

Social protests in Syria as US tightens net around Iran and its allies

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The last 10 days have seen numerous reports of anti-government protests in Syria demanding relief from economic hardship and the overthrow of President Bashar al-Assad's regime. Commentators have drawn parallels with the protests that broke out in March 2011 and posed the possibility of Assad's downfall.

The 2011 protests were designated, in the wake of the NATO-led invasion of Libya to topple the regime of Muammar Gaddafi, as Syria's "revolution" and used as a cover by the Obama administration for armed Islamist forces, financed by its Gulf allies and Turkey to replace al-Assad with a regime more compliant with the dictates of US imperialism.

On Sunday August 20, protests broke out in the southern, mainly Druze city of Sweida—the site of anti-government demonstrations in 2020 and 2022—after the government doubled public employees' salaries and cut fuel subsidies on August 15, more than doubling the cost. The Syrian pound—In free fall since the start of Washington's proxy war to topple the Syrian government in 2011—fell a further 30 percent. The dollar/lira conversion rate is now a staggering 10,700 lira, up from 50 lira to the dollar in 2011, resulting in hyperinflation and exacerbating already terrible economic and social conditions that have left 90 percent of the population living below the poverty line, amid rampant corruption among the ruling elite.

Local leaders with the support of the Druze clergy called a one-day general strike, closing all the shops in the city. Later in the week, protesters attacked the local offices of the ruling Baath party and set up roadblocks on the road to the capital Damascus. Some demonstrators chanted, "Step Down Bashar, We Want to Live in Dignity" and "Long Live Syria, Down with Bashar al-Assad."

The local news outlet *Sweida 24* reported protests had spread to the southern city of Daraa and the town of Jableh, near the coastal city of Latakia, along with others in opposition-held areas in the northwest, parts of Aleppo province bordering Idlib and the city Deir el-Zur along the Euphrates in the east. *Al-Monitor* reported that Baath party offices in other towns in Sweida province were also closed.

Rayan Maarouf, *Sweida 24*'s exiled editor, said that while the ending of fuel subsidies sparked the "uprising," the demands are political—for the fall of the regime—not economic.

However, these reports are sketchy. While Syria's state-controlled media have not reported the protests, Lebanese Hezbollah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah has acknowledged

them, blaming them on the US. The content of some of the articles certainly belie headlines such as "Hundreds of thousands demonstrate in Syria to overthrow the Assad regime."

These protests do appear to have US backing, with Syrian exile groups in the US supporting the demonstrations and calling for al-Assad's overthrow. In Syria, the Kurdish Autonomous Administration, the US proxy that controls Syria's northeast, and the rival Kurdistan National Council backed by Turkey, have put out statements in support, while protesters in Aleppo province and the rebel-held province of Idlib, where the Druze have faced systematic persecution, are pledging unity with Sweida and Daraa.

The pseudo-left Socialist Workers Party in Britain has given over the pages of their press to their co-thinkers in the Revolutionary Left in Syria. The group is breathlessly lauding the protests and supporting the recently formed 10 August Movement and the Civil Action Movement "that have called for strikes and other forms of civil disobedience." It is participating in a coordinating committee that it acknowledges is "made up of several active movements, including our party. So we're fighting a two-pronged battle—against the regime and against conservative and counter-revolutionary currents."

In taking part in such an organisation, the role of the Revolutionary Left/SWP is to provide a political cover for efforts to manipulate and subordinate Syrian workers to religious leaders, pro-Turkish Islamist oppositionists, and "democratic movements" that are backed by and support US imperialism and other factions of the Syrian bourgeoisie. This serves to prevent workers from mounting an independent struggle against their own ruling class and imperialism.

Trotsky's Theory of Permanent Revolution argues that the Syrian people cannot achieve any of their most basic needs—freedom from imperialist wars and oppression, democratic rights, jobs and decent living standards—by aligning with any section of the national bourgeoisie. In the imperialist epoch, the realization of the basic democratic and national tasks in the oppressed nations—tasks associated in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries with the rise of the bourgeoisie—pose the necessity for the taking of power by the working class. This in turn can only be achieved by unifying the struggles of the Syrian working class with those of the international working class as part of the struggle for world socialist revolution.

The protests coincided with a fleeting visit by three Republican lawmakers from the US Congress—the first in a decade—via Turkey

to a rebel-held area northwest of Aleppo that has seen sporadic strikes by Russian and Syrian forces against Turkish-backed Islamist militias. Their aim was to highlight the “tragic” situation in Syria, although their compassion only extended to rebel-held regions, and to call for the “international community to step in” against the al-Assad regime.

That conditions across Syria are dire is indisputable, but primary responsibility for this rests with US imperialism and its European counterparts. Wages are worth less than \$20 a month, making it impossible to put food on the table. Most families are dependent upon remittances from relatives abroad. Of Syria’s pre-war 22 million population, nearly eight million have fled the country, with an estimated 3.5 million living in Turkey. Remittances, believed to total around \$400 million a month, far outweigh the value of salaries and wages paid in the poverty-stricken country.

The war, including four years of intense US aerial bombing, has killed half a million people and injured many more. It ruined Syria’s economy, laid waste to its cities and infrastructure, its agricultural system and irrigation networks, and left a deadly legacy of unexploded artillery shells, mines, cluster bomblets and other munitions on farmland, roadsides and in buildings.

Washington and its regional allies, the Gulf States, Turkey and Israel, funded and/or supported hundreds of militias to fight the Syrian regime, but also each other. US forces and its proxies, including the Kurdish-led Autonomous Administration, now control up to one third of Syria’s land mass, although not its major population centres, including its oil producing region around Deir el-Zur and its traditional breadbasket around Hassakeh, both in the east of the country, where strife continues. There have been several clashes this week between US-backed Kurdish and Turkey-backed Arab fighters in Deir el-Zur province that have left at least 34 people dead and many wounded.

While al-Assad, aided by Iran and Russia and its regional allies, regained control of much of the country, economic and social conditions failed to improve as the US sought to bankrupt Syria, imposing sanctions targeting its banking sector and choking its export industries and businesses. The US, via its control over multilateral financial institutions, also engineered the collapse in 2019 of Lebanon’s economy with which Syria is inextricably linked, to tighten the noose around Damascus.

The devastating February earthquakes that hit Turkey and Syria intensified Syria’s socio-economic crisis, killing more than 6,000, destroying some 10,000 buildings and leaving about 265,000 people homeless. The earthquakes caused more than \$5 billion in direct physical damage in Syria and a 5.5 percent contraction in its GDP, already down from \$67 billion in 2011 to \$12 billion in 2022, according to the World Bank.

The US/NATO led war in Ukraine against Russia has also limited Moscow’s financial support for Damascus, while causing wheat prices to soar. Although the Arab League has readmitted al-Assad after suspending him at the start of the proxy war and the Gulf states have re-established relations with Damascus, this has yet to deliver either investment or significant aid.

Washington, anxious to disrupt the growing links between its Gulf allies, Iran, Russia and China, is ramping up the pressure on Iran and its allies in Syria, Lebanon and Iraq. The US is to hold

major military drills with Israel, including one that would simulate an attack on Iran’s nuclear facilities. It follows a major joint drill involving US Central Command and the Israel Defense Forces in January that included air force exercises and missile defence drills.

General Mark Milley, who heads the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, met Defense Minister Yoav Gallant and IDF Chief of Staff Lieutenant General Herzi Halevi recently in Israel in an unscheduled visit. During his previous visit last March, he had discussed regional security issues and “coordination to defend against threats posed by Iran.” Israel has carried out near weekly air strikes against Syria, most recently hitting both Damascus and Aleppo airports yet again, causing heavy damage, adding to the hundreds of air strikes since 2011 targeting Syrian troops, Iran-backed fighters and Hezbollah.

US energy envoy Amos Hochstein is visiting Lebanon to lessen the country’s reliance on Iran by dangling the prospect of support for the country’s offshore energy resources. According to Lebanon’s al-Mayadeen channel, the US has sent military reinforcements to its bases near Deir el-Zur in Syria and deployed fighter aircraft. It has also despatched additional forces along the border between Iraq and Syria, near Al Bukamal, possibly in preparation for operations against pro-Iran militias in eastern Syria.

Former Iraqi prime minister Nouri Al-Maliki said that the recent deployment of US forces to Anbar province in western Iraq indicated that their aim is to close its border with Syria and prepare to overthrow the Syrian regime. He added that he had refused Washington’s request to close Iraq’s border with Syria in 2011 because it would have amounted to a siege on another country.

Last month, the Pentagon sent additional F-35 and F-16 fighter jets and two warships to the region following what it claimed was Iran’s seizure and harassment of commercial shipping vessels. Washington is said to be considering a plan to put US Marines on commercial tanker ships to deter Iranian efforts to seize ships in the Strait of Hormuz, through which 20 percent of all oil shipments pass.



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