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**Syrian Standards in Light of
International Specifications
Requirements**

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Introduction

Standards and technical regulations are increasingly having significant role in international trade policy debates. In fact, there are a wide range of different standards and rules relating to food sector such as food safety standards, sanitary and phytosanitary standards, and others that determining the accepted levels of Aflatoxin or pesticides (Baghasa, 2008).

The standard is a form of communication organizes the work of the involved actors that deals with the product and its inputs. It is a tolerable and visible instrument of quality control¹ that can be applied by different categories of the society. The effective role of standards is clearly recognized through: promoting confidence and simplifying commercial and technical exchange; developing the national economy by increasing the interior and exterior investments; reducing the production cost by diminishing the loss; securing consumer and environment protection, developing product quality to increase its competitiveness.

The brief addresses some important definitions concerning standards, and the international organizations of standardization acting in agricultural goods in general and foodstuffs in particular. In addition, it gives details about Syrian standards (SS) aspects, setup mechanism, and application supervision as a preliminary step to update, adapt and promote their formulation, performance and implementation according to the international standards.

1. Standards Terms²:

1.1- Standardization

It is an activity aimed at achieving the optimal situation of a certain system in a given context through setting of certain conditions for common and repeated use with regard to actual and potential problems. Particularly, it includes formulation, issuance and application of a standard.

1.2- Standard

It is a document developed by consensus³ of all the concerned authorities to avoid any potential disagreement or objection in their opinions and a recognized body should approve it, noticing that the consensus does not necessarily mean a common agreement.

The standard provides for production activities or outputs the needed rules, guidelines, and characteristics for common and frequent use aiming to achieve the optimal arrangement in a given context. It must be built on approved scientific and technical bases and empirical practice to achieve optimal advantages for the society.

There are two types of standards:

- International standard: it is designed for international use by group of countries having common interests, and is exclusively granted through copyright issued by three international institutions: *International Standardization Organization (ISO)*, *Codex Alimentarius Commission*, and *International Electrotechnical Commission (IEC)*.
- National standard: It is locally established, approved and published by officially specialized and authorized national body.

¹ Including the binding actions that are necessary for safety and quality food due to FAO definition.

² Due to guidelines of (ISO / IEC)

According to 'Good Practical Code', (Appendix 3 of WTO Agreement on Technical Barriers to Trade), to set up and apply standards, each country member can develop its national standards to meet the requirements of performance⁴.

3.1- Quality

Although the term "quality" is commonly used, it has no precise definition. Sometimes it means an appropriate standard suitable to be used, or to conform to certain characteristics. While in food industry, it represents the appearance, processing purity, and safety. In general, it is a set of aspects and characteristics of the product regulates its suitability to attain the purpose of production and satisfy the expected consumer desires. With this respect, the standard is an essential indicator of the product quality.

2- International Bodies of Standardization:

2.1- International Standardization Organization (ISO)⁵

ISO is the major publisher of international management standards involving the public and private sectors. It was established in 1947 aiming to develop standards to support and facilitate international trade in goods and services.

2.2- Codex Alimentarius Commission⁶

It is the main international reference for consumers, producers, processors and firms working in foodstuff production and trade. It was established in 1962 jointly by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and World Health Organization (WHO) for developing standards of food safety and quality that serve in limiting the transferred diseases by food movements through borders. This issue usually leads to international disputes, affects negatively on tourism sector, and causes bad reputation for exported countries. Syria is a member of this commission.

In 1991, the Commission issued guidelines for the application of Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Points (HACCP) system, which is used to define, prevent and control risks of food safety. In 1993, these guidelines were considered as measures for food safety. Then in 1997, the general rules for food safety were modified to include HACCP principles.

ISO and HACCP are two major bodies of quality management system, therefore, they can be integrated into one management system for food to be more effective.

3.2- Other international institutions for standardization:

The International Organization for Metrology; Arab Industrial Development and Mining Organization; and European System Related to Good Agricultural Practice (EUROGAP).

3- The Most Important WTO Agreements Concerning Standards

The two WTO agreements; Sanitary and Phyto-Sanitary (SPS) and Technical Barriers on Trade (TBT) both allow the WTO members to set their own standards on scientific basis to ensure the minimum level of food safety and guarantee plant and animal health. (Bagassa 2007)

3.1- Technical Barriers on Trade Agreement (TBT)

Within the context of TBT Agreement, the countries are allowed to setting up necessary regulations to develop relevant measures ensuring human, plant and animal health protection; environment maintenance; and protection from deception, provided that these regulations do

⁴ Performance standard: it determines performance requirements of product without interfering in design characteristics.

⁵ www.iso.org/about iso

⁶ <http://www.coexalimentarius.net>

not generate baseless trade favoring. The TBT covers industry goods (for its infringements), agricultural goods (excepting SPS procedures) and technical standards for state purchases.

3.2- Sanitary & Photo Sanitary Agreement (SPS)

It covers regulations, legislations, measures and basic requisites related to protection standard for human, plants, and animals from diseases, epidemics, and risks resulted from contaminant and supplement usage.

4- Syrian Standard (SS)

The growing recognition to quality standards for all goods pushed the government to give due attention to Syrian Arab Standards and Metrology Organization (SASMO) through provision of fund, technology, and qualified personnel; enhance its institutional capability; and modernize its structure to accord with the international development and modernization motions.

The Syrian Arab Standards and Metrology Organization (SASMO) gives a conformity sign⁷ and quality mark for national products, grants conformity certification⁸ for Syrian exports, issues the national standards for commodities and services and controls the equipments of measurement.

The Syrian Arab Standards and Metrology Organization (SASMO) was established according to the Decree–Law No 248 of 1969. So far, it has issued over 3000 specificationS including definition of hygienic and technical requirements for commodities; ways of sampling, conformity process, packing, storage, analysis; and labeling requirements. The SS would be compulsory or freely taken. When it is compulsory, the law of deception and fraud curb is applied on dissentient incongruent products. (Al-Khabas 2002)

4.1- Preparation of SS

Preparation of SS is carried out through the following steps:

1. The (SASMO) sets up plan to identify goods for which a national standard will be established according to public and private sectors requirements and Commission potential.
2. The plan then distributed to related departments of the (SASMO).
3. A specialized technical committee prepares a primary draft of the standard in reference to one of the following sources: Codex Alimentarius for Agricultural Goods, the International Standard Organizations (ISO), the European Standards, the American ones, or neighboring countries standards. As for the local foodstuffs that do not have international standards (e.g. zaatar, labana, etc.) a similitude with likely description of similar products can be applied to be then specified.
4. Disseminating the final draft of the standard to related authorities of all sectors to be revised and approved.
5. Revising the comments on the final draft of standard.
6. Presenting the final draft to responsible committee of (SASMO) to be approved and authorized as Syrian standard.
7. Then the Minister of industry issues the dependency decree to be generalized among the concerned authorities to adopt the new standard. The decree also nominates the authority responsible of controlling the SS application.

4.2- Authorities Responsible of SS Preparation

⁷ A distinguished mark stock on the product indicating its conformity to Syrian specification

⁸ Conformity certificate : it is given for exported product as a sign of its conformity to Syrian specification

The (SASMO) is responsible for formulating the SS for all goods and services in cooperation with concerned ministries and other bodies. They includes the Ministries of agriculture, industry, and health; Union of Industry Chambers; General Union of Peasants; Damascus University; and the General Establishment of Cooling and Storage.

4.3- Authorities responsible of controlling SS application

Several official bodies are authorized to control and supervise goods and products specification in local markets as well as of imports and exports. In addition, they launch the needed instructions about the requirements and control strategy for products do not have definite SS. The supervisory authorities include:

1. *Ministry of Economy*: It is the main authority responsible for :

- Controlling food circulation and transport in cooperation with the ministry of transportation, particularly for animal transition across the Syrian land. The foodstuffs check is done by the laboratories of the ministry of economy; and
- Organizing the imports and exports of food and industrial products through its Center of Exterior Trade counting on previous agreement from the related ministries, e.g. ministry of agriculture for animals and ministry of economy for some grain

2. *Ministry of Agriculture*:

- Supervises and controls exported and imported seeds, pesticides, veterinary medicines, fodder, and agricultural foodstuffs through Agricultural Quarantine Centers available in Syrian boundaries (in accordance with the Law 26/2007 of Photo_Sanitary Quarantine) and Fodder Control Department in coordination with General Customs Department to assure the products conformity with the Syrian SS to be accepted;
- Defines technical requirements for livestock barns and fodder factories;
- Determines permissible pesticides; their usage instructions on crops, fruits and vegetables, and their residual trace. As well as, it determines allowable veterinary medicines and hormones and supervises their usage in the production process; and
- Participates with the ministries of health and local administration for setting out specific decrees defining hygienic conditions for factories of food production, and controlling the water of irrigation

3. *Ministry of Health*:

- Oversees children's food production (children's milk) and defines the technical requirements of the producing firms;
- Watches over the usage of food supplements (colorings) in factories of ice cream and drinks;
- Supervises the availability of hygienic conditions for workers in food industry and the production process by checking food products in laboratories of health departments;
- Supervises types of food that of special usage, e.g. for medical and health treatment. Even that there are Syrian SS for these types, but they need to be registered and regularly followed up for covering local and imported goods.

4. *Ministry of Industry*: Defines the technical and industrial stipulations for processed goods in factories according to a given license

5. *Ministry of Tourism*: Examines the quality of services in tourist establishments in coordination and cooperation with the ministry of economy

6. *Ministry of Local Administration*: Grants the administrative licenses for food factories and industrial establishments

7. *General Customs Department*: Controls imports in cooperation with the ministries of economy and of agriculture.

8. *Atomic Energy Commission*: Observes radiation traces in local and imported food.

4.4- Evaluation of the Following up of the SS Application

The mechanisms of control over the application of SS generate several negative remarks:

- Different mechanisms of control due to multiplicity of supervision bodies, although they rely on the same analytical and technical rules;
- Lack of an effective monitoring system over the permanent implementation of food legislations;
- Lack of knowledge among producers about food legislations due to the complexity of licensing procedures and their frequent modifications;
- In some cases, issuing and approving regulations for new specification of a product and become binding SS without notifying the manufacturers

Example of Syrian Standard (SS) –Apple Standard (AS):

This standard defines the quality requirements for exported and imported apples after preparation and packaging through the following stages: (The AS is not applied for domestic apples that used for direct consumption)

- Scope of application : the AS is applied on the fresh sort of apples species (*malus .spp*) and for direct consumption, excluding the apples for processing.
- Terms of conditions: whatever the degree of its classification is, the exported and imported apples must be:
 - Faultless and free of wounds, bruises, and shape defects;
 - Free of rots, and damages make it unfit for consumption;
 - Free of unusual surface moisture;
 - Free of any strange smell or taste
 - The pesticides residues should be within the international limits.
- Terms of Packaging:
 - The materials of packages must be new, clean, and durable to ensure products protection.
 - Authorizing the use of materials for coating and brand, particularly papers to enfold the fruit and posters of brand, provided the ink and glue used are non-toxic and easy removable without traces or causing damage to the peel.
 - Samples to be taken in accordance with terms and requirements of Syrian SS No. (65) for sampling of vegetables and fruits.
- Information card (label): on one side of each package has to be written in Arabic (and possibly with any foreign language) clearly and non-removal the following information: Name and address of packer or exporter, trademark (if available), product name and type, state of origin/and the region if possible, classification and size.

Source: (SASMO), the standard number is m. k. s. 63/ 2005

4.5- Standards Obstacles for Exporting Local Agricultural Products

- The need for adopting modern methods in preparing, packing and covering the agricultural products instead of the traditional ones, especially for vegetables and fruits;
- Shortage of cooling transportation services for perishable agricultural products affect the quality of exported commodities; and
- Shortage of qualified and trained personnel to carry out the operational preparation and to commit to quality standards, in addition to lack of awareness of new requirements of foreign markets, (Hamed 2001).

5- The SS Adaptation with International Standards

Several reasons call for modernization of the SS to be in line with global trade standards:

- The international organizations of specification ISO and Codex Alimentarius Commission are the major regulators of global standardization market and their membership is opened to all countries. Therefore, it is more convenient to any country to adopting the international standards than its local ones to avoid creating technical obstacles adversely affecting the flow of international trade.

- Harmonization of national food legislations with the standards of the Codex Alimentarius is a prerequisite for countries wishing to join the WTO, to resolve international trade disputes.

– In addition to the emerged economic, social and hygienic benefits for countries adopting these standards, Codex Alimentarius standards are based on scientific grounds ((with supervision of a committee of experts in food supplements and contaminants (JECFA9) that is considered the main reference in the world)). Thus, these standards are considered a reliable source for countries suffering from shortage in their scientific research basics to establish their national standards. Taking into consideration, any country has the right to develop its own standards to protect its national interest concerning local products of special importance in global markets.

- To modify the Syrian Standards according to the international standards, a comparison between them both is needed to identify the similarity and differences as well as defining the referential for each product. With recognition to this strategy, SASMO in its 2007 plan issued the standard of colors added to food according to the European legislation (the Syrian specification number 770 c2 /of 2007 for food coloring, issued in 2007, compulsory, food group 0.4.102.5 for jam and jelly) as it is shown in the following table:

Table 1. Comparison of the permitted limits for some coloring according to Syrian, European and Codex Alimentarius standards for jam and jelly group

Additive	INS ¹⁰	Max level (mg/kg)		
		European standards	Syrian standards	Codex Alimentarius standers
Allura red(ac)	129	100	100	500
Amaranth	123	30 (in special cases)	Not allowed	300
Brilliant black pk	151	10	10	500
Brilliant blue fcf	133	10	10	500

Source: SASMO

Noticeably, the table shown that Syrian standards are stricter than the European, which is considered even stricter than other international standards.

6- Recommendations for SS Adaptation with International Standards

- in accordance with the international system of standardization, it is recommended, as a primary step for adaptation, to authorize only one institution to be responsible for issuing and overseeing the application of the Syrian Standards and to be shared by certain bodies.
- Establishing a national commission to control exports and imports and providing an internationally reliable developed central laboratory for testing exports at the national ports , as is the case in Egypt.
- Modifying current food legislations by issuing a new food law and establishing food management commission based on the model proposed by FAO of the UN, in which the acceptable limits of food contaminant and decay and the inspection strategy are defined;

⁹ <http://www.codexalimentarius.net> & <http://www.who.int/foodsafety/codex/en/>

¹⁰ It is reliable international number, which indicates classification types of color according to definite numbers.

- Activating the role of information centers and databases and networks to update local SS, exchange of experience, and coordinate with similar bodies in the Arab States and regional and international organizations;
- Adopting of management systems and quality assurance such as ISO¹¹, which guarantees the product quality during processing, packing and covering stages; also HACCAP system that is applied in most successful international institutions. This system saves money and time by reveal errors in the first stage and corrects them before reaching the stage in which the product quality would be affected; beside using “Good Manufacturing Practices GMP” system in production.
- Qualifying local technical personnel working in the field of production, management and marketing through specialized training centers regionally and internationally recognized;
- Establishing developed centers for sorting, packing, covering and processing to benefit from the value added for manufactured goods. Also promoting Syrian processed products in foreign markets instead of raw products.
- Coordinating with Arab states in the field of productivity structure and orienting towards agricultural production integration by concentrating on Syrian Standards and quality in all bilateral agreements and economic cartel. (Al-Baroudi 2004, and AOAD)

¹¹ In 2005, 22000 ISO was issued, which is a comprehensive measure of food safety management. It is used by organizations working in food chain.

Within the support plan for quality infrastructure in Syria, the national laboratory for standards was established in 2008 after several tests according to ISO - 7025 of laboratory management measures.

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