

I. Earthquake Response

Earthquake Shows Why U.S. Syria Sanctions Must Be Overturned

by Carl Osgood

Feb. 10—The devastating earthquake that struck southern Türkiye and northwestern Syria Feb. 6 has underscored the cruelty of the U.S. sanctions regime and the 12-year terrorist war waged against Syria. The contrast between the international responses to Türkiye and Syria is striking. The devastation in southern Türkiye, where the epicenter of the quake was located, can't be

The sanctions, exemplified by the “Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act of 2019,” signed by then President Donald Trump, make the United States complicit in the accelerated death rates that have plagued Syria both before the earthquake and now since. James Jeffrey, Special Representative for Syrian Engagement during the last two years of the Trump Administra-



VOA/Mahmut Bozarlan

The daunting task of rescue from the extensive damage wrought by the Feb. 9, 2023 earthquake in Türkiye.

exaggerated, but there are no economic sanctions on Türkiye, and there's been no war there. Syria, on the other hand, has been the target of a regime-change policy from Washington and London which has destroyed much of the country's economic infrastructure, impoverished much of its population, and has resulted in a *de facto* partition by occupation of parts of the country by military forces of both Türkiye and the United States.

tion, admitted during a live event hosted by the Middle East Institute (MEI) in June 2020, moderated by MEI director Charles Lister, that the goal of the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act is to “make it clear to anyone who wants to rebuild Assad's Syria that that cannot happen without Caesar sanctions.” The goal is a government in Damascus agreeable to the United States.

In a PBS [interview](#) on March 8, 2021, he further ad-

mitted that the Al Qaeda-linked terrorist group Jabhat al-Nusra, also known as Hayat Tahrir al Sham (HTS), which controls much of Idlib Province, serves as a U.S. asset.

In short, the sanctions are an expression of the fact that U.S. policy toward Syria has been and remains one of regime change.

Sanctions Hinder Earthquake Response

Independent journalist Vanessa Beeley, who resides in Damascus, told *RT* in a video interview some hours after the earthquake that Syrian emergency services have been suffering from the lack of supply of equipment because of the sanctions. As a result, “they are dealing with a disaster that is really beyond their capability.”

Beeley noted that the sanctions have devastated the systems of hospitals “and rendered them incapable of providing certain medical operations, medical assistance.” Furthermore, the occupation of northeastern Syria by the U.S. military means that no oil is going to western Syria, which prevents the generation of electricity. There’s no shelter for people who have been made homeless, Beeley said, leaving many thousands out in a driving rainstorm Feb. 8:

So, everything is being complicated by the conditions, by the remnants of the war, and most of all by the sanctions.

Not one Western country, she added, had stepped up to provide aid to Damascus to actually deal with this emergency. This is despite an appeal made by Syria to the UN and international organizations to respond to the earthquake emergency.

Beeley posted on her Telegram channel the same day a statement of outrage attributed to Fares Shehabi, the head of Aleppo’s Industry Chamber:

Lift your God-damned sanctions so we can open our airports to receive international aid! In Aleppo alone more than 50 buildings have been destroyed resulting in more than 160 deaths so far and thousands of injuries. Thousands of families are now without shelter! What kind of evil governments pose economic & travel sanctions on earthquake devastated nations?!

Another statement she posted read:

International cargo planes are unable to land at

Schiller Institute Statement on the Earthquakes

The following statement was released internationally by the Schiller Institute on Feb. 6 to underscore the urgent need to lift all sanctions imposed on Syria.

The recent double earthquake in southern Türkiye and northwestern Syria is a terrible disaster which is generating a wave of emotion and empathy from around the world. The situation will likely worsen due to the forecast of extremely low temperatures throughout the region, which would result in the collapse of weakened buildings due to the cold and frost, not to mention the immediate consequences to children, women and men who have lost everything.

Time is of the essence. We welcome an international response. There are several countries that have already offered their assistance to the populations affected by the earthquakes. This being said, it is difficult to accept that the same disaster has a very different human impact on either side of the

border of Türkiye and Syria. On the Syrian side, this tragedy is affecting a population that has been hard hit by years of war and sanctions imposed by the United States and other nations.

This situation confronts us, as Western nations, with our responsibility to uphold the values we claim to embody. Are we going to continue to apply the measures that we very well know have led to the unimaginable suffering, misfortune, and death of innocent people? Or are we going to finally make the decision to lift these criminal sanctions? Don’t we know, after so many years of use, that the weapon of sanctions only hurts the people?

It is time for Western leaders to regain a minimum of moral fiber, by taking this tragedy as the opportunity to definitively lift all sanctions against Syria and, from then on, to organize the reconstruction of the country with those who are determined to contribute to it.

Syrian airports as a result of the U.S. blockade, and countries require Syrian airlines to transport aid on board their civil planes!!! As is well known, the so-called Caesar Act comes in the context of practicing economic terrorism and it is considered one of the most dangerous types of crimes against humanity.

The UN Knows

In the aftermath of the quake, UN officials called for an end to “politicization” of emergency aid to Syria, though stopping just short of calling for the end of unilateral sanctions altogether. UN special envoy for Syria, Geir Pedersen, said in a press conference in Geneva Feb. 9, after pointing out that Syrians need everything in the aftermath of the disaster:

Emergency response must not be politicized. We must instead focus on what is needed urgently to help men, women and children, those who we can still save, those whose lives are devastated by one of the most catastrophic earthquakes the region has seen in about a century.

When asked if unilateral sanctions on Syria should be lifted, Pedersen said that the United States and the European Union had assured him they will do whatever they can to “make sure” that there are no impediments to rescue and recovery efforts. And he added:

And indeed, if anyone can point to any impediments, they should let us know and we will make sure that the United States and the European Union know about this, because all support that is needed needs to get in.

UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres also made a statement, with great emphasis: “This is a moment in which everybody has to make very clear that no sanctions of any kind interfere with relief to the population of Syria in the present moment.” Despite loud emphasis on these words, Guterres’ statement did not include a demand that sanctions be lifted.



VOA/Mahmut Bozarslan

In a desperate search through the night, rescue workers hope to find survivors buried in a virtual mountain of pulverized rubble in Diyarbakir, Türkiye, after the earthquake of Feb. 9, 2023.

One official who did call clearly for the lifting of the sanctions was the UN Resident Coordinator and Humanitarian Coordinator *ad interim* for Syria, Mostafa Benlamlıh, who affirmed that the sanctions imposed on Syria hinder the humanitarian work in it, indicating that the situation now is very difficult and the humanitarian issue must not be politicized. In an interview with SANA, the Syrian Arab News Agency, Benlamlıh stressed that the goal of the UN organizations is to deliver a message about the suffering of the Syrians as a result of the sanctions imposed on their country, and the harm these sanctions have wrought on humanitarian work, as they prevented the arrival of millions of dollars to those affected by the earthquake. He pointed out that Syria today is suffering from a double crisis, as a result of the war since 2011 and now the earthquake: *Before it*, there were already 15 million Syrians in need of assistance, and 4 million of them needed almost daily assistance.

Syria Sanctions Officially Denounced

The UN has long had access to the documentation of the destruction of Syria caused by the U.S. sanctions. UN Special Rapporteur on unilateral coercive measures and human rights Alena Douhan issued a report Nov. 10, 2022 calling for the lifting of unilateral sanctions against Syria, warning that they were perpetuating and exacerbating the destruction and trauma suffered by the Syrian people since 2011. After her 12-day visit to Syria in 2022, the UN Rapporteur wrote:

I am struck by the pervasiveness of the human rights and humanitarian impact of the unilateral coercive measures imposed on Syria and the total economic and financial isolation of a country whose people are struggling to rebuild a life with dignity, following the decade-long war.

Douhan said 90% of Syria's population was currently living below the poverty line, with limited access to food, water, electricity, shelter, cooking and heating fuel, transportation, and healthcare. She warned that the country was facing a massive brain-drain due to growing economic hardship.

With more than half of the vital infrastructure either completely destroyed or severely damaged, the imposition of unilateral sanctions on key economic sectors, including oil, gas, electricity, trade, construction and engineering, have quashed national income, and undermine efforts toward economic recovery and reconstruction.

The expert said that blocking of payments and refusal of deliveries by foreign producers and banks, coupled with sanctions-induced limited foreign currency reserves, have caused serious national shortages in medicines and specialized medical equipment in Syria, particularly for chronic and rare diseases. She warned that rehabilitation and development of water distribution networks for drinking and irrigation had stalled due to the unavailability of equipment and spare parts, creating serious public health and food security implications. She said,



UN/Mark Garten

“This is a moment in which everybody has to make very clear that no sanctions of any kind interfere with relief to the population of Syria in the present moment.” —António Guterres, UN Secretary General.

In the current dramatic and still-deteriorating humanitarian situation, as 12 million Syrians grapple with food insecurity, I urge the immediate lifting of all unilateral sanctions that severely harm human rights and prevent any efforts for early recovery, rebuilding and reconstruction. No reference to good objectives of unilateral sanctions justifies the violation of fundamental human rights. The international community has an obligation of solidarity and assistance to the Syrian people.

Douhan had already warned in December of 2020 that the Caesar Sanctions would hinder the reconstruction necessary in the aftermath of the terrorist war, saying:

“I am concerned that sanctions imposed under the Caesar Act may exacerbate the already dire humanitarian situation in Syria, especially in the course of COVID-19 pandemic, and put the Syrian people at even greater risk of human rights violations. ...[New sanctions] may worsen the existing humanitarian crisis, depriving the Syrian people of the chance to rebuild their basic infrastructure.

“What particularly alarms me is the way the Caesar Act runs roughshod over human rights, including the Syrian people's rights to housing, health, and an adequate standard of living and development. The U.S. government must not put obstacles in the way of rebuilding of hospitals because lack of medi-

cal care threatens the entire population’s very right to life.”

U.S. Treasury Pushed to an Action

Whether in response to the international pressure or not, the U.S. Treasury Department announced on Feb. 9 the promulgation of Syria General License (GL) 23, issued by the Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC), “which authorizes for 180 days all transactions related to earthquake relief that would be otherwise prohibited by the Syrian Sanctions Regulations (SySR).”

The release claims that there are already broad exemptions allowing humanitarian relief in Syria by the UN, the U.S. government, and NGOs in “regime held areas,” and that the new authorization

... expands upon these broad humanitarian authorizations already in effect under the SySR for NGOs, international organizations (IOs), and the U.S. government. This GL reflects the United States’ commitment to support the people of Syria through their ongoing earthquake crisis. While sanctions relief alone cannot reverse

longstanding structural challenges and the brutal tactics of the Assad regime, it can ensure that sanctions do not inhibit the life-saving assistance needed following this disaster.

The U.S. regime-change policy, however, remains in place.

The Syrian Foreign Ministry responded to Treasury’s announcement by calling it misleading, as reported by SANA:

“The misleading decision issued by the U.S. administration regarding the partial and temporary freezing of some of the deadly and unilateral coercive measures imposed on the Syrian people is nothing more than a copy of previous sham decisions that seek to give a false humanitarian impression, since it stipulates alleged exemptions for humanitarian purposes, and the facts on the ground proved its falsehood. The U.S. coercive measures and U.S. policies have deprived the Syrian people of their natural wealth which is being plundered and have limited the ability of state institutions to improve living standards, achieve development goals and provide basic services.”

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