

Trump signs Pentagon budget imposing new sanctions on Syria

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The massive Pentagon spending bill President Donald Trump signed into law Friday night includes a new round of provocative and punishing sanctions against Syria based on the hypocritical invocation of “human rights”.

The record \$738 billion National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) was approved with the overwhelming support of the Democrats in Congress, winning by a margin of 86-to-8 in the Senate on December 18 and 377-to-48 in the House last week. Passed in the midst of the Democratic-led impeachment of Trump over allegations that he undermined the “national security” interests of American imperialism by withholding military aid to Ukraine directed against Russia, the passage of the NDAA exposed the bipartisan unity in support of continued US military aggression in the Middle East and internationally.

The harsh new sanctions on Syria are justified in the name of alleged war crimes committed during the eight-year-old regime-change war that has devastated the country.

The hypocrisy of Washington’s posturing as a defender of the Syrian people and a horrified bystander to the carnage that has claimed hundreds of thousands of Syrian lives and dislocated millions is staggering. The eight-year-old war that has ravaged the country was provoked by the CIA and Washington’s allies in both Europe and the Middle East in the bid to oust the government of President Bashar al-Assad and install a US puppet regime in Damascus. They armed and funded Al Qaeda-linked Islamist militias as their proxy forces, provoking a bloodbath. Then, in the so-called war against the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) launched by the Obama administration in 2014, the US military laid waste to cities like Raqqa in Syria and Mosul in Iraq, killing and wounding tens of thousands of civilians.

The Syria sanctions bill attached to the military spending act has been dubbed the “Caesar Syria Civilian

Protection Act 2019,” even though its purpose is to strangle the Syrian economy and prevent the rebuilding of its infrastructure, creating increasing misery for the masses of the Syrian people.

The legislation is extremely broad in scope and extensive in its reach, targeting not only the military forces of Syria, Iran and Russia, but anyone contracting with or providing assistance to them.

The sanctions likewise target energy companies participating in redeveloping Syria’s shattered oil and gas sector, as well as governments, construction firms and banks that participate in the country’s reconstruction or provide loans for that purpose and companies assisting the country’s civil aviation sector.

This so-called “Caesar Bill” is named after the pseudonym of an alleged Syrian police photographer who defected to the US in 2013 providing what he claimed were 55,000 photographs documenting the torture and killing of detainees in Syria. The story of “Caesar” and his supposed evidence was broken in January 2014 on the very eve of talks between the Syrian government and its Western-backed opposition to discuss an end to the war and steps toward a transitional government.

The Western media, with CNN leading the pack, hyped the story, comparing Caesar’s revelations to the Nazi Holocaust. They were used to promote Washington’s ultimatum that no transition could include Assad, and could only be achieved through fulfilling the US demand for regime change. The negotiations quickly broke down.

Subsequent analysis of “Caesar’s” photos revealed that the bulk of them depicted not murdered detainees, but rather victims of the war, including government troops, fighters for other armed groups as well as civilians killed in attacks. The entire propaganda operation was funded by the Emir of Qatar, one of the principal backers of the Islamist militias deployed against the Syrian government. It was also evident that “Caesar” himself was being

handled by the CIA, which oversaw the launching of the regime change war.

While the Assad government and its security forces are no doubt guilty of killing and torturing political opponents, so too are virtually all of the Middle Eastern regimes that Washington counts as its closest allies, including the Egyptian dictatorship of Gen. al-Sisi and the Saudi monarchy of Mohammad bin Salman, neither of which are fighting a war against a foreign-backed armed opposition. Moreover, whatever the crimes of the Assad dynasty, they pale in comparison to the mass murder and wholesale destruction wrought upon the Middle East by decades of US wars and sanctions that have claimed the lives of millions.

The “Caesar torture photos” are just one of the many pretexts that have been seized upon or manufactured by US imperialism to justify intervention in Syria. These have included the alleged gas attack on Douma, a suburb of Damascus, in April 2018 that was used to justify US, French and British missile strikes on multiple targets in Syria.

The Douma gas attack pretext was exploded last month with the release by WikiLeaks of an email sent by a member of the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) team that investigated the attack, protesting that the agency’s report had been falsified to fit the narrative of the Western powers to the extent that it “no longer reflects the work of the team.” This only added to a previous report by a member of the team indicating that the so-called attack had been staged by the Islamist “rebels” who controlled the area.

The “Caesar” bill had been stalled in Congress since 2016. Its revival has been connected to a lobbying campaign by a group calling itself “Citizens for a Secure and Safe America”, which advocates for increased US intervention in Syria and gained notoriety by calling for Trump to receive the Nobel Peace Prize. According to the website Al Monitor, which tracks Middle East lobbying, the group paid \$330,000 over the last year to Ballard Partners, a firm headed by Trump’s former lobbyist and fund-raiser Brian Ballard, to lobby Congress in support of the legislation.

The imposition of the new sanctions comes as the Assad government has succeeded in reasserting its control over the bulk of Syria, with the last of the Al Qaeda-linked militias besieged in Syria’s northwestern Idlib province.

Several hundred US troops remain in Syria, the bulk of them occupying oil fields in the northeastern province of Deir Ezzor. Trump has declared that they are there to

“take the oil” and has suggested that a major US corporation like ExxonMobil could be brought in to exploit it. The Pentagon, however, has insisted that their mission remains fighting the already defeated ISIS, and that there is no end in sight for the US occupation of the country.

The new sanctions bill, like the continued illegal US military presence, is aimed at countering Washington’s major rivals in the Middle East, part of the preparations for “great power” conflict that underlie the \$738 billion military spending bill.

Two Russian companies have recently signed agreements with the Assad government to revive Syria’s energy production, including through exploration and production in an oil field in northeastern Syria and a gas field north of Damascus. They would become immediate targets under the sanctions bill.

Meanwhile, China is poised to become the leading power in terms of Syria’s reconstruction. Last April, Beijing for the first time invited the Assad government to attend a summit on its Belt and Road initiative, a \$1 trillion overseas investment plan. Damascus has already submitted a number of proposed projects to the Chinese government for inclusion in the plan. Any project would trigger US sanctions under the newly enacted legislation.

China has already become the largest source of foreign investment in the Middle East as well as the biggest customer for its oil resources, while the region is seen by Beijing from a geo-strategic standpoint as vital to its trade links to both Europe and Africa. US imperialism, having invested over \$1 trillion in its catastrophic military interventions in the region, is not about to cede control peacefully.

In this context, while the new “Syrian Civilian Protection” will no doubt contribute to the continued suffering of the Syrian people, its main targets are both Russia and China. It is a component part of the escalating US buildup toward a new world war.



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