in December 2020 that "we need to develop the international role of the euro, to avoid being forced to break our own laws under the weight of secondary sanctions."[16] While there is no immediate threat to the dollar from the euro at this time, the fact that America's allies are publicly stating the need to challenge the dollar should be taken seriously in Washington.

The U.S. government has levied secondary sanctions with increasing frequency in recent years, resulting in severe consequences for targeted nations. Secondary sanctions not only restrict American companies from conducting business with sanctioned entities, but also threaten international companies and countries with severe penalties. These actions cut off the sanctioned nations from the global financial system due to the global reliance on the U.S. dollar. As the cases of Syria and Venezuela illustrate, these sanctions result in catastrophic consequences for citizens of these nations, which in turn bring about numerous unintended consequences that harm American national interests.

Unilateral and Secondary Sanctions on Syria

The U.S. has levied sanctions in some form against the Syrian government since the 1970s. More sanctions have been utilized against Syria over the last decade since the beginning of Syria's civil war in 2011. Most of these are primary sanctions, intended to limit American financial engagement with the Syrian government. These sanctions were unilateral as well, meaning the U.S. undertook these measures alone and without coordination with any international body. In fact, unilateral sanctions as a whole have been condemned by the UN on numerous occasions, and under international law exist outside of the UN's legal structure.[17] After nearly a decade of escalating primary sanctions against Syria, the U.S. ratcheted up the pressure on Syria with secondary sanctions.

On December 20, 2019, President Trump signed the Caesar Act into law after it was passed by Congress. Named after a Syrian photographer who documented torture in Syrian prisons run by the Bashar al-Assad regime, the Caesar Act is intended to "promote accountability for the regime's atrocities."[18] After coming into effect on June 17, 2020, the Caesar Act represented the first utilization of secondary sanctions on Syria, after decades of primary sanctions targeting American transactions with Syrian entities. This marked a significant escalation in the use of financial sanctions against Syria.[19] Although, by the State

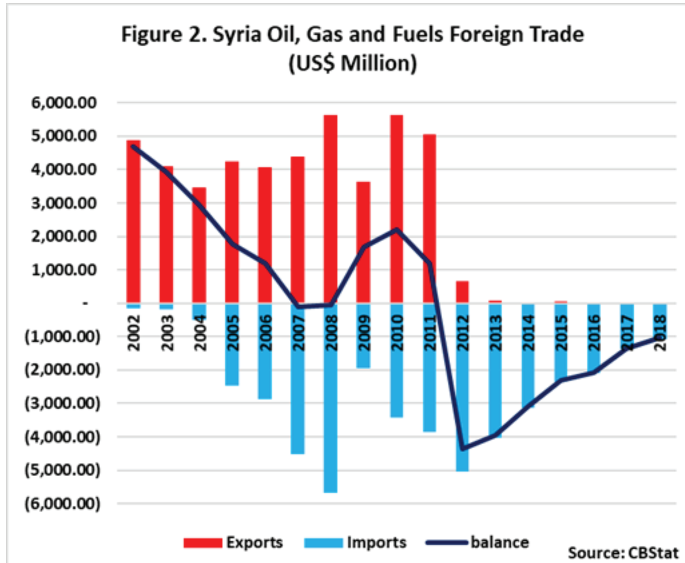
Department's own admission that these sanctions "are not intended to harm the Syrian people, but rather to promote accountability for the Assad regime's violence," the end result is that Syrian's civilian population has suffered immensely, while the Assad regime remains no closer to falling.[20] In fact, numerous Arab nations have begun to normalize ties with Syria as the regime has stabilized, and the sanctions instead are benefitting armed groups while preventing the country from attempting to properly rebuild after the decade-long civil war.[21]

Further complicating matters is that the impact of these sanctions has spilled over and been heavily felt in Lebanon, which is currently enduring its own financial crisis. Lebanon, a US ally that received $372 million in humanitarian aid in the 2021 fiscal year, should fall outside the category of human rights abusers in Syria.[22] Contributing to further destabilization in Lebanon is certainly not in American interests, especially considering the implications this holds for the biggest American ally in the region, Lebanon's southern neighbor Israel. Ultimately, US sanctions on Syria have resulted in massive humanitarian suffering and further destabilization of the region, all while purporting to support human rights.

The Economic Impact of Unilateral Sanctions on Syria

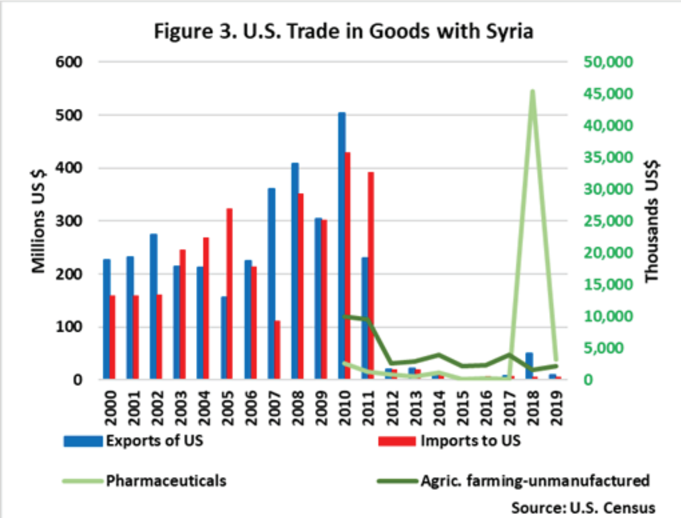
The impact of American sanctions on Syria has been severe. Even before the implementation of the Caesar Act, these sanctions in particular had a massive impact on Syrian imports and exports, as well as Syrian trade with America. While the civil war has certainly had a severe impact on the Syrian economy's decline, American sanctions have played a large role as well. Looking at the past decade, both Syria's imports and exports took a heavy hit.

After U.S. unilateral measures were levied against Syria, exports dropped by 71% in 2012, and imports by 39%.[23] While the U.S. unilateral measures were primary sanctions in nature, they had a chilling effect for all nations considering doing business with Syria, and in fact the Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC), the U.S. Treasury department that manages sanctions, issued warnings regarding the threat of sanctions on any Syrian oil transactions. Ultimately, this pushed the Syrian regime even closer with another U.S. regional rival, Iran. Although Iranian oil deliveries to Syria slowed down in late 2018, at one point Iran was providing the Assad regime with one to three million barrels of oil a month.[24] This reality underscores an inevitable consequence of sanctions – targeted nations will eventually turn to American rivals to satisfy their basic needs, which will result in more profits and business for these rivals.



Source: *The Unintended Consequences of U.S. and European Unilateral Measures on Syria's Economy and Its Small and Medium Enterprises*, the Carter Center.

U.S. trade with Syria was significantly impacted by the primary sanctions, with American exports to Syria dropping to an insignificant amount after reaching a height of $500 million in 2010 (see chart below). Likewise, imports from Syria dropped from $429 million in 2010 to around $5 million by 2019. Two of the most severely harmed industries were Syria's pharmaceutical and agricultural industries, which relied on American exports to sustain operations.[25] This would seem to fly directly in the face of the State Department's stated claim of seeking to prevent humanitarian suffering while implementing sanctions.



Source: *The Unintended Consequences of U.S. and European Unilateral Measures on Syria's Economy and Its Small and Medium Enterprises*, the Carter Center.

Consequences of the Economic Impact

The result of these severe economic consequences has been a significant increase in Syria's reliance on Turkish imports. This result is problematic because the majority of these Turkish goods have been imported "informally" through smuggling and unofficial border crossings, which has in turn benefitted the various armed groups and militias controlling these operations. According to the Carter Center's research, these armed groups include both jihadist and terrorist organizations, with the newly profitable smuggling operations representing "a major source of revenue for both, in turn prolonging the conflict."[26]

Not only did these sanctions benefit armed terrorist groups in Syria, but they also had the counterproductive measure of strengthening the state's security forces while weakening the Syrian population. U.S. sanctions significantly increased the transaction costs of importing goods to Syria due to the risk inherently involved. "These costs profited the forces supporting the central government and had a counterproductive impact on the declared intentions of unilateral measures, which was pressure to stop repression by the Syrian government."[27] Instead, these transaction costs were transferred to the Syrian civilian population, further weakening their position and preventing any serious hopes at resistance against the Syrian government. Meanwhile, armed opposition groups both profited from smuggling and foreign support, which has served to prolong the conflict.[28]

Although Syria and Lebanon have been intricately linked for decades, the U.S. sanctions implemented in 2011 only increased their codependence. Lebanon has absorbed around 1.5 million Syrian refugees over the course of the war, and Syria has relied on Lebanon for imports of crucial goods, both legally and illegally. However, the Lebanese financial crisis has put significant strain on this relationship, with up to $40 billion in Syrian assets frozen in Lebanese banks due to the crisis, all while Syria's economy has continued to deteriorate. The Caesar Act is expected to increasingly harm both countries so long as it's in place.[29]

Many of the consequences of U.S. sanctions on Syria are counter to American interests. Armed terrorist groups have profited from smuggling necessary goods into Syria, while the government has utilized its own security forces for the same purposes. While the Assad regime and armed opposition groups have cashed in on these operations, the Syrian civilian population has absorbed the brunt of the increased transaction costs for these basic goods, further weakening their chances of resistance to the Assad regime's oppression. Meanwhile, these sanctions have also strengthened the links between Syria and Lebanon, meaning that when one country's economic situation deteriorates, as is currently happening in both countries, both suffer. This further destabilization of the region does not favor American interests, as the Caesar Act has ultimately worsened a delicate situation.

The Caesar Act and Its Consequences

As previously mentioned, the Caesar Act marked a notable escalation of U.S. sanctions against Syria. After coming into effect on June 17, 2020, these secondary sanctions have only increased the significant pressure on the Syrian economy. Notably, these sanctions have also increased the pressure on Syrian allies such as Iran and Russia, as well as on other Syrian neighbors who had maintained some form of ties with Syria, including Lebanon, Egypt, and Jordan. Egypt and Jordan are notable for their significant ties to the U.S., both with heavy security cooperation and hefty foreign aid awards.[30]

Curiously enough, the international law firm Crowell and Moring notes that the Caesar Act was not necessary for sanctioning the human rights violators the U.S. wanted to target. In fact, "each of the 39 designations could have been made based on pre-existing authorities, and the Caesar Act was not needed to issue them."[31] However, the secondary sanctions implemented will certainly have a chilling effect on the Syrian economy, which had actually begun to show signs of improvement in 2017 and 2018, as the conflict began to stabilize.

While these sanctions seem to have the purported goal of mobilizing Syria's population to fight for the ouster of Assad, this ignores the fact that Syrians have been attempting to accomplish this goal for a decade now. Yet the Assad regime remains in place, and in fact has been bolstered in recent years with support from its allies such as Russia and Iran. Adding more misery to the Syrian civilian population will not empower anti-government action and will most likely lead to further dependence on the Syrian state for basic goods as the Syrian economy further deteriorates.

The Caesar Act has already resulted in further inflation of the Syrian pound, which will contribute to the already concerning food security in the country. Although these new sanctions could spark some anti-government protests, "given the pattern, the government will most likely suppress this."[32] Instead, theses sanctions will further destabilize the region by increasing restrictions on the Syrian economy and "worsening the standards of living even further."[33]

The timing of the Caesar Act is also incredibly impactful. When combined with the Lebanese financial crisis and the numerous complications and suffering caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, these new sanctions will serve as a multiplier for the hardship already encountered by millions of Syrian civilians. Of further concern should be the potential for these sanctions to contribute to the already increasing partition of Syria between government and opposition groups. By excluding rebel groups from snactions, including American Kurdish allies, Syria will continue to separate into hardened separate entities.[34] A Balkanized Syria will further destabilize an already precarious region, which is certainly not in American or American allies' interests.

Ultimately, American sanctions on Syria over the past decade have not brought the Assad regime any closer to falling. In fact, Assad's position today is stronger than it had been previously in the conflict, with several Arab regimes moving to normalize relations with Syria. Instead of seeking to hold the Syrian regime accountable through recognized international bodies, the U.S. has forged ahead unilaterally by levying yet more sanctions against the Syrian regime, despite the clear failure of the previous primary sanctions. The Caesar Act could not come at a worse time for Syrians, with the dual blow of the COVID-19 pandemic and the Lebanese financial crisis increasing the already significant pressure on the Syrian economy.

Rather than weakening the Assad regime, these new secondary sanctions are likely to only increase the suffering of Syrian civilians, while benefitting government security forces and armed terrorist groups who profit from lucrative smuggling operations. With years of evidence to analyze, American sanctions against Syria have worked in direct opposition to stated American aims. These sanctions have not worked to hold human rights violators accountable, but instead have increased civilian suffering while the Assad regime tightens its grip on power. In fact a major consequence of these sanctions has been to further destabilize the region, increasing difficulties for several American allies, including Israel, Jordan, Egypt, and above all Lebanon, whose economy is tightly linked with that of Syria's. If the U.S. Treasury truly intends to assess the strategic value of sanctions regularly, then they would do well to start with the sanctions levied on Syria.

U.S. Sanctions Against Venezuela

Much like the case of Syria, the Nicolás Maduro regime in Venezuela has also dealt with significant internal issues that American sanctions have only exacerbated. Although the U.S. first levied sanctions against Venezuela in 2017, the Venezuelan economy had been in freefall for several years prior. Venezuelan GDP was already declining, and oil production had dropped to 22 percent of 2013 levels.[35] This had been accompanied with high levels of inflation, as consumer price inflation from January to August 2017 was somewhere between "758 percent and 1,350 percent at an annual rate."[36]

These sanctions worsened the already severe recession by preventing Venezuela from borrowing funds in U.S. financial markets. This was further compounded by the fact that the primary method of acquiring foreign reserves was through Venezuela's oil exports, which were also impacted by these sanctions. As a result, Venezuela's ability to purchase necessary goods such as medicine and food was severely impacted, despite the fact that these sanctions carried technical exemptions for humanitarian goods.[37] If a nation has no funds to purchase these goods, then procuring basic humanitarian goods becomes quite difficult.

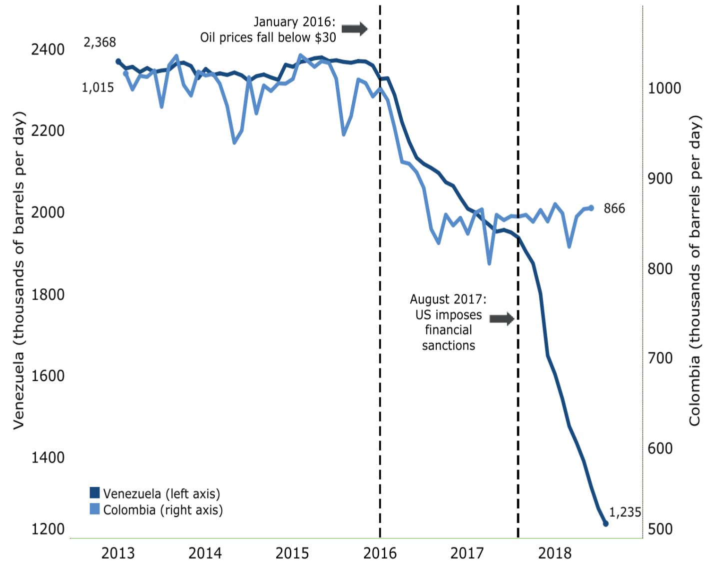
In addition to the 2017 sanctions, the Trump Administration turned up the pressure on the Maduro regime by recognizing Juan Guaidó as "interim president," in effect setting up a parallel government that sought to undermine the Maduro regime's legitimacy. This cut off Venezuela from its largest oil market, the U.S., while the American government also pressured other countries, including India, to cease purchases of Venezuelan exports.[38] Yet these sanctions have not brought the Maduro regime any closer to falling, and much like the Assad regime, the sanctions have instead "helped the government coalesce ideologically and become further entrenched in power."[39]

These sanctions have indeed had a significant impact on the civilian population, increasing the economic misery many Venezuelans are experiencing, and preventing the government from taking the necessary steps to recover from the deepening recession. This serves to further destabilize the region and has also prevented many American companies from conducting business with a natural regional market. Ultimately, none of these results further American interests and actually undermine American goals in the region.

Economic Impact of Sanctions on Venezuela

The impact of the 2017 sanctions on Venezuela's economy were immediate and severe. Although oil production had been decreasing for years, these sanctions significantly accelerated this decline. Following the implementation of the August 2017 sanctions, Venezuela's oil production began to decrease at three times the rate of the previous twenty months (see chart).

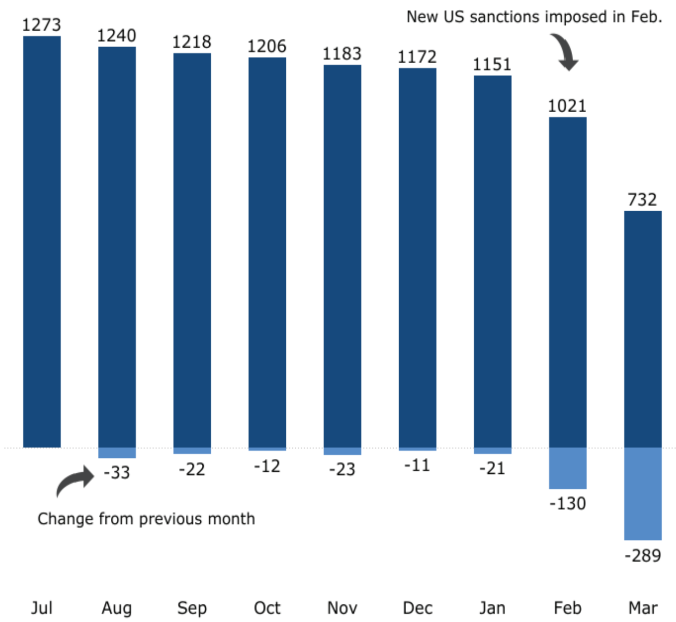
This resulted in an annual loss of $6 billion, which was a massive figure for a country Venezuela's size. In fact, Venezuela's total imports of goods amounted to around $10 billion in 2018. This massive shock to the Venezuelan economy contributed to its transition from inflation to hyperinflation, causing further harm to Venezuela's population.[40]



Source: *Economic Sanctions as Collective Punishment: The Case of Venezuela*," Center for Economic and Policy Research.

The 2019 sanctions levied against Venezuela served to exacerbate this trend. After the recognition of a parallel Venezuelan government, Venezuela was cut off from its largest consumer of oil, the U.S. In 2018, the U.S. had purchased 35.6 percent of Venezuela's oil, and these sanctions brought an abrupt end to these transactions. In 2019, Venezuelan real GDP declined by 37.4 percent, compared to a drop of 16.7 percent in 2018. This significant drop led to a nearly 40 percent drop in imports and a significant increased drop in Venezuelan oil production that will lead to billions in further losses (see chart below). These massive economic consequences have contributed to an expected 1.9 million people leaving the country.[41]

Venezuelan Oil Production by Hundreds of Thousands of Barrels



Source: *Economic Sanctions as Collective Punishment: The Case of Venezuela*," Center for Economic and Policy Research.

Consequences of the Economic Impact

As previously noted, these sanctions have led to widespread civilian suffering, leading millions of Venezuelans to flee the country, creating a new refugee crisis in the American hemisphere. Colombia, a significant U.S. ally in the region, has taken in 1.74 million refugees, as the Venezuelan refugee crisis has become the "second largest migration crisis worldwide," only behind Syria.[42] That the two largest migration crises worldwide are also countries suffering from intense U.S. sanctions should not escape notice.

Aside from destabilizing the region, these sanctions have also not weakened the Maduro regime to the point of a change in government, as the U.S. is aiming for. In fact, some of the government's state-owned enterprises have benefitted from foreign corporations leaving the country in the wake of U.S. sanctions. As the U.S. Chamber of Commerce notes, Western corporations leaving the country have given Maduro further control over Venezuela's oil production. When French and Norwegian corporations Total and Equinor announced their departure from a joint venture with Petróleos de Venezuela S.A. (PDVSA), the Venezuelan state-owned oil company, the PDVSA released a proud statement. "Now Venezuela is absolute owner of one of the most powerful companies in Latin America."[43] While Total faced a loss of $1.4 billion from their departure, PDVSA acquired their stake in the venture. This result has been seen in several of the Treasury Department's designations regarding Venezuela. By forbidding U.S. companies from profiting from their oil extractions in Venezuela, PDVSA profits from the American corporations' losses.[44] These sanctions, intended to harm Venezuelan interests have also harmed American and American allies' interests, forcing American companies to depart from a lucrative market, while the Venezuelan state-owned PDVSA moves in to fill the void.

Ultimately, U.S. sanctions against Venezuelan are severely counterproductive. While the sanctions have indeed inflicted widespread civilian suffering, the Maduro regime has consolidated its position in power. Much like Syria, many of these civilians have become even more reliant on the state for basic humanitarian needs, crippling any hopes for a sustained and powerful opposition movement. Meanwhile, the Venezuelan state-owned PDVSA has in fact profited from the U.S. pushing all foreign corporations to depart the Venezuelan financial market. American corporations have also been hurt by these actions, as they have ceased operations in a once-profitable market and are also prohibited from purchasing Venezuelan oil. While there are only a few years of data to analyze, the evidence is clear. U.S. sanctions against Venezuela are ineffective and in fact counterproductive, harming both Venezuelan civilians and American interests in the region.

Time For a Change

While much of the focus on the impact of American sanctions has been on Iran and Cuba, the cases of Syria and Venezuela have much to offer in sanctions discussion. While no one would argue that the Maduro and Assad regimes are benevolent and democratic institutions, U.S. sanctions against these actors have not achieved their objectives of regime change and have in fact worked in opposition to American interests in both cases.

In Syria, these widespread sanctions have in fact increased humanitarian suffering while claiming to act to prevent further human rights abuses. Terrorist groups and the Syrian government have profited from smuggling basic goods, while the hope of further

Syrian civilian has been severely damaged by the destruction of the Syrian middle class. These sanctions have also worked to weaken Lebanon, which holds severe repercussions for both America and its greatest allies in the region, most notably Israel and Jordan.

As for Venezuela, these sanctions have contributed to the growing refugee crisis, which has further destabilized the region. This naturally has significant consequences both for the U.S. and its allies in the region, notably Colombia. Further, as Western corporations have left the country due to U.S. sanctions, Venezuelan state-owned enterprises have come in to fill this void, further strengthening the Maduro regime's grip on the Venezuelan oil industry. These broad sanctions have not served to weaken the regime sufficiently, with no evidence they will bring about the stated goals anytime soon.

In order to increase the efficacy of sanctions, there are several steps policymakers could take.

Initiate a Shift From Comprehensive Economic Sanctions to More Targeted Sanctions

If the U.S. truly wishes to punish bad actors on the international stage, a shift from the widespread sanctions to more targeted, surgical sanctions would be a prudent move. There is a wealth of evidence underscoring that these high-level actors, be they government officials or corporate actors, are able to exploit comprehensive and secondary sanctions for their own good, pushing the costs of sanctions onto the civilian population. Additionally, comprehensive sanctions have often served to solidify a regime's support among civilians. This often results in the "rally around the flag" phenomenon, where citizens support the regime in the face of international economic oppression. Even among unpopular regimes, foreign intervention is not a popular tactic for many global citizens, and can instead contribute to nationalistic tendencies, which regimes will profit from.

Sanctions are often utilized as a way for policymakers to appear as if they're acting against bad actors on the international stage without resorting to military force. Targeted sanctions against individuals will avoid the broader civilian suffering that secondary sanctions cause, and will send a strong message that the U.S. does not tolerate these individuals' actions. While they may not result in regime change, there is little proof that heavy sanctions against entire countries encourage a change in leadership. If they must act due to political or other pressures, then targeted sanctions against leaders, such as the ones enacted on various Saudi individuals in the wake of Jamal Khashoggi's murder, are a more effective option.

Implement Further Oversight and Evaluation of Sanctions Policies

The Biden administration's review of sanctions policies is well overdue. The sanctions process, as previously mentioned, is notoriously opaque and undemocratic, and changes in policy move far too slow in an ever-changing global stage. Consistent review of whether sanctions are achieving stated aims is a must, as well as ensuring that each designated sanction seeks to achieve a strategic goal.

If the Biden administration truly means to improve American sanctions policy, then they would do well to adhere to their recommendations laid out in their own Treasury review. While the implication that the U.S. is not already assessing strategic aims and effectiveness of sanctions is concerning, if the administration makes a commitment to these goals, that will go some way towards improving the implementation of sanctions. While there are numerous ways this could be achieved, more monitoring, evaluation, and learning is certainly needed to increase the effectiveness of sanctions. Biannual reviews of sanctions, not just from the executive branch but also Congressional committees, would go a long way toward minimizing the ill effects of sanctions on civilian populations.

Increase Cooperation With Allies on Sanctions When Appropriate

In the rare instances of sanctions actually inducing a change in state behavior, such as apartheid South Africa or Iran leading up to the JCPOA, coordination with other countries has been key. Unilaterally imposing sanctions, such as the U.S. has done with Syria and Venezuela, has primarily served to isolate these nations while also raising tensions with crucial allies. Notably, the EU has expressed severe frustration with

American sanctions policies and indicated their intention to push back against these actions. Some within the EU have gone so far as to advocate for challenging the primacy of the US dollar, which would have significant implications for the American economy.

While that is a result that would be years in the making, the ability to coordinate with allies on crucial issues such as sanctions would no doubt improve American sanctions policy. In addition to increasing effectiveness, this would ensure our allies are not harmed by these policies. A united front against bad actors on the international stage would increase pressure on the offending parties, while also solidifying the legitimacy of the sanctions. Improving cooperation on sanctions would also increase access to necessary humanitarian aid when the U.S. does ultimately levy broad sanctions against countries. Ensuring the U.S. and its allies are on the same page when it comes to sanctions can help prevent confusion for international NGOs and nonprofits who are seeking to assist civilians without incurring devastating penalties.

This does not mean that there will always be unanimous cooperation, but there is certainly room for growth in this aspect. Rather than consistently acting unilaterally without consideration for how these sanctions impact our allies, the U.S. should consider input from our crucial allies when considering whether to implement sanctions or not. There is a growing fatigue of American unilateral action around the globe, and sanctions can serve to bolster a regime's support by focusing frustrations against the U.S., rather than the regime itself.

Conclusion

As the U.S. has dramatically increased its utilization of sanction, the methods in which it levies sanctions have come under increasing scrutiny. With American sanctions exacerbating humanitarian crises in Syria, Venezuela, and Afghanistan, among other locations, the dramatic repercussions of American sanctions have become exceedingly clear. While U.S. sanctions have been consistently justified as an effective method of punishing bad actors without encountering the inevitable costs of military action, this reasoning does not hold up to much scrutiny.

Decades of evidence have shown that U.S. sanctions can be incredibly damaging to countries, especially when policymakers have decided to levy secondary sanctions on entire nations. These sanctions are devastating for these targeted nations, and cause widespread humanitarian suffering. While policymakers have often maintained that this suffering is nominally justified in the hopes of increasing pressure on the targeted regimes, there is mounting evidence that the vast majority of sanctions actually work counter to American interests.

As the cases of Syria and Venezuela highlight, secondary sanctions have certainly succeeded at significantly impacting these countries' economic situations. However, the result of these sanctions has not had the intended effect, and have actually served to help both the regimes of Bashar al-Assad and Nicolás Maduro consolidate their positions.

By initiating a review of how U.S. sanctions policy is implemented, the Biden administration took a significant step towards altering this failed strategy. However, the review is just a start, and the contents of the review left several questions unanswered, and portrayed the serious lack of strategic thinking among policymakers when levying sanctions.

In order to truly improve American sanctions policy to further American interests while also minimizing civilian suffering, significant reform is needed. There are countless steps the Biden administration could take to improve how sanctions are implemented, but shifting away from blanket secondary sanctions, implementing regular oversight and evaluation of the impact of sanctions, and improving coordination with allies on sanctions are all steps that would instantly improve the current state of U.S. sanctions.

Ultimately, these changes would ensure that American sanctions policies are more transparent, effective, and agile. The benefits include less humanitarian suffering, less worldwide resentment against America, as well as the ability for America to adjust more swiftly to sudden changes in international politics.

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