

Hansard: Oral Question on Syria

13 May 2020

*The Question was considered in a Virtual Proceeding via video call.*

**Baroness Cox:** To ask Her Majesty’s Government what assessment they have made of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the humanitarian situation in Syria; and what steps they are taking to initiate the lifting of sanctions on that country.

**The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office and Department for International Development (Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon) (Con):** My Lords, after years of conflict, Covid-19 poses a particularly significant threat in Syria. The United Kingdom is working closely with the United Nations and partners to adapt our humanitarian response. We are also supporting the UN-led political process, which the Syrian regime must engage with seriously for sanctions to be lifted. EU sanctions, which we continue to apply during the transition period, are carefully targeted on specific sectors and individuals—[Inaudible].

**Baroness Cox (CB):** My Lords, I thank the Minister for that reply. Does he acknowledge that UK-backed sanctions make it impossible for many civilians to obtain food, medicines and life-saving medical equipment, causing widespread avoidable suffering and death, gravely exacerbated by coronavirus? As the UN’s special rapporteur emphasises, it is undisputed that sanctions do“contribute to a worsening of the humanitarian situation”.Will the Minister therefore agree to accept advice from UN experts, who emphasise that it is now“a matter of humanitarian and practical urgency to lift … economic sanctions immediately”?

**Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon:** The United Kingdom ranks among the leading donors to the humanitarian aid to Syria. The noble Baroness mentioned sanctions—[Inaudible]—specifically targeted on the Assad regime and businesspeople related to it. Importantly, on the issue of supporting ordinary Syrians, food and medical supplies used for humanitarian purposes are not subject to these particular sanctions, as the noble Baroness will know.

**Baroness Uddin (Non-Afl):** My Lords, nearly 10 years on since the Syrian conflict started, hundreds of thousands of people have lost their lives and their loved ones. Some 8 million are internally displaced and 6 million are languishing mostly in refugee camps. The Conscience Movement, a women-led organisation based in Istanbul, says that 10,000 women remain imprisoned by the Syrian Government. While I acknowledge that sanctions cause humanitarian catastrophe, what representation can the Minister and our Government make to the international community to ensure the urgent release of these women, who often face rape and torture, prior to any consideration of lifting sanctions?

**Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon:** The noble Baroness raises an important point on the issue of sanctions and that during conflict that women—[Inaudible]. We are appalled by the acts of the Syrian regime, often at the cost of its own citizens. I assure the noble Baroness that we are talking—[Inaudible]—ensuring that the advice—[Inaudible]—Syrian regime to act.

**Lord McInnes of Kilwinning (Con):** My Lords, only this week, Amnesty International published a report outlining the attacks the Assad regime and its allies have unleashed on humanitarian and non-military targets in Idlib since May last year until February this year. Surely this underlines why sanctions must continue until there is an agreed political settlement and requires us to ensure that our humanitarian aid continues to be funnelled through NGOs in Syria.

**Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon:** My Lords, I agree with my noble friend. The situation in Idlib is desperate, but, again, the UK has been at the forefront, providing £118 million of support to the suffering people in Idlib. Most recently, an RAF jet delivered more than 37,000 tonnes of aid. We are prioritising Idlib, but I agree with my noble friend that the sanctions must still apply until such time—[Inaudible.]

**Lord Hylton (CB):** The Minister will know that I was in Syria each year from 2015 to 2017. Does he agree that, even then, sanctions were doing more harm to ordinary Syrians than to their Government? Will he now argue for their removal, first, on health and medical goods; secondly, on food; and, thirdly, on reconstruction materials?

**Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon:** The noble Lords asks about sanctions; I believe that I have answered this in part already. The sanctions do not apply to—[Inaudible.]

**The Lord Speaker (Lord Fowler):** Minister, there is something seriously wrong with your sound production, but we will go on.

**Lord Collins of Highbury (Lab):** I agree with the Minister that no one should be able to act with impunity, and that includes agents of the Assad regime. Certainly, the NGO experience of distributing through a Damascus hub suggests that lifting sanctions would not change the situation for millions of Syrians in the north. Can the Minister update us on what his efforts are achieving in keeping aid corridors open through renewal of UN Resolution 2504?

**Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon:** The noble Lord raises an important point on Resolution 2504. Most recently, my right honourable friend the Foreign Secretary had a call with the Minister about the importance of keeping those corridors open. We hope that not only will this happen but that we will be able to open up additional humanitarian corridors.

**Baroness Northover (LD):** Will the Government consider time-limited sanctions relief for Syria to permit international transactions and supplies and to make the health of the civilian population a priority?

**Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon:** I have already made clear the Government’s position on sanctions, which is taken together with our EU colleagues. These will not be lifted until such time as we see meaningful engagement from the Assad regime.

**Baroness Hodgson of Abinger (Con):** My Lords, I understand that Turkey and Turkish-backed forces have cut water supplies several times to some 460,000 people in the Al-Hasakah Governorate in north-east Syria, exacerbating the situation there and putting many people, especially children, at enormous risk. Can my noble friend the Minister encourage the Government to use all available means to persuade the Turkish Government that water flow must be restored?

**Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon:** Turkey is an ally and a member of NATO. I assure my noble friend that we continue to make representations about the importance—[Inaudible.]

**Lord Green of Deddington (CB):** My Lords, this is not a question about sanctions as a whole, but their application to food and medicine. The Minister said—if I understood him correctly on this line—that sanctions do not apply to food and medicine. However, in practice, financial sanctions are impeding the purchase of food and medicine. Will the Minister undertake to look into that and make sure that they are not accidently preventing supply of such materials to ordinary Syrians?

**Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon:** As I have already made clear, our sanctions regime applies specifically to ensure that humanitarian support—[Inaudible]—can be taken forward and ordinary citizens receive this. I take note of what the noble Lord has said, but we are very clear—[Inaudible].

**Lord West of Spithead (Lab):** My Lords, civil wars are very bloody and unpleasant. There is no doubt that, as they come towards the end game, they get more bloody and unpleasant. There are no good guys in terms of the fighting in these wars; both sides always behave appallingly. Do the UK Government really think that a future with the bulk of Syria run by the Assad Government, with a tiny enclave run by disparate groups of jihadis—many of whom are as bad as Daesh—would be stable moving forward? Would it not be better to stop sanctions and try to come alongside the Assad Government and influence it in a way that we wish to influence it?

**Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon:** We have been very clear on the issue of the Assad regime; it is now very much a matter—[Inaudible].

**The Lord Speaker:** My Lords, the time allowed for this Question has elapsed. I apologise for the reproduction and clarity of the Minister’s replies.