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## The US Economic Statecraft Failure in the Application of the Caesar Act from 2019 to 2023

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**Abstract:** This article aims to analyze the reasons for the failure of the United States (US) economic sanctions under the Caesar Act project, which were intended to bring about a change in the Syrian administration between 2019 and 2023. In 2019, the US implemented the Caesar Act project, which involved imposing the most comprehensive economic embargo on Syria. The Caesar Act imposed explicit restrictions on all types of foreign assistance and investment in Syria. The primary goal of the economic sanctions implemented under the Caesar Act was to exert pressure on the Syrian regime to bring about a change in government due to its severe breaches of human rights against its own citizens. Consequently, the economic sanctions had adversely affected the Syrian economy, while simultaneously exacerbating the living conditions of the people in Syria. In general, a nation's resilience weakened when it was unable to fulfil its internal stability and economic objectives. However, the Syrian government remains resolute and unwavering in its decisions. The US economic sanctions proved ineffective in addressing political transformation in Syria. This article used a qualitative methodology, utilizing triangulation techniques. This article concludes that the American economic sanctions, namely the Caesar Act, have failed due to the domestic component (stateness level) which allowed Syria to refuse or disregard the economic statecraft.

**Keyword:** United States, Syria, Economic Statecraft, Stateness Level.

### INTRODUCTION

Foreign policy is a crucial element in the intricate dynamics of international relations. (Holsti, 1982) provides a definition of it as a sequence of activities and strategies implemented by a nation to pursue its national interests in the global arena. An instrument utilized to accomplish this objective is the implementation of economic sanctions. Following the conclusion of the Cold War, there was a significant change in the prevailing mindset, with nations increasingly opting to eschew military intervention and instead favoring the utilization of economic sanctions as the primary tool of their foreign policy. The rationale behind this is that economic sanctions are perceived to be more efficacious in attaining certain objectives, garner greater international acceptance, and incur lower expenses compared to military action (Kaempfer & Lowenberg, 2007).

The Syrian crisis, which began in March 2011, served as a significant illustration of the intricacies and difficulties involved in foreign policy. Originating from the Arab Spring protest movement, the conflict initially consisted of nonviolent demonstrations. Nevertheless, the level of violence increased significantly as Bashar al-Assad's administration retaliated with ruthless suppression of the pro-democracy protesters. The increase in violence led to the creation of armed resistance factions, such as the Free Syrian Army rebel group in July 2011, with the objective of overthrowing the government (Kemal & Elizabeth, 2016). Subsequently, this struggle has encompassed other organizations and factions, including extremists from different geographical areas, hence exacerbating its complexity (Humud, 2022).

For many years, the US foreign policy has placed a strong emphasis on its participation in the Middle East, particularly in relation to regional crises and global initiatives. Being an influential nation in the region, the United States has actively utilized its power to foster political transformation and guarantee regional stability. An evident instance of American intervention was its reaction to the situation in Syria, initiated by President Barack Obama's demand for President Bashar al-Assad's resignation in August 2011 (Humud, 2022). The decision was made in response to growing international pressure following allegations of the Assad government's deployment of chemical weapons, signaling the start of a prolonged era of heightened tension and US involvement in Syria. The Obama administration sought congressional authorization and financing to assist the Syrian opposition, but the United States only took limited action, which involved applying sanctions and providing minor support to the rebels (Humud, 2022).

In December 2019, President Donald Trump enacted additional legislation that bolstered sanctions against Assad and his allies, known as the "Caesar Syrian Civilian Protection Act" (Carter, 2020). The sanctions included primary measures that forbid US businesses from engaging with Syria, as well as secondary measures that try to prevent transactions between third countries and Syria. Primary sanctions encompassed a range of measures, including the prohibition of US foreign assistance to the Syrian government, restrictions on arms trade, limitations on the sale or re-export of US-manufactured commodities, constraints on the export of US services, restrictions on the importation of Syrian products like oil, financial and investment limitations, and the freeze of Syrian government assets within the US. In addition, the restrictions entailed a prohibition on most Syrians from travelling to the US (Carter, 2020).

The US had imposed economic sanctions on Syria, which included secondary restrictions that prohibit third-country trade under the Caesar Act. These sanctions also targeted non-US firms that were active in Syria's rehabilitation (Carter, 2020). This paper examined the efficacy of sanctions as a tool of diplomacy, the situation in Syria, and the role of sanctions in US policy towards Syria. Despite research indicating minimal success in altering state behaviour (Hufbauer et al., 2009), the situation in Syria remained dire, with human rights situations worsening due to sanctions (Cortright & Lopez, 2020).

The conflict in Syria resulted in substantial instability and extensive suffering, as the Assad administration employed severe tactics such as barrel bombs and chemical weapons against people, leading to international intervention (Byron, 2018). The implementation of this intervention was backed by global sanctions, which sought to put a stop to human rights abuses and promote the transition to a democratic system (Olanrewaju & Joshua, 2015). However, despite this effort, the social and economic conditions in the country deteriorated without any substantial alterations in Assad's policies (Madouni & Derradji, 2020). The international community's reactions to the violence in Syria had been diverse, encompassing both vehement condemnation and active assistance (USCRS, 2017). The absence of an examination of other elements that contributed to the ineffectiveness of US economic sanctions under the Caesar Act became the novelty that is to be investigated in this research.

There are several literatures related to the failure of United States economic sanctions against Syria. In general, it can be categorized into two main subjects: (1) a literature group that examines the efficacy of applying United States sanctions on specific countries. (2) a literary organization focused on the intricacies of enforcing United States sanctions against Syria. Within the realm of literature, scholars engage in discussions surrounding the application of United States economic sanctions. These discussions are centered around various case studies that examine the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of United States sanctions in different countries. There exists material that elucidates the ineffectiveness of United States sanctions non the specific case study of Libya. The implementation of economic penalties has proven ineffective in convincing the administration of Moammar Qaddafi to cease its endorsement of terrorism. The implementation of economic sanctions directly contributed to the Qaddafi regime's defiance and the subsequent rise of domestic opposition in Tripoli. This case elucidates that sanctions do not singularly determine the internal dynamics of the target country. Ultimately, the implementation of sanctions proved ineffective in achieving political transformation in Libya. Consequently, the United States resorted to employing military intervention against the Libyan state (Blanchard & Ripsman, 2008).

There are literatures that explains why the US sanctions on Russia in the case study failed. The sanctions imposed by the US following the Crimea increased the regime's defensiveness and made it more likely for them to be resisted. Sanctions have unintentionally increased support for the Putin government at home, which has allowed it to solidify its hold on power and stifle internal opposition to foreign powers that it views as a shared adversary. The impact of these economic restrictions has also been lessened by Russia's abundant energy resources and diverse economic strength. Sanctions lose their effectiveness if the regime of the target country may strengthen its hold on the remaining political and economic power, particularly in authoritarian nations like Russia (Early, 2016).

The case study of South Africa contains literature elucidating the effectiveness of US economic sanctions. Due to the South African regime's Apartheid policy, which upheld racial inequality and segregation, US and its allies' slapped sanctions on it in the 1990s. Economic sanctions ultimately proved successful in toppling the apartheid administration and bringing about the 1994 election of Nelson Mandela as South Africa's first black president, transforming the country into a multiracial democracy (Levy, 1999).

Economic sanctions played a significant role in international attempts to isolate and put pressure on the South African government, which ultimately led to the overthrow of the apartheid regime, even though they were not the only factor. International diplomatic isolation was another effective means of pressuring the South African government to alter its policies, as economic oppression had encouraged discontent among the populace and support for the apartheid administration. Economic hardships exacerbated internal discontent, weakening the dictatorship from within and causing elite defections to split its base of support. they. Sanctions have the symbolic effect of undermining the legitimacy of governments, lowering their morale, and quickening calls for change towards a more democratic and inclusive system. When combined, these factors rendered economic sanctions a very powerful instrument for quickening the end of apartheid and the transition to a new government in South Africa (Levy, 1999).

In the second literature category, there are literatures that explain the dynamics of United States sanctions against Syria. Syria has long been taken into account when determining US foreign policy in the Middle East. The dynamics of the relationship between Syria and the United States are quite complicated. One of them began with Syria's annexation of Lebanon, which served as one of the catalysts for the imposition of sanctions against Syria by the US. The intricate dynamics of the Syrian crisis led to an instant escalation of sanctions by the United States. These penalties ranged from individual transitions to commercial

embargoes, which included the ban of certain components from entering the country. Human rights violations are one of the reasons behind the economic sanctions imposed by the US on the Assad regime in Syria. Economic penalties, however, ultimately fail and are useless since they do not alter the regime or policy (Alalwani & Shaar, 2021).

Through the Caesar Act project, US levied additional extensive sanctions in 2019. Primary and secondary sanctions are included in this set of measures with the goal of overthrowing the Syrian administration. US aimed to withhold all sorts of assistance, including reconstruction in Syria, through the Caesar Act. But because of Syria's geopolitical circumstances, these sanctions have less impact (Madouni & Derradji, 2020). The substantial impact that US economic sanctions have had on Syrian trade is further explained by several other works of literature. due to the interruption of the Syrian conflict and the imposition of global sanctions, there has been a notable fall of up to 65%. But thanks to outside assistance from nations like China, Russia, and Iran, the Syrian regime is still in place (Suliman & Khwanda, 2020).

The effective execution of the Caesar Act was a matter of importance for the US Congress. When examining the Caesar Act in Syria, it was evident that the transition of governance from Trump to Biden's leadership had distinct variations. During the Trump Era, the implementation of the Caesar Act was executed promptly and assertively in addressing the Syrian dictatorship. However, the Biden administration was adopting a more cautious strategy, which was causing concerns among members of Congress regarding the pace of sanction implementation and apparent attempts to alleviate penalties. An area of disagreement emerged from the Biden administration's choice to permit the Syrian government to receive non-monetary compensation for the expenses associated with transporting natural gas and power to Lebanon (Tabler & Zweig, 2023).

Another topic of discussion pertains to the provision of US aid to Syria in 2023 in response to a natural disaster, specifically an earthquake. Instead of directly providing aid, the United States had offered humanitarian and financial support by granting a general license specifically for earthquake relief in Syria. Researchers contend that this form of assistance undermined the goals of the Caesar Act, enabling the Assad administration to exploit loopholes and redirect aid for its own purposes. The effectiveness and efficiency of United States sanctions against Syria had become a subject of debate (Tabler & Zweig, 2023).

According to the conducted literature review, a significant portion of past research had focused on explaining the dynamics and efficacy of economic sanctions imposed by the US. In addition, there exists a substantial body of research that elucidated the efficacy of US sanctions in various targeted nations, serving as a foundation for evaluating the success or failure of the US implementation of these sanctions. Previous work generally elucidated that the efficacy of economic sanctions imposed by the US was contingent upon both external and domestic elements inside the country implementing the restrictions.

While the US economic sanction effectively weakened the Syrian economy, they did not achieve their primary objective of instigating political change. The implementation of economic sanctions by the US in Syria demonstrated two key points. Initially, the implementation of sanctions led to the complete devastation of the Syrian economy. However, it simultaneously resulted in the loss of thousands of lives and the impoverishment of millions of Syrian citizens. This exacerbated their already dire circumstances following the conflict in Syria. Furthermore, it was well acknowledged that sanctions were largely ineffective in accomplishing the objective of political transformation (namely, regime change). The utilization of economic pressure was generally ineffective in attaining political objectives such as regime change, democratization, and enhanced adherence to human rights norms (Hanania, 2020). The Caesar Act Economic Sanctions, being the most extensive economic sanctions imposed by the US, effectively suppressed the Syrian economy, but failed to achieve the goal of ousting or implementing a regime change in Syria. The economic

sanctions had a particularly adverse impact on the Syrian population, especially if the Assad administration remained in control and no political transformation took place in the country.

## **METHOD**

This article utilizes a qualitative methodology, using triangulation analysis tools. The study employed a qualitative methodology to elucidate the reasons behind the failure of the US economic sanctions in the Caesar Act scheme, which are considered the most extensive sanctions, to bring about a change in the Syrian administration. Typically, a nation's resilience will crumble when it is unable to maintain its internal stability and economic objectives. Nevertheless, the Syrian government continues to display determination and frequently refuses to comply with or disregard these restrictions. Triangulation analysis techniques are employed to ensure the accuracy of data and minimise bias in data interpretation. This is achieved by integrating many data sources, including official documents, media reports, interview sources, and other pertinent sources (Neuman, 2014). The data gathering process commences with a comprehensive review of existing literature to gather secondary data from pertinent sources, including official documents, academic journals, media stories, and related scholarly works. Subsequently, the data acquired from the literature review was subjected to further analysis employing triangulation analytic techniques. The analysed data is thereafter presented in a narrative format and interpreted to address the research inquiries.

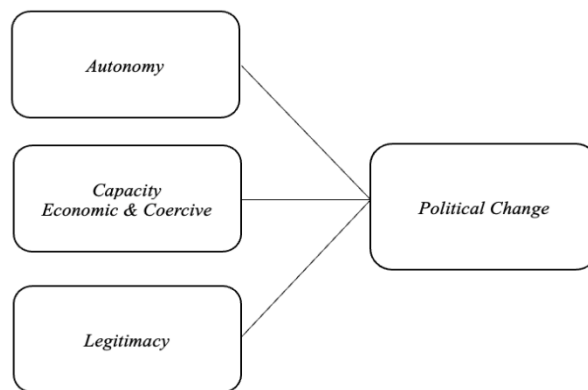
## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Results**

This article employed the political economic statecraft theory developed by Jean-Marc F. Blanchard and Norrin M. Ripsman to address the research issue mentioned above. The selection of this theory is grounded in deliberations regarding the utilization of alternative statecraft economic models. The author concluded that the economic liberal paradigm lacks the ability to offer comprehensive analysis, as it solely concentrates on quantifying economic incentives or sanctions while disregarding other intricate elements. In contrast, a realist approach prioritizes economic and political pressures while disregarding the internal variables within the recipient country. The conditionalist approach, however, fails to offer a thorough depiction of the US ineffectiveness lack providing assistance to Syria. Blanchard and Ripsman identify two primary variables: Stateness (domestic) and International. The level of stateness of the target country can be used as a measure to determine the success or failure of an economic statecraft, namely through the domestic variable. In addition, if the destination country exhibits a strong degree of statehood and is susceptible to economic statecraft, there is a potential for its leaders to disregard the implementation of economic statecraft. Conversely, if the level of statehood in a country is low, the likelihood of that country opting to comply with the demands of the sending country will be significantly higher. The stateness (domestic) variable is defined by three distinct components: autonomy, capacity, and legitimacy.

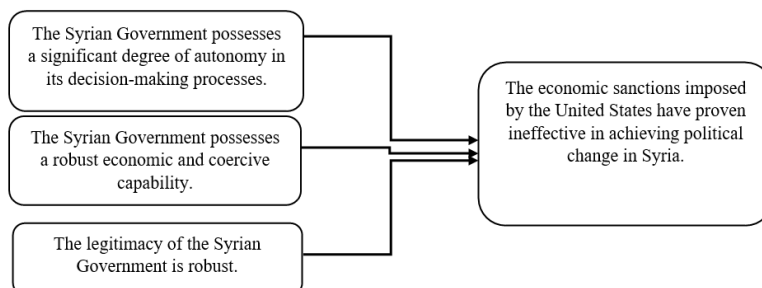
Political economic statecraft theory is an approach that emphasizes the use of economic incentives and sanctions to influence the policies of a target state. As per Blanchard and Ripsman (2008), this method functions by manipulating the domestic economic interests of the target country to convince its authorities to alter their policies. Blanchard and Ripsman argue that the effectiveness of economic statecraft relies on the degree of "stateness" exhibited by the country being targeted. The determining factors encompass autonomy, which refers to the state's capacity to make decisions despite opposition within its own political sphere; capacity, which pertains to the state's ability to incentivize or exert pressure on parties that do not align with its objectives; and legitimacy, which denotes the state's capability to rally dissatisfied domestic factions (Blanchard & Ripsman, 2008).

To operationalize this theory, the author must employ a set of guiding questions to assess the extent to which a country exhibits stateness. At the Autonomy level, variables considered include the extent of authority in making decisions related to foreign affairs, the participation in the legislative process, and the procedural standards following. Capacity can be categorized into two types: economic capacity, which refers to the availability of government money and non-tax resources, and coercive capacity, which is evaluated based on factors such as police numbers in relation to population and area, military strength, and the function of intelligence. Public opinion towards the government is used as a metric to gauge the amount of legitimacy (Blanchard & Ripsman, 2008). This approach is crucial for evaluating the possible efficacy of economic statecraft in attaining its objectives. The theoretical framework of political economic statecraft theory can be described as follows, according to the description provided above:



Source: Blanchard & Ripsman (2008)

**Figure 1. Analytical Framework of Political Economic Statecraft**



Source: Created by author

**Figure 2. Operationalization of Analytical Framework of Political Economic Statecraft**

**Discussion**

The author analyzed the ineffectiveness of United States economic sanctions non the Caesar Act scheme against Syria from 2019 to 2023, utilizing the theory and variables of the Political Economic Statecraft concept proposed by Blanchard and Ripsman. The target country's ability to evade or confront economic penalties as a tool of Economic Statecraft is determined by internal factors, specifically the level of stateness, which is classified as substantial. Moreover, the classification of important stateness is determined by three specific factors: autonomy, competence, and legitimacy. The author will examine the degree of statehood of the Syrian government as a research topic, focusing on the domestic political framework of Syria that grants significant power to the President. This subject is categorized into three main areas of focus: Syrian decision-making autonomy, the Syrian Government's Economic and Coercive Capacity, and the Syrian Government's legitimacy.

### **Syria's Decision-Making Autonomy**

The government's decision-making process need to be examined in accordance with the domestic circumstances prevailing in Syria. In this scenario, the true authority rested with al-Assad and the Ba'ath Party. Prior to 2012, the Syrian constitution stipulated that the Ba'ath Party held governing authority, and presidential elections were primarily conducted to validate the incumbent president's public backing (Defenders, 2022). Despite the new constitution's mandate for political pluralism and democratic elections, it was anticipated that Bashar al-Assad and the Ba'ath Party would retain their positions of power. The Ba'ath Party and its partner, the National Progressive Front, had a dominant presence in Syria's parliament. While it is theoretically possible to establish other political parties, the reality is that no political opposition is allowed. Parliament, despite its constitutional role in establishing the Legislative Assembly, lacked much authority. The al-Assad family, state security forces, and economic elites possessed the actual authority and control (Defenders, 2022).

Under the leadership of Bashar al-Assad, his family members frequently occupied prominent posts within the government and military. The Alawites, an ethnic group of the ruling family, are the regime's unwavering followers. From the beginning of the conflict, al-Assad has presented himself as a protector against domestic "terrorists," a label that the Syrian government applies to nearly all of its adversaries. In response to the emergence of ISIS, al-Assad endeavoured to position himself as the guardian of the Syrian populace. The Syrian regime's survival is significantly influenced by the backing it receives from the governments of China, Russia, and Iran, who offer substantial financial, military, and political assistance (Illinois., 2022). Consequently, President Assad possesses significant authority in making decisions, as there is minimal political opposition capable of challenging him. This authority is further bolstered by the support of Russia and Iran, which help him kept his grip on power.

### **Syria's Capacity**

Research discussion on the government of Bashar Al-Assad's capacity level. A key element in the survival of Bashar Al-Assad's government was the ability to state that the Syrian state under Assad remained an irreplaceable public service provider, even for Syrians living in many areas of the world outside of Syria's jurisdiction. The rise of ISIS as a functioning organization that could offer fundamental services reinforced Assad's assertion that his government was crucial for the everyday existence of Syrians. The provision of military and economic aid by China, Iran, and Russia played a crucial role in bolstering Assad's grip on power (Suliman & Khwanda, 2020).

### **Economic Capacity**

In analyzing Syria's economic capability, the author assessed many factors such as the effects of conflict and significant infrastructure deterioration, as outlined in Blanchard's book. According to the data on the Syrian economy, there was a significant concentration of wealth among the elite associated with the president, while poverty and infrastructural degradation were prevalent throughout the country (Cafiero, 2023). From 2011 to 2016, Syria saw a significant decline in its Gross Domestic Product (GDP), which decreased by about four times its size in 2010. This decline was equivalent to a contraction of 63 percent in real terms (Onder, 2022).

The Assad government persisted in functioning as a provider of important services, enabling it to be regarded as an irreplaceable provider. The dictatorship solidified its authority by centralising administrative tasks in strategically fortified urban areas (Khaddour, 2015). Syria became a participant in China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in January 2022,

leading to uncertainty regarding China's intentions in Syria. China's humanitarian aid saw a substantial surge following the loss of Aleppo in 2016. The amount of help rose from 500,000 USD in 2016 to 54 million USD in 2017 (Coar, 2022). Since 2017, China had offered direct assistance to the Syrian Government, which includes commercial agreements and the provision of COVID-related vaccination supplies. An emergency assistance package of at 30 million yuan (\$4.38 million) was delivered to Damascus in early 2023 by CIDCA (China International Development Cooperation Agency). In 2023, Syria's economic and diplomatic relations with several regional actors, such as the United Arab Emirates, Oman, Bahrain, Jordan, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, and Algeria, were normalized. This led to Syria's reinstatement as a member of the Arab League on May 7, 2023 (Khlebnikov, 2023). Despite encountering severe sanctions imposed by the United States and the Caesar Act, Syria could surmount the obstacles of reconstruction by leveraging assistance from China, as well as political backing from regional actors, and by fostering foreign investment and regional collaboration.

### **Coercive Capacity**

In terms of Syria's ability to use force, Bashar Al-Assad, as the central leader of Syria and its supreme commander, highlighted the connection between protests and terrorism. He characterized the uprising as a foreign plot driven by global imperialism, particularly by the United States and Israel, in collaboration with Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar (Athamneh & Sayej, 2013). Assad asserts that any armed resistance organization is a terrorist organization supported by Western powers. Iran has been offering technical, training, and financial support to the Syrian government and pro-regime Shiite militias since 2011. Assad let his territory to serve as a conduit for the transportation of armaments from Iran to Hezbollah in Lebanon (Defense, 2022). Hezbollah's engagement in 2012 was motivated by their desire to safeguard their interests in both Syria and Lebanon.

Iran's choice to back Assad was largely influenced by Hezbollah. In 2012, when Assad lost territory, Assad's allies decided to intervene militarily (Ali, 2019). Russia stepped in to support the Assad government in September 2015, which helped it reclaim land and regain control. In 2017, the Assad regime tightened its grip on the militia and its members with the aid of Russia, Iran, and Hezbollah (Ali, 2019). Under Assad, Syria's ability to use force is moderate. While its military and coercive capacities suffered, support from Iran, Russia, and Hezbollah helped to regain its coercive capacities.

### **Syria's Legitimacy**

The ability of Bashar Al-Assad's government to hold onto power in Syria is evidence of its legitimacy; in this instance, the Syrian state served as its primary resource. A monopoly on state institutions limited the legitimacy of the moderate opposition and permits the regime to claim only those that benefit the people. The idea that the state only existed in areas under regime control was strengthened by the regime's grip, which made it necessary to acknowledge Assad as the rightful political leader (Khaddour, 2015).

It was believed that the overthrow of the government could trigger the collapse of the nation or facilitate the growth of ISIS. The political opposition in Syria was currently dispersed, mostly outside of the country, and lacks credibility there. Both the international community and the people of Syria speak as though there are only two horrible options: ISIS or the Assad regime. Those in the Sunni community who gained from Assad's administration also support him, going beyond the Alawite group (Khaddour, 2015).

Shifting perceptions of regional players are reflected in Syria's re-entry into the Arab League and Assad's attendance at a conference in Saudi Arabia. This demonstrates Assad's continued rule and represents a political win for the Damascus regime (Milliken & Cafiero, 2023). In conclusion, there is a moderate level of legitimacy for Bashar al-Assad. Syrian



citizenry and regional players in the Arab League continue to acknowledge the Assad government as a legitimate political power, even in times of conflict.

## CONCLUSION

The US attempt at economic statecraft against Syria did not work. Syria was at a significant level of stateness when seen from the perspective of the political economic statecraft theory. Syria could reject or ignore the US economic statecraft, given its current standing. The degree of autonomy of the Syrian state was established by the decision-making authority of President Bashar al-Assad during his administration. As was mentioned earlier, President Bashar al-Assad had a good deal of discretion when it comes to making judgments. His enormous authority as President of Syria lent credence to this. The support of his loyal ministers fortified this power, allowing President Bashar al-Assadd to have a high degree of stateness in terms of autonomy.

In terms of input capacity—that is, both economic and coercive—President Bashar al-Assad's administration possessed enough financial reserves to sustain its continued rule, as previously stated. The Syrian economy was sustained by aid from its allies, including China and Russia, despite the country being in a state of war. The presence of special forces loyal to President Bashar al-Assad, backed by foreign militia groups like Hezbollah, and the rise in military spending to deal with war situations during his administration created a level of stateness in terms of capability and coercive power. Syria was in the middle category. Meanwhile, President Bashar al-Assad remained the head of state and has not resigned, even though the Syrian people view his government as weak. This justified as a legitimate situation.

Additionally, several nations are still maintaining diplomatic ties with President Bashar al-Assad's Syria; one such instance is 2023, which marks the start of Syria's reintegration into the Arab League and rehabilitation of ties with other Arab nations, including Saudi Arabia. This further demonstrates that President Bashar al-Assad is still acknowledged as the head of the state of Syria. President Bashar al-Assad's input degree of legitimacy stateness is therefore at a medium level due to this. Each of these variables affects how Syria responds to US economic statecraft activities, policies, and other measures taken against it. The conclusion must be linked to the title and answer the research formulation or objectives. Do not make statements that are not adequately supported by your findings. Write down improvements made to industrial engineering or science in general. Don't create further discussion, repeat abstracts, or simply list research findings. Don't use bullet points, use paragraph sentences instead.

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