As Syria digs earthquake victims from the rubble, US occupation denies access to direly needed energy supplies

Bill Van Auken
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Behind the backs of the American people, the Biden administration has continued the illegal occupation of Syria by US troops.

Syrians are desperately struggling to dig victims from the rubble of Monday's massive earthquake—with 3,317 deaths recorded in Syria as of Thursday—and to survive horrific hunger and cold. Under these conditions, the military occupation, along with a crippling US sanctions regime that blocks the flow of relief supplies, amounts to a crime against humanity.

Some 900 American soldiers are deployed in Syria, the vast majority of them at a base in the middle of the al-Omar oil field, the country's largest, in the eastern province of Deir Ezzor. They are supplemented by special forces operators and other units that are routinely rotated in and out of the country from among the 30,000 US military personnel deployed in the region under the US Central Command (CENTCOM).

The Western media has reported that Russian troops deployed in Syria with the permission and in support of the Syrian government have thrown themselves into the relief effort, while social media videos have shown them working alongside Syrian civilians to pull people from beneath collapsed buildings. The media has failed to pose the question: what are the American forces doing?

A CENTCOM spokesman, Army Col. Joe Buccino, told *Newsweek* that "the thoughts and prayers of the US Central Command team are with the people of Turkey and Syria in this critical moment."

CENTCOM posted a statement on its website February 8, two days after the earthquake, headlined "CENTCOM Prepares to Support Earthquake Relief," meaning that whatever relief arrives will come after those buried in the rubble have died. And this relief will flow exclusively to Turkey.

Outside of "thoughts and prayers," the only things that CENTCOM is offering the people of Syria is bombs, shells and bullets, along with barbaric conditions of imprisonment for some 65,000 people, according to a recent report by Human Rights Watch. Most of them are women and children, arbitrarily held by the US and its Kurdish proxies as suspected ISIS (Islamic State) supporters. US troops are remaining in their bases, while Buccino insists that CENTCOM has received no requests for aid.

Four years after the final surrender of ISIS, US troops remain in Syria on the pretext of combating any resurgence of the Islamist movement. ISIS emerged as Washington's own Frankenstein's monster, the product of the CIA pouring arms, money and recruits into Al Qaeda-linked militias with the aim of toppling the government of President Bashar al-Assad, resulting in a war that devastated the country and claimed half a million lives since 2011.

In reality, the US deployment, which is a violation of Syrian sovereignty and international law absent any mandate from the United Nations or even approval by the US Congress, is aimed against the Assad regime and the Syrian people. To the extent that US troops have been involved in combat, it has overwhelmingly been against Iranian-backed militias allied with Damascus, Syrian government troops and even Russian military contractors.

Today, Washington views Syria through the prism of the escalating US-NATO war against Russia in Ukraine. As both Russia and Iran support the government in Damascus, Washington's policy is

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aimed at countering their influence in the country and weakening the Syrian government, in the process deepening the suffering of the Syrian people, 90 percent of whom subsist under conditions of extreme poverty. The US government will exploit the earthquake to further those ends.

The mission of the American troops is to occupy and control, in collaboration with the US proxy forces of the Syrian Kurdish YPG militia, Syria's main oil and gas fields, denying their resources to the Syrian population. This mission is inseparable from the draconian and unilateral US sanctions regime, which includes the infamous Cesar Act, which imposes secondary sanctions on anyone in the world who dares come to the aid of Syria. Together, these policies are aimed at starving the population and precipitating regime change.

The US occupation of Syria's oil and gas fields began in 2019 after President Donald Trump had announced a complete withdrawal of American troops from the country and then back-tracked in the face of an uproar within the foreign policy and national security establishments, which wanted them to stay to confront Russia and Iran and further the drive for US hegemony in the oil-rich region.

At the time, Trump made the infamous admission that "We're keeping [Syria's] oil. We have the oil. The oil is secure. We left troops behind only for the oil."

Contracts were even prepared for politically connected US businessmen to organize the exploitation and export of Syria's oil. While the Biden administration voided these deals, columns of dozens of oil tankers, escorted by US armored vehicles, continue to flow through the al-Mahmoudieh border crossing into Iraq with stolen Syrian oil.

In addition to hijacking Syria's energy resources, the US occupation forces are also deployed to control this and other strategic border crossings, including at the US outpost at al-Tanf in southeastern Syria. The aim is to blockade a land route from Iran, through Iraq and on to Syria. This also serves to disrupt the deployment of rescue teams and relief supplies from both of these countries.

In August of last year, the Syrian oil ministry charged the US occupation forces and their Kurdish proxies with having looted more than 80 percent of Syria's daily crude production in the first half of 2022. In a statement, the ministry said that "US occupation forces and their mercenaries steal up to 66,000 barrels every single day from the fields occupied in the eastern region."

According to the ministry's estimates, the US war and occupation had deprived Syria of roughly $105 billion worth of energy resources that could have gone to the reconstruction of the devastated country.

Before the war, Syria, while not a major oil exporter, produced roughly 386,000 barrels per day, while the country consumed an estimated 250,000 barrels. The surplus accounted for around 25 percent of the government's budget.

Now, with its oil fields occupied by US troops and US sanctions blocking most imports, the country is struggling to meet even minimal energy needs. Before the earthquake, Syrians already confronted sustained blackouts, with little more than two or three hours of electricity, because there is inadequate fuel for power stations. There is little to no fuel for heating homes or, now, to provide heat for the many thousands left homeless in the freezing cold.

Syria's main source of fuel, Iran, confronting its own deepening economic crisis, has ceased providing Syria with subsidized oil, doubling the price of its exports to the country in recent months.

The US occupation and the US sanctions are strangling Syria's economy, denying the country the resources needed to mount an effective response to the earthquake and condemning thousands to death in the rubble, while reducing millions to abject poverty.

All US and Western sanctions against Syria must be ended immediately, along with Washington's criminal military occupation of Syrian soil and Syria's oil fields, and massive resources must be provided to save lives and rebuild the war-ravaged country. The fight for these demands must be waged by workers, youth and students internationally as part of a struggle against war and against the capitalist system, which confronts humanity with cascading catastrophes and the mounting threat of a nuclear third world war.

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