

Earthquake-ravaged Syria abandoned as Washington continues to pursue its goal of regime change

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The official death toll in Syria from last week's catastrophic earthquake has risen to nearly 6,000, with many more dead lying in the rubble, still to be counted. The United Nations estimates that as many as 5.3 million Syrians have been left homeless by the quake. Many of them were already internally displaced by the 11-year, US-orchestrated war for regime change that devastated the country and cost the lives of over 300,000 civilians.

UN officials have acknowledged that while the lion's share of international aid has gone to Turkey, Syria has been starved of assistance. The Syrian people, "rightly feel abandoned. Looking for international help that hasn't arrived," Martin Griffiths, the under-secretary-general for humanitarian affairs and emergency relief coordinator at the United Nations recently stated.

Even before the earthquake, nearly 90 percent of the population lived below the poverty line. Around 14.6 million people—nearly 70 percent of the population—were in need of humanitarian assistance, with some 12 million facing food insecurity as prices soared and supplies fell.

The population had also been left without access to electricity for more than two hours a day, while the vast majority of homes remained unheated.

These conditions are due in large measure to a crippling unilateral US sanctions regime, which under the so-called Cesar Act imposes severe punishments on any country or overseas financial institution or other entity that dares to engage with Syria.

This deliberate starvation of the Syrian population has been supplemented by the US military occupation of the country's northeastern oil and gas fields, which has denied the country access to its principal sources of energy needed for reconstruction.

Behind these policies lies the unstated and thus far failed aim of precipitating the downfall of the government of President Bashar al-Assad. What Washington failed to achieve through the arming and funding of Al Qaeda-linked militias, it now seeks to accomplish through deliberately inflicting mass misery upon the people of Syria in the hope that they will be forced to rise up against the government.

This tactic, likewise employed against Iran, Cuba and Venezuela, has thus far failed, while inflicting immense suffering.

Last Friday, in the face of growing international outrage and pressure, Washington was compelled to announce a temporary and partial suspension of US sanctions to allow earthquake relief into

Syria. The suspension is supposed to last for 180 days, and then the full sanctions regime will snap back into place.

In announcing the suspension, formally known as Syria General License 23, the US Treasury Department stated that it authorizes "all transactions related to earthquake relief that would otherwise be prohibited by the Syrian Sanctions Regulations."

The announcement exposes the boundless hypocrisy of the US government, which had long claimed that the draconian and deadly sanctions regulations posed no impediment to humanitarian relief. It only confirms what everyone in Syria already knew: that this was a barefaced lie.

The supposed partial suspension of sanctions only came four days after the earthquake, too late for thousands who died in the rubble, without sufficient heavy machinery and other aid to pull them out, or for the thousands more unable to access medical care or secure shelter in the quake's immediate aftermath.

Even now, Syrian immigrants in the US are unable to send remittances to their families in the earthquake zone as companies like Western Union, Ria and MoneyGram still don't allow transfers from the US to Syria. Platforms like Paypal, GoFundMe and Patreon have taken down pages soliciting relief for Syria and blocked attempts to route aid to the devastated country.

The sanctions regime continues to block any aid going through the Syrian government, which serves to prevent the importation of heavy equipment and fuel, cripple air traffic and ban the use of Syrian ports.

Meanwhile, companies and even aid organizations that have over-complied with US sanctions in the past for fear of US retaliation continue to remain wary of any dealings with Syria.

For its part, the Biden administration has offered a paltry \$85 million in aid to both Turkey and Syria, a tiny fraction of the billions in arms and aid poured into the proxy jihadist forces that ravaged Syria in Washington's regime change war.

What little aid is being provided by the US and the UK is politically directed at undermining the Syrian government. It is being funneled exclusively into the area of Idlib in northwestern Syria controlled by the remnants of the Al Qaeda and ISIS-affiliated jihadist militias previously armed and funded by the CIA in the regime-change war to topple Assad.

This has been combined with a concerted effort to promote the White Helmets, a so-called rescue organization that was organized

by British intelligence. It had been widely discredited for its involvement in the staging of fake chemical weapons attacks, as in Douma in 2018, meant to serve as a pretext for direct US-NATO intervention in the regime-change war.

The jihadist forces in Idlib have a filthy record of stealing international relief supplies and then selling them at drastically marked-up prices to the starving refugees trapped in the area under their control. There have been recent reports of rival armed factions fighting each other for earthquake relief supplies that have trickled across the Turkish border.

Washington and its allies have also mounted a new propaganda campaign blaming the Assad government as the culprit for blocking relief aid, something for which they themselves are responsible.

The reality is that Syria controls virtually none of its northern border, which is in the hands of jihadist organizations in Idlib, Turkish-backed militias and the US-backed Kurdish militia, the YPG in the east, where some 900 US troops are illegally deployed, in violation of Syrian sovereignty and without any mandate from the United Nations or even approval from the US Congress.

Washington has attempted to blame the Syrian government for the failure of aid to reach the jihadist-controlled areas of Idlib province. Only one route into the area from Turkey had been allowed before the earthquake by agreement between Damascus, the Turkish government and the United Nations, out of concern over the flow of weapons and foreign fighters. When Syria reached an agreement with the UN to open two more, the head of the White Helmets group, Raed al-Saleh, denounced the agreement, saying it had given the Assad government a “free political gain.”

Similarly, the dominant jihadist group, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), an offshoot of Al Qaeda in Syria, denounced the attempt of the Syrian government to deliver a convoy of aid trucks organized by the Red Crescent to the area of via a crossing at Saraqeb. An HTS spokesman told Reuters, “We won’t allow the regime to take advantage of the situation to show they are helping.” According to some reports, the HTS had demanded payment of \$10,000 for every truck allowed to enter.

The carving up of Syria, with rival US-backed and Turkish-backed militias controlling the country’s northern border, has proven a major obstacle to the provision of earthquake relief.

Al Jazeera reported that more common than aid crossing the border have been the bodies of Syrian refugees pulled from the rubble of southern Turkey. “1,413 Syrians have returned to their home country in body bags as of Wednesday morning,” it reported. Even in this regard, the carve-up of Syria makes itself felt, with the bodies of earthquake victims who fled areas controlled by the Syrian government denied return to their home villages and instead buried among the thousands of dead in Turkey.

The horrors of the earthquake and the supposed unity of the world in support of its victims notwithstanding, acts of war continue in Syria unabated.

The US Central Command (CENTCOM) reported Wednesday that its forces shot down an Iranian drone that it claimed was conducting surveillance of American troops at Mission Support Site Conoco, a US base that sits atop Syria’s oil fields and is

named after the American energy corporation that once exploited them.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) said a Turkish drone hit a military vehicle which it said belonged to the US-backed YPG militia in the Syrian city of Kobane, apparently killing one militiaman and wounding others.

ISIS-linked forces unleashed an armed attack south of the Syrian city of Palmyra, killing four people, including one woman, and wounding ten others.

And in the jihadist-occupied area of Idlib, HTS “rebels” claimed that government forces launched an unprovoked artillery attack. Damascus countered that its troops had responded to a drone attack by the Al Qaeda-linked militias.

One thing is certain, Washington has not given up on its aim of toppling the bourgeois national government of Assad and installing a puppet government subservient to US imperialist interests. It will continue to employ violence and coercion to that end.

The Biden administration views Syria not as a country urgently requiring humanitarian assistance after nearly a dozen years of war and a massive earthquake. Rather it is seen by Washington’s military and state apparatus as another battlefield in the war being waged in Ukraine against Russia, which backs Assad and operates its sole overseas naval base at the Syria’s Mediterranean port of Tartus.

After three decades of uninterrupted war in which it has reduced entire societies from Afghanistan to Iraq, Libya and Syria to rubble, American imperialism is prepared to kill hundreds of thousands more, either through hunger and cold or renewed military conflict to further its drive to control the strategic energy resources of the Middle East and Central Asia.

Workers, students and young people throughout the world must demand a genuine and permanent end to all US sanctions against Syria and the immediate withdrawal of all US troops occupying the country. These demands must be joined with the building of a mass movement against war as part of the struggle to put an end to its source, the capitalist profit system.



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