



مركز السياسات وبحوث العمليات  
Operations & Policy Center

# Public Attitudes Toward the Caesar Act in Northeast Syria

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Operations and Policy Center (OPC, formerly, Orient Policy Center) is an independent think tank and service provider based in Gaziantep, Turkey. Established in 2014, OPC conducts original research and provides consulting services to enhance policymaking, development programs, and humanitarian response projects. Syrian-led and owned, OPC combines local knowledge with technological and scientific expertise, utilizing in-house statisticians and graphic designers to create original and intuitive final products.

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## Executive Summary

The Caesar Civilian Protection Act, more commonly referred to as the Caesar Act, is U.S. congressional legislation imposing sanctions on individuals and entities in close relation to the Bashar al-Assad regime. Its intent is to hold Assad's regime accountable for crimes committed against its own people, to force a change of behavior, and to force Assad to the negotiating table for a political settlement of the country's decade-long conflict. We review the background and general provisions of the Caesar Act as introduction to this report.

We showcase general attitudes of the Syrian people in the northeast region of the country (NES) regarding both the overall effectiveness and specific local effects of the Caesar Act, extrapolated from a 600-participant sample, surveyed by phone by OPC researchers during August 18-27, 2020. The sample was stratified by several demographic variables to reflect ratios within the population as a whole, such as gender, education, age, and ethnic background.

Although most people do not claim to know much about the Act, our findings indicate a general cynicism in NES toward its effectiveness on its intended targets, and toward its effects on Syrian civilians and their economy. The responses also showed no significant difference between Arabs and Kurds in their position toward the Caesar Act. We explore this cynicism through the various lenses of our survey variables, seeking to understand where perception and reality may diverge as a result of poor messaging and potential implementation issues. The Act seems to be having little concrete effect on its intended targets—the regime and related players—and much more effect on both the economy and the morale of Syria as a people. Asked for their personal recommendation to the international community, the message was clear:

- 51% are fine with the Caesar Act, but want it combined with a U.N. mechanism which ensures civilians will not be affected
- 24% are fine with the Caesar Act, but want a clear road map for a political solution to the conflict
- 19% would prefer the regime not be sanctioned at all
- 6% want the Caesar Act imposed as is

Heavy-worded legislation, confusing propaganda from the regime, American diplomacy appearing to be more concerned with Russia and Iran than with Syria itself, and a basic exhaustion from a decade of war has left the Syrian people understandably frustrated with the international community.

Sanctions invariably hurt civilians; they cause even more damage when they fail to have any impact on the individuals and entities who were targeted in the first place. The results of our survey demonstrate that the Syrian people in NES have little confidence that the Caesar Act will deter Bashar al-Assad and his associates, and that the sanctions will only bring more suffering to civilians, even though their own areas are exempt from the provisions of the Act.

The majority of the population is fine with imposing sanctions on the regime and its allies—but only if those sanctions are combined with UN-led mechanisms to alleviate civilian impact, and they are linked to a broader political process which can lead to a negotiated solution and a lasting peace.

## Introduction

The Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act, commonly referred to as the Caesar Act, is United States congressional legislation implemented by the U.S. Treasury Department which establishes additional sanctions and financial restrictions on institutions and individuals related to the conflict in Syria. The basics of the Act state that the U.S. president shall impose sanctions on foreign persons who 1) provide significant support or engage in a significant transaction with the Syrian government (the al-Assad regime) or those acting on behalf of the Syrian regime, Russia, or Iran, or 2) are knowingly responsible for serious human rights abuses against the Syrian people.

The bill also imposes sanctions—which may include the blocking of financial transactions and the barring of entry into the United States—on those who knowingly provide “harmful” goods or services to Syria—military aircraft, technology for the regime’s domestic petroleum production, items on the U.S. munitions list, and items the U.S. president believes are being used to commit human rights abuses against the Syrian people.

The sanctions do not apply to activities related to providing humanitarian aid or supporting democratic institutions in Syria. Additionally, the areas outside the regime’s control in northern Syria are exempt from the sanctions.

Two operational features inherent to the legislation distinguish it from previous Syria sanctions:

1. The Caesar Act is a law passed by the U.S. Congress, rather than an executive order (EO) issued by the president. Sanction designations made under EOs gave greater flexibility to the Executive Branch to de-list actors. Under the Caesar Act, it takes considerably more effort to remove specific designees from the list—in order to get off the sanctions list designees are required to stand trial.
2. The Caesar Act strengthens the ability to impose “secondary sanctions” on third-party individuals or entities. This was done under earlier EOs; the legislated sanctions only strengthen that ability.

The Act was signed into law by President Trump in December 2019, and was implemented on June 17, 2020.

The Act is named for a Syrian photographer—a military defector, code-named “Caesar”—who in August 2013 smuggled 53,275 photographs out of Syria, documenting torture in Bashar al-Assad’s regime prisons. The photographs were taken between May 2011 and August 2013, and were delivered to the Syrian National Movement, a Syrian anti-government

political group. This group passed them on to Human Rights Watch, who shared a subset of the collection—19 victims—with a team of forensic pathologists from Physicians for Human Rights, who analyzed the photos for signs of abuse as well as evidence for the cause of death. The forensic team found evidence of several types of torture: starvation, suffocation, violent blunt-force trauma, and in one case a gunshot wound indicating that the victim had been shot in the head at close range.

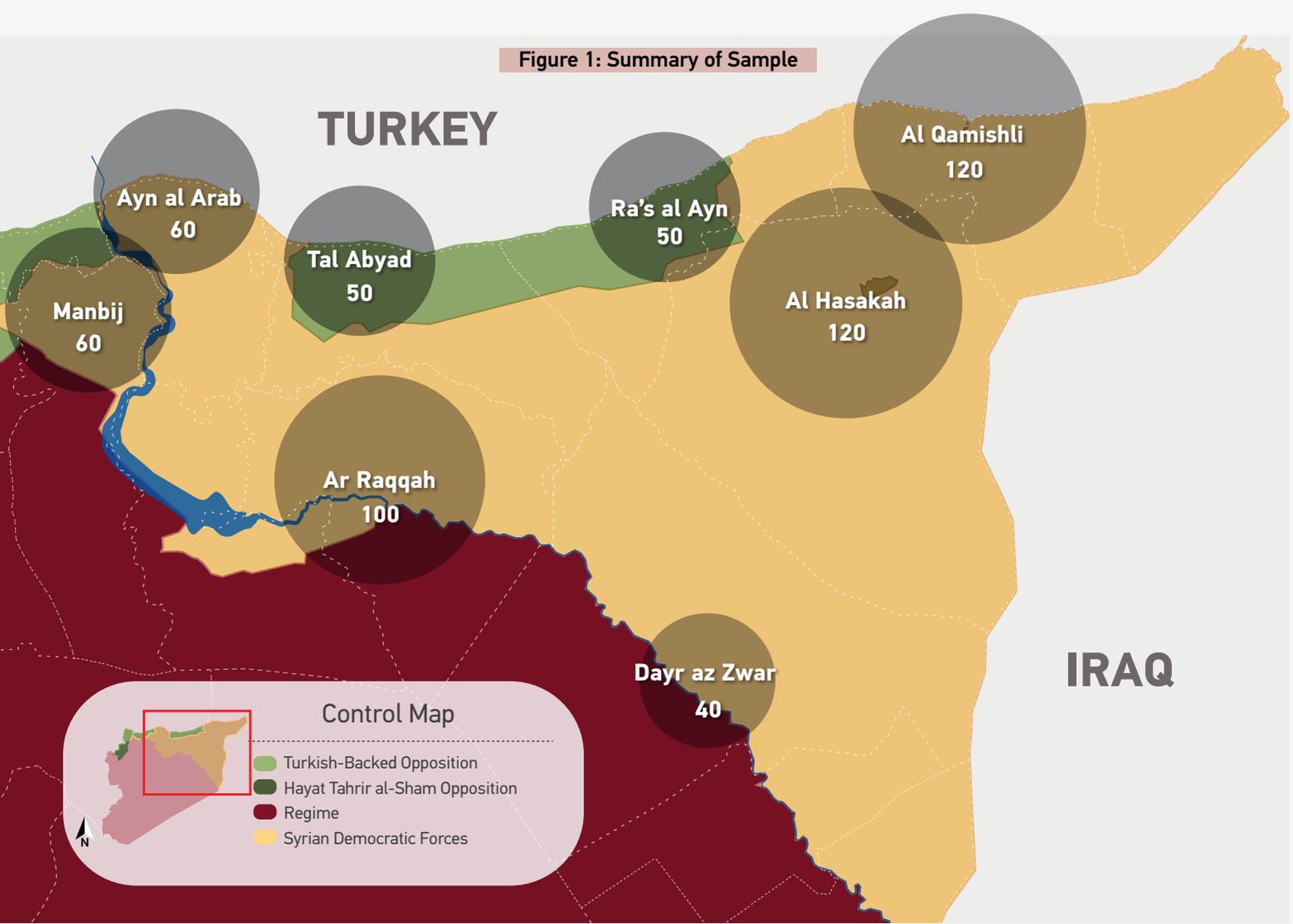
Under immense bipartisan pressure, this revelation prompted imposing the Caesar Act more than seven years after the photos were leaked. The creation and implementation of the Act focuses on further cornering the al-Assad regime by means of sanctions in order to force it to engage with the UN-led political process. The Act is also believed to be part of broader U.S. policy countering Iran and, to a lesser extent, Russia.

The Caesar Act has recently been a hot topic in Syria, as some people welcomed it and some did not. This report is based on public survey research in Northeast Syria (NES), which captures public opinion about the Caesar Act—people’s concerns and preferences.

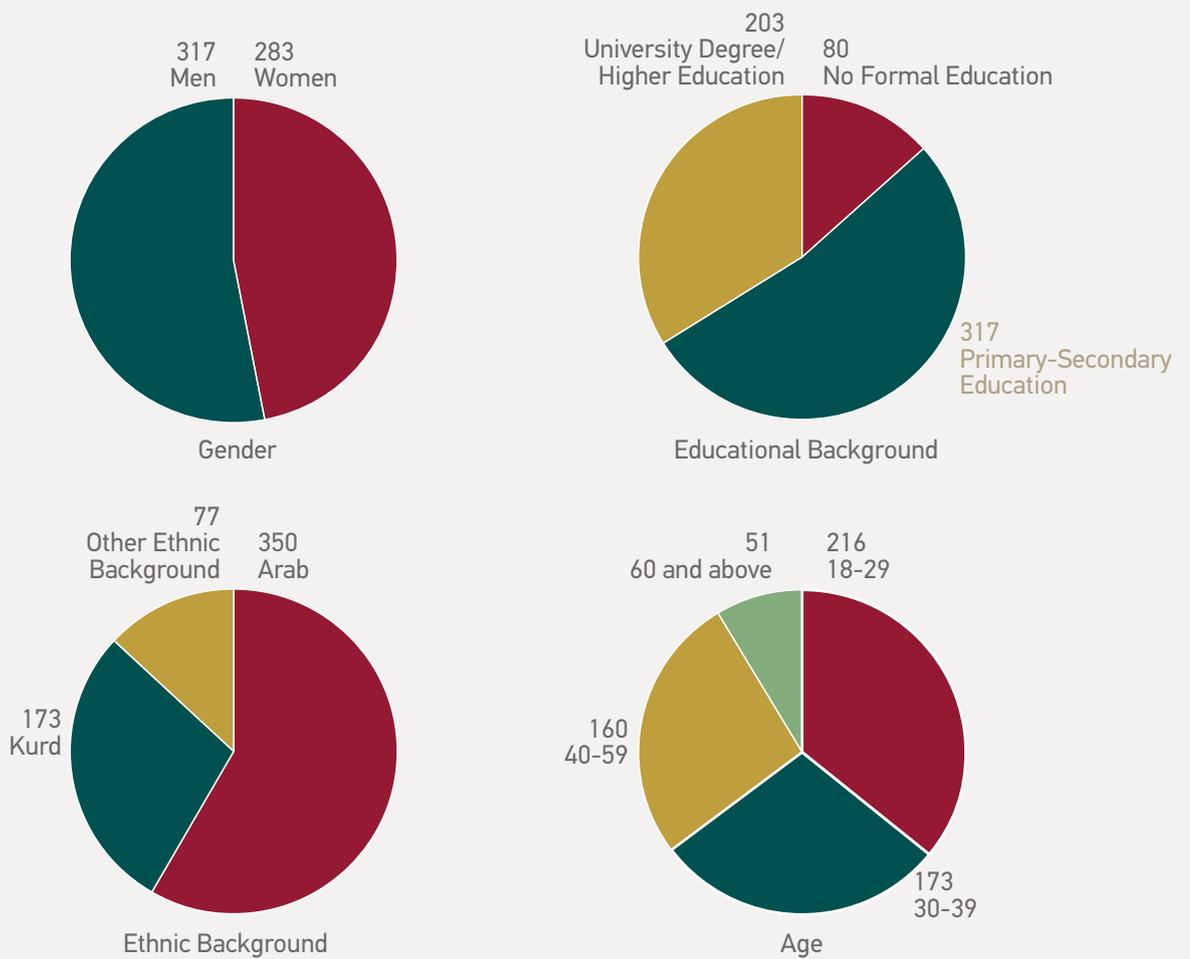
## Methodology

For this research study we conducted a phone survey with 600 respondents residing in NES. The interviews were conducted by 13 OPC field researchers and spanned two NES areas—territory held by the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (Autonomous Administration) and the Turkish-held Peace Spring area. In harmony with population ratios in the area, the sample size included 500 Autonomous Administration respondents and 100 Peace Spring respondents. The following variables were used to stratify the population: gender, education, age, and ethnic background. Figure 1 describes the key stratifications of the sample.

Figure 1: Summary of Sample



Summary of Sample Characteristics



Data collection took place between August 18-27, 2020. Field researchers received two days' training on the survey questions and the targeted sample. Quality control for the data was set to ensure the following criteria:

- a. All questions in each survey were answered.
- b. Each interview took at least 15 minutes.
- c. Each field researcher could upload data through a maximum of two electronic devices—to ensure that data was updated by the researchers themselves, rather than by respondents.
- d. The sample was balanced in terms of gender, age, educational background, and ethnicity.

***Disclaimer:*** *The sample is not assumed to perfectly represent the population as a whole. In order to make that assumption, a larger sample size and additional stratification methods would have to be added to better balance factors other than those included above. Such methods would be both costly and time-consuming. We therefore believe that, given the types of questions covered, and taking into account cost and time constraints, the current combination of data quality controls and sampling is adequate for this report.*

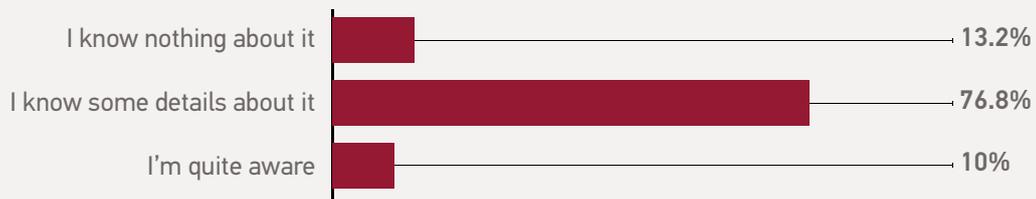
## Findings

### 1| Public Self-Reported Awareness About the Caesar Act

First, we asked respondents to what extent they are aware of the Caesar Act and its details.

Figure 2: General Understanding

To what extent do you understand the Caesar Act?

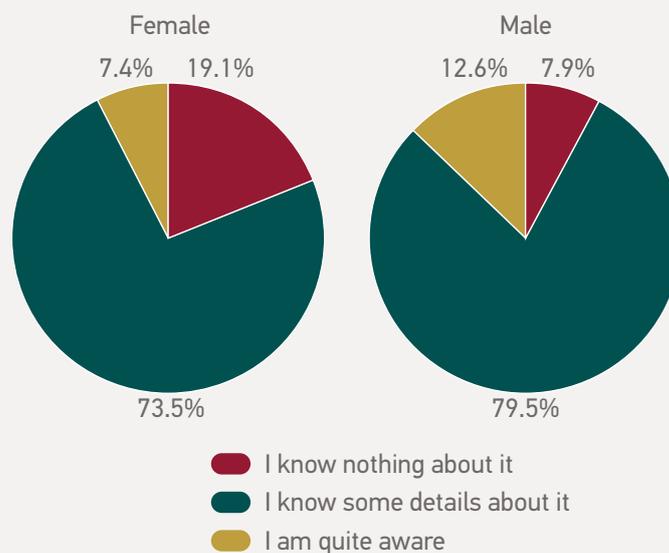


From the data we can extrapolate that most Syrians understand only some details about the Caesar Act; very few have either sought out or used external resources to become more aware of the details. Although a translated version of the Act was available, at least in Arabic, most people lack the skills necessary to process a legislative document in all its verbose wording.

To gain insight into awareness levels among different demographic groups, we broke down results by gender, age, educational background, area of residence, and ethnic background.

Figure 3: General Understanding Breakdown by Gender

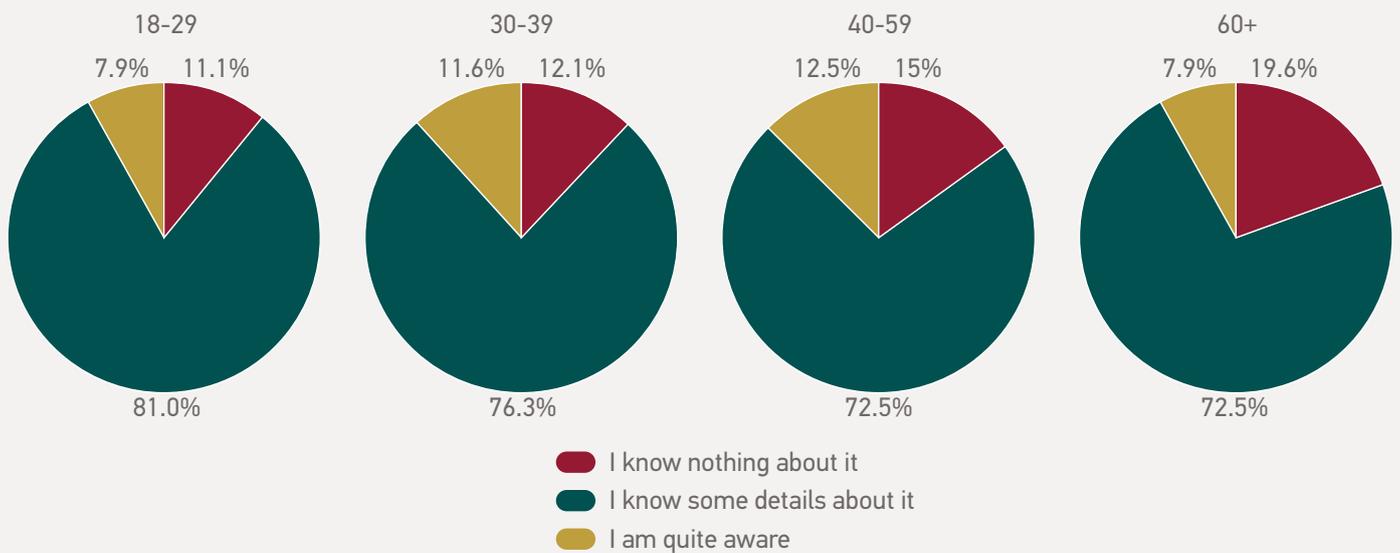
To what extent do you understand the Caesar Act? (Gender subset)



A gender breakdown reveals a slight difference in terms of self-reported awareness between male and female respondents; male respondents seem slightly more aware, but a few factors may account for this. First, women in Syria tend to be less engaged in public affairs overall. Second, there may be a disparity between self-reported and actual levels of awareness.

Figure 4: General Understanding Breakdown by Age

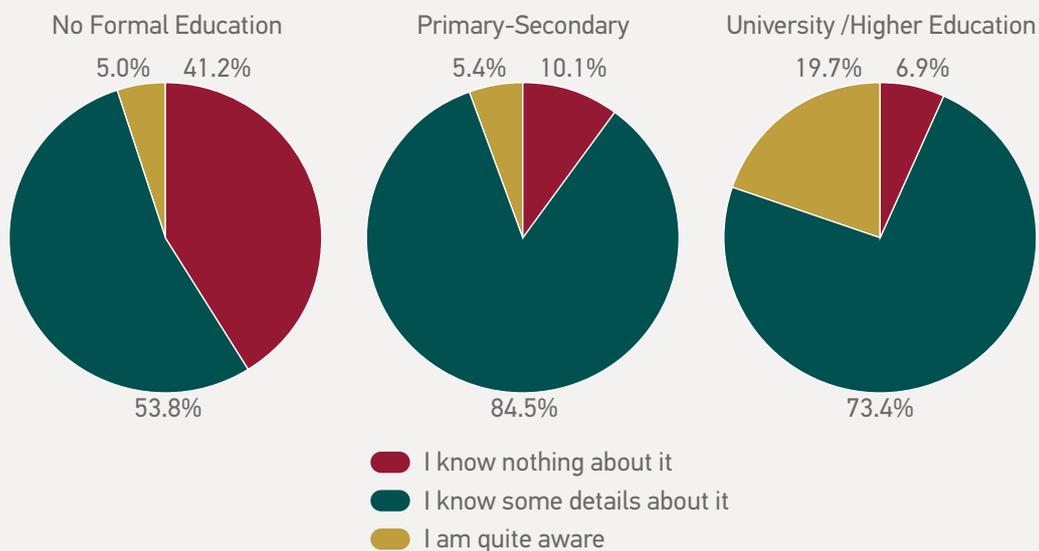
To what extent do you understand the Caesar Act? (Age subset)



Breaking the sample down by age reveals some slight differences, but taken broadly the result is within general expectations. Variations in both interest levels and available time and resources for deeper study can account for these minor fluctuations.

Figure 5: General Understanding Breakdown by Educational Background

To what extent do you understand the Caesar Act? (Education subset)



It's not surprising that those with no formal education don't necessarily understand the intricacies of the Caesar Act; many respondents in this subset likely learned the few details they know from mainstream media sources or community conversations. Even those with post-secondary education don't appear to have waded deep into the details. Legislative wording is often heavily legal, for a good purpose, but it does make reading and absorption difficult for laypersons. As attitudes can only be shaped by awareness, we anticipate this subset data to have an impact on further questions.

Figure 6: General Understanding Breakdown by Area of Residence

To what extent do you understand the Caesar Act? (Location subset)

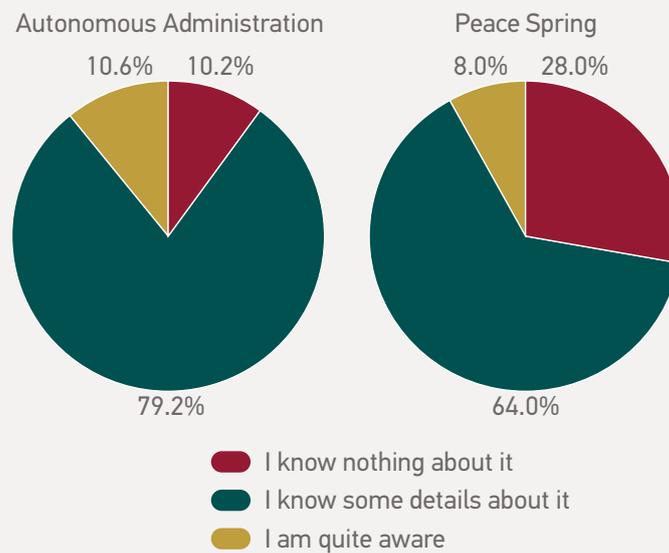


Figure 6 demonstrates that respondents in the area held by the Autonomous Administration are relatively more aware of the details of the Caesar Act than those who live in the Peace Spring area. This understandably follows the fact that the Peace Spring area is more closely linked with Turkey—residents in that area are less impacted by the Caesar Act, and therefore likely less interested in its details. As discussed in our earlier report to you on the depreciation of the Syrian pound, Peace Spring residents are more likely to use the Turkish lira (TL) in everyday transactions; the TL is unlikely to be impacted by the provisions of the Caesar Act.

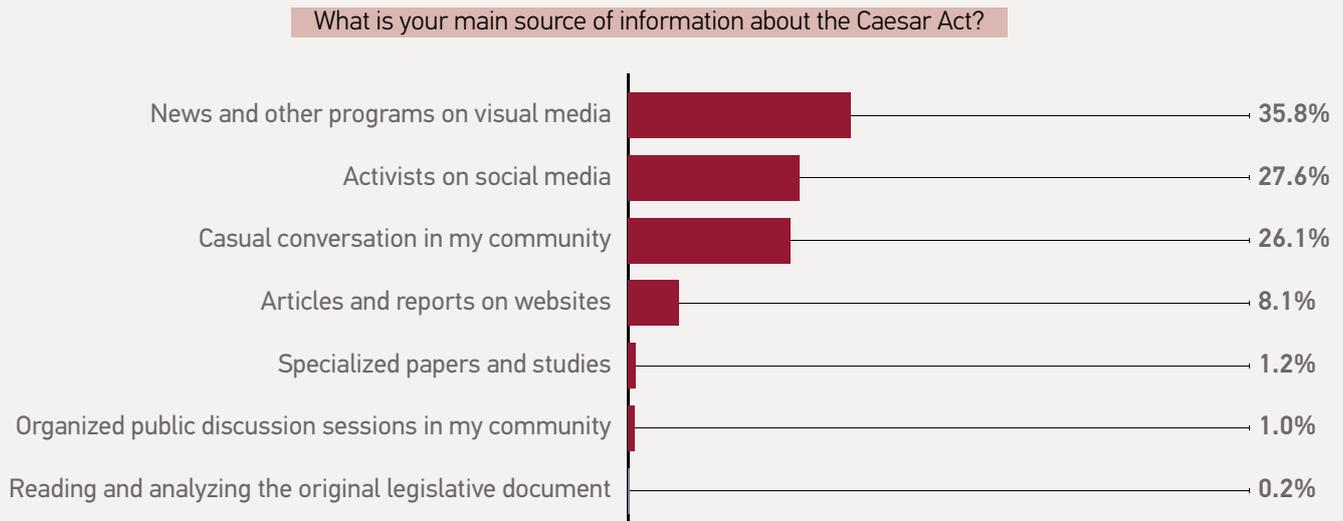
In summary: the only real difference in the levels of awareness about the Caesar Act comes from educational level. Which makes sense; one needs to be able to process information at the level it's presented in order to form a clear understanding of it.

Assuming that our sample adequately represents the population as a whole, a lack of passable awareness and understanding of the Caesar Act has likely impacted opinions on its effectiveness.

## 2| Respondents' Sources of Information

We asked respondents where they get their information on the Caesar Act and its provisions.

Figure 7: Information Source



An overwhelming number of respondents get their information from one of three sources: television news and other programs, social media activists, and casual conversations in their community. A few more read articles and reports on websites, but very few dig into organized public discussion or specialized studies (perhaps because such resources are not currently available), and fewer still have read the original legislative document.

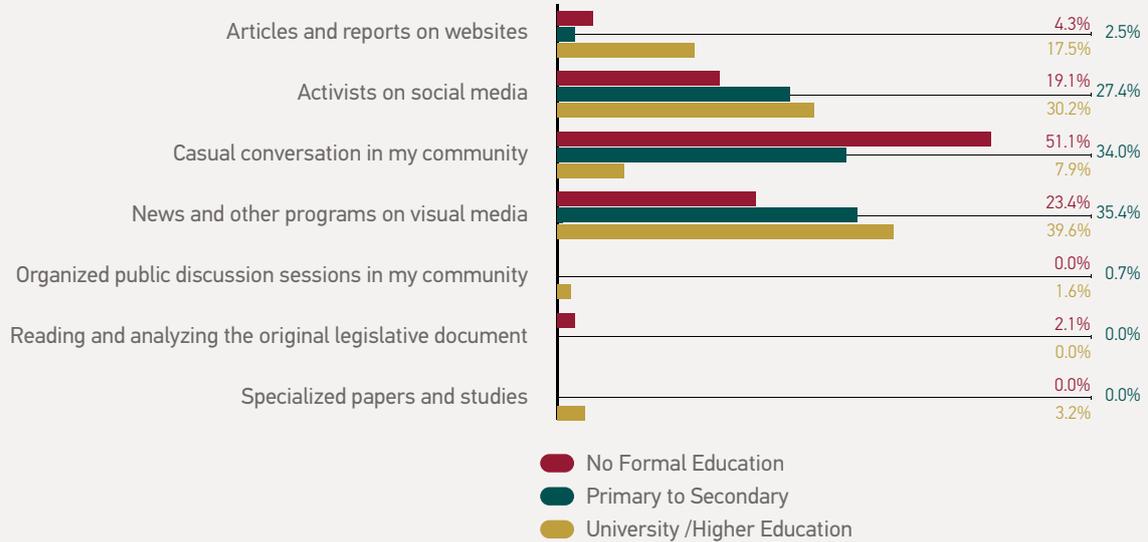
Of note: content of media outlets varies depending on who controls the source. While the regime has consistently trumpeted that the sanctions mainly target civilians because of their nationalist stance, most media sources in the opposition refuse to acknowledge that the sanctions have any negative impact on civilians. It may be of interest to narrow the lens of a future survey to indicate from which media sources respondents are getting their information and the impacts these have on their attitudes toward key political questions.

From this we can extrapolate that information on the Caesar Act is generally viewed through a potential bias filter or at least from an outside angle rather than one's own. It becomes a "water cooler subject," discussed at length but hardly studied by individuals as a matter of course.

Again we looked at the subsets, highlighting three here: education level, age, and area of residence.

Figure 8: Information Source Breakdown by Education Level

What is your main source of information about the Caesar Act? (Education subset)

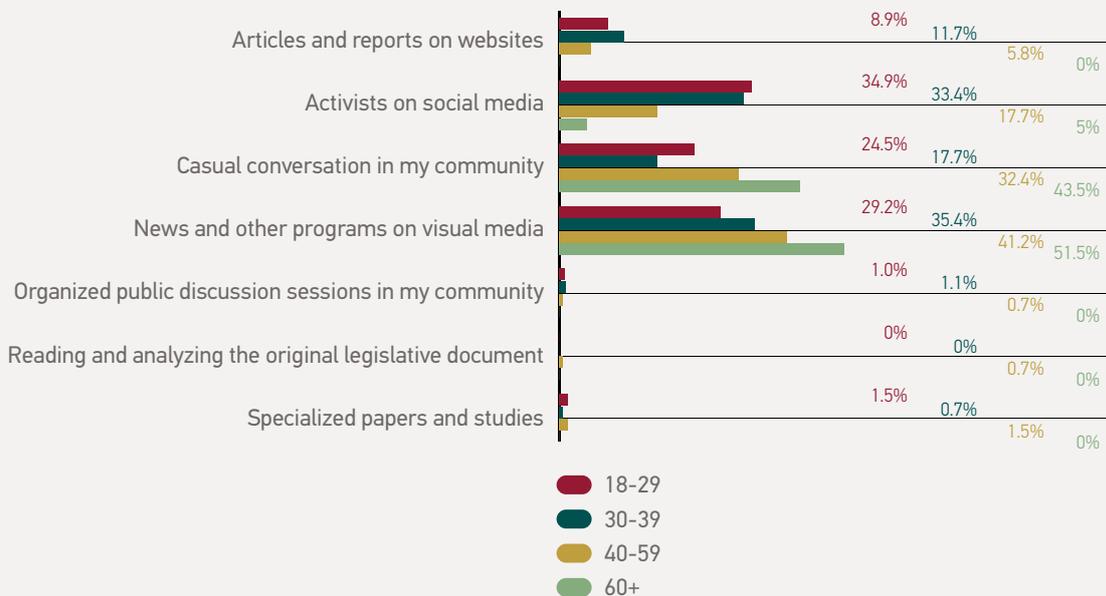


That those with no formal education rely on the news media or word of mouth is generally expected, as is the reliance on social media. The interesting figure is the small but present number of those in this subset who have read the original legislative document (compared to none of those with any level of formal education)—indicating, of course, that the lack of formal education does not automatically assume illiteracy. NOTE: This is just a claim by these respondents. We have no way of substantiating it.

Overall, we can conclude from this subset that the local community lacks an accurate understanding of the Caesar Act, regardless of education, and as such may be affected by the disinformation the regime is spreading regarding it—the regime blames much of its recent economic failures on the sanctions.

Figure 9: Information Source Breakdown by Age

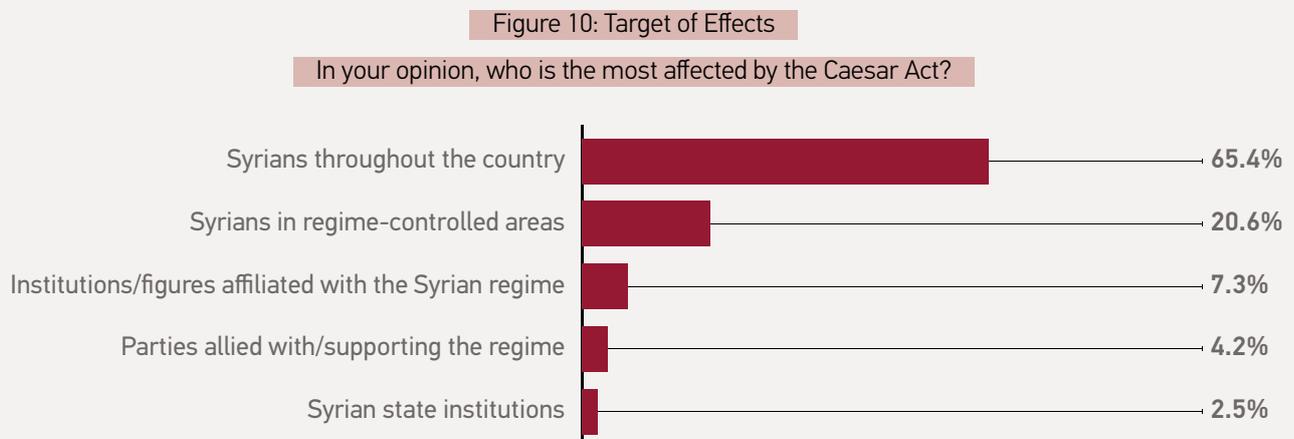
What is your main source of information about the Caesar Act? (Age subset)



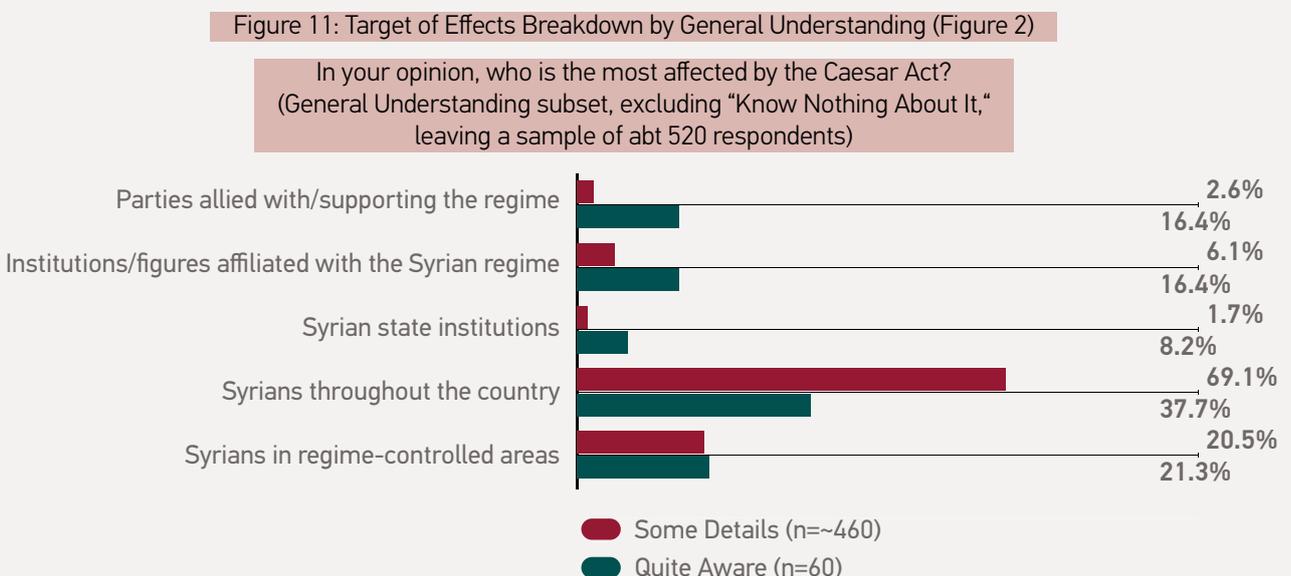
Again, the same three primary sources emerge, though their ranking differs—but not in unexpected ways. Younger respondents relied more on social media activism, while older respondents relied more on television news. Older Syrians also relied far more on casual community conversation than their younger counterparts.

### 3| Perceptions of Caesar Act Effects

When we asked respondents who they perceived would bear the greatest effects of the Caesar Act, a clear majority opinion appeared.



Very few respondents believe the Caesar Act will affect those it was intended to target. Instead, the perception is that the worst effects will be on the Syrian people as a whole—the very group the Caesar Act purports to help. This perception does not change even when respondents acknowledge some awareness of the Act’s details, although those who reported themselves to be “quite aware” of the provisions in the Caesar Act (only 10% of the total sample) did hold some expectation that the sanctions would affect those it was intended to target.



The perception that the Caesar Act sanctions will have little to no effect on those it targets and will instead further burden the Syrian people is likely the source of the generalized cynicism our survey reveals. Regardless of whether the perception is based in reality, the psychological impact may be difficult to surmount.

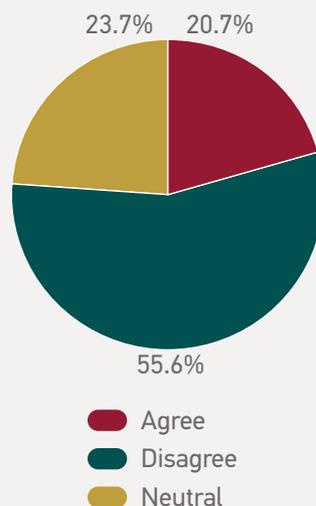
It would indeed be naïve of the supporters of the Act to think that sanctions have no effect on civilians and their standard of living. Already the price of food and basic materials in Syria have risen, mainly due to issues in securing imports and the sharp depreciation in the SP, which is partly due to the sanctions as discussed in the study shared with you last month. Few businesses jump at the chance to scale the mountain of red tape involved in importing basic necessity goods to a foreign government under sanction. And sanctions are rarely effective by themselves; they are meant to be combined with other policies and practices as part of the diplomatic process.

#### 4| Public Perception of the Imposed Caesar Act

Competing information sources, individual perception bias, and regime disinformation all play a part in forming any individual’s general attitude toward the imposition of U.S. sanctions via the Caesar Act. In order to get a general measure of public attitude, we asked respondents the following question:

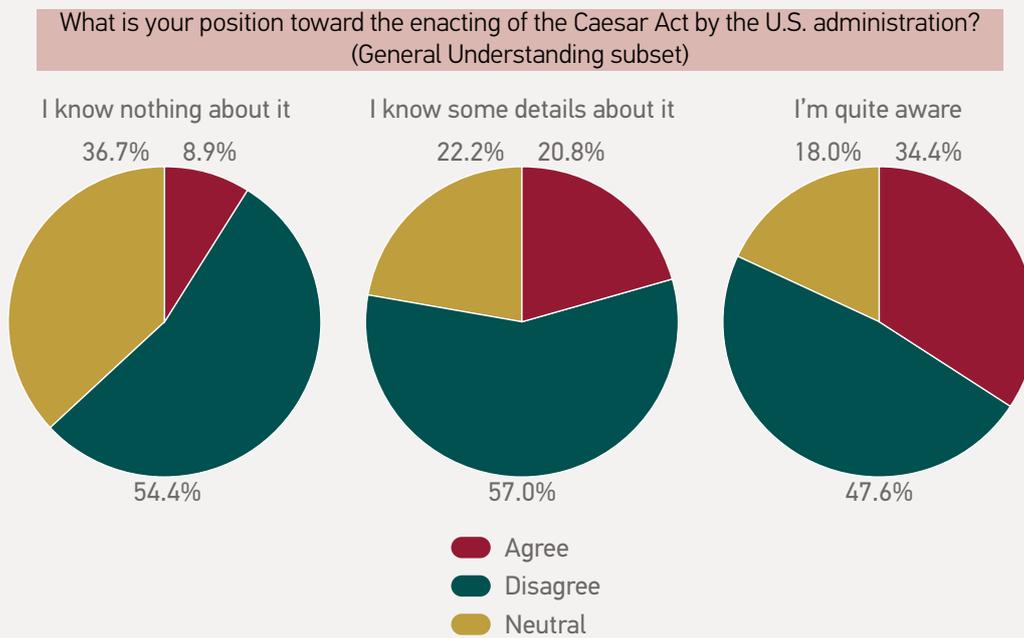
Figure 12: Position Regarding the Caesar Act

What is your position toward the enacting of the Caesar Act by the U.S. administration?



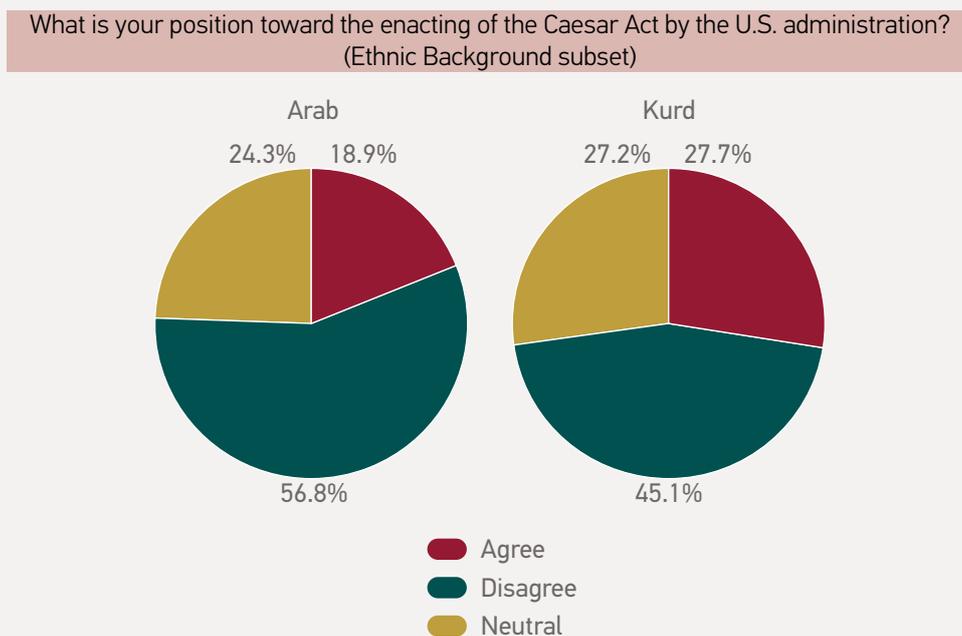
The results taken generally indicate a substantial majority of neutral-to-negative feeling toward the Caesar Act. However, when we look at the subsets of general understanding, ethnic background, and location, the issue becomes a bit more complex.

Figure 13: Position Regarding the Caesar Act Breakdown by General Understanding (Figure 2)



Although the clear majority attitude is negative, among those who self-reported being “quite aware” of the Caesar Act’s details there is a perceived shift from neutral toward agreement with the sanctions. Anecdotally, people who are aware of the Act are more likely to follow politics in general and more likely to oppose the Syrian regime—hence their support for the Act, even though some of them believe the sanctions will have undesirable side effects on civilians.

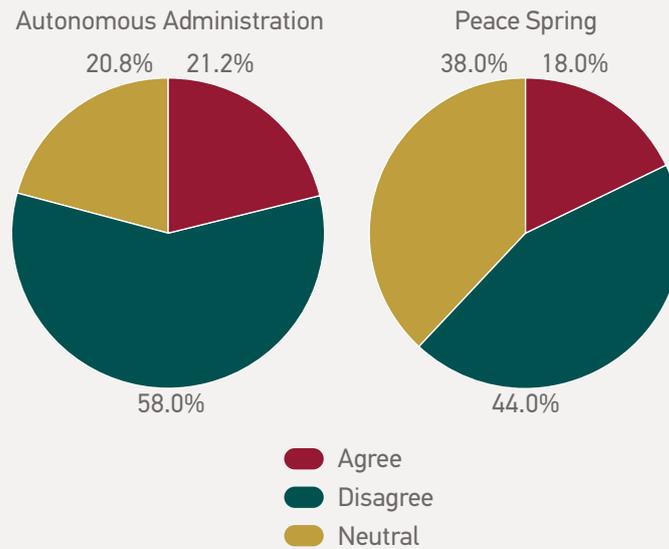
Figure 14: Position Regarding the Caesar Act Breakdown by Ethnic Background



There does not appear to be a significant difference between Arabs and Kurds in their position toward the Caesar Act, although the Kurd population appears slightly more in agreement than the Arab community.

Figure 15: Position Regarding the Caesar Act Breakdown by Area of Residence

What is your position toward the enacting of the Caesar Act by the U.S. administration?  
 (Location subset)



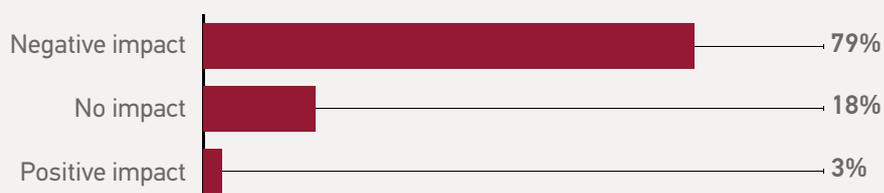
The location subset held some minor differences, the most obvious being the larger share of Peace Spring residents who hold a neutral position concerning the Caesar Act. This is expected, as the Peace Spring area is less likely to be impacted by the Act due to its closer economic ties with Turkey.

## 5| Public Opinion on the Economic Implications of the Caesar Act

Next, we asked respondents how they expect the ramifications of the Caesar Act to affect their local economy. The impact of this low expectation has likely done much to affect the general morale of the Syrian people regarding any light at the end of a long tunnel of conflict.

Figure 16: Expected Local Economic Impacts of the Caesar Act

How do you think the Caesar Act will impact the economic situation in your community?



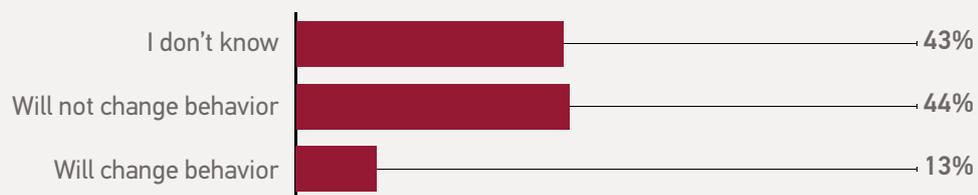
Breaking the answers down by certain demographics shows little variations in the responses among people with different backgrounds. Given even minimal study, a few realizations come clear. However, it is important to note that despite claims from the regime, sanctions are not the main cause of Syria's economic woes; a corrupt political system, the effects of a decade of war, and the Lebanese financial crisis have done greater harm than sanctions ever could.

## 6| Specific Questions Regarding the Achievement of the Caesar Act's Intended Goals

To better understand negative perceptions surrounding the Caesar Act, we asked the respondents several direct questions. Results are presented as overall responses rather than in subsets, as the variations did not offer richer insights. To explore the responses by various subsets, please refer to the interactive dashboard we shared with you alongside this study.

Figure 17

One of the goals of the Caesar Act is to pressure the regime to engage in political process in Geneva.  
To what extent do you think the regime will change its behavior?



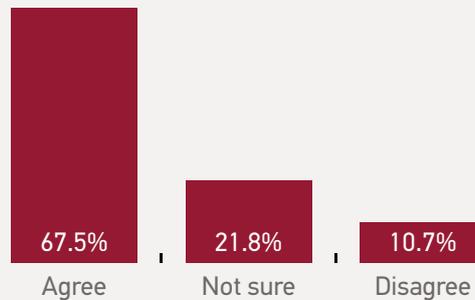
Very few respondents firmly believe that the regime will bow to pressure as a result of the Caesar Act. This offers an explanation for the widespread cynicism surrounding the Act—many Syrian citizens believe the sanctions will negatively impact their lives without solving any of the human rights issues or political problems the Caesar Act claims to have been created to address.

This perception is warranted. The Act boosts the ability to impose secondary sanctions, but so far none have been used. All of the current designees are Syrian nationals (some are dual citizens), although the messaging of the U.S. government prior to the Caesar Act was that third-party individuals would be sanctioned.

Also, the primarily punitive sanctions provide little motivation for behavioral change. Some designees, such as Wassim Qattan, have even expressed pride at being sanctioned; it signifies loyalty to the regime, fixing their position more firmly.

Figure 18

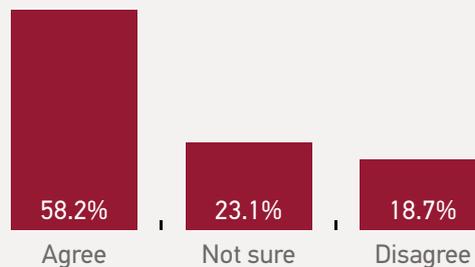
Do you agree with the following statement?  
 “The regime will always find a way to circumvent the Caesar Act.”



Similarly, a majority of respondents feel certain that the al-Assad regime has various ways to work around the sanctions; once again, Syrian citizens will bear the burden with no real solution taking place.

Figure 19

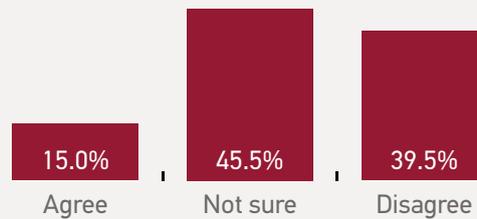
Do you agree with the following statement?  
 “Continuing U.S. sanctions under the Caesar Act indicates an inability of the international community to find solutions to the Syrian crisis.”



With a decade of war and destruction already behind them, the frustration demonstrated in these figures is understandable. It doesn’t help when local, regional, and national news media can quote the U.S. Special Representative to Syria, James Jeffery, saying, “My job is to make [Syria] a quagmire for the Russians” while both assuring that sanctions don’t hurt Syrian civilians and yet at the same time crowing the SP’s recent depreciation due to the sanctions. The recent depreciation in the exchange rate made all imports more expensive—medicine and missiles alike. All of this seems to highlight an overall perception among the respondents that their country is only a tiny part in a greater global conflict.

Figure 20

Do you agree with the following statement?  
 “The Caesar Act is different from previous sanctions, and the regime will pay for its crimes.”

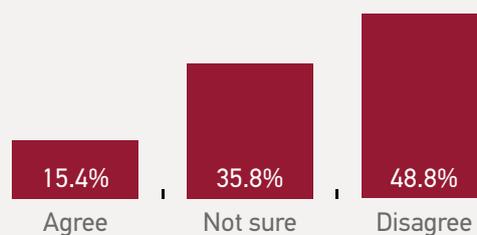


The Caesar Act was not the first round of sanctions imposed on the Syrian regime; the figures here indicate a disappointment and frustration with the international community’s ability to broker peace in Syria, and further explains the skepticism and reluctance around the Caesar Act.

Since all areas in NES are exempted from the Caesar Act, we asked all respondents if they then believe that they will not be affected by its consequences.

Figure 21

Do you agree with the following statement?  
 “Since the Caesar Act will not be implemented in NES, we won’t be affected by its consequences.”



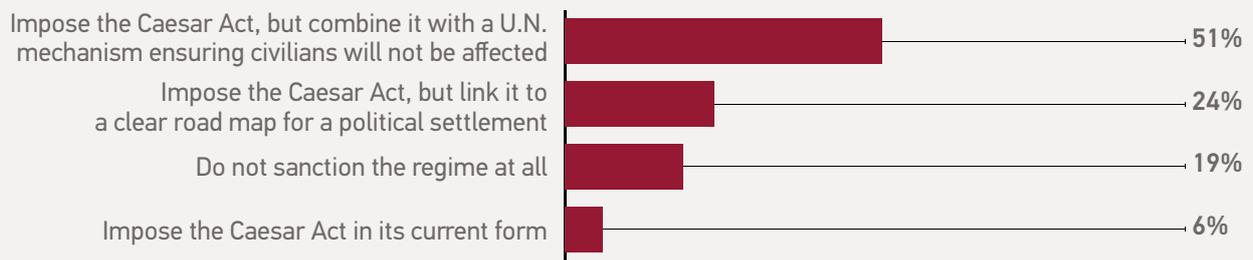
While the Act does not directly target the areas outside of al-Assad’s control, people in those areas still believe they will be negatively affected by it. This perception is correct; various areas of Syria are interconnected economically, with trade in oil and agricultural products still occurring between them. Additionally—and especially for the Autonomous Administration area—the impact of the sanctions on the exchange rate is very likely to affect them; the SP is still widely in circulation, as discussed in our previous study submitted last month.

## 7| Overall Public Preference in Terms of the Caesar Act and International Response

As part of our survey, we asked respondents for their recommendations to the international community regarding the crisis in Syria.

Figure 22

What is your recommendation to decision makers in the international community?



In simple terms, most respondents seem to say:

- a. "Punish the regime; just don't punish us in the process. We've been through enough."
- b. "Don't just drop sanctions and leave them indefinitely; offer a path out."
- c. "The regime's going to weasel around the sanctions anyway, so don't bother. You're only punishing us."

## Conclusions

Between a lack of clarity regarding heavy-worded legislation, confusing propaganda from the regime, half-hearted statements from American diplomats that seem to have far more to do with Russia and Iran than with Syria itself, and a basic exhaustion from a decade of war, the Syrian people are disappointed and frustrated with the Caesar Act and the international community as a whole. It's understandable.

Sanctions invariably hurt civilians, they cause even more damage when they fail to have any impact on the individuals and entities who were targeted in the first place. The results of our survey demonstrate that the Syrian people in NES have little confidence that the Caesar Act will deter Bashar al-Assad and his associates, and that the sanctions will only bring more suffering to civilians, even though their own areas are exempt from the provisions of the Act.

The majority of the population is fine with imposing sanctions on the regime and its allies—but not unless those sanctions are combined with U.N.-led mechanisms to alleviate civilian impact, and they are linked to a broader political process which can lead to a negotiated solution and a lasting peace.





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