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www.afgazad.com

afgazad@gmail.com

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BY PATRICK COCKBURN

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The War of Hunger is Taking Over From the War of Guns...and All Syrians are the Victims



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Great dollops of hypocrisy invariably accompany expressions of concern by outside powers for the wellbeing of the Syrian people. But even by these low standards, a new record for self-serving dishonesty is being set by the Caesar Civilian Protection Act, the new US law imposing the harshest sanctions in the world on Syria and bringing millions of Syrians to the brink of famine.

Supposedly aimed at safeguarding ordinary Syrians from violent repression by President Bashar al-Assad, the law is given a humanitarian garnish by naming it after the

Syrian military photographer who filmed and smuggled out of the country pictures of thousands of Syrians killed by the government. But instead of protecting Syrians, as it claims, the Caesar Act is a measure of collective punishment that is impoverishing people in government and opposition-held areas alike.

Bad though the situation in Syria was after 10 years of warfare and a long-standing economic embargo, the crisis has got much worse in the nine months since the law was implemented on 17 June last year. It has raised the number of Syrians who are close to starvation to 12.4 million, or 60 per cent of the population, according to the UN.

Already, more than half a million children under the age of five are suffering from stunting as the result of chronic malnutrition. As the Syrian currency collapsed and prices rose by 230 per cent over the last year, Syrian families could no longer afford to buy basic foodstuffs such as bread, rice, lentils, oil and sugar.

“The war of hunger ... scares me more than the war of guns,” says Ghassan Massoud, the Syrian actor famous for playing Saladin in the 2005 Ridley Scott film *Kingdom of Heaven*. A politically neutral and popular figure in Syria, Massoud is quoted as saying that government employees are earning 50,000 Syrian pounds (\$13/£9) a month when they need 800,000 Syrian pounds to survive. “I am a vegetarian but I do not accept that a citizen is not able to eat meat because a kilo costs 20,000 Syrian pounds.”

The Caesar Act threatens sanctions on any person or company that does business with Syria and thereby imposes a tight economic siege on the country. Introduced just as the Covid-19 epidemic made its first onset in Syria last summer and soon after the implosion of the Lebanese economy to which Syria is closely linked, the law has proved the final devastating blow to Syrians who were already ground down by a decade of destruction.

It was supposedly aimed at Assad and his regime, but there was never any reason to believe that it would destabilise them or compel them to ease repression. Since they hold power, they are well placed to control diminished resources. As with the 13 years of UN sanctions directed against Saddam Hussein between 1990 and 2003, the victims were not the dictator and his family but the civilian population. Iraqi society was shattered, with results that are still with us, and the same is now happening in Syria.

“Sanctions and other measures that are meant to penalise repressive rulers usually wind up hurting ordinary people the most,” concludes the Brussels-based International Crisis Group.

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