

## EU Policy and the Humanitarian Crisis in Syria: Time for a Reassessment

by Amer Al-Hussein

The West is not only Donald Trump's USA; it is high time for Europe to think of its interests in Syria and reassess its stance and policy therein. While European actors retain marginal influence over the diplomatic and military tracks, the EU cannot abdicate its role and responsibilities given that instability and conflict in Syria and the broader region impact EU interests in a much more direct fashion than the US.

Periodical renewals of sanctions on Damascus have by now become an almost automatic affair, with minor debate on the objectives and effectiveness of such measures. Sanctions only further the humanitarian crisis, without bringing about desired reforms or changes in Syrian behaviour. Simply renewing sanctions due to an apparent lack of alternatives is no substitute for a real policy towards Syria, however difficult to develop that may be.

A decade of conflict and civil war has devastated the country's social

and economic fabric. While marginal humanitarian aid is being provided to Syrians through two border crossings (as opposed to the previous four) according to a last-minute agreement reached at the UN Security Council in January 2020, the agreement will soon expire. UN Security Council members have until 10 July to extend this provision allowing for cross-border humanitarian aid. Failure to do so will have abysmal effects, with UN officials warning of a catastrophe as Syrian's battle with famine, conflict and the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>1</sup>

Aside from the upcoming expiration deadline for this UN measure, both EU member states and the US have recently renewed restrictive measures against Damascus. On 28 May, EU sanctions originally introduced in 2011 were extended for one year. The restrictive measures include a ban on all oil

<sup>1</sup> UN News, *Syria: UN Relief Chief Appeals for Renewal of Lifesaving Cross-Border Aid Operation*, 19 May 2020, <https://news.un.org/en/node/1064432>.

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imports and freezing assets deposited by the Syrian Central Bank in the EU while also providing exemptions for humanitarian assistance, including food and medicine.<sup>2</sup> Three weeks later, the US's Caesar Act went into effect, imposing financial sanctions and travel bans on a number of Syrian officials and entities.<sup>3</sup>

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo underscored how the US's "campaign of economic and political pressure" will be implemented in "full cooperation with other like-minded nations, especially our European partners".<sup>4</sup> Given the implications of these new US measures, which also include secondary sanctions targeting any third country or entity doing business with Syrian authorities,<sup>5</sup> it is worth questioning whether such policies are still appropriate and effective for the pursuit of EU interests in Syria and the region.

Secondary US sanctions contained in the Caesar Act will hit struggling Lebanese businesses hard, given that

many of them have benefited from being the main finance and trade artery between Damascus and the rest of the world.<sup>6</sup> In Syria, tremors have been felt long before the measures went into effect. Food prices have increased since January at a rate equivalent to the whole period between the start of the conflict in 2011 and the end of 2019.<sup>7</sup> Meanwhile, even before the outbreak of the COVID-19 emergency, 80 per cent of the population is living below the poverty line.<sup>8</sup>

The impact of the new measures has been particularly felt in the health sector. Despite exemptions on medical items, businesses in Europe do not want to risk operating in Syria for the fear of sanctions violations,<sup>9</sup> and given the size of the Syrian market, it is simply not worth it. A Syrian medic complained to me about the lack of essential medicines including Bisoprolol (used to treat high blood pressure) due to "sanctions and

<sup>2</sup> European Council, *Syria: Sanctions Against the Regime Extended by One Year*, 28 May 2020, <https://europa.eu/!RX48Wc>.

<sup>3</sup> Ironically, ordinary Syrians' are already barred from visiting the US due to President Trump's travel ban.

<sup>4</sup> US Department of State, *Syria Caesar Act Designations*, 17 June 2020, <https://www.state.gov/syria-caesar-act-designations>.

<sup>5</sup> Crowel & Moring, *U.S. Government Issues First Designations under the Caesar Act as Part of Larger Set of Designations Targeting the Syrian Government*, 25 June 2020, <https://www.crowell.com/NewsEvents/AlertsNewsletters/all/US-Government-Issues-First-Designations-under-the-Caesar-Act-as-Part-of-Larger-Set-of-Designations-Targeting-the-Syrian-Government>.

<sup>6</sup> Timour Azhari, "US Caesar Act Could Bleed Lebanon for Years to Come", in *Al-Jazeera*, 19 June 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/ajimpact/caesar-act-bleed-lebanon-years-200618182518464.html>.

<sup>7</sup> See for instance, Zaki Mehchy, "On the Edge of Starvation: New Alarming Consumer Price Index Estimates for Syria", in *LSE Conflict Research Programme Blog*, 26 May 2020, <https://wp.me/paiqyU-jH>.

<sup>8</sup> Khalid Abu-Ismaïl, *Note on Poverty and Conflict in Arab States*, paper prepared for the Inter-agency Expert Group Meeting on Implementation of the Third United Nations Decade for the Eradication of Poverty (2018-2027), February 2020, <http://www.un.org/development/desa/dspd/wp-content/uploads/sites/22/2020/03/Abu-Ismaïl-paper.pdf>.

<sup>9</sup> Nabih Bulos, "For Many Syrians, 'Smart' Sanctions Are Anything But", in *Los Angeles Times*, 4 December 2018, <https://www.latimes.com/world/la-fg-syria-sanctions-20181212-story.html>.

poor policy coordination between government and medicine suppliers”.<sup>10</sup> The damage goes beyond medicines, as equipment in Syrian hospitals fall silent due to lack of spare parts and software update prohibitions, with certain components taking months to be routed to Damascus through neighbouring countries.

The US maintains that the objective of its policy is not “regime change” but a change in behaviour in Damascus.<sup>11</sup> As it stands this policy seems to be doing the polar opposite, effectively driving Damascus further eastward towards Iran, China and Russia. It is debatable whether such a scenario is in Europe’s long-term interest. Brussels and member state capitals should consequently seek to develop a real policy strategy for Syria, one that goes beyond an excessive ideological fixation on Assad and sanctions to also explore other pragmatic means of retaining leverage and influence in Syria and the broader region.

The US’s obsessive campaign against Damascus, Tehran and Moscow has abandoned all considerations for morality and has ended up hurting the very people Washington claims to be supporting. This is the case in Syria and Iran, but in Lebanon and Palestine too, where the Trump administration also implemented punitive financial measures. “In their rush to get Bashar [Al Assad] and [Ali] Khamenei, the US are forgetting who their friends are”,

<sup>10</sup> Author interview with a Syrian doctor, June 2020.

<sup>11</sup> “US Envoy in Syria Says Washington Wants Assad to Change Behavior, Not Necessarily Step Down”, in *Sputnik News*, 22 June 2020, <https://sptnkne.ws/CKVU>.

a Lebanese minister stated in a recent interview, adding that “their ideological drive leaves them numb to the suffering of real people”.<sup>12</sup>

To retain an ability to deploy the EU’s economic, technical and diplomatic toolbox and improve local realities in Syria while alleviating the humanitarian crisis and pursuing EU strategic goals in the region, the time has come to consider the possibility of low-level engagement with the Syrian government.

Such an outreach could be on an ad hoc economic and humanitarian basis, which differs from an all-out political engagement. This does not imply a complete overhaul of the existing EU sanctions regime, which has recently been renewed, but rather an effort to build on existing exemptions while paying attention not to confuse legitimate political and human rights concerns with an ideological antipathy towards Damascus and its regional and extra-regional backers.

Just as EU members have supported a renewal of the UN mechanism to provide cross-border aid to Syria that is due to expire on 10 July 2020,<sup>13</sup> opposing Russian efforts to force the UN to direct all aid through Damascus,

<sup>12</sup> Martin Chulov, “US ‘Caesar Act’ Sanctions Could Devastate Syria’s Flatlining Economy”, in *The Guardian*, 12 June 2020, <https://gu.com/p/e3afg>.

<sup>13</sup> Kelly Petillo and René Wildangel, “Politicised Aid: Why Europe Should Sustain Cross-Border Humanitarian Assistance to Northern Syria”, in *ECFR Commentaries*, 29 June 2020, [https://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary\\_politicised\\_aid\\_why\\_europe\\_should\\_sustain\\_cross\\_border\\_humanitar](https://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_politicised_aid_why_europe_should_sustain_cross_border_humanitar).

EU states also need to develop parallel policies capable of maintaining some degree of engagement (and leverage) vis-à-vis Syrians in government controlled territory.

Engagement could build on existing sanctions exemptions, and gradually be designed to go further than simply providing humanitarian aid, also seeking to create opportunities for Syrians to sustain their livelihoods. This could mean empowering local actors to carry out early recovery projects through direct support, using microfinance institutions to provide loans for farmers and farming cooperatives or supporting the capabilities of small medicine factories and knowledge to meet local needs.

Any movement in this direction should be coupled with a campaign by the EU to educate businesses on existing sanction exemptions, providing them with safe channels and assurances. These efforts could then gradually move to include relief on certain sanctions imposed on the Syrian financial sector to facilitate trade finance under the said exemptions. While many can be expected to object to such a strategy out of fear that support could fall into the wrong hands, an on-ground monitoring system could be implemented to mitigate these concerns.

A recent paper on EU policy in Syria suggests a rethinking of what a presence on the ground actually means. "Europe needs to recalibrate its insistence that in-country engagement – such as a diplomatic presence – legitimises Assad", noted Julien

Barnes-Dacey, director of the European Council on Foreign Relations' MENA programme.<sup>14</sup>

This approach could be easier than anticipated given that Greece has recently moved to re-engage Damascus.<sup>15</sup> While largely motivated by a shared antagonism towards Turkey, this move by Athens could provide an avenue to assess the viability and deliverability of micro recovery projects in Syria. A greater appreciation of Syria's local talents and resources could provide the foundation for a more effective EU resilience policy, mirroring the objectives outlined in the EU Global Strategy, by engaging with civil society and "staying on the ground long enough for peace to take root".<sup>16</sup>

Europe must avoid being held captive to the US policy and address its own interests in having a stable neighbourhood. Sanctions, especially when devoid of a broader strategy, have repeatedly failed to bring about real change or reform. Believing that increased suffering and hardship among the population in Syria can lead to political concessions from Damascus is unrealistic.<sup>17</sup> Idriss Jazairy, the UN

<sup>14</sup> Julien Barnes-Dacey, "Society Max: How Europe Can Help Syrians Survive Assad and Coronavirus", in *ECFR Policy Briefs*, 21 April 2020, [https://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/society\\_max\\_how\\_europe\\_can\\_help\\_syrians\\_survive\\_assad\\_and\\_coronavirus](https://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/society_max_how_europe_can_help_syrians_survive_assad_and_coronavirus).

<sup>15</sup> Paul Antonopoulos, "Greece Finally Reopens Relations with Syria", in *Greek City Times*, 6 May 2020, <https://greekcitytimes.com/2020/05/06/greece-finally-reopens-relations-with-syria>.

<sup>16</sup> European External Action Service, *A Global Strategy for the European Union*, 10 August 2018, <https://europa.eu/WP88vv>.

<sup>17</sup> Raymond Hinnebusch, "The Battle over Syria's Reconstruction", in *Global Policy*, Vol.



rapporteur on sanctions described using sanctions to protect civilians as trying “to extinguish a blaze with fire rather than water”.<sup>18</sup>

The Caesar Act serves as an example of the US’s real objectives in Syria and differs significantly in scope compared to existing EU and western sanctions. US policies relate less to Syria or peace itself than to the issue of punishing Washington’s main antagonists in the region: Iran and Russia. Pursuing an incremental approach to engagement with Damascus would be more beneficial to European interests.<sup>19</sup>

This measured reassessment of EU policy also needs to be considered within the broader context of acrimony within the transatlantic relationship. With tensions simmering over Iran and Palestine, a concerted European effort to reassess its policy strategy in Syria would not only improve the EU’s image as an independent and principled actor that is “here to stay” in the region, but could also help convince Washington to implement a more balanced and sensitive policy vis-à-vis the Middle East.

While such limited forms of engagement will take time to develop, a “business as usual” approach to sanctions and restrictive measures on Damascus coupled with marginal

humanitarian aid cannot represent an effective alternative. Developing creative solutions to overcome this impasse by exploiting existing sanctions exceptions and building an incremental strategy of low-level engagement with Damascus that prioritises Syrian societal resilience could represent the broad contours of a more effective and pragmatic approach to the Syrian conflict.

Amidst hunger and famine, the EU needs to re-focus on Syria, exploring pragmatic means of engagement while not compromising on its principles. The abysmal humanitarian crisis in its neighbourhood can no longer be ignored, and given the serious implications of the US’s Caesar Act on Lebanon and others, the EU must begin exploring such avenues now, before a new escalation breaks out or spillovers from Syria again reach Europe’s borders.

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11, No. 1 (February 2020), p. 113-123, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1758-5899.12779>.

<sup>18</sup> Aron Lund, Briefing: Just How ‘Smart’ Are Sanctions on Syria, in *The Hew Humanitarian*, 25 April 2019, <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/node/260678>.

<sup>19</sup> Julien Barnes-Dacey, “Society Max: How Europe Can Help Syrians Survive Assad and Coronavirus”, cit.

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