

THE BACKGROUND AND IMPACT OF THE CAESAR SYRIA CIVILIAN PROTECTION ACT
ON LIFE, ECONOMY, AND POLITICS IN CONTEMPORARY SYRIA.

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by

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ABSTRACT

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After a Syrian photographer leaked pictures of the torture happening in the current Syrian regime's prisons, the United States plans to help the Syrian people, who have been suffering from terrible atrocities committed by their president Bashar al-Assad and his totalitarian regime by enforcing a strict economic boycott against anyone who does any type of business with them. This boycott is known as the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act and consists of a series of economic sanctions that the United States implemented in December of 2019 which targets Syria's tyrannical government, also known as the Assad regime, in an attempt to topple the regime, inspire political opening, and protect the citizens of Syria. This thesis studies the circumstances that led to the Syrian Conflict and its consequential barbarity. It also critiques the impacts of the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act on the Syrian regime, as well as the Syrian people. This study utilizes various academic resources from books, online publications, and data collected from interviews to assess whether the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act is successful in accomplishing its intended objectives.

KEYWORDS: Arab Spring, Bashar al-Assad, Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act, Democracy, Dictatorship, United States' Sanctions, Syrian Crisis

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PREFACE

My interest in the topic of the Caesar Syrian Civilian Protection Act is derived from the courses that I studied to achieve my Middle Eastern Studies minor. Dr. Zahrawi was my Arabic professor at Sam Houston State University and she enhanced my interest in the topic by providing me with her firsthand knowledge about the heinous injustices that the Syrian people are experiencing from their government, the appalling conditions in Syria, and the United States' plan of action. With this information, it was clear to me that I wanted to conduct research on this topic in an attempt to raise awareness to the fact that dictatorships wreak havoc on the lives of people all around the world.

Through my research, I learned about the Arab people's historic struggle to escape the hands of dictators during the various Arab Spring revolutions. These uprisings exemplify that as people's freedoms are restricted, the likelihood that they will experience greater abuses from their political leaders increases substantially. I have realized the importance of democracy as the solution to this specific type of human suffering. I believe that it is paramount for governments to be transparent and represent the interests of their people. Therefore, I strive to convince readers of the inadequacies of a dictatorial governing structure through my analysis of the Syrian situation and Caesar Act. Although it may be ambitious, my overarching intention is to eventually inspire the political opening of Syria and any other country facing governmental oppression.

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INTRODUCTION

The Syrian conflict began on March 15, 2011 with a group of a few hundred protestors gathering outside of the Omari Mosque, near the border of Syria and Jordan, in the city of Deraa. This protest, known as the Deraa Uprising, occurred in response to the Syrian government's tyrannical abduction of a group of schoolchildren who had written "down with the regime" on a wall at their school. These children were taken to Syria's capital of Damascus to be interrogated and tortured. Therefore, the demonstrators in Deraa were demanding the release of their children and the reformation of the corrupt Syrian government that would allow children to become political prisoners (Lesch, 2016, p. 55).

The Syrian government, ruled by the Assad family, has never once considered excessive violence against Syrian civilians to be out of the question. In response to the growing number of protestors gathering for the Deraa Uprising, security agents, sent from Damascus, raided the Omari Mosque, killing 15 civilians and wounding hundreds. This would not be the first, nor the last time that the Assad regime used deadly force to instill fear into the Syrian people in an attempt to quell peaceful, anti-regime sentiment. The list of human rights violations that the regime has committed includes baseless abductions, arrests, torture, executions, and denial of medical care to its citizens, as well as the use of chemical weapons, bombings of residential areas, and other atrocities.

In 2014, a Syrian regime defector, by the alias of Caesar, sought refuge in the United States and brought with him pictures of the atrocities being committed by the current leaders of Syria. This collection of photos, known as the Caesar Report,

prompted the U.S. government to enact the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act (also referred to as the Caesar Act or Caesar Sanctions). This thesis will evaluate the effects of the Caesar Act on affecting political change, ending the Syrian conflict, and improving the well-being of the Syrian people. Possible alternatives to the Caesar Act will also be explored.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research is intended to address the aforementioned inquiries through a variety of methods. First, this research paper will collect facts and opinions for and against Assad's practices, from such resources as books, articles, Syrian formal media, Arab and world media. Such information will provide solid background on the Syrian Crisis as a whole. Second, information from online resources and databases will be collected and organized in an attempt to provide the reader with a background about the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act (also known as the Caesar Act) with its positive and negative implications. Third, more data will be accumulated through interviews with the former leader of the Syrian National Council, George Sabra, and a history professor from Syria who specializes in the field, Dr. Ahmad Nazir Atassi of the University of Louisiana Tech. Fourth, the discussion, which includes synthesis and analysis of the previously specified material, will allow this thesis to gather educated opinions about the efficiency of the Caesar Act in achieving its objectives. Additionally, predictions will be made regarding what the future may look like for Syria if the Caesar Act continues, if the regime maintains control over the country, and if other circumstances present themselves.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Syria: The Fall of the House of Assad - David Lesch (2016)

This book was one of the most helpful resources in the production of this thesis.

In this book, Lesch provides readers with a comprehensive background to the Syrian conflict. This background includes a thorough history of Syria's political repression, its relationship with the international community prior to the Caesar Act, and Bashar al-Assad's transformation into a tyrannical autocrat. Lesch went into detail about the systemic corruption in Syria by explaining the specific offenses (such as random abduction, torture, and killing of anyone opposing the regime) and the regime's excessive use of explosive and chemical weapons to quell civilian protests and any other Islamic terror organizations such as ISIS and Nusra Front. Also, Lesch explained how the Arab Spring spread throughout the Middle East to Syria because its citizens have long been experiencing abuses on behalf of their government. Lastly, Lesch offered his educated opinions on the possible ways that the Syrian Crisis could play out.

With these important contextual details, I was able to gain a more complete understanding of how the situation in Syria has developed, economically and politically, since Bashar became president. This allowed me to analyze the factors which contributed to the introduction of the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act and to draw conclusions as to how justifiable the Caesar Act is in its severe repression of Syria's economy, how effective the sanctions will be at prompting political transition in Syria, and how much consideration it gives to civilian populations in Syria.

We've Never Seen Such Horrors - Human Rights Watch (2020)

In this report from the Human Rights Watch, they listed the atrocities committed by Assad and his security forces. Starting by reporting the regime's use of extreme violence in the 2011 Daraa Uprising and continuing with reports of mass executions and grave international human rights violations. The Human Rights Watch helped me to understand the full scope of Assad's power in Syria. Additionally, they shared other forms of repression that Assad used against the Syrian people which included his use of widespread fear of arbitrary arrest to control the general population, large-scale sweep operations to undermine any opposition forces, his use of sieges to debilitate any dissenting large areas, and the communication blockade Assad established to prevent the spread of information within Syria and from Syria to the international community. This information allowed me to understand the premise behind the U.S. intervention in the Syrian Crisis, the pervasiveness of Assad's corruption, and Assad's role in the destruction of Syrian society and industry.

Assad Blames Armed Forces - Al Jazeera (2011)

In 2011, Al Jazeera published this article in response to the Assad regime's violent crackdowns on demonstrators at the beginning of the Syrian uprising. This resource features an interview between US broadcaster ABC and Bashar al-Assad where Assad states his position on the Syrian security forces' use of lethal force to deal with peaceful protests. In the interview he states that the Syrian troops are not under his direct control, there are foreign actors attempting to disguise themselves as protestors, and the brutality displayed by Syrian troops was the result of individual mistakes. Assad

claimed that he would never kill the Syrian people in response to them expressing their discontent with the Assad regime.

This resource helped me to gather information on how the Assad regime attempted to rehabilitate their image in the wake of the Daraa Uprising and the Omari Mosque protests. It is clear that he is utilizing a strategy that is centered around propaganda and fear of collusion. Due to Bashar's relative popularity at the beginning of his presidency, this strategy was more successful in the early parts of the Syrian Conflict. This article helped me to evaluate the various tools that the Assad regime utilized to minimize the severity of his crimes in the international community and to understand how he created this strategy to capitalize on Syria's historical fears of foreign conspiracy.

Syria Accountability Act of 2002 - House of Representatives, Congress (2002)

This website, created by GovInfo, offered additional information to the Syrian Accountability Act of 2002. Not only did it provide a timeline as to when the bill was introduced and passed, it supplied information about the reasons behind the bill's proposal and who sponsored the bill. This website allowed me to evaluate the various reasons behind why Syria had been sanctioned by the United States prior to the Caesar Act. Additionally, it helped me to compare and contrast these previous sanctions to the current sanctions on Syria and to understand how these differences make the Caesar Sanctions more effective than its predecessors.

National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2020 - GovTrack (2020)

One of the goals of my research was to investigate the legislation package which contained the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act and to determine the primary

incentives of this package. This package was known as the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2020. This source, written by the Congressional Research Service and published on GovTrack.us, provided necessary answers to my questions regarding these topics. They began by providing an overview and a summary of this legislation specifying that the main purpose of the bill was to authorize various appropriations to the United States Department of Defense. They continued by providing the full text of this legislation which allowed me to determine that the primary purpose of this act was to authorize an estimated increase of \$43.9 billion in the U.S. military spending budget for the Army, Navy, Marine Corps, Air Force, and other defense-related ventures. Ancillary purposes of this act, which are relevant to my research, were to address the Russian Federation's "malign influence" on other countries, the sanctioning of certain individuals and groups in Syria, as well as the strategies to counter terrorism throughout the Middle East specifically in Syria, Iraq, and Iran. This source helped me to determine that the Caesar Act was only a small product of a large bill which was primarily passed for the benefit of the U.S. Department of Defense. Additionally, this raises the questions of how much thought was put into the Caesar Act and if it was simply included to provide a low-maintenance solution to the problems in Syria.

Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act - H.R.31 - 116th Congress (2019-2020)

The U.S. Congress' official website published the full text of the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act of 2019. The full text identified the Syrian parties that would be subjected to sanctions and the reasons for each. Among this list, the Central Bank of Syria was sanctioned on grounds of money laundering and Bashar al-Assad and his

affiliates were sanctioned due to their perpetration of human rights abuses. The U.S. Congress went on by stating that any domestic or foreign entity may also be subjected to sanctions if they engage in economic ventures with any sanctioned Syrian party. Furthermore, this source also discussed the Caesar Act's criteria for the suspension of its sanctions, its strategies for enabling continuous humanitarian assistance to Syria, and the methods through which an organization can obtain a humanitarian assistance waiver. This resource allowed me to gain a comprehensive perception of the Caesar Act, its goals, and the manner in which it hopes to achieve them. Gaining this understanding of the Caesar Act directly from the U.S. Congress helped me draw conclusions about how its effects will facilitate the success of its goals and how it will impact the Assad regime and the Syrian people.

Public Attitudes Toward the Caesar Act in Northeast Syria - Operations and Policy Center (2020)

Public Attitudes Towards the Caesar Act in Northeast Syria is a study conducted by the Operations and Policy Center (OPC) in Turkey. It aimed to gather opinion from the general populations of the Turkish-held Peace Springs area and the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria. In these opposition-controlled areas, anonymous civilians were able to give their complete and honest opinions about the Caesar Act without fears of being targeted by the Assad regime. To understand the public's perception, OPC researchers interviewed 600 people, organized the data according to gender, education, age, and ethnic background, and assembled their findings on this website. Respondents were asked questions about their knowledge of the Caesar Act, their opinions on its impacts, their perceptions of its effectiveness in

accomplishing its goals, and their sentiments towards this specific plan of action for Syria.

Due to the Assad regime's heavy repression of dissenting opinions in areas under its control, data on the Syrian public's perceptions of the Caesar Act is increasingly limited. This resource was imperative in providing me with insight into how the Caesar Act is viewed by citizens in northeast Syria. Among its other conclusions, this study stated that a majority of its respondents were supportive of imposing economic sanctions against the Syrian government, although they believed that the sanctions should be accompanied with a concrete plan from the United Nations to help mitigate the amount of civilian suffering caused by the act. These opinions, which were taken directly from populations that the sanctions are likely to disproportionately affect, assisted me in establishing credibility for Caesar Act and evaluating the need for supplementary measures to counteract the sanctions' negative effects on Syrian society.

A Year After its Implementation: How did the "Caesar's Act" Affect the Assad Regime? - Al-Estiklal Newspaper (2021)

Al-Estiklal Newspaper is a news agency that is based in Istanbul, Turkey who researches and reports on many occurrences in the Middle East. In this article, Al-Estiklal provides readers with a brief history of the Caesar Act, what it has achieved, what its sanctions packages consist of, and the opinions of the Syrian regime's opposition regarding the sanctions. In addition to that information, this source supplies videos created by the Syrian Emergency Task Force and the Middle East Institute which discuss how effective the Caesar Act will be at unseating the regime and what the

implications of it will include. Al-Estiklal points out that the Caesar Act has been successful at hindering the Assad regime through its inspiration of economic isolation, prevention of societal reconstruction, and dissuasion of political normalization between Syria and foreign governments. They also addressed the propaganda that the Assad regime has been spreading about the sanction's unreasonable consequences on the general Syrian population by asserting that the regime's corrupt institutions hold central culpability. More importantly, they reviewed the U.S. President Biden's complacency in publishing new sanction lists and his decision to remove sanctions on two previously-sanctioned Syrian companies.

With this information, I was able to draw several conclusions about Caesar's effects on Syria and the international community's concerns regarding its future. The first conclusion is that, although Caesar is proven to affect civilians more than the regime, its effectiveness at pressuring the regime cannot be understated. Although it has not explicitly achieved its goals, this pressure is a long term strategy that will ideally prompt political change in Syria. The second conclusion is that there are many supporters of the Caesar Act who hope to see the act maintain its reputation in the region and demand that President Biden's administration enforce the sanctions with the austerity of the Trump administration.

The Syrian Economy: In Ruins, with Few Prospects of Recovery - Even & Fadlon (2021)

This resource, published on jstor.org, is a research report that analyzes Syria's current economic situation, the Caesar sanction's effects on Syria's populations, and the possibility of reconstruction amidst Syria's political and economic challenges. It provides

concrete statistics of the sanctions' effect on Syria's Gross Domestic Product (GDP), unemployment rate, and inflation rate. Additionally, it emphasizes Caesar's effects on Syrian society by stating the hardships that civilians face in its wake. These hardships include struggling to pay for unsubsidized basic goods like sugar, bread and fuel. Even and Fadlon continued by stating that prospects for Syrian reconstruction are improbable due to the estimated entire cost to rebuild Syria being \$250 billion, the destruction of Syria's labor force and industry, and the propensity of the Assad regime to allocate any financial aid it receives to the Syrian military.

This research report was helpful to me in understanding the full scope of the Syrian Crisis. It offered several important research statistics which I was able to organize to improve this thesis' unbiased description of Caesar's economic and societal repercussions inside Syria. Additionally, this source was effective at contextualizing Syria's current situation allowing me to make educated inferences about whether the Caesar Act will contribute to or inhibit the eventual rehabilitation of Syria as a whole.

Timeline: The Rise, Spread, and Fall of the Islamic State - Wilson Center (2019)

Timeline: The Rise, Spread, and Fall of the Islamic State is a website published by the Wilson Center which is a congressionally chartered forum based in the United States. This article provides an extensive chronology of the Islamic State, popularly known as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), beginning from its conception in 2004 and continuing until 2019. It includes a timeline that specifies the exact dates and descriptions of ISIS-related incidents. This historical recollection purportes the argument that ISIS is one of the Middle East's most powerful and opportunistic threats with its sizeable pool of members, connections to a least eight countries and its ties with the

infamous terrorist organization al-Qaeda. This source was particularly helpful to me in determining the origins of ISIS and in understanding how their influence developed and expanded throughout Syria and the Middle East. I utilized this information to consider the possibility that the Islamic State will attempt to take advantage of the Syrian Crisis if the Assad regime falls from power and to hypothesize about how the Caesar Sanctions could potentially pave the way for Islamic extremist organizations to take control of the Syrian government.

Biden Lifts Sanctions on Firms Linked to Key Assad Backer - Adesnik (2021)

In this policy brief, published by the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, David Adesnik informs readers about President Biden's decision to lift sanctions on select Syrian companies and what changes might result from his decision. Adesnik offers readers a brief summary of events, relating to the Caesar Sanctions, that have occurred since Biden won the U.S. presidency in 2020. In summation, he asserts that Biden has been increasingly lenient in the imposition of new sanctions against Syrian agencies and their business partners which has elicited bipartisan accusations from American politicians that he is not committed to helping Syria escape Assad's tyranny. The information and opinions provided in this report helped me to realize the importance that the Caesar Act is enforced consistently throughout its enactment. Without commitment from the Biden administration, I was able to conclude that the Caesar Sanction's authority will diminish overtime which could reduce the possibility that it will achieve its goals in Syria.

Interview with George Sabra (2021)

I had the opportunity of interviewing George Sabra on September 20, 2021. Mr. Sabra's credibility on the topic is derived from the fact that he was the former leader of the primary political opposition group in Syria known as the Syrian National Council (SNC). After witnessing Assad's oppression firsthand, Sabra was one of the 250 individuals who signed the Damascus Declaration in 2005 during the Damascus Spring, in an attempt to promote peaceful political reforms in Syria. Due to his involvement with the SNC, he was imprisoned in Syria for more than eight years and, upon his release, he escaped with his family to France. Ever since, Sabra has been very outspoken against the Assad regime and he has been fighting for years to inspire political opening in Syria.

In this interview, which is transcribed and included in this thesis' appendix, George Sabra shared with me his knowledge and opinions regarding the Caesar Act and its effects. He addresses the effectiveness of the Caesar Sanctions, its potential for expelling the Assad regime, and his concerns for the future of the sanctions. One specific concern he had regarding the Caesar Act's future, which directly coincided with some of my research, is the U.S. decision to allow Egypt and Jordan to channel electricity and gas resources through Syria to Lebanon. In order to send these resources to Lebanon, he explains that Syria would be helping in the construction of these channels. Sabra asserts that this is an explicit violation to the Caesar Sanctions since this process would allow Syria to benefit financially, from the construction and facilitation of these resources, as well as politically, from enhancing its relationships with Egypt, Jordan, and Lebanon. Sabra stresses that this lack of enforcement of the Caesar

Act reflects negatively on the Biden Administration's policies towards Syria and discredits the authority of the Caesar Sanctions. In his opinion, it is quite possible that the Caesar Act has the power to affect political change in Syria, although only if the sanctions are enforced with their initial rigor.

Mr. Sabra's educated perspective was a valuable resource which inspired me to conduct additional research on how the sanctions influence may wane over time. He shed light on the fact that the Caesar Sanctions can only be as strong as the administration that enforces them. With this information, I was able to conclude that the United States must maintain its implementation of the Caesar Sanctions or else the Assad regime will be able to recover its resources and reaffirm its hold on Syria. Furthermore, Mr. Sabra reported his perspectives on Islamic extremist groups in Syria and allowed me to collect an alternative view on the possibility of their involvement in post-Assad Syria.

Interview with Dr. Ahmad Nazir Atassi (2021)

Dr. Ahmad Nazir Atassi is a Syrian-American academic, and the assistant professor of history at Louisiana Tech University, with considerable knowledge on Syrian history, the Syrian Crisis, and the Caesar Sanctions. He continues to advocate against the Assad regime and is hopeful that Syria will eventually gain independence from its systemic political oppression. Throughout the interview, included in the appendix, Dr. Atassi thoroughly explains how Bashar al-Assad benefitted from Syria's Housing Land and Property issues, the specific institutions that the Caesar Sanctions target, the impacts that the sanctions have had on the regime, and the prospects that the sanctions will achieve its goals. A key piece of information offered by Dr. Atassi is

that sanctions never remove the regime. He continues by explaining that due to Assad's destruction of the Syrian economy and infrastructure, displacement of Syria's labor force, and loss of crucial territory, the Caesar Sanctions may be able to contribute to the fall of the Syrian regime through causing a political implosion. Dr. Atassi also addresses Caesar's ramifications on the general populations inside Syria by stating that sanctions never consider their impacts on civilians and that Caesar did not include any mechanism to protect civilians. Despite this fact, he maintains his stance that the Caesar sanctions are effective in "helping to thin their [the Assad regime's] rank, deplete their resources, and make them turn on each other." (p. 61)

Dr. Atassi's interview provided me with necessary contextual information and knowledgeable projections about the Caesar Act's strategies of pressuring the regime. Dr. Atassi helped me to gain a greater understanding on the nature of sanctions as a form of economic and political constriction and he encouraged me to conduct further research on the underlying motives which contributed to the enactment of the Caesar Law. With his expertise, I am also able to further analyze the possibility of interference from Islamic extremist organizations in Syria given that the regime is successfully removed.

THESIS PROBLEM

The Syrian Crisis has been an active situation for the past decade and unrest due to corruption in the Syrian government has been present for almost two decades. Many historians, political researchers, and human rights organizations have voiced their thoughts about the volatile climate in Syria through various literature mediums. In order to have full understanding of the controversies around the Caesar Act, the reader must

comprehend the controversies of Bashar al-Assad's before and during the Syrian Uprising. This section will delve into contextual information found in books, articles, and news agencies from both sides of the conflict. After establishing a background, readers will subsequently be presented with information regarding the emergence and international perceptions of the Caesar Act, the positive and negative impacts of the Caesar Act, and the status of the Caesar Act and Syria currently.

Background to the Uprising and Civil War in Syria

To begin, one must understand the two main parties in this conflict. These parties include those in support of the Assad regime, represented by the regime's main media outlet Syria TV and the General Organization of Radio and TV in Syria, and those who support the revolution against Assad's dictatorship represented by the views of Al Jazeera (Qatar) and Al Arabiya (SAUDI). Both parties have been very vocal via news and media outlets (especially in the Middle East attempting to win over the favor of regional and global communities).

Before protests began in Syria, the majority of the Arab world, including the Assad regime, did not believe that the unrest would advance into Syria. In February of 2011, Al Jazeera reported, "Despite a wave of protests spreading across the Middle East, so far the revolutionary spirit has failed to reach Syria" (Wikstrom, 2011). The article continues to explain how, although Syria shared similar characteristics with Egypt and Tunisia such as being under authoritarian rule, containing widespread corruption, and economic hardships, Syrians held a far greater fear of their government. This is partly because of the fact that, in the 1982 Hama Massacre, the Syrian army killed

around 20,000 people in an attempt to suppress a Muslim Brotherhood-backed revolt. It was clear that the Syrian government's preferred method of maintaining control was the use of fear.

This fear was not enough to prevent the Omari Mosque protests from occurring in Daraa over the arrests and torturings of the fifteen Daraa schoolchildren. During the demonstrations, "Security forces initially used water cannons and teargas against the protesters and then opened live fire, killing at least four" (Human Rights Watch, 2020). This protest was the catalyst for the Syrian conflict, because it was evident to Syrians that their government was only interested in staying in power even if that meant killing some of its own people.

Following the brutality that the Assad regime displayed in the Daraa Uprising, many news outlets were quick to investigate and disseminate information about the Syrian government's gross mistreatment of its citizens. The National Public Radio (NPR) published an article which interviewed one of the teenagers who was arrested for the graffiti on their school's wall. In the interview, he explained to reporters that "he was detained for months. He says he was hanged by his wrists for a day at a time, beaten and tortured. His speech is hard for our interpreter to understand. He says it was altered by the electric shocks" (McEvers, 2012). With the regime's treatment of mischievous children and peaceful protestors, the New York Times published a report asking, "How far can they go in this repression?" (Shadid, 2011).

As the world began to realize what the Syrian government was capable of, the Assad regime had already begun engaging in its own "amelioration" tactics. Al Jazeera explains in a 2011 release that the Syrian president Bashar al-Assad denied

involvement in the violence that took place in Daraa. During an interview with United States' broadcaster ABC, Assad claimed, "They are military forces [who] belong to the government. I don't own them. I'm president. I don't own the country. No government in the world kills its people, unless it is led by a crazy person" (Al Jazeera, 2011). In the following months, Assad continued to blame the brutal crackdowns on "mistakes made by some officials," foreign combatants, Islamic extremists and armed thugs. This strategy was an obvious attempt at escaping the responsibility of his actions, but most of the Syrian people were well-aware of the realities of their situation. Despite knowing that the government security forces, also known as the Mukhabarat, were willing to torture and kill protestors, demonstrations continued and eventually spread to Homs, Idlib, Aleppo, and the rest of Syria.

As waves of protests surged through Syria, various opposition groups formed throughout the country such as the Free Syrian Army (FSA), Syrian National Council (SNC), the National Salvation Front (NSF), Local Coordination Committees (LCC), the Popular Front for Change and Liberation (PFCL), the Syrian Patriotic Group (SPG), and other smaller groups (Middle Eastern Policy Council, 2020). Out of these groups, the SNC became the primary political opposition and the FSA became the primary military opposition. Unfortunately, each opposition party has its own motivations and is backed by various foreign countries that may hold ulterior motives, therefore, Syrian opposition forces have not only been unable to oust the Assad regime, but some even began fighting other opposition groups. "Infighting is to be expected. Money and weapons — although not of a quality or in sufficient quantity to alter the course of the campaign — have flowed to various factions and the scramble for them has divided what ought to be

a united opposition... If the rebels felt they were making progress and had the support of the outside world, they would not descend to such wasteful infighting" (Middle Eastern Policy Council, 2020). With the uncertainties that surround the various opposition parties' abilities to consolidate, many foreign countries are hesitant to provide their support because they do not want their resources to go to waste fighting other opposition groups. This vicious cycle is but one of the perpetuating forces that has resulted in Syria's drawn out conflict.

Another reason that outside countries are averse to getting involved in the Syrian Conflict is because the Assad regime is being militarily and politically backed by Russia and Iran. "The Iranian general (Qassem Soleimani) supposedly convinced Russian President Vladimir Putin to send Russian troops and save the Syrian government" (Petkova, 2020). Despite this rumor, since Syria is one of Russia's main regional allies, it can be assumed that Russia would have intervened militarily without pressure from Iran. Although Russia had been supplying weapons and munitions to Assad since the beginning of his violent crackdowns, in 2015, Russia became directly involved when it began a series of bombing campaigns on anti-Assad forces throughout Syria under the pretense of combatting Islamic extremist groups. These bombing campaigns targeted many opposition-controlled cities in Syria and, "With Russian assistance, Syrian- and Iranian-supported ground forces retook Deir ez-Zor in the east and Aleppo, Homs, Damascus, and other cities across the country" (Jones, 2019, p. 1). Due to this combination of military efforts, the opposition's forces became further fragmented and weakened. Seth Jones (2019, p. 2) adds that, "Many of these strikes were of low accuracy, and Russian aircraft used unguided weapons to hit targets in urban areas,

causing substantial collateral damage.” Therefore, opposition forces were not the only casualties, but schools, hospitals, and civilians also fell victim to the indiscriminate bombings.

Emergence and Multiple Perceptions of the Caesar Act

In 2014, as the fighting was escalating, a man who goes by the alias of Caesar defected from the Syrian regime, bringing with him 55,000 photographs of the mass torture and murders that the Assad regime had been allowing to take place in their detention facilities. “The horrifying pictures... showed scenes that were compared to the depravity of the Nazis” (Simon & Bolduan, 2019). He presented these photos to the United States Congress in an attempt to inspire America to help the Syrian citizens.

In response to Caesar's photos, the United States' Congress passed the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act in December 2019. The Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act is a series of economic sanctions which targets Syria's Assad regime and all of its affiliates in an attempt to inspire political opening, protect the citizens of Syria, and prevent Assad from converting military gains into political success. Economic sanctions are strategic, low maintenance hindrances that are imposed upon foreign countries, governments, and individuals and may utilize a variety of economic penalties which may contain trade restrictions and tariffs. These are aimed at weakening the economy of whatever or whoever they are established against for the purpose of solving foreign disputes or forcing a country into submission. Sanctions, by definition, are the epitome of a nonviolent attempt at conflict resolution.

The Caesar Act was conceived in the 116th U.S. Congress (2019-2020) along with many other pieces of legislation in the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal

Year 2020 (S.1790). This act, which received exceptional bipartisan support, was assembled by the Senate Committee on Armed Services, sponsored by the U.S. Senator James Inhofe and signed into law by President Trump. The primary purpose for S.1790 was to authorize appropriations for the U.S. Department of Defense's military activities, military construction, defense activities, and other purposes (GovTrack, 2020). Therefore, those who lobbied for this bill were more likely focused on the increase in military spending and allowances than they were with providing a solution to the Syrian conflict. Especially when enacting sanctions, lawmakers should consider the negative effects, such as currency destabilization, food shortages, and isolation from foreign markets, which can take a large toll on the civilian populations of the targeted country.

Despite the severity of sanctions, the Caesar Act was not the first set of sanctions that the United States enacted against Syria. The 2002 Syria Accountability Act (SAA) was signed into law by President Bush in 2004. The goal of these sanctions was to, "To halt Syrian support for terrorism, end its occupation of Lebanon, stop its development of weapons of mass destruction, cease its illegal importation of Iraqi oil, and by so doing hold Syria accountable for the serious international security problems it has caused in the Middle East, and for other purposes" (Syrian Accountability Act, 2002). Some believe that these sanctions were prompted by the Bush administration's crackdown on Islamic extremist organizations brought about by 9/11. The Caesar Act replaced the SAA in 2019, but even before the SAA, the U.S. had sanctions against Syria. "Syria has been sanctioned by the U.S. since 1979, due to allegation of state sponsored terrorism, the occupation of Lebanon, and Damascus' pursuit of weapons of

mass destruction and missile programs” (Syrian Justice and Accountability Centre, 2020).

Although there are quite a few, the main difference between the Caesar Act and previous sanctions is that the Caesar Act extends sanctions not only to the Assad regime and its affiliates, but also any country or individual who engages in trade/rebuilding activities with Syria. The goal of this specification is to deter any outside countries from engaging in relations with the Assad regime, thereby preventing the regime from replenishing its resources. Although the Caesar Act does include sanction waivers for humanitarian assistance, in order to receive this waiver, one must receive authorization from the United States' Department of Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) (Willkie Farr & Gallagher LLP, 2021). The complexity of this process and fear of potential sanctions is sufficient deterrence for many human rights organizations, therefore experts suggest a streamlining of the waiver process for humanitarian aid (Robinson, 2020).

The primary goals of the Caesar Sanctions can be identified in the six requirements for the cessation of its sanctions. First, Syria and Russia must stop aircraft bombings of civilians. Second, Syria and its allies (Russia and Iran) must allow humanitarian access to besieged areas and guarantee civilians the freedom to leave. Third, political prisoners must be released and specific human rights organizations must be given access to all Syrian incarceration facilities. Fourth, bombings of medical, residential, commercial, and communal facilities must stop. Fifth, displaced Syrians must be allowed to have a “safe, voluntary, and dignified return.” Sixth, those in the Assad regime who perpetrated war crimes and crimes against humanity must be held

accountable. Once these goals are accomplished, the sanctions will be revoked (GovTrack, 2019).

In order to accomplish these goals, the Caesar Act targets a broad range of Assad regime affiliates and entities. The individuals who are specifically sanctioned by the Caesar Act include Bashar al-Assad, Hafez al-Assad (Bashar's son), Asma al-Assad (Bashar's wife), Zuhair Tawfik al-Assad (a Syrian military official), Karam al-Assad (Zuhair's son), Rami Maklouf (Syrian businessman), Wassim Anwar al-Qattan (Syrian businessman), and other associates of the Assad family (Sun, 2020). As previously mentioned, any entity who does business with the Assads, without permission from the United States' OFAC, will also be sanctioned.

As for the targeted entities, the sanctions are intended to hinder four specific sectors of the Syrian economy which are the oil and gas industry, aircraft manufacturing, and, most importantly, engineering and construction. The primary purpose behind these targets is to hinder any of the Assad regime's reconstruction projects in Syria. If they are unable to reconstruct the infrastructure which they destroyed in Syria, the U.S. reasons that this will prevent Assad from transforming military victory into political victory. James Jeffrey, U.S. special representative for Syria, stated, "We are targeting those people who are benefiting from the construction and creating a playground for oligarchs while the war rages on" (Shatz, 2020). This is one of the primary goals of the Caesar Sanctions.

Within the construction and engineering sector of the Syrian economy is the company Marota, which is in charge of the largest-scale reconstruction project inside of Syria. This project aims to confiscate land from citizens living around the settlement of

Basatin al-Razi in the western region of Damascus and begin constructing Marota City. “In 2012 the government issued Decree No. 66, providing the legal foundation for developing areas of unauthorized housing and informal settlements—those in which properties have not been registered but may have been passed on for generations” (Fakhani & Zainedin, 2020). This decree set the stage for Assad to exploit the Housing Land and Property (HLP) issues that have originated in Syria since the 1960s. During this time, the Syrian government began rezoning agricultural areas around cities into industrial areas in an attempt to promote industrialization. This idea was interrupted by waves of nationalization in the 1980s and the government never built any infrastructure on these lands and, eventually, people began to build houses and shops on this land. Once these informal settlements were established, many land owners tried to register their land with the “Tabu” (the Syrian land registry), although they were unable to because the land was industrially zoned. Soon, these areas became heavily populated due to the high rate of reproduction in Syria. “In October 2018, the government issued Law No. 10, which expanded Decree No. 66 beyond informal areas and allowed towns and cities to earmark zones for development and reconstruction” (Fakhani & Zainedin, 2020). This new law granted the Syrian government the unconditional ability to reclaim any land that was unregistered with the TABU. “It is a way of controlling populations, you keep them threatened all the time that you will be destroying their houses and livelihood” (Atassi, 2021, p. 56). The Assad regime utilized this to displace tens of thousands of Syrians (offering them no form of compensation) and leveled their homes to begin the construction on Marota City. The Caesar Act makes this process incredibly

difficult for the Syrian government by making it impossible for them to import any resources needed for reconstruction.

Aside from reconstruction, the Caesar Sanctions also target the Syrian economy as a whole. Syria is known by political scientists as a rentier state which is a state that acquires the majority of its revenue through remittances paid by foreign individuals, companies and governments. As Syria has no private banks, these funds must pass through the Syrian Central Bank which is sanctioned under the Caesar Act. This discourages any foreign entity from engaging financially with Syria, resulting in a substantial decrease in rentier revenues. Without these revenues, the Assad regime was unable to subsidize the price of international goods for Syrian citizens causing unprecedented inflation. The following statistics are provided by Makki (2020): In 2011, the Syrian Pound (SYP) was valued at 49 SYP to 1 USD. In October 2019, the SYP was valued at 500 SYP to 1 USD. As of November 2021, the SYP has depreciated to a value of 2,512 SYP to 1 USD. The price of goods increased drastically and the average income of Syrians decreased to around 27 USD per month, making it difficult for the average Syrian citizen to afford basic necessities. "People aren't dying because food isn't available, they are dying because they cannot buy the food. That is Caesar. Caesar is forcing the regime and forcing the people to buy and sell at an international price, which the Syrian people cannot afford" (Atassi, 2021, p. 58).

Following the enactment of the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act, Bashar al-Assad and his cohorts were quick to contribute their thoughts on the matter. They viewed the sanctions as an obvious form of foreign conspiracy and they publicized the sanctions as an attempt to undermine Syria's sovereignty. They also stated that the

sanctions were a form of economic terrorism and that the United States will be responsible for any suffering that the Syrian people experience because of the sanctions (Khatib & Kossaifi, 2020). "Bashar Ja'afari (the Syrian Ambassador to the U.N.) referred to sanctions and other coercive measures by Western governments as 'crimes against the Syrian people,' saying that they hurt humanitarian and medical efforts in the country" (Sun, 2020). Another statement released by an Aleppo-based Assembly member named Fares Shehabi insisted that the intentions behind the sanctions were to "destroy the country and loot it, and not anything else" (Makki, 2021).

Due to the lack of internet access and oppression from their regime, direct opinions from the Syrian public regarding the Caesar Sanctions are limited. In 2020, the Syrian-led and Turkish-based Operations and Policy Center (OPC) was able to conduct a study entitled *Public Attitudes Toward the Caesar Act in Northeast Syria*. In this study, the OPC gathered the opinions of residents residing within the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria and the Turkish-held Peace Springs area. The OPC researchers concluded that only 6% of the sample population is in favor of imposing the Caesar Act in its current form. They assert that the majority of the respondents (51%) are in favor of the Caesar Act, although they would like to see it paired with "a U.N. mechanism ensuring civilians will not be affected" (Operations and Policy Center, 2021). Respondents were also asked about their beliefs on the effectiveness of the sanctions at achieving its goals. In this section, only 13% believed that the regime would change its behavior in response to the sanctions and 58.2% indicated that the Caesar Sanctions are a sign that the international community is unable to find a real solution to the Syrian Crisis (Operations and Policy Center, 2021).

The international community holds mixed opinions regarding the Caesar Act. The European Union agreed with the U.S. decision to sanction Syria, due to the Assad regime's grave violation of human rights, although they disagreed on the Caesar Sanction's extraterritoriality. Extraterritorial sanctions, also known as secondary sanctions, are sanctions which can be applied to any entity (even those out of the jurisdiction of U.S. international law) who engages with the targeted country. These types of sanctions commonly affect the entire population of a country, instead of only targeting the ruling elite, and they limit the amount of humanitarian aid that a country can receive. "The U.N. General Assembly and the Human Rights Council have similarly condemned extraterritorial sanctions as illegal... the General Assembly said that it 'strongly object[ed]' to extraterritorial sanctions, and 'call[ed] upon all member states neither to recognise those measures nor to apply them'" (Barber, 2020).

Russia and China, who have been long-term allies of Syria, even throughout the Syrian crisis, objected to the Caesar Sanctions. Following its actualization, Russian media outlets criticized the sanctions for attempting to undermine Syria's constitutional process and interfering with Assad's legitimacy to create a new and improved Syrian state. Prior to the signing of the Caesar Law, Russia solidified its intentions of helping the Syrian government by signing multiple reconstruction contracts with them, although this process will not begin until the Syrian conflict has been resolved. China's media responded similarly claiming that the "'illegal' U.S. sanctions 'recklessly suppressed the Syrian government and its people.'" Chinese state-aligned media outlets also emphasized the imperative for Beijing to resist U.S. unilateral sanctions against Syria" (Ramani, 2020). Although both countries seem dedicated to the recovery of the Assad

regime, neither country has publicized any future plans for reconstruction due to possible penalties from the secondary sanctions.

Another ally of the Syrian government, Iran, seems to be unbothered by the sanctions. "Iran has reportedly upped its shipments to Syria to help the country face the newly introduced Caesar Act" (Hashem, 2020). Some analysts believe that the Caesar Sanctions will open the door for closer relations between Damascus and Tehran (Iran's capital). Since Iran is not deterred by sanctions, it could be the only foreign influence willing to assist in Assad's reconstruction plans. Therefore, if reconstruction commences as planned, Iran could benefit financially, through reconstruction investments, and politically, by consolidating its influence in Syria and by gaining strategic regional positioning that it could utilize to advance its campaigns to oust Israel from the Middle East.

Conversely, Israel is currently in support of the Caesar Sanctions on Syria. Despite being the United States' closest ally in the Middle East, Israel's agenda is more focused on reducing Iran's influence in the region than achieving a political solution in Syria. An announcement from the Israeli Minister of Foreign Affairs, Gabi Ashkenazi, stated, "The continued Iranian presence undermines stability in Syria and the whole region. Assad is responsible and accountable for what happens in Syria and must pay a price for the continued presence of Iran and Hezbollah in his country" (Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2020). With this being Israel's overarching reason for supporting the Caesar Act, there is a chance that Israel may change its mind. Russian President Vladimir Putin has been pressuring Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennet to persuade the U.S. to lessen its sanctions. "Russians argue that the US sanctions open the way for

Iranian firms, which are already under sanctions, to get the major reconstruction projects, leading to an increase in Iranian influence in Syria" (Alhas, 2021). If Israel begins to see an increase of Iranian investments in Syria, there is a possibility that it will renounce its support for the sanctions in favor of a Russian-led reconstruction process.

Another important foreign actor, who has been hoping to benefit from the Syrian situation, is Turkey. Direct quotes from the Turkish government in Ankara regarding their support or protest of the Caesar Sanctions are elusive. At the beginning of the conflict, it was obvious that Ankara had aligned itself against an Assad-led government in Syria through providing substantial support to opposition forces in northeastern areas, as well as by welcoming Syrian refugees with open arms. Ideally, Turkey hoped for a fast resolution to the Syrian conflict and the ability to utilize their position, as an influential negotiator, to maximize their regional interests. However, as war continues to devastate Syria and sanctions continue to restrict the Syrian economy, living conditions in Syria will also deteriorate prompting even larger numbers of refugees to flee to Turkey. According to the United Nations High Contributor for Refugees (2021), there are currently 3.6 million Syrian refugees in Turkey. "One author describes the evolution of Turkish attitudes [towards refugees] as 'initial compassion which developed into xenophobia,' likening the more recent Turkish attitude to that of a host toward 'a guest overstaying his/her visit'" (Makovsky, 2019). Therefore in the coming years, Turkey may face increased challenges relating to the housing and integration of Syrian refugees in their society which may prompt Ankara to urge Washington to curtail its sanctions.

Caesar's Positive and Negative Effects

Since it has been more than two years since the implementation of the Caesar Act, researchers have been able to efficiently evaluate its effectiveness at achieving its goals through analyzing the positive and negative impacts of the sanctions.

The main benefit of the extraterritorial sanctions is that they successfully dissuaded many foreign entities from assisting the Assad regime in reconsolidating its power. "On the political level, the Caesar Act contributed significantly to stopping the normalization processes that some Arab countries intended to carry out" and their "participation in reconstruction operations" (Al-Estiklal Newspaper, 2021). With this lack of support, the regime has been struggling to gather the resources and finances necessary to begin large-scale rebuilding projects and to sustain its military. Decreasing the regime's military capabilities will reduce the number of lives that will be lost if they decide to launch another campaign.

The sanction's prevention of foreign investments placed a heavy financial burden on Damascus and forced the regime to begin thinning their ranks. Rami Maklouf, Bashar's cousin and one of Syria's wealthiest businessmen, became the first target of the regime. Prior to the conflict, Maklouf established an association, known as Cham Holding, consisting of Syria's 71 best businessmen who, combined, had a total capital of \$350 million (equivalent to two-thirds Syria's economy). Bashar's cousin had been an Assad regime loyalist for the entirety of his life, utilizing his wealth and influence to support the regime and its militias. With the sanctions destabilizing the economic atmosphere in Syria, Bashar was unsettled knowing that Rami controlled all the Assad regime's money. Therefore, Bashar inflicted a \$65 million fee on Rami's company,

Syriatel, under the premise of tax evasion, and demanded that Rami hand over all of his assets inside and outside of Syria. This act of betrayal on Bashar's part was an obvious attempt at mitigating monetary hardships in Syria, although the money he gained from it will eventually run out. More importantly, this intra-regime quarrel indicates that the regime is willing to sacrifice essential members to survive. Under the sanction's constraints, Bashar can be expected to continue siphoning money out of his wealthy loyalists which has the possibility of provoking a coup d'etat if dissatisfaction escalates (Nour, 2021).

Another positive aspect about these sanctions is that they attempt to hold the Syrian government accountable for its crimes against humanity in a non-militaristic manner. War consumes an excessive amount of money, resources and human lives. Also, when a country conducts military action against another, allied nations of either country may decide to enter into the fray, exacerbating the conflict. These sanctions, on the other hand, are an inexpensive and low-maintenance strategy that aims to expose the Syrian government and its allies to large amounts of economic pressure without getting too involved in the situation. Even if sanctions are unable to accomplish their intended goal, this economic burden can prove to be useful when attempting to bring a stubborn country to the negotiating table.

Conversely, the severity of the Caesar Act has negatively affected the humanitarian aid that is available to civilian populations inside Syria. Despite the addition of humanitarian aid waivers to the sanctions package, the number of organizations that are willing to contribute humanitarian aid to Syrians is dismal. "Banks, insurance and shipping companies, and sellers providing humanitarian goods often

refuse to conduct business with humanitarian NGOs due to fears of inadvertently violating U.S. or international sanctions” (Syrian Justice and Accountability Centre, 2020). This apprehension may also have been perpetuated due to the complexities associated with navigating the humanitarian waiver process. Analysts recommend that the U.S. streamlines the process of receiving a humanitarian waiver and that they open up direct communication channels between Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and the OFAC to encourage such organizations' participation in Syria.

In discussions regarding the negative effects of the Caesar Sanctions, many believe that its comprehensiveness disproportionately affects the Syrian population rather than the regime. The argument behind this concern is that sanctioned regimes will always find a way to transfer costs to the general population. “Sanctions never take into consideration the effects on the populations” (Atassi, 2021, p. 61). Instead these sanctions target Syrian political and economic institutions on a large scale, although it does not prevent the Syrian government from raising taxes, lowering wages, utilizing crime-ridden, underground markets, and employing other mitigation strategies onto its citizens. “The country [Syria] has suffered severe oil shortages as a result of U.S. sanctions, which has benefited illegal black-market monopolies while negatively affecting ordinary civilians. Such sanctions have also had the unintended effect of increased production costs for Syrian civilians working in manufacturing and agricultural sectors” (Syria Justice and Accountability Centre, 2020). Therefore, the process of holding the regime accountable seems to be contingent upon societal disruption and civilian unrest due to the organized crime increases and economic turmoil they face.

It is widely purported by many Caesar critics and the Assad regime that the suffering of Syria's civilian population is primarily due to the sanctions (which has some truth to it), although others believe that the sanctions merely contribute to the toxic atmosphere that Bashar al-Assad created. The Caesar Sanctions did not cause Syria's societal unrest, the destruction of Syria's infrastructure, the massive amounts of displaced and dead civilians, or the depletion of Syria's oil revenues. "Caesar without the war could not help the situation to spiral downhill. Things were spiraling before Caesar" (Atassi, 2021, p. 58). Consequently, the intentions of the Caesar Act are to perpetuate the Syrian crisis in a way that forces the regime to concede to international demands.

Present Day Syria and the Caesar Act

Currently, the situation in Syria is becoming increasingly volatile by the day. "Compounded by systemic corruption and mismanagement, the conflict has led to an unprecedented meltdown of the Assad regime's economic activity, which has declined by more than 60 percent. Syria's currency, the Syrian pound, is estimated to have lost 97 percent of its prewar value, while the poverty rate has soared to 90 percent" (Mohamad & Al-Masri, 2021). With the destruction of infrastructure and industry caused by the civil war, the lack of skilled labor due to massive amounts of population displacement, and the U.S. Caesar Sanctions inhibiting most forms of foreign investments, the Assad regime faces an enormous reconstruction cost of around \$400 billion (Nizar, 2020). This means that even with help from Russia and Iran, Assad will be unable to make a dent in the rehabilitation of Syria's infrastructure. In 2018, the United Nations stated that an international aid package would be required to completely rebuild

Syria, although Syria's stability is necessary for that process to begin (Even & Fadlon, 2021, p. 3). As long as Bashar remains the leader of Syria and the Caesar sanctions remain in effect, Syria will be unable to achieve stability. Until either side makes concessions or the regime disintegrates under the pressure, substantial rebuilding will not occur and Syria will continue to deteriorate.

As of today, the Caesar Sanctions are still in effect and the regime's opposition has not lost hope in its abilities to affect a change in Syria, albeit there have been concerns that, if the United States neglects to implement the Caesar Act's secondary sanctions, they could lose their influence in the international community. The U.S. has previously been guilty of this, states the Syrian Justice and Accountability Centre (2020), pointing to the fact that, "Secondary sanctions on individuals and institutions doing business with Syrian entities that existed prior to the Caesar Bill were 'rarely implemented.'" After Joe Biden won the 2020 U.S. presidential election, U.S. foreign policy towards Syria has become less stringent.

In June 2021, the Biden administration gave the green light to two previously-sanctioned Syrian companies with connections to the Assad regime (Letia and Polymedics) for the purpose of increasing COVID-19 assistance in Syria. Specifically, these companies were granted the ability to engage in, "All transactions and activities related to the exportation, re-exportation, sale, or supply, directly or indirectly, of services to Syria that are related to the prevention, diagnosis, or treatment of COVID-19 (including research or clinical studies relating to COVID-19)" (Adesnik, 2021). Although the intentions behind this decision were altruistic, the Assad regime will undeniably be looking for a way to exploit this privilege to benefit itself. This allowance,

along with its neglect in updating the sanctions list against Syria, prompts the international community to believe that the Biden Administration will be more lenient towards the Assad regime than the previous administration. American Republicans and Democrats, “Put forward a draft resolution in the Senate that coincided with the tenth anniversary of the Syrian revolution, in which they urged Biden to implement the law and impose sanctions” (Adesnik, 2021).

In more recent news, U.S. President Biden's administration has decided to lift sanctions on Egyptian and Jordanian gas and electricity companies who are hoping to supply the Lebanese with their resources by sending it through Syria. Under the premise of helping the Lebanese, Syria will be able to profit through moving these Egyptian and Jordanian resources to Lebanon and begin normalization processes with these countries. After a meeting between Syria's Minister of Defense and the Jordanian Chief of Staff, Jordan announced that it will be reopening all of its borders with Syria. (Cengiz, 2021) In an interview with former Syrian National Council President, George Sabra (2021, p. 67), he states, “the violations of the law will not stop with bringing gas and electricity to Lebanon. You will see some other projects from Iraq or Turkey in the future. You will see the Arab gulf start a relationship with the Assad regime.” Not only will this exception to the Caesar Act allow Syria to begin economic and political rehabilitation, but it will damage the reputation and authority of the Caesar Act. If the international community believes that the U.S. is lenient in its implementation of the sanctions, less countries will be deterred from investing in Syrian reconstruction and the Assad regime will regain its power.

DISCUSSION AND RESULTS

Throughout the recent years, Syrians have seen very little change in the Assad regime's conduct. The Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act has succeeded in placing significant financial pressure on the Assad regime, although two years of sanctions has not proved to be a long enough time to affect a transformation in Syrian leadership. The future of Syria and the Assad regime is still unknown, although David Lesch, author of *Syria: Fall of the House of the Assad*, asserts that there are a couple possible ways that the Syrian Conflict could progress. "There are three basics ways in which the Syrian uprising could pan out: 1) Bashar al-Assad could fall from power; 2) Bashar al-Assad could stay in power; or 3) the crisis could turn into a protracted stalemate or civil war" (Lesch, 2016, p. 215).

If the Caesar sanctions continue as they started and the Biden administration begins strictly enforcing the sanctions, there is a good chance that, after a couple years, the Assad regime will crumble from the inside-out resulting in Assad's fall from power. Years of political and economic instability have the possibility of inspiring a coup d'etat in any governing entity. Rami Maklouf is a prime example of how the regime may begin to target its members in an attempt to stay afloat. Once high-ranking regime members begin sensing a trend of intra-regime targeting, they may become suspicious of Bashar and begin planning to overthrow him in favor of a more internationally accepted and stable government. Despite the unreasonable expectations that Bashar has for some of his high-ranking colleagues, he has been able to elicit large amounts of loyalty from his subordinates. Whether or not this loyalty is brought about by fear tactics or fealty rewards, the Assad regime's power structure has remained relatively unchanged to this

day. Therefore, without pressure from the Caesar Sanctions, this option is unlikely to occur.

Another way that Assad might fall from power is through military intervention. Currently, this option is improbable due to the fact that the military opposition in Syria is too fragmented and weak to defeat the Assad regime. Even if they were to suddenly unite, Russian military forces can be expected to intervene in support of the regime. Without a unified opposition and/or support from powerful, foreign allies, any military conquest in Syria would prove to be arduous and cost thousands of lives.

If Bashar is removed from power through military action or internal coup, Syria will still continue to face external pressures. If Bashar's successor has a reputable image with the international community, the Caesar Sanctions are likely to be dropped and reconstruction will begin in Syria, however this will not deter Iran from attempting to establish a representative government in Syria. There is also the possibility that his successor may be a member of the current Assad regime and that, after a period of reputation-enhancing behavior, the Syrian government will once again return to its oppressive habits. Moreover, there is debate that (if Bashar forcefully loses the presidency through either of the aforementioned ways) outside forces, such as Islamic extremist organizations, will attempt to establish themselves in the Syrian government.

When asked if Syria is in danger of coming under the influence of Islamic extremist groups if the Assad regime falls, George Sabra (2021, p. 71) stated: "Not at all, because Islam in Syria, historically, is not fundamentalist." He went on to discuss that Syria is a primarily Christian nation and that Islamic fundamentalist groups primarily target people of Islam. "This is propaganda to put us in front of two bad things, either

Bashar al-Assad or Islamic terrorism" (Sabra, 2021, p. 71). His opinion is validated by the fact that the Assad regime has been publicizing (since the conception of the revolution) that Islamic extremist groups were backing the opposition, despite the fact the regime has been aiding and abetting such groups. To support their narrative, "In mid-2011, the regime released hundreds of Islamist militants from prisons to discredit the rebellion" (Laub, 2021). This allegation also helped to justify the excessive use of force against protestors by the Syrian security forces and Russia's indiscriminate bombings of dissenting areas. Therefore, supporters of this opinion believe that the Assad regime's downfall will also reduce the presence of Islamic fundamentalism that the regime allowed to develop in Syria.

However, other academics believe that the emergence of a post-Assad, Islamic State in Syria is more than plausible. According to Dr. Atassi (2021, p. 57), Assad has enabled the introduction of extremist groups into Syria by giving them the opportunity to capitalize off of Syria's circumstances which started with his release of hundreds of Islamic fundamentalists from prison. Amidst the Caesar sanction's financial burden, the situation further developed when the Assad regime harvested valuable materials from destroyed buildings and sold them to ISIS. Eventually through vigorous war campaigns, ISIS grew to control around one-third of Syria (Wilson Center, 2019). Due to their rapid growth in power, the Syrian government and the international community began conducting separate military campaigns against ISIS which were successful in eliminating their territorial holds, although they cannot be assumed to have been completely expelled from the region.

Another extremist group with ties to al-Qaeda, named Nusra Front, is also intent on establishing an Islamic State in Syria. "The Nusra Front has consistently been one of the most active rebel groups in Syria. By the end of 2013, the group was operating in 11 of Syria's 14 provinces" (Glenn, 2016). Despite sharing similar ideologies, ISIS and Nusra Front are quarreling for influence in Syria. Nusra believes that an Islamic State should be achieved over time and with minimal sectarian violence while ISIS believes in using military force to establish Sharia Law. Nusra Front has attempted to bolster its public image through supplying goods to Syrian people living under its control and providing support to select opposition forces such as the FSA and independent anti-regime militias. Regardless of these acts of service, Nusra Front has direct ties to al-Qaeda leaders and they hold similar oppressive extremist views. If Nusra Front were to take control of the Syrian government, al-Qaeda would benefit immensely. Therefore, contrary to George Sabra's views, if Assad falls from power, it is reasonable to assume that ISIS or Nusra Front will at least make an attempt to exert their influence over Syria.

The second possibility is that Bashar may remain in power with the help of Russia and Iran. With Russia committing to keeping the Assad regime in power through military assistance and Iran's willingness to invest in Syrian reconstruction (despite the sanctions), the regime is not anticipated to surrender in the near future. This combination of support from its allies, along with the lack of a unified opposition and an easing of the Caesar Sanctions, has opened up the possibility of recovery for the regime. Furthermore, if the Caesar Act loses its credibility in the international community, foreign investors will undoubtedly begin to finance Syrian reconstruction and promote normalization processes with the Assad regime. With this outcome, Assad

would be able to escape accountability for the massive amounts of destruction and casualties which he inflicted upon his own country and he would reaffirm his grasp on Syria. This is the scenario that is currently projected to happen.

Third, the crisis may turn into a drawn-out stalemate or civil war (Lesch, 2016, p. 235). In this scenario, neither the opposition nor the regime would be able to assert their authority over the entire country and neither party would give up territory that they already control resulting in a division of the Syrian state. Lesch (2016, p. 237) states that as the Syrian conflict continues, more international forces will enter into the fray. Therefore, Syria will be increasingly susceptible to becoming a proxy war ground for powerful global actors as the crisis is prolonged. The various opposition forces and the regime have both elicited support from foreign agencies which may help them survive a stalemate, but these agencies will not ensure victory to either side. It is noteworthy that Lesch's projections in 2016 were valid at the time, before Bashar al-Assad regained control over his territories. However, this scenario of the division of Syria is still highly possible due to the dormant opposition forces who may become active given an opportunity in case of civil unrest. Recent history has shown such a possibility to be true especially when the dormant Taliban forces regained power in Afghanistan after the American forces withdrew in 2021.

The Caesar Act is an effective strategy at weakening the Syrian government. At present, some of the main positive and negative impacts of the Caesar Act present themselves through the international community's unwillingness to invest in a Russian-dependent regime and their reluctance to help rebuild Syria. The only way that these inhibitions will remain is if the Biden Administration reasserts its willingness to

impose the sanctions in full force allowing the Caesar Act to sustain its credibility in the international community. Without the sanctions, the regime will become less economically dependent on Russia and reconstruction ventures will appear more lucrative to outside organizations. Pragmatically, there is no perfect solution for fixing the Syrian situation except through weakening the government even if it is at the expense of delaying Syria's economic and societal reconstruction.

CONCLUSION

The Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act has been questionable in accomplishing its goals of promoting political change in Syria, ending the Syrian conflict, and improving Syrian citizens' wellbeing. Since the Caesar Act's sanctions are designed in a manner that applies continuous pressure to Syria's Assad-led government, its short-term consequences can be accurately assessed, but only speculations can be made as to how it will affect Syria in the long-term.

For fear of repeating the mistakes that were made in Iraq, the United States has been keeping its distance from Syria through the use of Caesar Sanctions. The U.S. decision to implement sanctions against Syria, instead of becoming directly involved in the Syrian Crisis, has contributed to the country's rampant poverty, food shortages, lack of humanitarian assistance and economic catastrophe. Additionally, the sanctions have limited the Assad regime's international supporters to Russia and Iran, meaning that these countries will have priority in Syrian reconstruction investments. Their involvement gives them more power in the Middle East to impair the establishment of a democratic process in Syria and undermine the ability of western democracies to assist other Arab

countries in the region. Additionally, there is a high likelihood that, under Russia and Iran's manipulation, any newly initiated governing structure will have authoritarian qualities that are similar to its predecessor. Therefore, it can be concluded that the Caesar Act will further advance an anti-democratic agenda in Syria and in the Middle East if it is not back with sufficient measures to ensure the freedoms of the Syrian people. Other short-term inadequacies of the Caesar Act include how it has not prompted any noticeable political change in the Assad regime and that it has exacerbated the Syrian conflict and contributed to an increase in the suffering of the Syrian civilians. It has also negatively impacted the amount of humanitarian aid that Syria has received since its enactment in 2019 and made securing basic necessities very difficult for populations inside Syria.

Despite these facts, the Caesar Act has achieved favorable outcomes in other areas. The extraterritorial nature of its sanctions has proven to be a successful deterrent for any foreign entity who has hopes of conducting business with the Assad regime. This has significantly affected the Assad regime economically, by isolating Syria from foreign markets, and politically, by disconnecting Syria from the international community and preventing it from engaging in political normalization processes. Due to Syria's loss of revenues from the oil and gas sector and foreign remittances, the pressure created by the Caesar Act has succeeded in forcing the regime to turn on its own members which is the first step to the regime's disintegration. In its current state, the sanctions have left the regime barely surviving due to help from its allies and the prospects of Assad's recovery under the Caesar Sanctions are slim.

In summation, the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act, despite its harshness on Syria's economy, is the most viable game plan for freeing the Syrian people from the despotism that they face. Nevertheless, the only way that it can accomplish its long-term goals is if President Biden's administration begins implementing the sanctions with more stringency. The Caesar Sanctions must continue with the strength that they started with if there is any hope for the Syrian people. The sanctions, in combination with Assad's destruction of Syria's society and economy, have set the stage for the entire Syrian state to crumble and it is only a matter of time before this occurs. Since Assad will not leave Syria voluntarily, the success of the United States' Caesar Act is contingent upon the implosion of Syria and its government. As the sanctions are designed to facilitate the removal of the regime, they only offer a solution to half of the problems in Syria. President Biden should heavily reconsider the United States' level of involvement in the Syrian Crisis and be ready to give his full efforts to rehabilitating Syria, once its current regime has been disassembled, to ensure that Syria does not fall under the control of any Islamic extremist organizations, Russia, or Iran.

The United States is a major world power whose influence has the power to elicit the support of many countries around the world. Therefore, by simply formulating a plan for post-Assad Syria and committing to establishing a representative government in Syria, it will motivate the international community to assist in the process of freeing Syria from its oppressive political traditions, ensuring the safety of Syria's citizens, holding Assad accountable for the atrocities he has committed, and creating a stable future for Syria.

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tate.

Appendix

Interview with Dr. Ahmad Nazir Atassi Transcription

September 18, 2021

Robert Suttie:

What is your occupation?

Dr. Ahmad Nazir Atassi:

I am the assistant professor of history at Louisiana tech university.

Suttie:

How long did you live in the US?

Dr. Atassi:

Since 1993, so 27 years.

Suttie:

What prompted you to move to the US?

Dr. Atassi:

Better prospects for jobs and running away from Syria.

Suttie:

In your opinion has the Caesar act achieved its goal of financially disabling the Assad regime?

Dr. Atassi:

You have to differentiate in the case of a dictator between the money that the state gets and the money that the dictator gets. You understand this is a gang, a mafia, so they have ways of supporting themselves through illegal means like informal channels. They have ways of making money for the state to do the affairs of the state.

The state could collect taxes, it could depend on oil revenues, it could depend on fees and trade, foreign aid, so it does not disable the financial revenues of the state itself. So the state can trade in necessity, in food and oil, but it cannot buy things that it could use to oppress its people like weapons. As for money that the dictator can make himself in order to support his own business and cronies, the sanctions never affected any of it. They are financed by illegal means anyways, it is a narcotics state so they get their money.

What the caesar act did is it targeted persons who work with the regime and prevented them from, for example, starting the reconstruction, but the reconstruction in Syria meant confiscated (illegally seizing) land that belongs to refugees and giving it to companies that work with the regime (the cronies of the regime) and then they build new real estate to sell to non-Syrians. The real estate problem in Syria is very acute, especially in rebel areas.

These are areas that used to be agricultural and then the state, a long time ago, rezoned it as industrial, but they never built the infrastructure for the industrial rezoning, (like sewage, sidewalks, roads, etc) so the population did not know what to do or how to deal with it (how to transition from agriculture to industry) because industry was interrupted in the 1960s and late 1980s by waves of nationalization. So, this is an issue that very few people talk about, but it is an issue that is hot among the UN and NGOs, it is called Housing Land and Property (HLP). People started building on their land, like building houses and shops on their land, which is zoned industrially, but it was never redistributed or made into an industrial lot which resulted in illegal building. This means it's your land, you build a house on it and you go to register it with the authorities known, as the Kabul (the land registry), to make it official, but the state prevented them from doing so since they would be building houses on industrial land. For about 50 years, there grew, around these cities, zones of "shanty towns" or "ashwayat" (haphazard) towns which are not supported by deeds. All that you can prove is that you have the land deed from the agricultural zoning, but you don't have the deed for the building that you built on top of it because the state refused to register it. It is a way of controlling populations, you keep them threatened all the time that you will be destroying their houses and livelihoods. This started in the 60s and continued all the way to modern day. It exploded in the 2000s because the population of Syria has a very high rate of reproduction, it doubles every 20 years. In the early 90s, the population of Syria was about 12m people, in 2000-2010, the population was about 24-25m people. It is a big problem and a lot of those who live around the big cities in these haphazard areas. Those people may prove ownership of the land but not anything that is built on top of the land.

These areas rebelled because they felt that there was no future for them so the government responded to their rebellion by dissecting the neighborhood and putting them under gunfire and preventing them from communicating with each other. The government intensified bombings to level these areas and to make them uninhabitable. Then they made these peace deals to stipulate that the people and the fighters should leave which resulted in a depopulation of these areas. After the people left, they released these people that steal everything usable ("tafif"). First they besieged or cordoned an area. After it is depopulated, then you let loose

people who would take the iron from the demolished buildings and the people who take the copper from the wiring of the houses. Then you let loose people who would take the wooden finish of the houses, the appliances, doors, tables, dishes, etc. So they would completely empty these areas of their resources so they could sell them on the black market which is how they paid their soldiers and paved the road for later time when they issued a law saying if it is your land, bring the deed and then it will be returned to you. But they did not talk about the buildings on top of the land because the buildings were destroyed and also the buildings are illegal so you cannot prove that they are your property. Even the people that owned the land couldn't return because they were among the rebels who left. That law enabled Assad to confiscate huge amounts of land by the huge cities, level it with bulldozers, and then prepare to rebuild highrises and fancy neighborhoods to sell to the biggest bidder. That company was called Marota. The Caesar law targeted Maroota specifically. The sanctions targeted anyone involved in maroota, the people in charge of rebuilding, selling, buying iron, and it made it impossible for them to import anything they needed for reconstruction.

In a way, the Caesar law and laws before it prevented the cronies of the regime from replenishing their wealth and made it difficult for the state to be engaged in deals that could benefit the cronies, because the Syrian regime is sort of a parasite. It uses its power to give state contracts to its cronies so they can steal money. Caesar made it difficult for these state contracts and made it difficult for the central bank to make operations that are destined for any effort of rebuilding which means it bothered the regime. It affected the connection of the state and it affected their parasitic practices where they can get money from the state by legitimizing their activity through the state.

Caesar has other consequences too. It made dealing financially with Syria difficult. It was difficult to transfer money through banks because there are no private banks with Syria so all transactions had to go through the central bank. The central bank would take your dollar and give you Syrian money for it. It is very crucial that these rentier states get their fees, remittances from immigrants, and revenues from oil that they need to stay afloat.

Oil does not exist in Syria anymore under the regime. The existence of troops supported by the US (like the Kurdish troops) in the Northeast, denied the regime oil revenues which is very crucial because Syria is a rentier state. It also made it difficult to get remittances from immigrants. Syria before the war had more than a million immigrants who supported their families so now it has 6 million immigrants who are sending hard currency to Syria through banks and friends. But the fact that banks cannot function under the sanctions made it scary to deal with Syria so banks opted out voluntarily. Remittances diminished. Foreign banks sending money into Syria stopped. Foreign banks playing as conduits for Syrian money, state money, or crony money stopped. The movement of hard currency stopped. The state depends heavily on hard currency and foreign currency, because they subsidize certain products to increase their popularity (like sugar, tea, flour and fuel). These are essential for poorer countries. It made it difficult to buy bread, sugar, teas, fuel, and house fuel from the international market. The regime depends on harvesting any hard currency, buying from the international market, and offering it at a low price to the population so they can stay loyal. If it doesn't harvest hard currency, it cannot buy it. If it cannot pay the difference in price, it cannot offer it to the population at a lower price. Everything is available in Syria, although it is available at a high price through private channels so people cannot afford it. People aren't dying because food isn't available, they are dying

because they cannot buy the food. That is Caesar. Caesar is forcing the regime and forcing people to buy at international prices and sell it at an international price, which the Syrian people cannot afford.

Suttie:

Do you think that, with those effects on the Assad regime, it will facilitate the removal of Assad?

Dr. Atassi:

In normal situations, sanctions never remove the regime. But, the Assad regime destroyed the infrastructure in Syria, depleted Syria's able middle class (due to economic pressure or military pressure), crippled the economy by not being able to sell oil to get the benefit from the revenue, and lost the ability to receive remittances from immigrants. It is very hard for the regime now to revitalize itself, as you can see. In normal situations, if the economy is working and the infrastructure is not destroyed, sanctions will be replaced through other channels such as the alternative channels that have been in Iran since the late 1970s. They have been under sanctions since the 1980s (40 years). They have alternative channels, everybody knows about alternative channels for everything. Sanctions never remove the regime, but if a regime like Assad goes on and destroys its infrastructure, destroys its economy, disables its labor force, and loses important territory, then it cannot replenish its coffers. That is when Caesar comes into play. It kinda allows things to spiral down, but it does not invent the situation or background which has been done by the war. Caesar without the war could not help the situation to spiral downhill. Things were spiraling before Caesar. Specifically because the regime destroyed the infrastructure, depleted the population and lost oil revenues.

Suttie:

So what I'm hearing is that Caesar sanctions will not necessarily remove Assad from power any time soon?

Dr. Atassi:

Caesar cannot do it by itself, sanctions never removed a bad regime, but with Caesar plus the effects of the war, it could. Because the regime is going to shrink and target its members for money. This is what they are doing now, they imposed a certain amount on each rich person that used to work through the network of the regime. The regime has a network of cronies that get monopolies and government contracts, now these monopolies and contracts don't exist so they cannot replenish their wealth so they are targeted by the regime in order to supply money, which makes many of them eliminated. So the regime would start these campaigns of "anti-corruption" and target some of their cronies saying that their wealth is ill-gotten-gains (which they are) but the state is going to put their hands on it.

Suttie:

Like Rami Maklouf?

Dr. Atassi:

Exactly, he was the latest in a long series of cronie targeting. Of course they will make new cronies and target them later. But the meager resources are forcing them to thin their ranks and to impose heavy burdens on the remaining ones. The remaining ones are complaining because their job is to make money. Then they complain that they cannot feed the militias because they are the ones paying for the militias. Because they cannot pay for a regular army, you transform your soldiers into paramilitary militias, you feed them through other channels,

through stealing, through checkpoints where they impose fees on people passing through, and through smuggling (between Syria, Lebanon, and Turkey). This is how a failed state feeds its soldiers because the state doesn't have money to pay them so then they impose payment on rich cronies to support militias. If the rich cronies cannot support the militias, the soldiers will complain, so the rich merchants will complain, and the cronies will complain which means the solid structure of the regime could fracture under that pressure. This is the way but it is unpredictable and it cannot be done institutionally by decapitating Assad, replacing him, or a coup d'etat. Caesar does not bother to know how that implosion will work out, but that pressure added to the destruction of the infrastructure caused the regime to thin its members and to apply more financial pressure to the remaining ones. More financial pressure means the soldiers and militia members cannot be fed, so they complain and look for other alternatives. Since the regime decentralized by creating militias, they are not elements of the army. So the regime doesn't have power over them, so if they splinter or stop depending on the regime, they will not take orders from the regime. They will start making zones for themselves and engage in illegal activities to support their members. This is one example of how the regime could crumble from the inside due to the sanctions.

Suttie:

Does that mean that there is some hope that, sometime in the future, this implosion will become something bigger for Syria?

Dr. Atassi:

No you cannot call it hope, because the regime has lots of weapons and soldiers. If these soldiers turn on each other through warlords, you have another civil war. So if we had a civil war between sunnis and alawites, now it's going to be a civil war between alawites and alawites. It's not hope, its further destruction.

The initial thinking of those who imposed the sanctions was institutional change, not implosion. Today, the scenario of implosion is due to Caesar and destruction of infrastructure, but the US will not be able to deal with it or harvest its benefits if there are any. The military and political power will fracture and the rest of Syria will turn into warlord territories. Sanctions are designed to create radioactive actors that you cannot touch. You punish the actors and everyone who deals with them. Sanctions are a regulation mechanism for international affairs where you create satan and anyone who touches satan gets punished whether they are opponents or allies of you. The French deal with Assad, he is one of their old buddies, now they cannot deal with him. You're punishing the Germans, Italians, and everyone else who used to deal with him. Of course if you don't want to punish them, you give them exceptions.

Sanctions are made to regulate international relations. Sanctions are institutional and don't think about the people. They aim to pressure institutions, but sometimes you don't pressure institutions because they transfer that pressure to the people. Who passed Caesar Law?

Suttie:

Wasn't it Donald Trump who passed it in 2019?

Dr. Atassi:

You have to think beyond that. Foreign policy in the United States is not a single actor, which means the president makes the decision which is one choice among many given to him so there is the decision maker, but the decision maker is not knowledgeable in all affairs. These

are choices given to him, but he selects one. So there are people who lobby for these choices. There are the military forces, the CIA, Israel, other countries, other allies, the state department, and many other actors who are interested in foreign policy and the president chooses one. You should notice that the Caesar law was passed in a package. You will notice that the US government passes packages, not single laws. The package was the military budget. Caesar's law was part of a package that was mainly about improving the military budget.

Suttie:

So he may not have been completely focusing on the Caesar Act, he may also have been tempted by an increase in military spending or something else included in the bill?

Dr. Atassi:

You have to look for the people who inserted Caesar into the package. These are the primary beneficiaries. I don't have much information, this is just an observation. Don't just take the tip of the iceberg, the president, because in foreign affairs, most presidents don't know anything. So these are options given to them and people lobbied. Figure out who lobbied for Caesar and who inserted it into a bill and helped it to pass, as well as how difficult it was to pass. Or how easy it was to pass. In my opinion, it wasn't difficult to pass Caesar law since it was a part of the military package, so take those aspects and just allude to them in your study. It's a study done by nonprofits and by congress themselves, which examines the effect of any law that they enact. They study the long term effect. So you can hold them responsible for laws that they pass and you can study the entire thing by just taking the outcome. President and congress sign laws for an intended purpose, did it fulfill its purpose? This is a way of holding administrations accountable, but it doesn't tell you anything about the deep game of what Syria represents for the military, for the congress, for other foreign actors, for other domestic actors who lobbied for the law. Then you gain a greater understanding of how American politics works in international affairs and how these policies are shaped.

Suttie:

Do you believe that the Caesar act has successfully advanced its agenda at establishing democracy in Syria?

Dr. Atassi:

No, it's chaos.

Suttie:

Do you think that the Caesar act is holding the Assad regime accountable for the war crimes that they have committed?

Dr. Atassi:

Did they specifically say that they would hold him accountable?

Suttie:

Yes, that's one of the stipulations in the Caesar act. They wanted to hold the Assad regime accountable for war crimes.

Dr. Atassi:

So if accountable means an international tribunal, it will never happen. If accountable means punishing Assad, yes Caesar law is punishing, but not making him pay for his crimes. There is no justice in it. Sanctions never bring justice.

Suttie:

The situation in Syria is very dire at this moment. Do you think that the Caesar act was formulated with the thought of the Syrian people in mind?

Dr. Atassi:

No, it targeted specific people who work with the regime but they did not study the unintended consequences

Suttie:

Then it was named very poorly, since it is the Caesar Syria "Civilian Protection" Act. It is obviously not considering the civilians and what it's going to do to them.

Dr. Atassi:

That's politics, branding is a game. That name is a branding.

Suttie:

Are the Caesar sanctions helping or hurting the average syrian?

Dr. Atassi:

Always combine it with the destruction of the infrastructure. Caesar cannot hurt without the destruction of the infrastructure. Also the regime always has mechanisms for deflecting the costs and transferring it to the citizens. Sanctions never take into consideration the effects on the populations.

Suttie:

Would you rather see the living conditions deteriorate under the caesar sanctions or see the Assad regime recover its resources if the sanctions are removed?

Dr. Atassi:

I am callous. The population under Assad will suffer no matter what. Caesar now is helping to thin their ranks, deplete their resources, and make them turn on each other. Any opening given to the regime, they will use to rebuild itself before rebuilding the country. So, call me callous, I am in favor of continuing Caesar not for its avowed intentions, but for its consequences. Syria is going into chaos no matter with or without Caesar.

Suttie:

The poverty rate has elevated to around 90% in 2021. Is the regime primarily to blame for this occurrence or do you think the sanctions are more to blame?

Dr. Atassi:

Totally the regime. Sanctions are not to blame.

Suttie:

With around 12 million refugees internally and externally displaced, is the caesar act helping or hurting the refugee crisis?

Dr. Atassi:

Internally displaced people will suffer the most since they don't have resources. The ones outside, it's preventing them from sending remittances to their families. So, in the end it hurts refugees and displaced persons.

Suttie:

Will continuing the Caesar act result in more positive or negative for Syria's future?

Dr. Atassi:

Can you really assess it in these terms?

Suttie:

I know there are a lot of both, more negative than positive though, but if there's any chance that Assad is removed, do you think that will help Syria become a better place to live?

Dr. Atassi:

Assad will not be removed alone. The entire regime will collapse and it will be another civil war. You cannot assign blame because it is a big process. Caesar, the destruction, failures of Russia, and the interventions of Iran all played a role. So, it will implode, but Caesar does not provide any mechanism to actually protect anybody from the implosion or to prepare the United States for response to the implosion. Caesar does not take that into consideration. The US must prepare some other intervention mechanisms in case of implosion. Would the implosion be good or bad? It's always said that "it can never get worse," but it can get worse.

Suttie:

Beyond the Caesar act, how can the Syrian people organize themselves to create a new front of democracy or just a working and genuinely transparent government?

Dr. Atassi:

It is impossible. Inside Syria they have a firm grip on the populations through fear, intimidation, kidnapping, arrest, and torture. Outside Syria, people are busy getting their papers in order and, frankly, the ones living in tents cannot do anything. The ones living in Turkey and outside Germany are busy establishing their lives. They have not attempted to do anything political and many of them are so fed up they don't actually want to do anything for Syria. The fact that they are living in foreign countries makes it very hard to assemble and play Syrian politics. They also don't have the resources, whether Gulf or Western countries, nobody is investing in the Syrian crisis. It is toxic material, you just leave it as it is. The Russians, Iranians, and Turks are involved. That is good, let them sink in the swamps, but nobody is investing in Syria, nobody. Since they are starting their lives in new countries, many people do not have the resources or time to invest in a new revolution in Syria.

Suttie:

How can Syria be independent from its debts to Russia and Iran?

Dr. Atassi:

Debts?! It's very hard. The Iranians have a model of intervention that creates communities. It creates communities, connections, trade, changes the population, changes religion, it creates its own markets, and it feeds off chaos. It is a state within a state, like Hezbollah. The more Syria descends into chaos, the more Iranians benefit. Russians have more institutional intervention. They don't have boots on the ground, they have airplanes in the sky. They really haven't been able to affect any change in Syria after the war. They don't have boots on the ground. If you don't have money or boots on the ground you can't do anything. Are you going to threaten to bomb the Assad regime after you saved them? Russians are useless, but they will stay. They are hoping to convert their supposed success into something that they can sell to the West and trade it for Ukraine. They always ask, "Syria for Ukraine?" It's very hard to get rid of Russia and even harder to get rid of Iran. And even if Syria implodes, it will be impossible to get rid of Iran because they feed off chaos.

Suttie:

Do you think that either of the countries will try to establish their own representative government in Syria?

Dr. Atassi:

Yes, Russia tried but did not succeed. Iran does not care, Iran creates a state within a state.

Suttie:

What's the main reason why many of the opposition forces haven't unified yet?

Dr. Atassi:

It is an insult to intelligence to call them actual opposition forces. These are people who never practiced real politics, which means positions of power in 50 years. They lack institutions to do that, they don't have political parties. The institutions they built, they built with foreign money so they are completely at the mercy of the donors. The donors today have withdrawn their money. Basically the opposition are mercenaries. They are hoping to enter into a political process where they get a share of the Syrian state on the shoulders of their supporters and donors. The Assad regime refused that kind of deal so the military opposition disappeared and the political opposition does not have the tools and consists primarily of opportunistic people. Syria has lived for 50 years under a crippling dictatorship, it doesn't have political institutions outside the state. It's very hard to ask the opposition to unite because the parent politicians are opportunistic people who are trying to get power through international politics. Some are paid by Britain, some by Qatar, some by Turkey and their job is, whenever there are negotiations, to sit at the table behind the donors and the donors would ask for partition from the state and then insert its representatives in the state. Assad has refused that scheme, I consider that smart so there is no opposition. All these countries have invested in agents who work for them, they haven't invested in real opposition. There is no real way for the opposition to unite, it's not designed to be united.

Suttie:

If the Assad regime is to fall, does that put Syria in danger of coming under the influence of an Islamic state?

Dr. Atassi:

Oh yea, of course. Then that would be good because the United States would intervene.

Suttie:

There have been allegations that Bashar used islamic extremist groups to suppress revolutionary forces. Is this accurate?

Dr. Atassi:

Yes. Not that they work for him, it is like sometimes they facilitate his lie. For example, when Isis was in charge of the Middle East, Assad bought oil from ISIS. Also, he sold the iron from the crushed buildings to ISIS.

Suttie:

So they are a part of the underground market that he has going on in Syria?

Dr. Atassi:

Yes. You either enable or disable them. You don't influence them directly, you influence them by creating a good environment for them to intervene. For example, you pull troops from an area. Therefore you are inviting them. When Assad pulled troops from Palmyra, who is going to take the regime's place. Of course it's ISIS. He wanted to recruit people from Suaida, whose people are the Druze. These people wanted to remain independent. He wanted to force them to be in his militias, so he retreated from their area and ISIS filled the gap and threatened the druze.

End of Transcription

Interview with George Sabra Transcription

September 20, 2021

Robert Suttie:

How long did you live in the US?

George Sabra:

I lived in the United States for 1 year in 1978. I went there with an official scholarship from the American government to the Syrian government to study educational TV programs. I studied at Indiana University in Bloomington Indiana. I studied instructional systems and technology and I had the chance to get some training at Kentucky Educational Television. Also, I studied at CTW (a famous institute) in New York.

Suttie:

What prompted you to leave Syria?

Sabra: I was a part of the Syrian National Council which was the opposition forces in Syria and I went to prison for more than 8 years for that. During the revolution in 2011, I was captured for 3-4 months and I went to jail. There was not any possibility to continue living there, so I left with my family to France.

Suttie:

In your opinion has the Caesar act achieved its goal of financially disabling the Assad regime?

Sabra:

Oh, not yet. The problem is that last week we saw something stop the real effect of the law. Syrians were happy with Caesar law, at least it could remind the world of what Caesar found. When Americans, especially congress, saw what was really happening in Syria, through the 55 pictures released by Caesar, they were horrified. And so we were happy that this act from the American Congress will help to stop these tragedies in Syria. To stop killing people in all kinds of ways. Syrian people heard about the law, they will care about it. When the regime said that Syrian people get hurt from the law, this was propaganda because the law targeted 100 Syrian people and Syrian companies around Bashar al-Assad. Most of them are from military and security establishments and the law didn't put any pressure on food, medicine, or any other resource like that. The only people targeted by the law are people around Bashar al-Assad and his authority.

Suttie:

Do you expect that the sanctions are eventually going to facilitate the removal of Bashar al-Assad from a position of power?

Sabra:

If the law continues with the same steps as it started, it can put a good pressure on Bashar al-assad and other groups of people and government in that area. Bashar al-Assad's authority died some years ago when Iran sent Hezbollah from Lebanon to save him. Next, Iran came with it's military (called al-Haraz al-Towry) to help Bashar. Everything didn't help, so

Russia in 2015 interfered with their military, airplanes and bombs to save Bashar. At least the Caesar law will stop the rehabilitation of Bashar al-Assad.

Suttie:

What do you think the process of removal will look like for Bashar in the coming years?

Sabra:

Now the problem is that they [the Assad regime] are using the lack of gas and electricity in Lebanon in their favor. They claim that the only way to solve this problem is to bring Egyptian gas and Jordanian electricity through Syria to Lebanon. That was the cover to breaking the Caesar Sanctions. Really what happened 10 days ago was breaking the law. After that, Bashar al-Assad's regime received an official minister from Lebanon and they had a meeting in Damascus. Then Bashar al-Assad and his authority shared a meeting with 4 ministries in Jordan and, only yesterday, [September 19, 2021] there was an official visit from the Syrian defence minister to Jordan. This happened for the first time in 10 years. How do you imagine the authority of the Caesar law looks after that? Especially when we will see that Bashar al-Assad will take some of the Egyptian gas and Jordanian electricity to help himself. He will also get some money from facilitating the gas and electricity from Jordan to Lebanon. Nobody can do something like that without the green light from Washington. So the decision was made in Washington and everybody saw that King Abdulla of Jordan was the first Arab leader to visit the Biden administration. Four weeks ago he came from Washington and went to Moscow directly to prepare the result of this decision on the ground. Everybody saw that Russian and Iranian troops along with Bashar al-Assad were starting to exert pressure against Daraa in southern Syria. They made a siege around the city [of Daraa] which was home to 50,000 people because that was where the gas and electricity would pass through. They entered Daraa city and some other villages for the first time since 2011. Also, they issued a new government in Lebanon. Lebanon had been waiting because, for more than a year, it had no government. Now they have a new government and Bashar al-Assad has some representatives inside the Lebanese government.

Suttie:

Doesn't that mean that Bashar will have influence over the Lebanese government?

Sabra:

There is no doubt about that.

Suttie:

Since Bashar is getting gas from Egypt and electricity from Jordan, doesn't that mean that Jordan and Egypt are going against the Caesar Act and they may stand the risk of having sanctions put against them?

Sabra:

Something like that, but they were covered (themselves and their action) by the American government who allowed them to break the law. Now, not only Jordan, but Egypt will try to do something like this which will encourage some other Arab countries in the area (like Turkey) to start a relationship with Bashar.

Suttie:

Did they file any humanitarian waivers or anything? What was the criteria to do business with Bashar out of nowhere?

Sabra:

It was for the purpose of "helping the Lebanese." Starting economically, but ending politically, to open all kinds of relationships with the Assad regime. This means rehabilitation of Bashar and his authority. Russia was doing their best to avoid the sanctions many years ago, but now they will do it freely, because the lack of enforcement of the Caesar Act allows them to do it freely.

Suttie:

So people are going to eventually not take Caesar Law seriously anymore?

Sabra:

Yes. Unfortunately this is the situation. John McCain, who carried the Caesar file to congress, will now be unhappy in his grave.

The problem is the American administration. They not only let them [Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria] do what they want, they announced "we have to break the law." Brett McGurk is the National Security Council Coordinator for the Middle East and North Africa. He went to Cairo and made negotiations with the Egyptian government and prepared a meeting for four ministers in Aman, Jordan. The American administration helped with the procedures of breaking the law. Mrs. Barbara Leff, who is now the assistant of the department of state. She said that we [America] will open the way to facilitate the gas and electricity to arrive in Lebanon. She announced that officially and you can see that in the meeting of the international relationship committee. In the Senate, there was a real discussion about that and the results were announced officially. It makes us, as Syrians, very sorry about what happened with the important law from the Senate [the Caesar Law].

Suttie:

Since its enactment in 2009, do you think the Caesar Act has successfully advanced its agenda for establishing democracy in Syria?

Sabra:

I do not want to exaggerate, but I think it can help give hope to Syrian people that democracy can be brought to Syria in the future. As Russia and Iran's authority couldn't do anything to rehabilitate Bashar's authority, we were happy with the law. We have hope in the law even if it will take some years. Also it allows Syrian people to feel that there are some people in the world beside them. But now, the Syrian people feel that they are alone in front of authority that uses chemical weapons against its own people. They remember the decision of President Obama and his red underlines for chemical weapons. He did nothing. Unfortunately the reputation of American policy is now on the ground.

Our problem with the United States is that Americans will decide to help in a conflict and they will bring other countries with them. Therefore, when they withdraw, the other countries (that joined them to help) will withdraw. It is not a normal country. The decision which was made in Washington is very dangerous against us as Syrians, positively or negatively.

Suttie:

Do you believe that the Caesar act has held Assad accountable for the war crimes it committed?

Sabra:

He started the law for the purpose of encouraging Syrians and international human rights committees to start creating reports and discover the facts from the ground. Many reports

were established to prove whether the Caesar law is the right action for the right time. So really, we were optimistic of the law, but suddenly something changed.

Suttie:

_____ Has the Caesar Act already lost credibility since the recent occurrences?

Sabra:

Yes, I think so. I think the violations of the law will not stop with bringing gas and electricity to Lebanon. You will see some other projects from Iraq or Turkey in the future. You will see the Arab Gulf start a relationship with the Assad regime. Really, this went against all American and international policy that had been established in the past ten years. It opened the siege around Bashar al-Assad and Iranian troops in Syria. Most of the crimes were done by the Iranian militia, Hezbollah, from Lebanon and troops from Iraq.

Suttie:

So if that investigation substantiates the point that they are the main perpetrators of these crimes, does that mean that Bashar al-Assad is going to get off the hook for what he's done?

Sabra:

Yes, especially now. Two months ago, Bashar al-Assad made an election to renew his "presidency" for another seven years. I am afraid the problem is that Bashar arranged his election and that American policy went against it ignoring what happened in Syria by saying "this is not a real election." So, when we saw the Caesar law and this American behavior challenging Bashar and his decisions, we felt happy. But now, what is the meaning of ignoring the importance of Bashar's election if you open the door for countries and companies to do what they want with him.

Suttie:

Do you think the Caesar Act was formulated with the thought of the Syrian people in mind?

Sabra:

You know Syrian people as a public want to live. The problem is with the politicians and with the Syrian intelligence. People hope that American policy and the Caesar Law will help by using the sanctions to make a real siege against the regime. Because of Caesar's law, Russia couldn't be of any use to Syria. They did their best to make a conference to bring back the refugees to Syria. No country, no company, nobody went with them. Russia did their best to get Bashar back into the Arab League (AL) because the AL stopped him from being a member. We are afraid that someone will ask the Arab League to bring Bashar back. That would open all the doors and the important thing is changing the country into a closed democratic system.

Suttie:

Do you think that the Caesar Act is helping the Syrian people more than it's hurting?

Sabra:

For me, I hope that the only negative step, the bringing of electricity and gas to Lebanon, is stopped. We hope that we can get something useful on the other hand, but there's no exact hope that will exactly stop Lebanon. I told you, only yesterday, there was an official meeting in Jordan with the minister of defence from Jordan and Syria. That means something opened widely. So we are very worried about that.

Suttie:

Overall, do you think that the Caesar sanctions are helping or hurting the average Syrian? Could it be somewhere in between?

Sabra:

Something in between, but it depends on the results at the end. If they continue opening the doors to break the law more and more, here and there, that means it was all a lie. But, if they stop with Lebanon's needs, we can understand that, but we have to see Americans try to prevent the rehabilitation of Bashar al-Assad and prevent the bringing of Syria back into the international community.

Suttie:

Would you rather see the living conditions in Syria deteriorate under the Caesar Sanctions or see the Assad regime recover their resources if the sanctions are removed?

Sabra:

You know if the sanctions are removed, that means that there is a decision somewhere in America to continue the Russian decision of keeping Bashar al-Assad as the president of Syria and to disregard the hundreds of thousands of Syrians who sacrificed their life. Especially when you see that it's going the same way that Afghanistan went. After 20 years in Afghanistan, American policy gave the country to the Taliban. Now, will they do the same thing in Syria? Give Syria and Syrian people to another terrorist government. This is the bigger question. So that will negatively impact the reputation of American policy.

You know in the Arabic newspaper, they are currently saying that there is no political plan for the Middle East announced right now. All people feel like that. But when you see decisions and procedures, you can understand that either there is a bad policy and they couldn't announce it exactly or there is no policy at all. American politicians are confused, especially now. We see what happened between the U.S. and France. Can you imagine the relationship between these two states for hundreds of years? Now they're withdrawing their ambassadors. Now there is a big question mark surrounding American policy. It's not clear enough.

Suttie:

Is the regime primarily to blame for Syria's spike in poverty or are the sanctions?

Sabra:

Naturally, Bashar will blame everything negative on the Caesar sanctions. But in fact, you can see the report that was published on August 13th, 2021, issued by the international investigation community of Syria. That's from the human rights council of the United Nations. In this report, everything is clear and, at the end, they state that Syria is still not safe for the refugees to come back. How will American policy behave about that? If Russia starts to push refugees from Lebanon, Turkey, and Jordan to come back to unsafe places, that means that they will be killing the Syrian people twice. When you promise them help and encourage them with the thought of democracy, then you leave them in the hands of Iran and Russia, this prompts the people of the Middle East to ask a question. Is the US weak enough to do something like that? We don't believe it.

Suttie:

Is the Caesar act helping or hurting the refugee crisis?

Sabra:

Now, it will hurt them. It will encourage people and the government in Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan to do whatever they want to these refugees, like pushing them to go back to an

unsafe country. We were covered by American policy when they said that Bashar's election was illegitimate. Now, the situation in Syria is not safe enough. We were covered then, but now that Caesar's law can be broken so easily, we lost our cover. Our fears are that we are facing a problem with the United States. We feel that in a couple weeks or months we may be facing the same problem with the United Nation. We know the important influence of American policy in the United Nations. We are asking now what about the political operation. The decisions of the security council, which opened the door for political solutions, can be pushed off the table as a result of that. That means destroying everything. This is the sure fire way to encourage terrorism in Syria.

Suttie:

If the Caesar Act continues being enforced and the Americans reassert their authority with the Caesar act, do you think that it will result more positively or negatively for Syria's future?

Sabra:

Frankly, it's not currently clear to me. We have some fears, but at the same time we still have hope. We cannot believe that the US will leave everything in the area and withdraw. We will see if the US will withdraw from the Northern part of Syria and leave the Kurds there alone. That means giving $\frac{1}{3}$ of Syria to Bashar al-Assad. If they did something like that, it would be negative.

Suttie:

How can the Syrian people organize themselves to create a new front of democracy?

Sabra:

You know we have an organization where we organized ourselves first in 2011 which was the Syrian National Council. Then after that, we became the Syrian National Coalition. We gained support from 128 countries around the world including the United States. I, myself, met with the secretary of state, Hillary Clinton and John Kerry. All U.S. diplomats have fallen out of interest with the Syrian issues. So our fears are too much. The problem is when we think that the US and the UN are stopping political procedures, political meetings, and political interests aimed at helping Syrians. When we think that something like that will stop, we are reminded about our fears of terrorist groups coming into Syria. You saw when the US withdrew from Afghanistan, the next day ISIS conducted a terrorist bombing in the airport. This is the problem. We will not be safe until the US' political procedures start and continue with the UN security council. If this doesn't happen, people will resort to violence.

Suttie:

How can Syria be independent of its debts to Russia and Iran? How can they sever their ties with them?

Sabra:

There is no way except for political decisions. Political decisions depend on the UN security council's decisions. The political process is ready but the problem is that there is no acceptance between the US and Russia. There is no agreement between the two sides about the Syrian situation. There is no way to push Russia and Iran out of Syria except political solutions because all sides say that there is no military solution to the Syrian crisis. We have, on paper, certain political solutions, but they are not the real decisions of the important forces in the world (Russia and US). Russia cannot rehabilitate Bashar al-Assad, therefore if Russia

withdraws from Syria and the Syrian issue, the result will be to divide the country between Turkey in the North, Israel in the South, some to Bashar around Damascus, and Hezbollah and Iran in the Euphrates area.

Suttie:

Who wants to divide Syria?

Sabra:

Iran and Israel because Israel wants to see Syria turn into four small countries instead of one big country. There are problems between them. Every group in Syria will forget about Israel as an enemy because they have a new enemy now. Iran wants to divide the country and put its hands on a part of it, similar to what happened in south Lebanon which is now Iranian. That's the area of Hezbollah. Hezbollah does whatever it wants. Last week, Hezbollah brought petroleum from Iran to Lebanon without agreement from the Lebanese government.

Suttie:

So Hezbollah basically controls the Lebanese government?

Sabra:

Sure they do that, everybody in Lebanon knows it. Hezbollah did their best to make a way to carry the petroleum through four countries (Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon) and they have a plan to make a railway from Tehran to Beirut. That means a tragic change in the Middle East.

Suttie:

Because then Hezbollah can become stronger and exert their influence over more of the Middle East.

Sabra:

There is no doubt about that. Iran is very happy with the fact that millions of Syrians left Syria because they will bring some other people who will probably be Shi'ite. Iran is Shi'ite. They will bring Shi'ite to live instead of Sunnis in Syria.

Suttie:

Is Bashar alright with that?

Sabra:

Bashar is not a leader anymore. You saw how Russians brought him from Damascus to Moscow which was only to try to prove that he is the Syrian authority. But on the ground, everything is done by Russians and Iranians.

Suttie:

So Bashar has lost his credibility?

Sabra:

No doubt about that.

Suttie:

What is the main reason that many opposition forces haven't united yet?

Sabra:

Oh, this is the real problem caused by international affairs. Countries interfere inside Syrian society. The Syrian revolution is now six months without any reports. There are demonstrations in the streets shouting for freedom and dignity. Every day there are 1-2 thousand people who are killed by the government. Can you imagine that the situation can continue like that? Syria has a border with 6 countries and a sea which can be used to bring weapons. So many countries in the area encourage that. When you carry weapons that means

you will be backed by a country to provide you money and resources. The problem is, the military and political decisions of these groups are not in the Syrian's best interest. The interests of the countries providing these resources will be prioritized. This is a big problem. We have some attempts to unite the opposition forces, but we have been facing a problem of famine for the past 10 years. Most Syrians want to bring food to their families and children. Most of them will obey the orders of the other governments which is a problem. As there is no hope in front of them, they agree to be a part of Turkish policy, Lebanese policy, Hezbollah's policy, Jordanian policy, Israeli policy, and Sudani policy.

Suttie:

Is Syria in danger of coming under the influence of islamic extremist groups if the Assad regime falls?

Sabra:

Not at all, because Islam in Syria, historically, is not fundamentalist. Historically, we were christians and lived in our country freely. For more than 1000 years the Christian church has remained in operation. You know Syria is the country of Christianity. The first church was built in Damascus 2000 years ago and it is still open to this day. There are no Islamic fundamentalists in Syria. We have to remember that fundamentalist people were freed from Syrian prison by Bashar al-Assad. He freed them and helped them to do whatever they wanted, such as what happened in al-Musil in Iraq. When the Prime Minister of Iraq left military goods and a great deal of money in the bank of al-Musil to ISIS and left the city. This is a play. I will remind you that the victims of Islamic terrorism were the people of Islam, not Christians, not Alawites, and not the Druze. Syrian people have in their mind a blank idea about Islamic terrorism. Now in the Arab countries, Islamic people have lost their position. In Morocco, the Islamic people lost the election and the government. In Tunisia, the same thing occurred. This is propaganda to put us in front of two bad things, either Bashar al-Assad or Islamic terrorism.

Suttie:

There have been allegations that Bashar has utilized islamic extremist groups to suppress revolutionary forces, do you think that is an accurate assumption?

Sabra:

Yes, he did that many times. He used ISIS last year in the southern part of syria in a district called al-Suwaida. People there are from the Druze part of Islam. People there refused to agree with Bashar's using military services to kill Syrian people. They refused to send their boys to do that. Bashar sent ISIS beside them to get their children and women. They tried to push the Druze in al-Suwaida to ask the Syrian military to come to al-Suwaida. Bashar and the Syrian military couldnt go to that areaa, that means he wants to use ISIS or al-Quaida help him to make people fearful of terrorism and side with him. This propaganda is silly right now, nobody believes it. Ten years is enough time to discover the truth.

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