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[www.afgazad.com](http://www.afgazad.com)

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European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

Jean Shaoul

16.12.2024

## **US-sponsored war of regime change devastates Syria**

Thirteen years after the Obama administration, along with its regional allies, began its relentless campaign to topple the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad using Islamist proxy forces, the al-Qaeda-linked Hayat al-Sham (HTS) has taken Damascus.

Syria now faces a reactionary, imperialist-led carve up as the US, Turkey and Israel each pursue their own interests in the country.



A masked fighter carries a flag of the Al-Qaeda linked Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) in the courtyard of the Umayyad Mosque in the old walled city of Damascus, Syria, on Tuesday. (AP Photo/Hussein Malla)

Washington and the Israel Defence Forces (IDF) have carried out hundreds of aerial strikes to destroy the military bases and weaponry of Syria and its allies, including those of Iran, Hezbollah, and Russia. Turkey-backed Syrian opposition groups seized Manbij and other towns in northern Syria from US-backed Syrian Kurdish Forces (SDF), while the SDF took control of Deir al-Zur and its oil installations on the western bank of the Euphrates. Israel took over the security zone on Syria's Golan Heights and adjacent territory in breach of

international law. Washington has emphasised the US's commitment to defeating ISIS that has carried out attacks on the SDF in eastern Syria—a signal that it will continue its efforts to gain control over the war-torn country.

The prospect of renewed fighting and the dismemberment of the country comes atop the deadliest conflict of the 21st century.

Washington utilised the Syrian regime's lethal suppression of anti-government protests over declining social and economic conditions, even as the rich grew richer, in several cities in March 2011, as in Libya before it, as the pretext for a large-scale operation in pursuit of its geostrategic interests—against a regime it had long opposed.

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 rushed to promote these forces as “revolutionaries.” They made no attempt to explain who these “revolutionaries” were—in many cases discredited former regime figures. They ignored the class forces involved. They did not bother 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—let alone with the support of the imperialist powers. The vast scale of the funding for these reactionary forces, through CIA programs that later became public such as Operation Timber Sycamore, emerged years later. These pseudo-left groups are now embracing the Assad regime's downfall at the hands of these Islamist reactionaries in alliance with the financiers and perpetrators of the genocide in Gaza.

They backed a war in which nearly 500,000 people lost their lives, nearly half of all the conflict-related deaths worldwide over the same period. While the scale of the conflict abated after Russia and Iran's intervention on the side of the Syrian regime, intense fighting has continued in the northern and eastern parts of the country. In the first 10 months of last year, more than 450 civilians were killed in the conflict.

The war decimated the two main pillars of the economy, oil and agriculture. While small compared to other Middle East countries, oil exports accounted for about a quarter of

government revenue in 2010 while food production contributed a similar amount to GDP. The government lost control of most of its oil fields to rebel groups, including ISIS and later the US-backed Kurdish forces. International sanctions in 2011 severely restricted the export of oil, with output down to less than 9,000 barrels per day (from 380,000 bpd in 2010) in regime-controlled areas last year. Syria became heavily reliant on imports from Iran. This is likely to be curtailed now that the US-backed forces have seized control of the Bukamal crossing into Iraq. Electricity has long been in short supply, with power cuts most of the day. It means that families have no working refrigerators and must get up at 2am to use their washing machines.

The war laid waste to Syria's 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. Once a lower middle-income country positioned 68th in the global GDP rankings of 196 countries in 2011, Syria has lost more than half of its GDP since 2010 and fallen to 129th place, on a par with the Palestinian Territories and Chad. It now ranks as a low-income country where families struggle to put food on the table.

Around 5 million of the country's 21 million population have left the country. A further 7 million, one third of the population, are internally displaced within Syria, many of whom live in overcrowded camps and have lost their civil, land and property documentation. Around 30 percent of households have an absent member due to death or the migration of young men in the 20-40-year age group.

The migration of some of Syria's most skilled people has left the country with reduced public services, particularly in water, sanitation and health, putting the health of more and more people at risk. Syria is currently dealing with an active cholera outbreak. Recurrent disease outbreaks, waterborne diseases, vaccine shortages and food shortages are contributing to rising malnutrition rates.

With much of the country's productive facilities destroyed in the war, most people now work in the informal sector, on low rates of pay. As the government withdrew the limited subsidies available for fuel and food, families became increasingly reliant on remittances from family members working abroad. At the same time, as wages have fallen, the wealth and income of the rich has grown.

While extreme poverty was virtually non-existent in 2010, by 2022 it affected more than 25 percent of Syrians, 5.7 million people. Based on the international poverty line, about 16.7 million people—70 percent of the population—are in poverty. More than 50 percent of the

extremely poor live in the Aleppo, Hama and Deir el-Zur governorates and the north eastern governorates have the highest levels of poverty.



Housing in Damascus in 2010

The primary responsibility for the terrible conditions across Syria rests with US imperialism and its European counterparts that have sought to starve Syria into submission.

While 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 first Trump administration sought to bankrupt Syria—imposing bilateral and secondary sanctions in 2020 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. Together, these measures drastically increased the demand for dollars, led to a massive rise in the cost of living and prevented any aid to help with Syria's reconstruction. The COVID pandemic and the rising cost of wheat due to the US/NATO-led war against Russia in Ukraine further increased poverty in the country.

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. They deprived many families of their main breadwinner, making millions of people dependent upon humanitarian aid.



People remove their furniture and household appliances out of a collapsed building following a devastating earthquake in the town of Jinderis, Aleppo province, Syria, Tuesday, Feb. 14, 2023. [AP Photo/Ghaith Alsayed]

Public sector wages fell precipitously, forcing workers to take on second jobs and destroying whatever support remained for the Assad regime. Last year saw strikes and demonstrations break out in Suwayda, Dara'a and Idlib over deteriorating conditions.

While the Arab League readmitted Assad after suspending him at the start of the proxy war and the Gulf states re-established relations with Damascus, this did not result in either investment or significant aid, undermining the Assad regime's last chance of surviving.

The economy is now in freefall. Between February and November 2023, the Syrian pound lost half its value against the US dollar, pushing up inflation by a massive 88 percent, double the previous year's inflation rate, according to the World Food Programme, due to reduced access to goods, disrupted supply chains and higher distribution costs. The Syrian Center for Policy Research said more than half of Syrians were living in abject poverty, unable to secure basic food needs.

The UN asked for \$4.07 billion to fund its response inside Syria this year and has thus far received only 31.6 percent of it.

The World Bank's report published last spring expected Syria's protracted economic contraction to persist in 2024, with a further 1.5 percent decline, assuming the conflict was largely contained, with government subsidies for food and fuel declining. This truly desperate situation is set to get worse as the rival groups and their backers carve up the country.