

The devastating impact of the 10-year US-orchestrated war on Syria

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March 15 marks a decade since the start of the campaign by Washington and its regional allies to topple the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.

The Obama administration utilised anti-government protests in several Syrian cities that were suppressed with lethal force in March 2011, as in Libya before it, as the pretext for a large-scale operation in pursuit of its geo-strategic interests—against a regime with which it had long been at odds.

In a chorus of moral outrage, the United Nations, the US and the European Union all condemned Syria's crackdown while issuing only pro-forma criticisms of far worse repression in allied states Bahrain and Yemen, amid the broader upsurge of the working class in the region that became known as the Arab Spring.

The CIA and Washington's regional allies—the Gulf petro-monarchs, Turkey and Israel—financed, sponsored, trained and aided a succession of Islamist militias as their proxies to carry out the task of unseating Assad. These Sunni sectarian forces, some of whom like al-Nusra Front were linked to al-Qaeda, were ludicrously hailed as “revolutionaries.”

A plethora of pseudo-left groups, including France's New Anti-Capitalist Party, Britain's Socialist Workers Party, and the US's International Socialist Organisation (now dissolved into the Democratic Socialists of America, a faction of the Democratic Party) and academics such as the University of Michigan's Juan Cole and the School of African and Oriental Studies' Gilbert Achcar, also hailed these “revolutionaries,” in many cases discredited former regime figures. No attempt was made to describe their political programme or to explain why feudal Gulf despots who outlaw all opposition to their rule at home would support a progressive revolution abroad.

Despite this assistance, these opposition forces proved unable to topple Assad, testifying to the lack of popular support for their far-right, often jihadist politics.

Today, the situation in Syria, formerly a middle-income country, is in UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres's words a “living nightmare,” where, “The scale of the atrocities shocks the conscience.”

The appalling suffering produced by imperialist warmongering—other than that in the opposition-held Idlib province—has largely been ignored by the world's media. The fighting has led to the deaths of more than 400,000 people. It has spawned the world's largest refugee and displacement crisis, forcing around 5.6 million people to flee the country, with another 6.1 million displaced within Syria. Nearly 11.1 million people—around 60 percent of the population—need humanitarian assistance.

About half of those affected by the refugee crisis are children. Half the children have never lived a day without war. Their life expectancy has fallen 13 years. More than half a million children under the age of five in Syria suffer from stunting due to chronic malnutrition. Nearly 2.45 million children in Syria and a further 750,000 Syrian children in neighbouring countries are out of school.

According to a recent report by World Vision, the war has cost the Syrian economy a massive \$1.2 trillion in lost GDP. Worse is yet to come with 60 percent of the population likely to face hunger this year as the cost of an average food basket rose by over 230 per cent in the last twelve months.

As a reader in the capital Damascus told the *World Socialist Web Site*, life is a daily struggle just to get basics like food and fuel. Bread at affordable prices is in short supply. A wheat exporter before the war, Syria saw its growing areas seized by militias that prevented farmers from selling their produce to the government, smuggled wheat out of Syria, and resorted to burning the land of farmers who objected, forcing the government to import wheat. While the government has set up a smart card rationing system to distribute bread at subsidised prices, it means standing in line for more than four hours. The

alternative is bread at ten times the price.

Syria used to export small amounts of oil, but after armed groups took control of the oil producing areas, it had to import oil. While gasoline and diesel are also distributed via a smart card, it means waiting for hours, often to find that supplies have run out. As a result, the streets are largely traffic free. The lack of electricity has affected production while factories have been unable to replace equipment and machines destroyed in the war, compounding unemployment and economic hardship.

Even in relatively upscale areas in Damascus, the city least affected by the war, electricity is available for just three hours at a time. Power cuts last much longer in the countryside and in other cities.

The cost of a kilo of meat has risen to 25,000 lira, equal to half the average monthly wage, while the cost of chicken, eggs, fruit and vegetables has soared due to the plummeting currency—the lira trades at 4,000 to the dollar compared to 50 in 2010—high transport costs, and rampant profiteering.

Our reader concluded, “While everything is available in Damascus for those who have money, the poor and those on low incomes, more than 75 percent of the population, suffer terribly.”

The authorities have officially recorded around 16,000 COVID-19 cases and more than 1,000 deaths. Figures are widely assumed to be a gross underestimate with President Bashar al-Assad and his wife both testing positive recently.

According to the International Rescue Committee, only 64 percent of hospitals and 52 percent of primary health care centres are functioning, while 70 percent of healthcare workers are believed to have fled the country as healthcare facilities became targets for the rival militias. Some 84 percent of healthcare workers reported that attacks on health care directly affected them, their team or their patients, while 81 percent know of patients or colleagues who were killed in attacks.

One in four health professionals witnessed attacks that left facilities beyond repair, with many setting up alternatives in places such as caves, private homes and underground cellars. The situation has been compounded by US sanctions preventing medical supplies and equipment reaching the country. All this has left 12 million Syrians in need of health assistance. Around one third require routine reproductive, maternal, neonatal and child health services.

Guterres, and almost all the western media and analysts, blamed the country’s economic collapse on a

combination of “conflict, corruption, sanctions and the COVID-19 pandemic.” This is a flat out lie.

The proxy war in Syria was bound up with decades of military and covert operations, sanctions and other economic measures by the US and its allies in the resource-rich Middle East that have devastated not just Syria, but Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya and Yemen, as well as Iran and Lebanon.

The US-orchestrated intervention was in large part driven by Washington’s efforts to isolate Iran, Syria’s chief ally in the region, and cut it off from its ally Hezbollah, the bourgeois clerical group in Lebanon. It came amid the discovery of significant offshore oil and gas reserves in the Eastern Mediterranean, including in Syria and Lebanon’s territorial waters.

Even as Assad, with the help of Russia, Iran and Hezbollah fighters from Lebanon, regained control of most of the country, the situation did not improve. The Trump administration sought to ramp up the economic pressure on Damascus by implementing economic sanctions against Syria. This drastically increased the demand for dollars, led to a massive rise in the cost of living and prevented any aid to help with the country’s reconstruction.

The incoming Biden administration has already signalled, with its launching last month of airstrikes against Syria in violation of international and its own domestic law, that it is intent on escalating the provocative and militaristic policies pursued by its predecessor in Syria, the Middle East and internationally.

The US strikes follow the revelation that Israel has not only conducted hundreds if not thousands of airstrikes on Iranian and pro-Iranian militias and Hezbollah in Syria, and more recently similar attacks in Iraq, but also—according to the *Wall Street Journal* — attacked 12 ships on their way to Syria with Iranian oil and possibly also with Iranian weapons.



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