

June 17, 2020

Dear Member of Congress:

Today, as additional U.S. sanctions on Syria take effect as a result of the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act, we write to raise our concerns about the impact that broad U.S. sanctions are having on the civilians of Syria. We are also concerned by the destabilizing effect of the Syria sanctions on Lebanon and the surrounding region. As church agencies and organizations, some of which have long-standing relationships within Syria, we share your deep concern for the well-being of the Syrian people. But we urge you to examine the impact of U.S. policies on the civilians they are intended to protect and support.

In recent months, the prices of basic commodities such as food and fuel have skyrocketed in Syria. The reasons for this are complex and include the Lebanese financial crisis, COVID-related shutdowns and policy decisions by Syria's government. But sanctions have also played a key role. As the World Food Programme reported in March, "The informal exchange rate has now depreciated by 88% compared to November 2018, when the sanctions intensified. As a result the prices of food and non-food items have risen across Syria."¹ Since the issuing of that report in March, the Syrian pound has lost even more value.

As a result of the increased prices, food insecurity is rising in Syria as families struggle to put food on the table. In late May, the United Nations' Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs reported, "Prior to the COVID-19 crisis, an estimated 80 percent of people in Syria already lived below the poverty line...9.3 million people in Syria are now considered food insecure; an increase of 1.4 million in the past six months."² Rising fuel prices have made it difficult for families to heat their homes in the winter, to fill their cars with gasoline, and to operate generators—an important source of electricity, with so much of Syria's infrastructure destroyed.

Currently, U.S. sanctions on Syria contain humanitarian exemptions, but they are inadequate. Many humanitarian items require a specific license, which can be time-consuming to obtain and delay the implementation of projects. In addition, banks and suppliers are hesitant to engage in any transactions related to Syria, including for items such as food and medicines that are clearly covered by the general license.

With implementation of the Caesar Act, Congress has also directed the Administration to develop a strategy to deter reconstruction in government-held parts of Syria where civilians have been forcibly displaced. We are concerned that this stance will, in effect, deny the provision of basic services to civilians who are living in government-held parts of Syria. This will make it more difficult for Syrians who want to return home to eventually do so and exacerbate instability throughout the region. As a February report by the Congressional Research Service indicated, "A lack of reconstruction, particularly of critical infrastructure, could delay the country's recovery

¹ [Syria: Review on the impact of rising food prices, World Food Programme, March 2020](#),

² [OCHA Syrian Arab Republic: COVID-19 Humanitarian Update No. 1, May 30, 2020](#)

and exacerbate the legacy effects of the conflict on the Syrian population, with negative implications for the country's security and stability.”³

We stand ready to work with Members of Congress to support a more constructive way forward. Fundamentally, the political crisis in Syria will require a political solution, led by Syrians and reflecting the commitments laid out in UN Security Council Resolution 2254 to “Syria’s unity, independence, territorial integrity, and non-sectarian character, to ensuring continuity of governmental institutions, to protecting the rights of all Syrians, regardless of ethnicity or religious denomination, and to ensuring humanitarian access throughout the country and to the territorial integrity of Syria.” We urge strong U.S. support for this political process.

We encourage Members of Congress to assess the cost and impact of broad economic sanctions on Syria’s civilians and on the stability of the region as a whole. When used, sanctions should be limited and narrowly target particular individuals who are violating human rights norms. At a minimum, the U.S. should expand the general license to include items related to agriculture and food security, water supply, civilian energy infrastructure, including fuel for generators, and health-related needs such as medical equipment. To address overcompliance by banks, the U.S. should also consider supporting proposals to facilitate humanitarian transactions.⁴

Finally, we encourage Members of Congress to refrain from sanctioning efforts to meet basic human needs in government-held parts of Syria. This includes the rebuilding of homes, schools, health clinics and hospitals, water and sanitation infrastructure, electrical grids and roads. Long-term, a stable and healthy Syria and surrounding region is in the best interests of everyone, including the U.S.

We recognize that the situation in Syria is complex and defies easy solutions. But as the U.S. implements Syria policy, we urge that the well-being and needs of the most vulnerable people in Syria and throughout the region—who have suffered so greatly as a result of the war—be at the center of our concern. The U.S. remains the largest single donor responding to the humanitarian crisis in Syria, and the Syrian people have historically admired and respected the American people’s generosity and kindness. We should not put that goodwill at risk by supporting policies that increase hardship for the Syrian people.

Thank you for considering these requests.

American Friends Service Committee
Christian Reformed Church Office of Social Justice
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
Global Ministries of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and United Church of Christ
Mennonite Central Committee U.S.
Presbyterian Church (USA)
The United Methodist Church – General Board of Church and Society

³ [Congressional Research Service, “Armed Conflict in Syria: Overview and U.S. Response,” Feb. 12, 2020](#)

⁴ [Report of the Special Rapporteur on the negative impact of unilateral coercive measures on the enjoyment of human rights on his mission to the Syrian Arab Republic](#)