

# Theorising Sanctions as Warfare: Insights from the US-Led Aggression on Libya

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**Abstract:** Conventional literature on sanctions tends to overfocus on measuring their political efficacy on targeted countries, accused of carrying out terrorist activities. More critically, other studies have focused on the ethical problems arising from the consequences that sanctions have on entire populations. Departing from these approaches, this article draws on Fidel Castro’s concept of the “Battle of Ideas” and argues that sanctions should be studied as a form of US-led imperialist warfare over the Global South. Taking the case of Libya, the article relies on archival sources (CIA [Central Intelligence Agency], US and Libyan government, and UN documents) as well as secondary literature, and argues that sanctions act as a form of economic warfare that supplants or complements the use of other forms of warfare, including military and non-military. In doing so, the article calls for a deeper and renewed engagement with the Third-Worldist Marxist theoretical lineage, when studying the question of financial subordination, dependency, war, and imperialism in the Arab world, and the Global South at large.

**Key words:** Global South; US imperialism; Libya; sanctions; warfare

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When unrest erupted in Libya in February 2011, the United Nations quickly responded with the imposition of targeted sanctions on the government and its affiliates. The sanctions regime included an arms embargo and asset freeze of personal and government-related funds—i.e. sovereign wealth funds, such as the

Libyan Investment Authority and the Libyan African Investment Portfolio—to counter the alleged violation of human rights by the Jamahiriya’s<sup>1</sup> government towards its people (United Nations Security Council 2011). Yet the sanctions were only a starter, and what followed is now history: a NATO-led military operation was unleashed on the country that led to the assassination of colonel Mu’ammar Qaddafi and the complete fall of the government by October 2011. After more than a decade, while the country was plunged into a state of civil war, where opposing factions and militias—backed by their foreign patrons—vied for control of national resources and revenues, these same sanctions that were imposed in 2011 remain (Panel of Experts Established Pursuant to Security Council Resolution 1973 [2011] 2021). In 2021, Libya appears to have almost \$68 billion of assets frozen in Western countries (Libyan Investment 2021). The justification not to lift the sanctions resides in the international community’s preoccupations over the absence of a unified government, and the status of ever-present violence in the country. While seemingly valid, these concerns openly contradict the numerous reports and evidence that international actors are actively involved in supporting various armed groups in the country.

Most unsurprisingly, this large sum of frozen assets and money is now being eyed by several local and international actors. The United Arab Emirates, for instance, has been accused of channelling the frozen assets into a major figure in the country, Khalifa Haftar, hoping to boost his military victory on the ground (Libyan Express 2018; The Libyan Observer 2018). Belgium instead has allowed the interest accumulated on these frozen assets to flow out of the country to unknown beneficiaries (Paravicini 2018). At the same time, these funds are also being sought legally by alleged victims of terrorist activities from the previous regime; as is the case raised by a Dutch law firm representing 11 Israeli families in relation to the Munich attack in 1972 (I24news 2022). Considering Qaddafi’s support for the Palestinians, Libya should compensate those families, so the legal argument goes. On a similar, yet already unsuccessful move, a group of Irish protestant families, victims of the Irish Republican Army (IRA) military activities, asked the UK government to use Libya’s frozen assets to compensate them (O’Neill 2021). Libya’s inability to access these funds, coupled with the millions of public funds—for instance, from oil revenues—being embezzled by local political figures (OCCRP [The Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project] 2022), has only worsened the socio-economic reality of the Libyan ordinary masses. To live in a situation of endless duress and civil conflict, prolonged shortages of water, electricity cuts, and rampant levels of corruption have now become the new normal for the country.

The 2011 sanctions regime has not been Libya’s first encounter with the imposition of geopolitical measures. The political and social trajectory of the country

since the early 1970s has been hugely determined by a spiral of economic and military forms of warfare, including sanctions, whose overall aim has been to (dis)integrate Libya into the international capitalist regime with the US at its epicentre. Imposed as early as 1973, for instance, US economic sanctions started with a refusal to sell eight Lockheed C-130 Hercules that Libya had already paid for. In 1981, the US upgraded them by imposing controls on the export of aircraft, spare parts, and avionics to “limit Libyan capacity to support military adventures in neighbouring countries” (General Accounting Office 1983). Then, in 1992, economic sanctions became multilateral, when the UN imposed an air embargo, together with the prohibition to sale arms or supply aircraft spare parts (United Nations Security Council 1992); those lasted until the early 2000s.

By drawing on the case of the Libyan Arab Jamahiriya, this article aims to reconsider the role of sanctions as a form of US-led imperialist warfare. It shows that sanctions function as one among many tools of warfare unleashed on Global South countries that threaten and challenge the political supremacy of US-led imperialism. In doing so, the article contributes to those studies on the political economy of sanctions broadly, and in Libya particularly (Niblock 2001; O’Sullivan 2003; St John 2008; Vandewalle 1991, 2015), which approached their study from a rather normative perspective. That is, these mainstream analyses proceeded to investigate the impact and efficacy of sanctions on the country, without questioning the reasons and motives at play that brought to their imposition, i.e. the accusation of international terrorism. Moreover, there are important similarities between the neoclassical, marginalist, and monetarist economists—still forming the mainstream in the discipline—and mainstream literature on sanctions. While neoclassical approaches set aside the phenomena of war because it upset the search for a general economic equilibrium, mainstream analyses of sanctions relied on game theory to explain sanctions “as a strategic negotiating tool in the game of geo-economic statecraft” (Davis and Ness 2021, 5). Overall, these dominant approaches have made the study of sanctions conveniently legible to US policymakers.

By reconsidering sanctions as a form of imperialist warfare, the article advances the necessity to treat war as a fundamental feature shaping the developmental—both political and economic—constraints of countries of the Global South. Specifically, it calls for recentring the Third-Worldist Marxist theoretical lineage, considering a renewed scholarly interest in the study of financial subordination (Alami 2019), colonialism and dependency (Bhambra 2021; Kvangraven 2021), as well as security (Egan 2022).

I present this argument in three main sections, combining the use of archival documents from the United Nations (UN), US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), US Office of the Historian, and the Libyan government—i.e. newspapers (mainly

*Al-Zahf al-Akhdar* and *Jamahiriya*) and research reports—as well as secondary sources.<sup>2</sup> In the first part, this article delineates the conceptual limitations present in the literature on sanction and propose to understand sanctions in relation to US-led imperialism in the Arab region. The second part draws on Fidel Castro’s concept of “Battle of Ideas” to trace the ideological and material struggle that brought to the imposition of sanctions on Libya from the late 1970s to the 1990s. The importance of this aspect is to show how the literature on sanctions has always aligned with the preoccupations of various US administrations, without questioning its imperial grand-strategy. In the third part, this article demonstrates how sanctions operated as one among many forms of warfare that were unleashed on Libya, i.e. covert actions, military bombings, and the mobilisation of the UNSC (United Nations Security Council). Since the literature on sanctions tends to focus too narrowly on their economic, social, or humanitarian effects, this article suggests instead that sanctions should be studied as one among many forms of imperialist warfare. In conclusion, this article reflects on the importance of approaching sanctions as part of the imperialist arsenal, and what such an approach reveals about the wider struggle at play for many countries of the Global South.

## Sanctions under US-Led Imperialism

Economic sanctions have played an important role in influencing Libya’s political and economic development (Niblock 2001). However, numerous studies have only examined their role from a rather normative perspective. That is, they focused on the effect and/or consequences of sanctions, discounting the role they play as part of the arsenal of US-led imperialism. A large bulk of studies (Crawford and Klotz 1999; Drezner 1999; Early 2015; Hufbauer et al. 2021; Miyagawa 1992; O’Sullivan 2003), or what Jones (2015) defines as “the academic cottage industry” in the study of sanctions, narrowly focus their attention on sanctions’ political efficacy. Overwhelmingly, these academic works have uncritically accepted the reasons and motives raised by the US and the UN to impose sanctions. In doing so, they limited themselves to studying what—or, if any—aspects could be revised to make sanctions work more efficiently. In other words, while posed somewhat differently across the literature, the central question translates as “Do sanctions work (or not)?” This aspect is even more accentuated when analysing the so-called UN sanction decade in the 1990s, of which the Libyan Arab *Jamahiriya* was part (Cortright and Lopez 2000). The overall objective of such approaches is to assess what role sanctions played in curtailing the “terrorist” aspirations of the countries under sanction. In line with the political historiography on Libya, these studies (Cortright and Lopez 2000; O’Sullivan 2003) took for granted that the status of the *Jamahiriya* as a “rogue” and “aggressive” regime disrupting the liberal international order. Overall, these analyses fall short of critical

questioning normative US policy discourse used to justify sanctions on the targeted countries, i.e. the pursuit of terrorist activities or the existence of weapons of mass destruction.

More recent scholarship assesses sanctions from a humanitarian/ethical standpoint (Early and Peksen 2022; Fathollah-Nejad 2014; Gordon 2019; Jazairy 2019; Weisbrot and Sachs 2019), criticising their detrimental effects on the welfare of ordinary people—i.e. education, health, etc. Most notably, Joy Gordon's work on Iraq (2012) traces the immense degree of human suffering visited upon the ordinary population, showing how sanctions override many of the basic principles established in international humanitarian law. In doing so, these works point out the complete lack of ethical concerns on behalf of powerful policy makers when imposing sanctions. For example, this is an aspect that the answer of the first female US Secretary of State, Madeleine Albright, reveals when pressed about the death of half a million Iraqi children due to the sanctions: "I think that is a very hard choice; but the price, we think, the price is worth it" (CBS News [Columbia Broadcasting System News] 1997). As this answer demonstrates, the (un)ethical concern of studies on the cost of sanctions is undoubtedly important. However, this article argues that such hyper-emphasis on sanctions (un)ethical dimension, presents two main limitations. First, they continue not to question the motives at play for the imposition of sanctions; and second, they obscure the relation that sanctions have vis-à-vis larger geopolitical and economic structures. In other words, these analyses do not give much consideration to what the second part of Albright's answer points out:

It is a moral question, but the moral question is even a larger one: don't we owe to the American people and the American military, and to the other countries in the region, that this man [Saddam] not be a threat? (CBS News 1997)

Ironically, this statement reveals what scholarship on sanctions has too often ignored; that is, the role and mission of US-led imperialism globally, and in the Arab region specifically. Albright's "moral" argument points, in fact, to the exceptional mission of the US, the righteousness of its deeds and interests. By claiming to curb the threat of terrorist dictators (i.e. Saddam or Qaddafi) to protect other countries in the region, she presents these actions as part-and-parcel of the unique mission bestowed upon the US government, what many scholars of US foreign policy define as "American exceptionalism" (Hixson 2021). This ideology assumes that the US is a force for the world's moral and political compass, and thus has the right to decide which nations or peoples have the right to exist and which do not. Thus, whereas mainstream analyses have accepted the exceptional

role of the US uncritically, this article proposes to assess more closely its ideological and material underpinnings through a Third-World Marxist approach, which identifies the existence of a global structure called “imperialism.”

Imperialism refers to a world system of surplus value extraction (Emmanuel 1972; Amin 1976; Patnaik and Patnaik 2016), where development is apportioned unequally along racial and class lines. It is a set of material relations of exploitation between countries of the global North and South, which takes place through a process of class collaboration between ruling classes in the core and neo-colonial bourgeoisie in the periphery. Accumulation then depends more and more on the degree imperialist countries oppress and exploit developing countries (Kadri 2019). This entails, for instance, the use of military domination or policies that prevent developing countries from accessing technological resources or harnessing their internal resources for the purpose of regional or popular development. At the same time, this historically established unequal accumulation of value does not only entail the pile of commodities and natural resources, but it is also the mass of ideas corresponding to capital’s encroaching logic. In other words, imperialism as a sociological phenomenon (Abdel-Malek 1981) operates as both a material and ideological process.

In the aftermath of WWII, it was the US that consolidated its political and financial leverage worldwide, becoming the major imperialist power. As a creditor to France and Britain during the war (Hudson 2003), the US attempted to restructure the world system in the wake of the deficit-driven withdrawals of European colonialism from Africa and Asia (Kolko and Kolko 1972). This task required the reliance on the interrelated realms of trade and military expansion. On matters of trade, the post-war Truman Administration sought to establish an “Open Door,” with “the elimination of trade and financial barriers, exclusive trading blocs, and restrictive policies of every sort” (Kolko and Kolko 1972, 12). While portraying these new trade arrangements as facilitating a neutral freedom of enterprise and international exchange, they in fact represented an Americanisation of the global system, reflecting US capital’s needs as they existed in the late 1940s. The newly created World Bank and International Monetary Fund regulated world trade under a common currency of the US dollar (Hung and Liu 2022); the post-war economic reconstruction of Western Europe provided US exporters with emergent markets; and military coordination with receding British imperialism allowed US corporations preferential access to the key resources of the industrialised world, namely oil (Stork 1975). Inevitably, it was the mythology of “American exceptionalism” that helped maintain these policies of domination. This political mythology incarnated the missionary and colonial zeal that justified the genocide of the Americas (Losurdo 2017) and displayed a religious belief towards the idea that the US has a unique role to play in world history, while other countries would follow.

In such a context, the Arab region has occupied a unique role in the geostrategy of US-led imperialism since WWII, especially due to its oil wealth. Being a key natural resource for the economies of the imperialist countries (Di Muzio 2015), the best means of ensuring this guaranteed access consisted of securing political control of the region (Wolfe-Hunnicut 2021). To achieve these goals, US-led imperialism operated closely with two faithful allies—Israel and the reactionary Gulf monarchies. The oil-rich Gulf monarchies guaranteed the supremacy of the US dollar at the international level through dollar-denominated oil sales (Ajl 2021), which were then being recycled in the purchase of US treasury bonds and weaponry. As per the Zionist entity, this became effectively a US military outpost in the region (Dana 2016). As Sheila Ryan writes, from 1948 until mid-1973

Israel had received the staggering sum of over \$8 billion in economic assistance from various foreign sources, or \$3,500 total for each Israeli—an average of \$233 per year per capita in aid. Thus, an average Israeli each year received in aid alone more than double the per capita income of an Egyptian (\$102 in 1969). (Ryan 1974, 6)

The aid to Israel is an investment in militarism for US-led imperialism. The peculiarity of the Zionist entity lies in it being a settler-colonial formation, as much as the US, incubating a mode of consciousness that promotes imperialist values and secures US-led interests. By acquiring nuclear weapons and through its numerous military attacks on and invasions of other countries of the region—i.e. such as Iraq (Avramidis 2005), Lebanon, and Syria (Higgins 2023)—Israel has been the major force behind imperialist capital accumulation and, subordinately, Arab de-development. Thus, as the Palestinian progressive circles consistently noted, the liberation of Palestine is a struggle against US-led imperialism on whose behalf Israel acts as a gendarme.

However, the US was not alone on the world stage after WWII. As the Soviet Union grew in global popularity, robust labour movements and peasant uprisings took shape throughout the world that challenged US capital. From Europe (Ganser 2005) to the Global South (Williams 2021), the US and its allies have constantly mobilised their arsenal to assert control over resources and trade routes, or to fend off rising political challenges. In such a context, this article argues that the emergence and imposition of sanctions must be understood as part of the arsenal of US imperialism to control the world, and the Arab region specifically. In doing so, as mentioned in the introduction, this article calls for studies on the political economy of sanctions to expand their focus beyond assessing the impact of sanctions on targeted states. This article calls instead to adopt a more expansive and



interdisciplinary approach that, while including works from IPE (international political economy), IR (international relationship) (Davis and Ness 2021; Sial 2022), international law (Nanopoulos 2020) and area studies, it links questions of financial subordination, imperialism, and dependency to the study of developing countries.

For these reasons, as the next section will show, it is imperative to begin by questioning—contra mainstream literature—the official reasons why sanctions were imposed on Libya. The objective is to show how sanctions were deployed when Libya sought to pursue ideological and developmental strategies that undermined imperialist interests.

### **The Battle of Ideas: Terrorism or Liberation?**

When the US government imposed sanctions on Libya for the first time, it claimed to do so as a response to the Libyan government's support of international terrorism, which brought Libya to be named as the first state sponsor of terrorism (SST) under the 1979 Export Administration Act. Under the terms of the law then in place, Libya was prohibited from receiving US exports of military and dual-use goods, US bilateral assistance, and US support in receiving loans from international financial institutions. In 1978, for instance, the Carter Administration sanctioned the sale of "\$400 million in trucks, aircraft and spare parts in an effort to discourage Libya from harbouring international terrorists . . . as part of an evolving policy to combat international terrorism, according to State Department sources" (Ibrahim 1978). Similarly, in 1992, when the UNSC passed "Resolution 748" imposing multilateral sanctions on Libya, official documents refer to "the failure by the Libyan government to demonstrate by concrete actions its renunciation of terrorism," being considered a "threat to international peace and security."

The most relevant works that studied sanctions on Libya did so from the same standpoint of the US government. In her book *Shrewd Sanctions: Statecraft and State Sponsors of Terrorism*, O'Sullivan (2003, 1) proceeds to investigate the impact of sanctions on the targeted states, including Libya, by claiming that the book "examines an age-old tool, sanctions, to deal with one of the greatest challenges of the post-September 11 environment: states that support terrorism and pursue weapons of mass destruction." While providing a more nuanced analysis of the on-the-ground effects of sanctions on the Libyan population, Tim Niblock's book, *Pariah States & Sanctions in the Middle East: Iraq, Libya, Sudan* (2001), also fails to question the motives that led to their imposition. On par with Libyan political historiography, the country is presented as a "rogue, aggressive" state, threatening the stability of the international order (Capasso 2021).



In the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union and increasing US hostility, the Cuban government launched the “Battle of Ideas,” which was sought to strengthen socialist consciousness and combat the Revolution’s enemies within (“the new rich”) and without (“imperialism”) (Yaffe 2020, 69–70). For the Cuban leader, Fidel Castro (1999, 7), the Battle of Ideas against US-led imperialism unfolded simultaneously at the economic, military, and ideological levels, which is captured at best in the use of the metaphor “trench of ideas.” He refers in fact to how the country and its people “have had to wage, and will have to continue waging, a more difficult battle against that extremely powerful empire—a ceaseless ideological battle . . . That is, what we are at this moment, and I also believe that here, at this moment, we are defending a trench” (Castro 1999, 7). The materiality of this metaphor shows how the Battle of Ideas can guide our analysis in a twofold manner.

First, as much as the struggle to advance socialism and regional solidarity in the Americas required the grasp and advancement of “just ideas,” violence and military defence were just as essential to protect the developmental model of the Cuban Revolution. As Samir Amin (2015) also writes, the imperialism of the Triad (US, Europe, and Japan) walks on two legs:<sup>3</sup> “the economic leg—globalised neoliberalism forced as the exclusive possible economic policy; and the political leg—continuous interventions including pre-emptive wars against those who reject imperialist interventions.” Both Amin and Fidel indicate the existence of a mutual interpenetration between the material and the ideological terrains, which countries of the Global South use in response to the various imperial threats and aggression. The second interrelated point entails the impossibility of severing the domestic and foreign spheres. While Fidel understood that the fight against imperialism took place at home and abroad, US-led imperialism also worked to undermine it on both levels. That is, foreign military attacks instil a sense of ideological defeat domestically.

Therefore, when the US condemned Libya as a state sponsoring international terrorism, these labels should be understood as a form of ideological warfare aimed at discrediting and undermining the material gains that the Libyan model of development was pursuing in the country, and in the wider region. Consequently, the imposition of sanctions on Libya in response to “foreign” actions undermined the forces of production and the political legitimacy of the state at home. On its part, the Libyan government understood very well the importance of this form of ideological warfare and the significance of differentiating and explaining what role violence played in the liberation struggle:

The difference between liberation movements and terrorism is colossal. Liberation movements struggle for a just cause and for an oppressed people . . . The United

States of America works to give this term [terrorism] a specific meaning that serves its interests and imperialist goals. (The World Center for Studies and Research of The Green Book 1990, 25, 31)

By accepting the “terrorist justification” proposed by the US government, these works fail to understand the historical and political role of violence. That is, they fail to provide an analytical explanation of the actual reasons violence occurs, nor do they allow us to understand how and why some forms of violence can be normatively or legally justified. In doing so, what Walter Rodney (1972, 46) discussed on the bourgeois analyses of African development, remains still valid for the study of sanctions: “the whole concept of imperialism and neocolonialism is dismissed as mere rhetoric—especially by ‘academics’ who claim to be removed from ‘politics.’” Ultimately, these studies should be supplanted by an analysis of the material and ideological spaces of anti-imperialist praxis that a country, like Libya, sought to advance in the geopolitical arena. Through the combination of US and Libyan archival documents, the study of sanctions requires an historical materialist analysis of the main oppositional spaces to imperialist praxis that Libya sought to pursue. This allows us to identify three main preoccupations<sup>4</sup> that remained consistent for various US presidential administrations vis-à-vis Libya from the 1970s to the early 1990s, revealing how the ideological and the material, the foreign and the domestic, did not function as separate spheres; rather they must be constantly approached as a totality.

### **Anti-colonial and Regional Solidarity**

Since its takeover, the Revolutionary Command Council (RCC) remodelled the Libyan political system into the unique party formula of the Arab Socialist Union (ASU), and signed a union declaration with Egypt, adopting its flag and anthem. Qadhafi and his colleagues clearly saw “the Egyptian armed forces as the major hope for the ultimate defeat of Israel” (CIA 1973a, 4) and provided Egypt with ample cash and military forces until 1973. Yet, Libya’s support also extended to a wide range of revolutionary, socialist, and independent movements across the world. Even though their ideological motivations and ultimate political ambitions varied, all those movements were seen as a direct challenge to the hegemony of the main Western imperialist powers (the US, France, and the UK), and their regional allies (mainly Israel and Saudi Arabia). For instance, when in 1973 the Chadian civil war started, Libya soon entered the conflict in support of the anti-French group, Front de Libération Nationale du Tchad (FROLINAT). Moreover, recent unclassified documents revealed that over three periods (1973–1975, 1985–1986, and 1988–1990), the Libyan government paid over a total of \$12,655,863 to the Irish Republican Army (McCullagh, McMorrow, and McCarthy 2021). Overall, as

CIA documents (1983, 2, 1985, 1991) reveal, the Libyan government from 1975 “adopted a policy of subversive activity, coup plotting, and support for ‘national liberation movements’ in Latin America, Asia, Africa, and the Middle East, as well as support for terrorist organisation in Western Europe” (CIA 1985, 2). Therefore, while the fight against French colonialism took place in Chad, it was the Palestinian question that occupied the most central role in Libya’s efforts to undermine US imperialism.

In the immediate aftermath of the revolution, the CIA (1969) already identified how the newly installed revolutionary council was expected to take a more proactive stance toward the “Arab–Israeli” issue. The sense of humiliation, frustration, and helplessness that spread throughout the Arab world in the aftermath of the Six-Day War had, in fact, led these young military officers to a desire for profound change. Whereas Palestine had remained a marginal issue on the political agenda of the monarchy, the revolutionary government was determined to confer it its centrality. At the same time, Libya’s anti-Zionist position was often depicted as an emotional hostility of Qaddafi, rather than part of a larger anti-imperialist logic (CIA 1973b). A considerable amount of Libya’s budget and political energies were “consumed by activities directed at the number one enemy, Israel” (CIA 1974, 19). In 1973 only, Libya provided at least \$50 million in arms and supplies to the fedayeen, together with training facilities in Libya for perhaps as many as 2000 guerrillas, offering logistical and cash support, as well as extended documentation and asylum (CIA 1973c, 1974). By 1979, when Egypt and Israel signed the Camp-David treaty, the Libyan government—like Syria—firmly rejected it (CIA 1982a). As a response, the US designated Libya as a state sponsor of terrorism under the Export Administration Act on 29 December 1979 (Schwartz 2007), enforcing an economic embargo on spare parts in the aviation and oil fields. During these years, the various US administrations were already discussing and assessing plans on how to curb Libya’s regional influence in Africa and the Middle East (Burton and Howard 2014, Document 18).<sup>5</sup>

Terrorism, in particular, translated into Libya’s opposition to the Zionist occupation of Palestine, which had become so central to the maintenance of the US-led imperialist clout in the region (Gendzier 2016). As mentioned above, Libya not only provided military support, training, and funding to various Palestinian factions. In 1977, for instance, Tripoli hosted the first international symposium on Zionism and Racism, where renowned scholars—including Edward Said—participated to discuss the racist premise of Zionism (International Organization for the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination 1979), following the famous “UN General Assembly Resolution 3379” condemning Zionism as a form of racism in 1975.<sup>6</sup> In 1982, the Libyan government established *al-Mathaba*

*al-Alamiya* [The World Centre], which aimed to gather progressive revolutionary forces worldwide in the fight against Imperialism, Zionism, Racism and Reaction (World Mathaba n.d.). Libyan archival documents, including research publications and press outlets from these years (particularly in the 1980s), reveal further how the government perceived the presence of Israel, the Arab monarchies, and Western powers in the region. Therefore, the Libyan government's persistence to undermine Zionism militarily or ideologically, in the Arab region, in the United Nations (CIA 1975a) or among African states (Burton and Howard 2014, Document 54),<sup>7</sup> was not only carefully monitored by US intelligence and security agencies; but could not be tolerated for long.

Such tensions escalated further in 1986 when the Libyan government (*Baltimore Sun* 1986) praised the Rome airport attacks by Palestinian factions in retaliation for Israel's bombing of the PLO headquarters in Tunis. Finally, the strong anti-Zionist agenda of the Libyan government further mirrored its constant, yet often unsuccessful attempts or short-lived experiences, to establish a Pan-Arab federation with neighbouring countries, such as the Federation of Arab Republics in 1972 with Syria and Egypt, the Arab Islamic Republic with Tunisia in 1974, or the Arab Maghreb Union in 1989.

### **Proximity to the USSR**

The Battle of Ideas approach goes against the idea of isolating specific variables for hypothesis testing. As such, it is impossible to overlook how the Cold War, and Libya's perceived proximity to the USSR, represented a major preoccupation for the US and its allies. Up to the establishment of the Jamahiriya in 1977, the Libyan government did not assiduously collaborate with the Soviet Union, as it aimed to develop its own vision for the Third World and the struggle for national liberation. However, as Douglas Little (2013, 71) also writes, US administrations—from Nixon to Ford—soon misinterpreted the Libyan “regime's increasingly radical nationalism as evidence of Soviet subversion” and froze US arms sales to Libya on that basis since the early 1970s. Although the Libyan government was not a natural ally of the USSR—i.e. having praised Sadat's expulsion of the Soviets from Egypt—the increasing escalation between Libya and the US brought them closer. As CIA (1975b) files document, since 1974, while the Soviets provided the revolutionaries with arms procurement, military assistance, and technical know-how in the oil industry, they had never been granted a permanent military base for their fleet into any ports of the Mediterranean country. Despite the two parties continued to disagree over the nature of the struggle against the Zionist entity (CIA 1977), US administrations assessed that Libya's undeterred support to revolutionary regimes benefitted more the Soviet, rather than Western interests (Little 2013), thus posing a concrete threat. According to CIA assessments, the two

parties hold a “pragmatic friendship” that nonetheless had brought them to collude in several countries, including Oman, Western Sahara, Ethiopia, and Angola, to subvert pro-Western regimes (CIA 1979). The politico-military proximity between the Soviet Union and Libya remained a concrete preoccupation also when Ronald Reagan set in office in the early 1980s. For instance, the director of the CIA, William Casey, continued to draw these interconnections during his speech delivered to the American Israeli Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) Policy Conference in Washington in 1986, pointing out how:

The Mediterranean segment of this Soviet global network is anchored at Libya and Syria, which are gaining influence and control in Lebanon and Sudan to further squeeze Israel and the moderate Arab States . . . Terrorism today is an integral part of the foreign policy and defence apparatus of these states. (CIA 1986a, 4, 6–7)

### **Oil and Economic Nationalism**

As mentioned above, one of the key tenets of imperialism is to reduce or control altogether the possibility that a developing country harnesses its internal resources for regional or national developmental concerns, gaining a space of manoeuvre, if not independence from imperial domination. Unsurprisingly, when many countries of the Middle East, such as Iran (Wight 2021), Iraq (Wolfe-Hunnicut 2021), or Libya, decided to weaponise their oil revenues, imperialist warfare ensued. For Libya, following the 1969 revolution, the RCC undertook a series of economic measures that aimed to regain the country’s sovereignty over its national resources, while making it more economically independent from Western control. In other words, oil revenues were used for national and regional (as described above) political anti-imperialist goals. The overall objective was to use investment policies to create a new state and society, while envisioning the building of a New International Economic Order (NIEO). There is no doubt, in fact, that Libya had been influenced by the ongoing discussions on and visions for a NIEO, which directly inspired its policy implementation. For instance, the revolutionary government began renegotiating oil contracts with major Western companies, and the “Tripoli Agreements” tipped the balance of power in favour of Libya and oil-producing countries. The RCC nationalised foreign and domestic exploitative businesses, from oil to the retail industry to reduce social inequalities, while striving for economic self-sufficiency. This influence also materialised in the organisations of seminars hosted in Tripoli, trying to reconcile the debate on NIEO and Qaddafi’s theory of direct democracy, also known as the Green Book (see The World Center for Studies and Research of The Green Book 1984).

These redistributive measures meant that popular forces—workers, peasants, revolutionary intellectuals—needed to seize control of that wealth through more communitarian and populist forms of social organisation, while establishing a central planning apparatus capable of exercising control over the whole economy. This is why, in 1977, the role of the Libyan government as guarantor and distributor of the country's economy was consolidated further with the launch of *Jamahiriyah*. In 1978, other bold reforms were implemented, such as the elimination of private property and employment, the introduction of a programme of land reform in 1978 (Abdussalam 1985) and caps on real-estate property ownership, which abolished the practice of rent (Deeb 1986). In 1986, private land ownership was abolished, and private retailers were forced to close throughout the country. In 1971, the government created an extensive subsidies programme covering basic foods such as flour, rice, and sugar, as well as electronic equipment and petrol (World Food Programme and Food and Agriculture Organization 2011; Sehib 2013), protecting consumers from fluctuations in international prices, and minimise inflation. Such policies also showed important limitations, especially the creation of self-sufficient agricultural and industrial sectors, which remained largely dependent on foreign labour (Alawar 1985) due to lack of expertise in the country.

However, as the Libyan government *zig-zagged*<sup>8</sup> its way to build an alternative model of economic development and regional political solidarity, it also faced major internal difficulties in establishing a popular democratic political control at the grassroots levels,<sup>9</sup> witnessing instead an increasing centralisation of political power in the hands of the government. The US government closely followed these developments and understood the disruptive potential of the Libyan revolution. For instance, Libyan “extremist militancy” could “undermine conservative Arab governments in the Gulf, making them more susceptible to political pressures to use oil as a political weapon against US-Middle East policies.” In fact,

Libya has been a consistent advocate of the use of Arab oil resources as a political weapon to undermine western and particularly US support of Israel. It has begun to lay the groundwork for an Arab boycott of oil shipments to the west if Arab-Israeli hostilities were to resume. (Burton and Howard 2014, Document 21)<sup>10</sup>

Therefore, the undermining of US policies in the region, coupled with Western Europe's increasing reliance on Libyan oil and American commercial interests, provided a perfect ground for the imposition of sanctions. In 1981, for instance, when Ronald Reagan came to power in 1981 and the US-led global financial counter-revolution was unfolding, unilateral sanctions were imposed on all these areas that were considered to endanger US national security. Interestingly, the oil and

aviation sectors, which were vital to the Libyan economy, were immediately targeted. The sanctions not only included heavy export controls on aviation spare parts and the embargo of all crude oil products, but they also banned Libyan students from studies in the fields of energy, aviation and all related areas.

The Libyan government, on its part, understood these sanctions as part of a wider struggle:

The second is the cultural battle to build a progressive civilisation of the masses. For, in addition to our campaign to eradicate illiteracy, poverty, disease, technical backwardness and the lack of expertise, the Jamahiriya has also to deal with an economic, technological, and educational blockade which the belligerent American administration and some Western European countries have declared against it. This blockade is part of the campaign which the imperialists have been conducting to deprive the country of the means of progress. (Al-Zahf al-Akhdar 1984)

Overall, this section has clarified the nature of the ideological and material (anti)imperialist ideas and praxis that underlie the use of sanctions. It did so by showing the importance of building an expansive approach that considers the question of ideology. In this case, it has examined how terrorism and liberation can be used to justify or undo conditions of financial subordination and dependency. Since the end of WWII, the US has maintained a military and economic *project*, in the world generally and specifically in the Arab region of which Libya is part. By recognising the existence of such an imperial system, the next section moves to show what function sanctions, as one among many forms of imperialist warfare, played vis-à-vis the maintenance of this project. It argues that sanctions should be understood as part of a structure, functioning as a form of economic warfare that supplants or complements the use of other forms of warfare, including military and non.

### **One among Many: Sanctions and Warfare**

To understand sanctions as warfare, it is important to identify three main limitations that mainstream literature presents. First, there is a need to move past the traps of methodological nationalism; that is, evaluating the impact and effects of sanctions within closed temporal and spatial limitations—i.e. UN sanctions on Libya from 1992–2000s. Second, as mentioned above, while the humanitarian approach traces the suffering of ordinary people, it continues not to question the motives at play for the imposition of sanctions, as well as to obscure the relation that sanctions have vis-à-vis larger geopolitical and economic structures. Third,



sanctions are always singled out as a unique form of aggression. What this article proposes instead is to approach the study of sanctions as one among many forms of imperialist warfare aiming to prevent the consolidation of alternative models of political and social development to US-led imperialism. In other words, while it is important to conclude that sanctions inflict a great deal of suffering on ordinary people, my approach hypothesises that sanctions have a wider and more structural function, namely to impede a successful social transformation on a world scale. Therefore, by compelling Libya to change its “rogue” behaviour, the (un)ethical nature of sanctions is of marginal importance because sanctions are part of the imperialist arsenal adopted, covertly or not, to wage an ideological and material warfare on the Global South at large.

In the twenty-first century, US-led imperialism has relied on sanctions as a “means of disciplining and controlling Global South sovereignty and blocking the emergence of a multipolar world order” (Doutaghi, Mullin, and Farnia 2022). In the 1990s, UN sanctions became widespread and were imposed, for instance, on Afghanistan, Angola, Cambodia, Liberia, Haiti, Iraq, Iran, Sierra Leone, Somalia, and Yugoslavia. The scale of this imperialist attack was favoured by the geopolitical collapse of the USSR in the 1990s. Yet, in the Arab region, it also coincided with the imperialist “peace” offensive on Palestine, the US-led war on Iraq, and the final levering of Egypt out of the Non-Aligned camp.

Undoubtedly, sanctions triggered major operational difficulties for Libya and led to a reduction in investments due to the risky geopolitical conditions surrounding the country. For instance, unilateral sanctions on the oil and aviation sectors raised the costs of technological equipment and goods, since procurers could sell them at inflated prices, adding risk premiums to invoices (CIA 1986b). The US ban on spare parts had a major impact on the nascent Libyan aviation sector, “the unjustified financial cost, the damaged image and distortion suffered by Libya’s national airline in routes and fleet development, are sacrifices as natural as are scars after every battle” (Marghani 1988, 553). The US monopoly over the aerospace industry functioned as part of the process of unequal exchange of technology and impeded the healthy development of a service that was vital to Libya’s economy. However, as much as sanctions impacted these vital sectors of the economy, they were only one among many instruments being adopted.

For instance, a recurring argument suggests that the decline of oil prices throughout the 1980s—due to international oil gluts—revealed the limitations of rentier economies, such as Libya. Interestingly, what such an argument does not account for is how the control of oil prices always had been a US foreign policy tool. Scholars (Di Muzio 2015) have argued that the 1973 oil crisis was engineered to weaken the industrial capacities of Europe and Japan and frame the Arab states as a threat to US energy security. Similarly, the gluts in the 1980s coincided with

the worldwide launch of a neoliberal political agenda, and the financialisation of the oil industry (Spiro 1999), allowing the sale of oil on the stock market as future contracts (Reagan 1986), thus substantively stripping oil-producing countries of their capacity to control over prices. When the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) decided to break with OPEC and flood the market, this move should also be linked to the US attempts to counter the USSR. In 1985, when oil production in KSA increased fourfold, oil prices collapsed by approximately the same amount in real terms (Wight 2021). These changes were directly perceived by the Libyan government, which realised how KSA had acted in coordination with the US to cement the power of US-led imperialism, thus supporting Israel:

Today, Saudi Arabia, on US orders, declares on you a war of starvation and an economic war against the Libyan people, the Algerian people and the Kuwaiti people. Today, Arab reaction expresses its true identity and is totally biased in a flagrant challenge to the Arab nation. It is biased in favour of America and the Israeli brothers. . . . These peoples, brothers, the Arab peoples whose lives depend on oil, now face an economic blockade by order of the United States and by its implementation by the Saudi rulers who are flooding the market with 7 million barrels a day without fulfilling any economic need for Saudi Arabia but for the purpose of preventing Libya, the Algerian people and the Kuwaiti people from selling their oil. (CIA 1982b, 2–3)

At that time, Libya was not only one of the two smaller oil exporting countries—together with Iran—to Eastern European states but was thought to be colluding with the USSR in undermining US interests in MENA and Africa, at least since 1979 (see discussion above). By 1986, KSA oil had “evidently displaced Libyan oil in Western Europe. The Saudis are also landing new customers in the Far East, largely at the expense of Iran” (CIA 1986c, 2–3).

Moreover, these measures of economic warfare had been preceded and/or followed by the covert sponsoring, training, and assistance of opposition groups. In 1973, when the Chadian civil war started, Libya soon entered the conflict in support of the anti-French group, Front de Libération Nationale du Tchad (FROLINAT), and occupied the border area of the Azouzou strip. Despite the initial military successes, the war turned into a complete quagmire, particularly when the US entered the conflict and began providing military aid and training to Hissène Habré—who later came to rule Chad until 1991—to defeat the Libyan-backed groups. In such a context, the war not only needed to curb the regional ambitions—arguably occupation—of the Libyan regime, but it also provided the perfect opportunity to mastermind covert operations against its leadership. In fact, the US—together with the military assistance of Israel and economic support of

Saudi Arabia—supported the creation of two different opposition groups: the National Front for the Salvation of Libya (NFSL), led by Muhammad Mugarief,<sup>11</sup> and the Libyan National Liberation Army (NLA), a group of “contras” whose commander was Col. Khalifa Haftar. The group of “contras” consisted of former Libyan soldiers who had been captured as prisoners of war (Nolutshungu 1996, 310) in Chad; some sources suggested their number to be up to 2500 (Nolutshungu 1996, 48). Interestingly, as Idriss Deby succeeded to Habré, US officials scurried to remove the contras out of Chad discreetly, spreading them across Africa or granting them refugee status in the US (Hunter 1991, 47–51). As the International Committee of the Red Cross admitted, there was no chance to interview the prisoners before their departure due to US hindrance. Consequently, the Libyan government rushed to demand a UNSC meeting, describing these actions as

[an] act of international piracy by the United States [that] constitutes a violation of the sovereignty of an independent State, a deliberate attempt to take advantage of the transitional situation in that State and an assault on international norms and conventions, since it is transferring this group of prisoners against their will and taking them as hostages in order to use them for political purposes. (Libyan Arab Jamahiriya 1990, 2)

In 2020, Mugarief openly admitted during an interview on the Arabic version of *Aljazeera* (2020) that the NFSL had closely collaborated with the CIA to subvert the Libyan leadership.

In 2011, an article appeared in the German newspaper, *Der Spiegel* (Gebauer et al. 2011), pointing to the existence of a close relationship between the leader of *al-Burkân*—a Libyan opposition group, Ragab Zatout, a hefty German millionaire, Hilmar Hein, and an American security agency. Their relationship traced back to 1978 in Derna where the two came to know each other for business reasons, yet business quickly turned into a partnership aimed at destabilising and overthrowing the Libyan regime through the provision of fake passports and weapons. Hein was arrested in 1985 by the German authorities because one of his employees had decided to go to the police and reveal the involvement of his company in the assassination attempts on the former Libyan ambassador in Vienna, Iss al-Din al-Ghadamsi, in that same year. Hein was sentenced to seven years in prison and found guilty of helping to set up the attack on the Libyan Embassy in Bonn in 1984 (Gebauer et al. 2011; Meyer 2012). In 1996, a BBC (British Broadcasting Corporation) documentary “Dispatches” revealed that the leader of *al-Burkan* had personally met with Oliver North, a US general involved in the Nicaragua contras’ scandal, and received constant US intelligence support.

Throughout the 1980s, imperialist warfare also translated into the use of military bombings, such as the shooting down of Libyan airplanes, and the killing of Libyan sailors in response to Libya's proclamation of the Gulf of Sidra as an integral part of its territory. Whereas the US barely shows its concerns every time that Israel overtakes Palestinian land, it rushed to deploy its fleet into the Mediterranean and undertake military trainings in response to Libya's claims. Then, on 15 April 1986, the US launched "El Dorado Canyon," authorising the shelling of the two cities of Benghazi and Tripoli, including the direct bombing of the residence of the Libyan leader in Bab al-Aziziya (Davis 1990, 133–171; Bacevich 2016). What triggered the El Dorado Canyon operation was a terrorist attack that had taken place on 5 April 1986, at the LaBelle discotheque in Berlin, where two Americans and one Turkish woman died (Malinarich 2001). For the US government, it took barely ten days to indict the Libyan regime as responsible for the attack, citing the existence of "undisputable proof" related to a coded communication between the Libyan Embassy in East Berlin and Tripoli. It nevertheless took 15 years and the fall of the Berlin Wall for German prosecutors to establish that there was no proof "that Colonel Qaddafi was behind the attack—a failure which the court blamed on the 'limited willingness' of the German and US governments to share intelligence" (Malinarich 2001). As Chomsky already argued in 1987, evidence was meagre, if not non-existent, but it provided the opportunity for the first-ever military strike scheduled for primetime television (Chomsky 1987). These constant, yet fabricated, attacks on Libya, as discussed in the previous section, functioned as forms of ideological warfare intended to undermine the material gains of the Revolution by delegitimising the Libyan government in the eyes of its people.

In 1992, unilateral sanctions became multilateral ones. As mentioned above, the imposition of these sanctions should be understood as part-and-parcel of a decade of imperialist economic warfare over the Global South. For Libya, these sanctions had been imposed through the swift mobilisation of the UNSC by the UK and US, accusing Libya of the explosion of Pan Am Flight 103, on 21 December 1988, over Lockerbie, Scotland, causing the deaths of 270 people. The initial findings of the three years investigation had assigned responsibility to PFLP-GC, which had previously carried out similar operations and had received support from the governments of Syria and Iran (Köchler and Subler 2002). In 1991, however, the direction of the investigation switched completely, with the appearance of new evidence that pointed solely to the involvement of two Libyan individuals as orchestrators of the explosion. The attack on Pan Am 103 was now presented as a direct response of the Libyan regime to the US bombings in 1986. Following this decision, France also reached the same conclusion about the explosion of another flight—UTA 772 DC—in the skies of Niger in September 1989, condemning the Libyan regime. In this case, France accused Libya of targeting the

French flight in response to France's support for Chadian forces fighting against the Libyan Army (for more information, see also Péan 2001).

The Libyan regime initially denounced both accusations as outrageous, yet it also proposed to allow the two Libyan individuals accused in the Pan Am bombing to be tried in a "neutral" country under a Scottish court, a proposal that was in accordance with international law (Rubin 1993). The UK and US governments, however, rejected the proposal outright, deeming it as a sign of obstructionism and refusal by the Libyan regime to hand over the two suspects. What they instead did was to pressure the UNSC to impose economic sanctions against Libya (Rubin 1993, 15; United Nations Security Council 1992), including an air and arms embargo and a ban on the sale of oil equipment to Libya, and called on Libya "to cease all forms of terrorist action and assistance to terrorist groups" (United Nations Security Council 1992). As feminist scholars have also argued, the UNSC—based solely on the pressure of the US and its allies—was mobilised to bypass a legal dispute—Libya's obligation to extradite the suspects—that instead "should as a general rule be referred by the parties to the International Court of Justice" (Hodson and Lavers 2021, 105).

It goes without saying that all these measures drifted even further away from the ambitions of the Libyan revolution. They in fact triggered major consequences at the economic and political level. On the one hand, foreign-backed military coups and armed resistance increased. The most important threat involved the complicity of two British secret intelligence agencies—MI6 and MI5<sup>12</sup>—supporting the Islamist group Libyan Islamic Fighting Force (LIFG) (Coles 2016, 28–29), which unsuccessfully challenged the regime throughout the 1990s (Dorril 2002, 793–795). This group mainly consisted of the so-called "Libyan-Afghans," Islamist jihadi fighters who had fled Libya in the 1980s to join the mujahedeen in Afghanistan and fight against the Soviets. Coming back to Libya in the 1990s, the group mounted a steady armed resistance against the regime with the firm goal of eliminating the Libyan leader. As a result, the regime's use of repression towards the population also increased, which—for instance—led to the infamous killing of prisoners in Abu Salim prison in 1996.

On the other hand, the socio-economic conditions deteriorated steadily. By 1994, just two years into the UN sanctions regime, as much as 9000 medical patients had to be treated outside of the country, since Libya was not allowed to access the necessary equipment to do so. Medical staff reductions, at the same time, had seriously impaired the functioning of the health services, strongly dependent on the expertise of foreign doctors—like many other industrial sectors.<sup>13</sup> Also, conventional analyses highlight insistently that Libya was able to maintain a somewhat normal level of oil output during the 1990s, sometimes higher than the previous decades. However, these same analyses completely ignore that the economic consequences of the embargo translated into a

steep depreciation of the currency, thus inflation, and a price increase of consumer goods equal to 200 percent above their usual level.

On a global-structural level, these measures represented a form of international financial subordination, since currency instability in developing countries, as Alami (2019) writes, “is a key manifestation of contemporary imperialism, and it entails a highly uneven spatial distribution of financial vulnerability and deflationary adjustment.” Similarly, although the supply of foreign goods under the embargo continued to take place, it did so under very unfavourable conditions. Many foreign intermediaries were ready to exploit the geopolitical situation of Libya, forcing the recipient country to pay an additional cost of 300 to 400 percent, as well as huge delays in delivery (see Burgat 1994, 555).

In such a context, it is important to question how some analysis (O’Sullivan 2003; St John 2008)—like numerous NSA (National Security Agency) or CIA assessment papers—discusses the role that unilateral and multilateral sanctions had in limiting “terrorist” Libya and its sponsor of “radical” groups. The argument goes that, while sanctions contributed to curbing Libya’s “extremist” tendencies, Libya’s mismanagement of the economy—meaning: any form of state-planned economic programme—is central to understanding its socio-economic difficulties. The very language of these sources is steeped in ideology, reflecting a particular class position and worldview. Nowhere is that more apparent in their insistence on referring to Palestinian resistance groups as “radical groups” or “terrorists” for claiming their right, recognised under international law, to take up arms against a colonial occupation.

Overall, this section has aimed to offer a twofold argument. First, the article showed that sanctions operate as one among many forms of imperialist warfare, which were unleashed to maintain the dominance of US-led imperialism in the Arab region, and the Global South at large. In this regard, sanctions remain a fundamental tool of the imperialist “security doctrine.” As former national security advisor and author of *Treasury’s War: The Unleashing of a New Era of Financial Warfare*, Juan Zarate (2013, ix) writes, “over the past decade, the United States has waged a new brand of financial warfare, unprecedented in its reach and effectiveness. This ‘hidden war’ has . . . since become central to America’s national security doctrine.”

Second, it is important to take note of the fundamental role that warfare and violence play in shaping the strategies for economic development of developing countries, as well as US-led imperialism. For instance, many studies on Libya’s political economy have strictly focused on highlighting the abolition of capitalist-led measures as the primary culprit for Libya’s economic malaise. This argument has been reinforced further by accepting uncritically the forms of ideological warfare used to label Libya’s foreign policies, i.e. terrorism. By doing so, however,

they dismissed not only the existence of an imperialist structure, but also the consequences that all these forms of warfare have had on the planning of the economy. This argument aligns with those existing critiques offered in relation to US academic analysis on the developmental policies of China and the USSR—especially its strong emphasis on heavy industry. Vladimir Kontorovich (2013) argues that US academics preferred to ignore the possibility that developmental strategies can arise from defensive concerns. Rather they opted to explain these developmental strategies as the result of bizarre preferences by Soviet rulers; this is an argument that resonates strongly with mainstream scholarship on the Libyan Arab Jamahiriya (Capasso 2021). For instance, when the collapse of oil prices happened in the 1980s—as mentioned above, this translated into a massive reduction of Libya’s national budget, which initially caused the government to push for “maximum production” in the heavy industry and “minimum consumption” of non-necessary goods.

It goes without saying that to treat war and warfare as central components to the study of economic development of countries of the Global South does not absolve scholars from scrutinising critically the limitations of these countries’ economic policies. However, the status of academic scholarship on these issues suggests that the recentring of the category of imperialism and imperialist warfare are much more pressing if we are to draw a balance sheet on these issues.

## Conclusion

This article has proposed a theorisation of sanctions as a form of US-led imperialist warfare, used to prevent the emergence of alternative material and ideological models of development, led for and by Global South countries. When examining sanctions, mainstream literature has consigned the category of imperialism to history, and conceptualised their unfolding/imposition in isolation from the consolidation of the US-led imperialism globally, and in the Arab region specially. Sanctions are singled out as a unique variable—and somewhat more ethical than war—to assess their socio-economic impact on the targeted states, accused of carrying out terrorist activities destabilising the liberal international order. Moving beyond the traps of methodological nationalism, this article has aimed to show that sanctions should be understood as part-and-parcel of the imperialist war regime. By reconsidering sanctions vis-à-vis imperialism, the first step entails conceptualising the connections between ideological and material levels. Drawing on the case of Libya, this article has drawn on Fidel’s “Battle of Ideas” (1999) to argue how accusations of terrorism function as a form of ideological warfare aimed at discrediting and undermining the material and political ambitions of the Libya revolution. From regional solidarity to economic nationalism, “terrorism” justified the imposition of unilateral and



multilateral sanctions to curb and hinder the capacities of post-colonial countries that aimed to break away from US-led imperialism. At the same time, the article has shown that sanctions are only one among many forms of imperialist warfare, operating in conjunction with open or covert strategies, including coup d'état, funding of opposition groups, direct bombings, etc.

Overall, the article suggests that the normative understanding of sanctions is symptomatic of how scholarship in the field of IR and IPE draws the link between the question of war and economic development in the Global South at large. There is as much insufficient focus on how consistent forms of warfare are used to uphold a global project—US-led imperialism, thus becoming actually existing constraints to the development of these Global South countries that pursue more autonomous policies. Consequently, it is advisable to start treating warfare as a key issue when assessing the contemporary global economic order that has consolidated under US leadership, as well as the political and economic development of peripheral countries of the world. As many countries of the South remain under the unjust pressure of US-led sanctions, such as China, Iran, Lebanon, Palestine, Syria, and Venezuela, scholars should rely on a more expansive and interdisciplinary approach that links questions of financial subordination, dependency and war to the nature of the imperialist domination of the Global South.

## Notes

1. This was the official name of the country, Libyan Arab Jamahiriya (meaning: Republic of the Masses, a term coined by Mu'ammarr Qaddafi), from 1977 to 2011.
2. The archival research was mostly undertaken in the US or online through the official database of the various government's agencies (i.e. CIA, Office of the Historian, UN library), or by using Wikileaks. As per the Libyan documents, archival research was also conducted in the US by accessing the database of major public and private libraries, including Columbia, Princeton, and Stanford universities. Unsurprisingly, the state of the archives in Libya remains very poor, as they were either destroyed by NATO bombs or dispersed after the fall of the government in 2011.
3. My special thanks go to Bikrum Gill for pointing me to this definition of imperialism in the work of Samir Amin.
4. This section was largely inspired by the incisive work of Patrick Higgins (2023) on the US war on the Syrian Arab Republic.
5. See <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76ve09p1/d18>
6. See <https://www.un.org/unispal/document/auto-insert-180327/>
7. See <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76ve09p1/d54>.
8. This term is borrowed from Vijay Prashad's discussion on the history of socialism (see Prashad and Hsiao 2022). More specifically, Prashad paraphrases Hegel to discuss the difficulties that countries of the South faced in building an alternative model of economic development to US-led imperialism. As short forms of constant experimentation, if compared to the historical weight of capitalism, these economic projects zig-zagged throughout history; that is, they were able to make

- progressive steps, while encountering numerous limitations, including the constant assault from imperialist forces.
9. For a longer and more detailed discussion of Libya's developmental limitations in the early decades, see (Capasso 2023; El-Fathaly and Palmer 1980).
  10. See <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76ve09p1/d24>.
  11. This was considered a splinter group of the Muslim Brotherhood, founded in Sudan in 1981 and operating in exile.
  12. According to ex-M15 officer David Shayler, the most important LIFG military operation, a failed attempt to assassinate Qadhafi in February 1996 that killed several of his bodyguards, had been financed by British intelligence to the tune of \$160,000. While these allegations have never been independently confirmed, the group gained a degree of tolerance from Western foreign intelligence services because it was an enemy of the Libyan regime (Ibrahim 2020). It is nonetheless confirmed that Britain allowed LIFG to develop a base of logistical support and fundraising on its soil, particularly in the city of Manchester (Brisard, Dasquie, and Madsen 2002; Machon 2005).
  13. Archival documents from the United Nations reveal the extent of the impact across several industrial sectors, including oil, transportation, and agriculture. See this collection of reports and letters submitted by the representative Libyan Arab Jamahiriya to the United Nations Secretary General (in both English and Arabic), such as S/23915/1992; S/24428/1992; S/1994/921; S/1995/226; S/1996/717; S/1997/404; S/1999/457. (See <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/143259>, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/148750>, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/162676>, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/175433>, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/221459>, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/234427?ln=en>, and <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/1490898?ln=en>.)

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