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Sanctions on Syria

The Comment by Hamid Yahya Hussain and Kasturi Sen (September, 2020)¹ rightly drew attention to the damage being inflicted on Syria by EU and US sanctions. However, by concentrating on the impact of sanctions on humanitarian interventions, their Comment did not illustrate the full extent of that damage.

A decade of war and sanctions has already left the Syrian economy weakened, and restrictions on economic activity aimed at reducing the spread of severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) are increasing hardship in the country, particularly for those most vulnerable. In particular, the price of food has increased substantially. A basic food basket costs more than double what it did a year ago.² 8% of Syrians were unemployed in 2019. That the EU should at this juncture discreetly renew sanctions and the USA brazenly introduce new drastic sanctions under the Caesar Act show a callousness similar to that seen in the sanctions on Iraq in the run-up to the Iraq war.³

Not only do sanctions hamper delivery of medicines and equipment, as the Comment by Hussain and Sen highlights,¹ but the situation is more grave than that. Sanctions have decimated Syria's once thriving pharmaceutical industry by making it near impossible for companies to obtain raw materials, mainly because of financial sanctions that deter suppliers and increase costs exponentially.⁴

Food supply problems have been aggravated not only by sanctions but also by a virtual blockade by US forces that control the quarter of Syrian territory in the northeast of the country, which is the location of most of Syria's grain and oil resources.⁵

The EU recently pledged €4.9 billion to Syria. However, the bulk of this money is not for Syria, but for neighbouring countries so that they can continue to hold millions of

Syrian refugees that the EU does not wish to receive itself, and does not wish to see return to Syria under its current leadership. What would be far more helpful is if the EU and the USA stopped enforcing fresh sanctions and suspended all sanctions other than those that affect named individuals for a period of 6 months, followed by a review that would take into account the state of the pandemic and its effect on Syria.

I am co-chair of the British Syrian Society and was UK Ambassador to Syria for 2003–06.

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- 2 Syria - Review on the impact of rising food prices, Food Security Update March 2020. United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, March 2020. <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/syria-review-impact-rising-food-prices-food-security-update-march-2020#:~:text=Food%20prices%20in%20Syria%20increased,food%20items%20have%20also%20increased> (accessed Sept 16, 2020).
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For an opinion piece from a medic in Syria see <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/aug/24/medic-syria-covid-19-crisis-health-pandemic>

For Syrian unemployment rate see <https://tradingeconomics.com/syria/unemployment-rate#:~:text=Unemployment%20Rate%20in%20Syria%20is,according%20to%20our%20econometric%20models>

For European Commission press release on Syrian crisis see https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_20_1211