

# United States Senate

May 6, 2020

The Honorable Mike Pompeo  
United States Secretary of State  
2201 C Street NW  
Washington, D.C. 20520

Dear Secretary Pompeo:

We urge the Administration to take action to avert further catastrophe in Syria, whose people have suffered for nine years under a crushing civil war. We believe the United States is poised to lead the international community in this effort, through three discrete measures: (1) protecting the fragile ceasefire in Idlib province, (2) removing barriers to humanitarian aid, which will help limit the spread and impact of COVID-19 in Syria, and (3) implementing targeted sanctions in response to the Assad regime's chemical weapons attacks and other barbaric human rights abuses. Through these steps, the United States can help foster conditions that can bring about an end to the Syrian civil war and play a pivotal role in easing the suffering of the Syrian people.

Last month marked the nine-year anniversary of the first democratic protests in Syria that ignited the civil war that wages to this day. The brutal conflict—marked by violations of international law governing the rules of conflict, use of chemical weapons, and protections of civilians—has led to a humanitarian disaster of epic proportions. A political resolution to the Syrian civil war remains elusive, adding to the misery faced by more than eleven million Syrians who either have fled their country as refugees or now populate internally displaced persons (IDP) camps. But there is much the United States can do to alleviate this human suffering in Syria.

First, we urge you to fully support the fragile March 5 ceasefire in Idlib province, which is protecting the province's three million inhabitants from a barrage of attacks by the Russian-backed Assad regime. Assad has a history of targeting civilians in the region, in contravention of international law. For example, before the ceasefire, a series of bombings by the Assad regime forced the Wisdom House — an orphanage providing refuge to children in rural Idlib — to suspend its operations out of concern for the safety of teachers and students.<sup>1</sup> The United States must support efforts to enforce the ceasefire, including by providing assistance to partners and allies who are defending territory and civilian lives in and around Idlib.

Second, the Administration should call upon the Syrian regime and its proxies to open Syria's long-closed borders in order to allow the movement of humanitarian assistance, especially medical aid the country needs to battle the coronavirus pandemic. Nine years of war and the Assad regime's targeted attacks on hospitals have seriously damaged the Syrian healthcare system. Despite generous pledges of support from the United States and other donor countries, Syria still lacks necessary equipment and personnel to address the coronavirus. We

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<sup>1</sup> Syrian Emergency Task Force Wisdom House, <https://www.syriantaskforce.org/wisdom-house> (last visited Apr. 28, 2020).

must not allow COVID-19 to spread in Syria because available humanitarian assistance cannot reach those who need it.

Finally, we urge you to stand with the Syrian people and implement targeted sanctions in response to human rights abuses and chemical weapons attacks, as U.S. law requires. The Caesar Syria Civilian Protection (CAESAR) Act, which the President signed into law at the end of 2019, bears the name of a former Syrian military police photographer who documented the Assad regime's crimes in gruesome detail. The CAESAR Act gives us tools to target Assad, his government, and their supporters. The Administration should fulfill the law's requirement to impose targeted sanctions designations for Assad and those in his inner circle responsible for human rights abuses.

Our sanctions response should not be limited to the CAESAR Act. On April 8, 2020, the Investigation and Identification Team (IIT) of the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) concluded definitively that the Syrian regime was responsible for three uses of chemical weapons in 2017, adding to evidence previously reported by the Joint Investigative Mechanism (JIM).<sup>2</sup> We urge you to use other authorities under existing law to sanction individuals who perpetrated these horrific attacks, which terrorized civilians and eroded the global taboo on the use of chemical agents. We further ask that you push for corresponding action in the United Nations Security Council, and stand up against Russia's continued efforts to shield the Syrian regime from responsibility.

Only a negotiated political agreement that ends Bashar al-Assad's brutal reign will end a civil war that has claimed over a half million lives. The steps we have outlined in this letter can help achieve it and bring relief to the Syrian people in their time of greatest need. To help us better understand how the Administration intends to respond to the crisis in Syria, we request responses to the following questions by May 15, 2020:

1. What steps has the Administration taken, and what additional steps does it intend to take, to bolster the March 5 ceasefire in Idlib province, including support for partners and allies who are protecting territory and civilian lives in the area?
2. What steps has the Administration taken, and what additional steps does it intend to take, to allow humanitarian assistance to reach the Syrian people, especially medical equipment and personnel needed to fight the coronavirus pandemic in Syria?
3. Will the Administration impose sanctions against Assad, his government, and its supporters under the CAESAR Act, as U.S. law requires? If so, what sanctions and when? If not, why not? How does the Administration intend to respond to the Assad regime's three confirmed instances of chemical weapons use in 2017?

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<sup>2</sup> *OPCW Releases First Report by Investigation and Identification Team*, OPCW (Apr. 8, 2020), <https://www.opcw.org/media-centre/news/2020/04/opcw-releases-first-report-investigation-and-identification-team>.

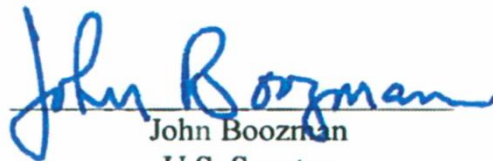
Thank you in advance for your attention to this matter. If you have any questions, please contact Blake Narendra ([blake\\_narendra@markey.senate.gov](mailto:blake_narendra@markey.senate.gov)) and Salvador Ortega ([salvador\\_ortega@boozman.senate.gov](mailto:salvador_ortega@boozman.senate.gov)), respectively, on our staffs.

Sincerely,



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Edward J. Markey  
U.S. Senator



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John Boozman  
U.S. Senator