



ماعت للسلام والتنمية وحقوق الإنسان  
Maat For Peace, Development, and Human Rights



# **No Scape from Hell**

## **The Impact of Unilateral Coercive Measures on Human Rights in Syria**

PREPARED BY: MOHAMED MOKHTAR

EDITED BY: SHARIF ABD ALHAMID

## Preamble

The Syrian Arab Republic suffers from the spread of conflicts, disputes, civil war and fragile conditions resulting from the faltering paths of political settlement, especially after the events of the so-called Arab Spring, while violent conflicts caused by the proliferation of armed groups increased to an unprecedented level during 2021 and the beginning of 2022. As such, the unilateral and coercive measures imposed by foreign countries on the Syrian government would only increase the suffering of civilians. Although the international humanitarian law imposed restrictions on interference in the affairs of states, many countries continued to impose more economic and political sanctions on the Syrian government, which would exacerbate the deadly consequences they are subjected to, particularly at the level of economic and social rights such as the right to food, the right to development and the right to work. 12 million people suffer from food insecurity, and 14.6 million Syrians need humanitarian assistance in 2022.

Amidst all this, over-compliance with the sanctions by companies and banking agencies puts the Syrian people under constant suffering because of the fear of these companies from dealing with the Syrian authorities, including commercial entities and civil society organizations, which results in a shortage of basic needs for citizens. Despite the exception of humanitarian and medical services and the humanitarian needs of the Syrian people from sanctions, many banks and companies, including pharmaceutical and medical ones around the world, are excessively complying with the sanctions for fear of possible penalties that may be imposed on them. Therefore, they refuse to finance exempt trade or conduct parallel transactions with all Syrian commercial entities, which ultimately leads to stopping the commercial activity of the various companies that provide basic services to citizens.

It is worth noting that families across Syria face unprecedented levels of inability to access basic services as well as a lack of medical and educational services, due to the continued imposition of coercive unilateral measures by major countries on the Syrian government, as well as excessive compliance by the major companies and institutions to the sanctions imposed for fear of sanctions being applied to them. For this reason, these sanctions have become a collective punishment that constitutes unfathomable suffering for all segments of the Syrian people.

## Serious consequences: impacts of unilateral coercive measures on the Syrian people

The years 2020 and 2021 manifested the suffering of the Syrian people against the background of the faltering economy, due to the economic sanctions and coercive measures imposed by the major powers such as the United States of America and the European Union on the Syrian government, which had a disastrous impact on the Syrian economy and the Syrian citizens. These measures affected the Syrians' food purchasing power due to the financial restrictions imposed on various institutions, in addition to hampering the purchase of medicines and medical equipment. The sanctions have contributed to increasing the suffering of all segments of the Syrian people, especially the most vulnerable groups, such as children, women, the elderly and people with disabilities.

In this manner, the unilateral coercive measures have damaged the ability of the Syrian government to purchase foodstuffs and basic needs from the international market, and to pay import costs due to financial and banking restrictions on Syrian national economic institutions and banks, in addition to the inability to import dual-use items related to water, sanitation, health, and public services related to electricity and transportation due to the ban imposed on them. It is worth noting that the Syrian pound has declined significantly, which put additional pressure on the purchasing power of Syrians for various commodities, as the rise of some types of commodities reached about 100%, and others by about 50%, in addition to a shortage in the basic resources and the increase in inflation<sup>1</sup>. All this increases the physical and mental stress of citizens due to the lack of food and basic services necessary for living, which negatively affects the ability of citizens to confront the Coronavirus and puts the lives of many of them at risk<sup>2</sup>.

While the oil embargo has become the biggest challenge of the economy and the worst impacting the lives of citizens, in light of the outbreak of the Coronavirus inside Syria, some services that depend on the provision of electricity are largely disrupted due to the inability to obtain fuel against the background of the imposed ban, while this matter has contributed to an increase in the cost of transportation at times, which has led to a significant increase in the prices of some basic household

---

<sup>1</sup> وباء كورونا والمشهد السوري المخاطر والاحتمالات، مركز الإمارات للسياسات ، أبريل ٢٠٢٠ ، <https://bit.ly/31Fiypv>  
<sup>2</sup> تأثير كورونا على الاقتصاد السوري وفرص الاستفادة من الأزمة، جريدة المغرب ، مارس ٢٠٢٠ ، <https://bit.ly/2XKwbbv>

and food items such as gas, rice and milk<sup>3</sup>. In this context, the Corona crisis, along with the financial and economic sanctions imposed on the Syrian government and related to coercive measures, contributed to the collapse of the exchange rate of the Syrian pound, which amounted to 2,300 pounds against the dollar, which made it difficult to secure food for citizens<sup>4</sup>.

The matter has also become more complicated in light of the restriction in the import of materials and reagents needed for tests of water, sanitation, and electricity services, which contributed to the spread of the Coronavirus due to the lack of basic services such as clean water and sanitation as important tools for citizens to limit the spread of the disease<sup>5</sup>. It is worth noting that the sanctions undermine the ability of the Syrian government on providing basic goods and services to citizens<sup>6</sup>, the Central Bank of Syria was unable to provide funds to purchase basic commodities for the Syrian people due to the ban on its foreign currency reserves, which increases with the suffering of citizens in light of the spread of the Coronavirus<sup>7</sup>.

Although the health sector in Syria is not directly targeted by economic sanctions, this did not protect the sector from being affected by the sanctions imposed on other sectors. For example, the clampdown increased more on pharmaceutical industrial facilities, due to the increase in the prices of raw materials by a rate ranging between 20-70% and the output of the increase in the exchange rate of the local currency on the background of the imposed economic sanctions, with the Syrian government being forced to import from various institutions and companies other than the ones it was dealing with before the outbreak of the Coronavirus, due to the suspension of some factories in China and the suspension of India and China exporting a large and important part of the raw materials, which are the companies and factories that the Syrian government was dealing with in obtaining the raw materials needed for the manufacturing process at low prices, and then the matter contributed to the shortage of medicines available in the Syrian

---

<sup>3</sup> Iran, NKorea, Syria: How sanctions are hindering coronavirus response

<sup>4</sup> أثر جائحة فيروس كورونا على الاقتصاد السوري في مناطق السيطرة الثلاث، وطن، <https://bit.ly/2Cd4rof>

<sup>5</sup> GLOBAL HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE PLAN unocha APRIL ٢٠٢٠ <https://bit.ly/3iDgJWP>

<sup>6</sup> SOCIETY MAX: HOW EUROPE CAN HELPSYRIANS SURVIVE ASSAD ANDCORONAVIRUS. Ecfr. April 2020 <https://bit.ly/2PFMhi4>

<sup>7</sup> COVID-19 Lift sanctions 'bringing suffering and dea , urge UN rights experts . .un news . August 2020 <https://bit.ly/31QODAD>



market, with the increasing suffering of the Syrian people, many of whom suffer from chronic diseases, and the spread of the Coronavirus has increased this matter<sup>8</sup>.

In this context, the economic sanctions imposed on petroleum products and oil supplies have affected the ability of medical bodies' transportation and hospital infrastructure, which often rely on oil-powered electric generators on their ability to respond to the Coronavirus. For example, there may not be enough oil for ambulances to deliver various cases to hospitals, while ventilation devices and ambulances for emergency transportation were affected, while the ban on dual-use goods such as chlorine contributed to the increase in the spread of the Coronavirus in Syria. It is worth noting that chlorine can be used in the manufacture of bombs and as a very effective substance in the prevention of the Coronavirus, which helps prevent infection<sup>9</sup>. The previous context shows how various economic sanctions can affect the ability of the health sector to confront the Coronavirus, which increases its spread and suffering of citizens.

### **Over compliance with unilateral coercive sanctions and their impact on the economic and social rights of Syrians**

Families across Syria are facing unprecedented levels of inability to access basic services as well as a lack of medical and educational services, and the destruction of civilian infrastructure for facilities, especially residential ones, all of which are the effects of the devastating protracted war, what makes the matter even more difficult is the difficulty of unilateral coercive sanctions impeding citizens' access to basic services, in particular the right to health, due to companies' excessive compliance with the economic sanctions imposed by states on the Syrian government, for fear of imposing sanctions on them.

In the midst of this, the economic sanctions imposed by the United States on Syria under many laws, especially the Caesar Act, pose a threat to the health of its residents by radically limiting the country's ability to import medicines, as well as the shortage of medical equipment in many hospitals due to the fear of medical companies from supplying them to Syria in order not to be affected by the sanctions. For example, during the spread of the Covid-19 epidemic, the coercive sanctions

---

<sup>8</sup> How economic sanctions negatively affect the health sector in Syria: a case study of the pharmaceutical industry  
مرجع سابق ذكره

<sup>9</sup> Iran, NKorea, Syria: How sanctions are hindering coronavirus responseمرجع سابق ذكره

imposed on Syria often hindered its ability to deal with the epidemic, as there was a severe shortage of personal protective equipment and oxygen machines, as well as ventilation devices and various medical supplies required to combat the epidemic<sup>10</sup>.

In the meantime, the testimonies of Syrian medical workers indicate the unwillingness of medical companies to sell the required medical equipment to Syrian hospitals and companies, for fear of the various repercussions of excessive economic sanctions on Syria to affect these companies despite the exception of activities related to civilians from the sanctions. According to the testimonies, there is a shortage of diagnostic equipment such as MRI machines, CT scanners, cardiac catheters and coronary stents along with dialysis facilities are not readily available to cover all patients. On the other hand, banks refuse to open credit to import urgently needed healthcare goods, amid fears that sanctions may affect their business, as shipping companies refuse to deliver medical equipment to Syria, and large companies refuse to send equipment, medicines, ambulances, or even baby formula. In contrast, many physicians are still unable to access modern medical information due to sanctions related restrictions, including lack of access to the internet easily and the inability to travel to attend international medical conferences<sup>11</sup>. Hence, these examples show how excessive compliance with coercive sanctions harms the ability of Syrian patients to enjoy their human rights, especially the right to health.

Meanwhile, the US Caesar Act imposes secondary sanctions on companies of any nationality that deal with sanctioned actors in multiple sectors of the Syrian economy, particularly energy and construction. Therefore, the results of the law become disastrous for citizens, as the law works to develop fear among operating companies in the construction sectors from entering the Syrian market, so they are reluctant to participate in supporting the rehabilitation of the war-damaged Syrian infrastructure, from damaged water networks to assistance in rebuilding schools or constructing various housing, which affects the citizens' right to housing as well as access to basic services<sup>12</sup>.

---

<sup>10</sup> Conflict, sanctions and the struggles of Syrians for food security in the shadow of the UN Food Systems Summit 2021. Reliefweb. <https://bit.ly/3HkwvBA>

<sup>11</sup> Caesar Act sanctions are crippling Syria's beleaguered health sector. Middleeasteye. July 2020. <https://bit.ly/35gmBRS>

<sup>12</sup> WILL MORE SYRIA SANCTIONS HURT THE VERY CIVILIANS THEY AIM TO PROTECT? Warontherocks. JUNE 2020 <https://bit.ly/3HiQwZc>

In the same context, the sanctions affect the right to access educational services for Syrians in addition to the right to information. The sanctions hinder the import of digital devices such as laptops and radios, which are all important tools for receiving education, and their importance increased during the spread of the Covid 19 epidemic when they were relied on to provide digital educational programs<sup>13</sup>.

On the other hand, many of the sanctions refer to the imposition of sancations on entities that knowingly sell or provide goods, services, technology, information, or any other support that greatly facilitates the maintenance or expansion of the Syrian government's domestic production of natural gas or petroleum, this has affected citizens' access to basic services from electricity to gas, etc. As testimonies of citizens in Latakia confirm their inability to obtain basic services necessary to continue their lives due to the lack of provision of these services by the government, which is related in part to the restrictions imposed on expanding local production of natural gas and petroleum<sup>14</sup>.

### **The impact of over compliance with sanctions on the work of civil society organizations operating in Syria**

The challenges facing civil society organizations operating in Syria have increased, and threaten the continuity of their activities and work and their ability to enhance their role, both in providing humanitarian services to those affected by the conflict on the one hand, and documenting human rights violations on the other. On top of these challenges comes the excessive compliance by banking institutions with the unilateral coercive sanctions imposed on the Syrian government, and the consequent prevention of the arrival of funding and donations necessary for the continuation of the activities of these organizations, This is in addition to the delay in the arrival of grants and various logistical materials necessary for the continuation of the work of these organizations, due to restrictions stemming from the excessive response to the unilateral coercive sanctions imposed on the Syrian government.

Since the beginning of the conflict, organizations working in the Syrian issue have faced increasing obstacles in their dealings with banks and financial institutions at various levels. Some of these organizations have canceled their projects because

---

<sup>13</sup> Sanctions and their Impact on Children. Unicef. <https://uni.cf/3hdlZ3s>

<sup>14</sup> As ordinary Syrians struggle with economic crisis, questions over looming sanctions under 'Caesar Act'. Syriauntold. February 2020. <https://bit.ly/3JU0faq>

they were unable to reconcile their conditions to deal with various financial institutions, it was also refused to deal with other organizations because of their work in Syria without clear reasons, but they work in Syria, which are subject to sanctions imposed by many countries<sup>15</sup>.

In this way, it is estimated that nearly a third of the funds allocated to Syria are held in an almost constant state of limbo due to obstacles in the correspondent banking system. Many facts confirm the negative effects of sanctions on the work of civil society organizations. In March 2020, it was refused to open a bank account in Sweden for an NGO working on Syrian refugees in Turkey. However, a number of Syrian NGOs faced different types of difficulties in France in order to open a bank account or make money transfers. The analysis of these incidents confirms the intransigence and reluctance of banks such as the British Natwest Bank and the Bank of Scotland (RBS) for dealing with Syrian human rights organizations <sup>16</sup>.

In the meantime, many humanitarian and human rights organizations were late in providing services due to a number of things related to the impact of unilateral coercive sanctions on them. For example, donors did not allow humanitarian organizations in Syria to repair damaged sewage systems due to fear of unilateral coercive sanctions<sup>17</sup>.

## Recommendations

In general, it can be said that whatever the option the sanctions may take during the coming period, most opinions agree that the Syrian residents bear the brunt of those sanctions, particularly the over compliance with them by companies and financial institutions and the impact on the economic and social rights of Syrian citizens, such as the right to health. Based on the foregoing, Maat for Peace, Development and Human Rights recommends the following: -

- The need to stop imposing coercive unilateral measures on the Syrian government because of their negative effects on the rights of citizens.

---

<sup>15</sup> العقوبات المقنعة: المبالغة في الامتنال للعقوبات الدولية وأثرها على عمل المنظمات الإنسانية العاملة في الشأن السوري، impact،

<https://bit.ly/3LZy1fU>

<sup>16</sup> العقوبات المقنعة: المبالغة في الامتنال للعقوبات الدولية وأثرها على عمل المنظمات الإنسانية العاملة في الشأن السوري، مرجع سابق ذكره

<sup>17</sup> Sanctions and their Impact on Children. Ibid



- The necessity of providing food commodities and medicines to the various hospitals, as well as completing the medical equipment that contradicts them without restriction or condition.
- The necessity of strengthening Arab solidarity and discussing the return of the Syrian government to the League of Arab States to confront the extremely difficult humanitarian situation inside Syria, where 12 million people suffer from food insecurity, and 14.6 million Syrians need humanitarian aid in 2022.
- The necessity of allowing all companies to operate inside Syria, especially those that provide medical services, without fear of punishment.
- The need to establish an international mechanism through which civil society organizations are allowed to receive various donations without the various restrictions established due to sanctions, provided that this mechanism is under the supervision of the United Nations.