

PRESS RELEASE

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For Immediate Release

SUPREME HEAD OF THE UNIVERSAL SYRIAC ORTHODOX CHURCH: BRITISH SANCTIONS ‘PROLONG SUFFERING OF INNOCENT CIVILIANS’

Yesterday evening, one of Syria’s most senior clerics, Ignatius Aphrem II, issued an urgent statement calling on the UK Government to “*save lives*” and “*lift economic sanctions immediately*”.

He made the comments during a humanitarian conference with British parliamentarians, diplomats and international religious leaders, saying: “*It is now undisputed that the imposition of these crippling economic sanctions has worsened the humanitarian crisis in Syria. They severely limit access to food, medical equipment and life-saving medicines, contrary to their stated intentions, and prolong the suffering of innocent civilians.*”

Former British Ambassador to Syria, Peter Ford, who attended the conference, said: “*The UK Government must stop playing politics with people’s lives. It is the poor who bear the brunt of these actions. Food should never be used as a weapon of war. The humanitarian exceptions to sanctions are simply not fit for purpose and to point to them as a response to criticism is simply being devious.*”

Background

Yesterday’s urgent statement from the Patriarch comes in the wake of numerous warnings from human rights experts, as the UK Government faces increased pressure to lift economic sanctions on Syria:

1. Last month, UN experts warned that economic sanctions are “*bringing suffering and death*” in Syria. “*Sanctions that were imposed in the name of delivering human rights are in fact killing people and depriving them of fundamental rights, including the rights to health, to food and to life itself.*” (see [here](#))
2. The same concerns were raised by 20 senior parliamentarians and human rights experts in an open letter to Boris Johnson. (see [here](#))
3. According to a recent article in the medical journal *The Lancet*, these “*blunt bilateral instruments, which have not been approved by the UN Security Council and have been opposed by the UN Commission on Human Rights, imposed on Syria in the unsupported belief that they will hasten regime change, have seriously impeded the country’s ability to cope with the pandemic... [New EU guidance] on humanitarian exemptions for managing COVID-19 in Syria has produced little relief. [The EU guidance] is 15 pages of dense, mostly legalistic detail that seems to be little more than a public relations exercise.*” (see [here](#))
4. A new report by the Quincy Institute argues that “*sanctions relief is essential to reconstruction and stabilisation operations in Syria.*” (see [here](#))

Notes to editors

- The UK supports a complex network of non-UN economic sanctions, which are directed at the Government of Syria, but which greatly harm civilians – especially in the context of coronavirus.
- For more information contact Dr Andrew Ashdown: andrew.ashdown@hart-uk.org