



Mathurin Hybrid Initiative

Global Advisory Report

Syria's Ongoing Suffering Amidst International Sanctions

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Earthquake strikes:

Months after an earthquake of 7.8 magnitude struck Syria and neighbouring Türkiye on February 6th, 2023, medics in northwest Syria are still struggling to provide essential healthcare (Skyle, 2023). This disaster will continue to have lasting health and humanitarian impacts with current estimates indicating that over 50,000 people have died and over 100,00 people have been injured (Villasana, 2023). Thousands of buildings have been destroyed with millions displaced. Vulnerable populations including children, older people, and people living with disabilities have been severely impacted.

The earthquake has worsened an already challenging situation in a war-torn Syria. Infrastructure and health-care facilities have been damaged or destroyed (Villasana, 2023). Much of the Syrian population, already under human security pressures from the conflict, now find themselves without adequate food sources or healthcare. This is especially so in the impoverished northwest (Skyle, 2023). This region is non-regime, hosting those wishing to disassociate with the Assad regime. The accumulative effect of both twelve years of war and the earthquake have resulted in a barely functional healthcare system for the 4.2 million people in the northwest and as such, this region has remained heavily reliant on foreign aid (Skyle, 2023).

Compounding with these ongoing issues, the region is still being bombed by both Russia and Syria. Moreover, on July 11th Russia vetoed the UN security council, blocking further import of UN-governed humanitarian aid into the region. This continues as part of Russia's ongoing support of the Syrian regime, manifesting as the manipulation of humanitarian aid, weakening the anti-regime area. The Syrian regime also directly targeted healthcare workers during the peak of the conflict. The military campaign in 2019 bombed 70 health facilities. This was the situation before the earthquake (Skyle, 2023).

In the aftermath of the earthquake, many international support teams arrived only to find themselves delayed in accessing northwest Syria, taking up to eight days to enter the region. Groups, such as the Syrian Civil Defence, did what they could for those trapped yet they lacked the proper equipment to free all they encountered. Casualties are high and medical supplies are low. There is a growing mental health crisis and increasing rates of suicide as increasing food scarcity, lack of resources, and lack of healthcare blends with the traumatic rupture of the earthquake. In the northwest, 1.7 million people live in displacement camps. The region has had three times the casualties from the earthquake compared with regime-controlled areas.

Suffering and Sanctions:

Amongst the shockwaves, debate has been reignited over current U.S led sanctions imposed on Syria. Evidently, the globally coordinated humanitarian assistance for Syria failed to reach critical regions in time (Asghar, 2023). Bloated and ineffective bureaucracy and over-cautious interpretations of international law have stunted efforts. Since 1979, the U.S has labelled Syria as a State Sponsor of Terrorism (U.S Department of State, 2023). Sanctions were aggressively pursued following the March 2011 uprising. The U.S government aimed to deprive the regime of the resources it needed to continue violence against civilians and to pressure the Syrian regime to allow for a democratic transition as per the demands of the Syrian people (U.S Department of State, 2023). Further sanctions, executive order 13582, prohibited new investment in Syria, prohibited the exportation of sale of service to Syria, and barred the importation of petroleum and byproducts of Syrian origin. By June of 2020, congress passed the Caesar Syrian Civilian Protection Act (Asghar, 2023). Broadly speaking, this was designed to hinder the Syrian government in efforts to rebuild war-torn areas of the country. Unfortunately, despite certain exemptions for humanitarian aid, the Act has blocked or slowed crucial financial flow to aid channels. Furthermore, the sanctions have caused major disruptions to the Syrian economy, leading to a devalued currency, limited investment, and isolation from the global economy.

Compounding pressures on the Syrian population mean that around 90% of the population live in abject poverty.

A History of Suffering:

This is not the first time that U.S led sanctions – intended to damage a regime – have crippled civilian populations. In Iraq, after Operation Desert Storm, sanctions essentially disabled the economy. The Iraqi state was unable to raise money to purchase desperately needed food and medicine in the wake of a series of airstrikes on critical water infrastructures. Public health collapsed as reconstruction and humanitarian aid was blocked, perpetuating one of the worse public health and human security disasters of the late 20th century (Graham, 2019; Red Cross, 1999).

Sanctions have remained a vital arrow in the quiver of U.S foreign policy. Acting as a tool to coerce target nations into compliance by economic and political isolation, unilateral coercive measures restrict a nation or an organization’s ability to import goods - such as pharmaceuticals - and industrial parts vital to the maintenance of key infrastructure, from water systems to healthcare. These measures are often heralded as a peaceful alternative to war (Asghar, 2023). Yet, how peaceful can sanctions really be? Civilian populations typically suffer, as per Iraq and as per Venezuela – where one 2019 study by the Centre for Economic and Policy research reported 40,000 deaths resulting from U.S sanctions since 2017 (Asghar, 2023). Data continually shows that in sanctioned nations, civilian caloric intake decreases, infant mortality increases, and deaths from preventable deaths increases as well. Sanctions are unethical, ineffective, and immoral. If the global community truly values both human rights and international law, unilateral sanctions must end. In the continuing international efforts to help Syria rebuild and recover, its imperative human lives cease being geopolitical pawns.

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