

The Honorable
Mike Pompeo
Secretary of State
Washington, D.C. 20520



March 31, 2020

Policy on Syria

Dear Mr. Secretary,

We write to express our grave concerns about American policy on Syria as reflected in the Joint Statement, published on March 15, by the US, UK, France and Germany. A further concern is the timing of its release, which coincides with the global coronavirus crisis.

The Joint Statement is, as might have been expected, highly critical of the Syrian government, but it provides a greatly simplified analysis of a complicated country in a complex region. There are at least four serious omissions:

- It overlooks the fact that around 75 per cent of habitable Syria and over 60 per cent of the overall territory is now controlled by the Syrian state – a member of the United Nations. In Syria’s state-controlled territory, religious pluralism continues to be a reality, whereas all territory controlled by Islamist rebel armies has been cleansed of religious minorities.
- There is no reference to the Syrian army’s defeat of Islamist extremist forces in Palmyra, Deir Ez Zor, Yarmouk Camp, Suweida and elsewhere. Rather, the statement claims that the Global Coalition and the Syrian Democratic Forces liberated “all territory once held by Daesh”; this is simply false.
- Nor is there any reference to the complex network of armed opposition groups, many of which adopt the same extremist policies as Daesh or Hayat Tahrir (al-Sham Jabhat al-Nusra), including abductions into sexual slavery, religious persecution, torture, burning civilians alive and beheadings, and which continue to attack civilian areas under the control of the Syrian state.
- The statement also overlooks the disastrous impact of broad, coercive sector sanctions imposed by the US and the EU over the past nine years. They have greatly harmed the displaced and millions of other vulnerable civilians, for whom it is very difficult to obtain adequate food supplies, medicines and medical equipment, let alone employment. According to *The Lancet*, the coercive economic sanctions imposed by the United States and its international partners “are among the biggest causes of suffering for the people of Syria and a major factor perpetuating the conflict.” Now, the coronavirus has reached Syria, and can be expected to bring further death and destruction in its wake, especially as the country’s once well-functioning health sector has been so badly degraded by the instruments of warfare, including the economic sanctions. These sanctions constitute a form of collective punishment of a civilian population, contrary to the prohibition of the Geneva Conventions.

It is, of course, impossible to condone violations of human rights by the Syrian government. But they cannot blind us to the human cost of the policies implemented by the various powers that strive to overthrow it. The reality is that the suffering caused by the Syrian government has been compounded by nearly a decade of coercive measures against the people of Syria applied by members of NATO, the EU and the Arab League, together with an array of extremist non-state proxies, all in the name of “transition to democracy”. It is now abundantly clear that the various coercive measures, including covert actions, have failed to bring about the Syrian-led and Syrian-owned political settlement, followed by UN monitored elections, as called for by UN Security Council Resolution 2254 (2015) – a solution that we support. They have instead contributed to one of the worst humanitarian disasters of our time.

It is surely time for a full policy review, taking full account of the interests of the United States and its allies. Chief among them must be the denial of Syrian territory to the Islamic State, al-Qaida’s allies and

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affiliates, and other violent Islamist groups. Another must be the adaptation of economic sanctions so as not to harm further the civilian population, as called for by UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres in his letter to G-20 Members, dated March 23, 2020. In connection with this, we urge the State Department to fund and publish an independent study of the impact of economic sanctions on the Syrian civilian population.

Continuation of current policies will only help the Islamist extremists, prolong the suffering of the Syrian people, weaken the stability of the Middle East as a whole, and create conditions for fresh waves of uncontrolled, mass migration as national and international institutions attempt to cope with the threat to public health and economic stability arising from the coronavirus crisis.

Below you will find a link to a similar representation made by Syrian Christian leaders, parliamentarians, former diplomats and religious freedom advocates to the British Foreign Secretary.

Respectfully,



Dr. John Eibner
President, Christian Solidarity International (CSI-USA)

Dr. Nabil Antaki, Blue Marists, St. Louis Hospital, Aleppo.
Rev. Haroutune Selimian, President, Armenian Evangelical
Community in Syria
Right Reverend Michael Nazir-Ali, Bishop of Rochester,
(1994 - 2009), OXTRAD
The Baroness Cox of Queensbury, Independent Member of
the British Parliament's House of Lords
Rev. Dr. Andrew Ashdown, Humanitarian Aid Relief Trust
Rev. William J. Murray, President, Religious Freedom
Coalition
Dr. Nkaze Chateh, President, Crusade of Love

Enc:

Open Letter to the British Foreign Secretary, the Rt. Hon. Dominc Raab, MP

<https://bit.ly/39tG4NH>