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## How Caesar will impact Syrian civil society

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al-Jumhuriya Collective  
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Al-Jumhuriya asks five prominent Syrian civil society figures how they expect their work to be affected by the new US sanctions package known as the Caesar Act.

Last month's [new US sanctions](#) in Syria, commonly known as the Caesar Act, have sparked widespread discussion of their possible political, economic, and geostrategic

ramifications. Less examined are the potential consequences for the groups and individuals working hardest to bring about a brighter future for the war-wracked country. Al-Jumhuriya asked five prominent Syrian civil society figures how they expected the Caesar Act to affect their work. Their responses are presented below.

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Oula Ramadan, Founder and Executive Director of the Badael (“Alternatives”) Foundation

There has been no change in the core priorities for which we’ve been working over the past years. These priorities include achieving a political transition without Bashar al-Assad in the transitional period; demanding the release of detainees and forcibly disappeared persons—a demand I see as more urgent now than ever; and supporting the tentative first steps towards justice that have been taken in Europe, which represent a sliver of hope for Syrians that justice may be attained.

As for the Caesar Act sanctions, they put me personally in a dilemma. I’m generally in favor of sanctions on the regime in order to weaken its power and cronies, but things are now more fragile, because one can’t deny that the Caesar sanctions primarily target state institutions and businessmen in a country where there is no private sector in practice, because the economy is controlled entirely by the regime and its affiliates, with no possibility for individuals to create independent businesses. This means it will be individuals and ordinary citizens in Syria who pay the price of these sanctions.

Of course, this isn't to say the Caesar Act will cause the coming economic collapse, for that collapse began ten years ago, as a result of the regime abusing the country's resources, using them to kill its people. Yet we face a deep dilemma, because the Caesar Act is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it pressures the regime and undermines the economic support it receives from Russia, Iran, and other states normalizing the regime and supporting it in the reconstruction phase. On the other hand, it's the Syrian people who will pay the price of this economic meltdown, which will threaten their food security in particular.

The Syrian regime has spent years peddling propaganda to the effect that Syria's economic collapse is due to Western economic sanctions, while we know well that the regime has used all its resources to wage war against the Syrian people. On another note, we must stress that the effects of the Caesar sanctions will only appear in the medium and long terms. Yet, from the moment the sanctions came into effect, people have gone into a panic, showing clearly the psychological and social impact of these sanctions on ordinary Syrian citizens, which is currently greater than their economic impact. This requires thinking about other ways to communicate with Syrians living inside Syria; to help families and individuals supplement their income; and to propose alternative ways of lessening the severity of the economic collapse at the level of everyday living necessities.

I think the key points to mention in this regard are facilitating the entry of humanitarian aid into Syria, and boosting support for the humanitarian sector. This in turn is a major challenge, especially after the Covid-19 crisis and its economic effects, which will push donor countries to

prioritize their own internal crises, rather than help poorer countries suffering conflicts and human rights violations.

Maria Al Abdeh, Executive Director of Women Now for Development

Today, our greatest concerns pertain to our relationships with banking institutions. Since 2014, we've been suffering from banks' fears of any bank account linked to Syria. We expect these measures to become even more severe, as these institutions may move to close the accounts of Syrian humanitarian and civil organizations, in accordance with the "zero-risk" rule such institutions follow.

Add to that the restrictions we face from neighboring countries, which makes transferring cash into Syria much more difficult, plus the collapse in the value of the Syrian and Lebanese pounds, which greatly affects the financing of development projects for Syrians.

For us, the priorities today are to work to protect civilians from the consequences of the Caesar Act sanctions, and to protect the work of independent humanitarian institutions, including with legal protection, given the fear that humanitarian aid and many other activities in Syria will become targets for new mafias, preventing them from reaching the Syrians who need them. Syrian institutions bear the greatest legal burden with respect to financial transfers into Syria, as we must explain these transfers to funders, and to the state or states through which the funds pass.

We, the Syrian civil and humanitarian institutions that

operate from outside the country, have a great moral responsibility. We must be clear in our rejection of any sanctions that affect civilians, and demonstrate that our work and vision are governed by equal human rights for all. We oppose the idea of civilians paying the price of the regime's criminality.

As for programming our activities inside Syria and with Syrians, we must work to find job opportunities for both women and men. Personally, I fear the impact of the neoliberal sanctions model on the situation in Syria, which will lead to it being treated as though it were a humanitarian crisis, when for us the core issue is the human right to a dignified life, not merely preventing starvation. Our institutions are also highly concerned about the impact of the sanctions on women, in terms of diminished job opportunities and rising violence, as happened in Iraq in the 1990s.

Dr. Abdulrahman al-Haj, researcher and political activist

Syrians should be actively involved in implementing the law, rather than playing a passive spectator role. This US law, which was adopted with input from Syrians, needs to involve both Syrians and the US administration. The Americans should consult Syrians regularly about where to direct the sanctions. For their part, Syrians must steer the sanctions as much as they can towards the pillars of the regime, its financiers, and war profiteers, while sparing all other Syrians the harmful consequences of the law's implementation as much as possible, by monitoring the application of the law in practice and providing assistance

in steering it.

Groups active in the public realm, especially civil society organizations, can play an important role in this.

There must be involvement of this kind in the implementation of the law, instead of simply anticipating and awaiting the results. The law is an important opportunity to weaken the regime and its allies, though it should not be relied on to topple it. Syrians should consider this an opportunity to be seized, by reorganizing themselves in preparation for a coming phase that will likely be to their advantage. The regime has reached a military impasse in Idlib, lacks resources, and is now under additional pressure. These factors point to a new phase.

The work of civil society organizations must also be intensified and developed to face the repercussions of the Caesar Act on everyday life as much as possible. There is a widespread feeling of solidarity with all Syrians, especially those living under regime control. What's required today is to adapt to this new phase, in order to mitigate the effects of the law's application on the general Syrian public.

Mazen Gharibah, activist, researcher, and member of the Constitutional Committee

The Caesar Act is a political decision taken by the US administration, and therefore the influence of Syrian actors on its form and application is very limited, if not non-existent, contrary to what many of us believe. I think its direct impact on humanitarian work will be limited to increasing the logistical difficulties related to bank transfers

and financial transactions for Syrian entities working in the humanitarian field. This is not new, as such obstacles existed before the law was issued, but they will increase in the coming period. By comparison, the direct impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, in terms of reduced financial and logistical aid from major donors, will be greater than that of the Caesar Act on humanitarian work.

The economic collapse in Syria today cannot be blamed solely on sanctions. There's no doubt that sanctions have played a role in the unprecedented depreciation of the Syrian pound, but the primary reasons for this collapse are widespread corruption; conflicts within the structure of the patronage network tied to the head of the regime; failed monetary policies adopted by the Syrian Central Bank; the squandering of all state revenues in the service of the regime's war machine; and of course the wipeout of fundamental infrastructure as a result of years of war.

In my view, the current priorities for humanitarian work and political activity should focus first on the economic collapse and its humanitarian impact. Syrian actors must go directly to all those affected in all Syrian regions, including civilians in areas under regime control, to try and work on lessening the economic burden. Microfinance, for example, could support development projects generating financial returns.

As for the political process, the Syrian regime today is at its weakest, and the Caesar Act has blocked the path of its direct re-normalization, and made it impossible to start reconstruction without a real political transition guaranteeing accountability, transitional justice, and the safe and voluntary return of displaced Syrians. This may provide an important opportunity to raise pressure on the

regime to engage in a real political process, focusing first on the release of all detainees in official prisons, as well as unofficial ones run by the intelligence branches. This pressure might also help reactivate negotiations in line with UN Security Council Resolution 2254, including the constitutional aspect, in a manner that reinvigorates the Geneva political process.

The Caesar Act, and the other sanctions that preceded it, were imposed for clear reasons and with clear conditions, including the release of detainees and the achievement of a political transition in Syria. The lifting of these and other sanctions is thus fundamentally dependent on meeting these conditions, and this is what the Syrian street must push for. I believe the recent protest movement in Suwayda province is a clear indication of Syrians' political demands, closely interlinked with the present economic situation.

Fadi Al-Dairi, co-founder of Hand in Hand for Syria, and member of the Syrian NGO Alliance's steering committee

The sanctions were well-designed to target specific individuals and entities that have contributed to crimes against humanity. Yet the sanctions' implementation is another matter, as we will face the new problem of increased scrutiny by banks of the movement of money towards NGOs working in Syria, in order to ensure the funds transferred will indeed be spent on the objectives declared by the NGOs. This heightened scrutiny will cause intolerable delays for the recipients of these funds, while also adding another burden to the banks themselves. Since the latter make lower profits working with NGOs than they do with



private companies, many will prefer to simply close our accounts, deeming the extra work not worth the hassle and risk.

We need to deliver a clear message to the Syrian community that things will get worse before they start getting better, and that the way we work will change considerably. For example, there is a struggle now to fund current operations, let alone meet future needs, in addition to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on donors, whether individuals or governments, which of course will also have consequences for us.

Donors are well aware of the humanitarian needs and challenges, and our message is linked to the core issues today, such as human rights documentation, detainees, justice, and accountability. These are some of the messages of which we'd like to remind political decision-makers.

The Syrian crisis is a protection crisis. Civilians need only be given a safe space and hope for peace, and they will be able to persevere and survive, no matter how little support they receive.