

From the Caesar Act to Custodianship: Sanctions Transform into Direct Control

(Translated)

Al-Rayah Newspaper - Issue 582 - 14/01/2026

By: Ustadh Abdo Al-Dali*

The talk of lifting or suspending sanctions on Syria was neither innocent nor humanitarian, as it was portrayed in the media. Instead, it came laden with heavy conditions, clearly revealing a shift in pressure from comprehensive sanctions to a more dangerous and profound form: direct political control, oversight of sovereign decisions, and linking economic recovery to the limits of American approval.

What is being proposed today is not an exit from the Caesar Act, but rather its reproduction with more subtle, more intrusive, and more closely aligned tools that permeate the very fabric of the state and society.

From the outset, the suspension of sanctions was portrayed as an achievement or a historic opportunity, while ignoring the fundamental truth that the sanctions themselves were an injustice and an act of aggression, primarily targeting the people in every aspect of their lives: their livelihoods, their medicine, and their sustenance. Therefore, lifting the law is not a favor, let alone something for which one should pay a price. However, America, as is its actions, does not relinquish its tools of pressure; instead, it adapts them to the exigencies of the moment.

The Caesar Act, in its essence, was not merely economic sanctions, but a political framework for imposing a specific course on Syria. This course aimed to restructure governance, control the political and security environment, and link reconstruction and economic development to the conditions of a political transition according to the American vision. With the fall of the Bashar al-Assad regime, it was expected — had the West been sincere — that the sanctions would be lifted automatically, given that they were imposed on a regime that no longer existed. However, the opposite occurred: the sanctions were maintained, and then the door was opened for conditional easing, transforming them from a collective punishment, into a sophisticated tool of pressurizing extortion.

The image dominating current discussions, concerning the conditions set by the US Congress for lifting the Caesar Act, clearly reflects this shift. The conditions do not relate to providing aid to the people or rebuilding what the war destroyed, but rather focus on sensitive security and political issues: combating terrorism according to the American definition, ending the role of those it calls "foreign fighters," protecting minority groups according to imposed standards, and controlling military decision-making. All of this is subject to a specific timeframe, with steps that could be described as factory reset buttons, allowing for the immediate reinstatement of sanctions if the course deviates from the prescribed path. The latest statements were more explicit than ever. EU foreign ministers didn't speak of a complete lifting of sanctions, but rather of a "roadmap," "close monitoring," and "reversing the decision if

mistakes are made.” This amounts to a system of continuous oversight, essentially a form of custodianship, granting them the right to assess internal policies, judge the state's direction, and intervene when necessary. Even the reopening of embassies wasn't presented as diplomatic normalization, but as a means for them to have a direct, visible, and pervasive presence in Damascus.

Most dangerous of all is the explicit link between easing sanctions and the form of government. The repeated emphasis on “inclusive, non-sectarian governance” and a “secular state” reveals that the issue is not economic, but fundamentally ideological and political. America doesn't fear chaos as much as it fears Islam filling the political vacuum as a way of life and governance, outside the capitalist frameworks it has traditionally imposed. This is why the slogans of “combating extremism” and “protecting minorities” are invoked as readily available tools to counter any deviation from the desired model. In this sense, the shift from sanctions to monitoring is not a reduction of pressure, but rather a reorganization of it. During the Caesar Act, the pressure was harsh and far-reaching, but politically costly. Today, the pressure is selective, conditional, and accompanied by a softer humanitarian and media discourse, with a greater capacity for direct intervention in the details of political and economic decision-making. It is an attempt to manage Syria from the outside, not through military occupation, but through international recognition.

Ignoring these realities and celebrating the lifting of sanctions only serves to perpetuate illusions. Historical experience with the West, in Syria and elsewhere, confirms that every concession demanded today will be followed by another demand tomorrow, and that the ceiling of conditions is limitless. Those who tie their livelihood to foreign approval will find themselves incapable of making any independent decision, no matter how simple.

What is needed today is not a message of reassurance to the West, nor a race to appease it, but rather an aware understanding of the nature of the political battle after the fall of the regime. The battle has not ended; its form has simply changed. Therefore, independent decision-making, building a self-reliant economy, investing available resources, and establishing internal security free from external dictates are essential elements for thwarting the new form of tutelage. Relying on the suspension or lifting of sanctions as a path to salvation is a gamble on a mirage.

In conclusion, what is happening today is a true test. Either the sacrifices of years will be crowned with a free and sovereign decision that rejects turning the country into a testing ground for political and economic experiments, or dependency will be reproduced through more subtle means. Between these two extremes, it remains a fact that America and its allies have never been, and never will be, concerned with the interests of this Ummah, and that the path to dignity is not opened with keys from Washington, but rather with an aware domestic will that does not sell out its decision-making authority for a temporary easing of the siege.

*** Member of the Media Office of Hizb ut Tahrir in Wilayah Syria**