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Opinion

## The U.S. is still the world's policeman — this time, through sanctions

By **Nell Srinath** - February 21, 2023

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Last week, my [column](#) discussed how the violent nature of economic sanctions have harmed Syria's recovery from a series of earthquakes that have flattened infrastructure and killed over [46,000 people](#) in Syria and Turkey. Throughout the decade leading up to these devastating earthquakes, the people of Syria were have been in the middle of a civil war between the government of Bashar al-Assad and disparate rebel groups who still control the northwestern region of Idlib — the region [hit the hardest](#) by the tremors.

Although the Biden administration [announced](#) that the Treasury would temporarily lift sanctions on Syria "to speed up aid deliveries," some critics actually claim that sanctions have a net positive effect on the country. Wa'el Alzayat, a former U.S. State Department official, [holds](#) that sanctions keep Syrians relatively safe from the Assad government, which, according to Alzayat, would rearm if sanctions were relaxed further. The sheer irony of former State Department personnel hand wringing over the rearmament of the Syrian government is that both the Central Intelligence Agency and White House engaged in [arming Syrian opposition](#) groups during the civil war in a \$1 billion covert operation known as "Timber Sycamore."

Rehashing the "Syria debate" is an exhausting and largely unproductive endeavor, reducing a century of Western imperialism and West Asian/North African history to the actions of "the regime" or the CIA. If you can cut through the Twitter-level quality of discourse between self-proclaimed foreign policy "analysts" and "experts," though you'll find a necessary lesson on the extent to which the U.S. still occupies the role of policeman of the world.

References to America as a global police power appeared as early as the late 19th century, with the "[Roosevelt Corollary](#)" to the Monroe Doctrine promising that it was the United States' responsibility "to put an end to chronic unrest or wrongdoing in the Western Hemisphere." It is nonetheless debatable, however when exactly the U.S. appointed itself the world's policeman — an inherently patriarchal position, as [imperialism](#) and the denial of national economic sovereignty almost always [subjugate women the hardest](#).

One might go as far as to say that the nation and empire-building project of the United States has always been to enforce laws molded by and for Christian white supremacy and capitalist accumulation. Inherent to European colonization of the Americas was the enforcement of the law where colonial law had no recognized legitimacy by indigenous people, who governed — and continue to govern — their societies according to their own established order and traditions. As Cheryl Harris writes in "[Whiteness as Property](#)" for 1993 Harvard Law Review, "Indian forms of possession were perceived to be too ambiguous and unclear" to colonizers, thus legitimating the law over the latter over that of the former.

Further seizure of indigenous lands and Spanish colonies such as Puerto Rico, Cuba and the Philippines after the Spanish-American War granted it more jurisdiction over which to extend its imperial police powers. A particularly gross example of this is the 1948 "[gag law](#)" administered by colonial authorities in Puerto Rico to ban any display of the contemporary Puerto Rican flag, then a revolutionary nationalist symbol. It is both ironic and crudely apt that just a few years after the end of World War II, the U.S. brought to its colonies the same subjugation tactics used by the Japanese empire on political opponents in the [Philippines](#) and Nazi Germany on [Jewish people, Communists](#) and [LGBTQIA+ people](#).

More recent wars of aggression on Afghanistan and Iraq were unquestionably resource wars, but they were equally attempts by the United States to secure imperial police powers in the 21st century — why else would the U.S. [lie](#) about weapons of mass destruction in Iraq if not to prove it could "enforce" its hegemonic order? Although, upon pulling out of Afghanistan in summer of 2021, President Joe Biden boldly [asserted](#) that America is "no longer the world's policeman," the badge and gun are still very much active in the form of sanctions and military aid. The Biden administration has [strengthened](#) the gratuitous trade embargo on Cuba, [citing](#) "support for democracy and human rights" as its modus operandi. During an unexpected [visit](#) to Ukraine this week, Biden also announced an additional \$500 million in aid to the Ukrainian war effort against Russia, thereby prolonging the war for the benefit of arms manufacturers.

The economic and military capacities of the U.S. empire ensure that the "rules-based order" it undemocratically projects over the entire globe can effectively be enforced through monetary or military coercion. The United States has no morally or politically legitimate authority to police conflicts in and between other sovereign nations, let alone punish countries for their political and economic arrangements such as Cuba and Venezuela. Throughout history, the U.S. has used "moral" intervention as a guise for resource extraction and political leverage; but when the police drop a nuclear bomb on civilians or starve innocent persons through sanctions, who polices them?

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