

# Hunger and poverty in Syria – the result of Western blockade policy

by Karin Leukefeld\*



Karin Leukefeld  
(Photo ma)

*(Edit.) The tragic and historically outrageous unilateral decision by the Swiss government in February 2022 to endorse EU sanctions against Russia across the board, despite Switzerland's neutrality, has seriously damaged Switzerland's role as a neutral mediator. Moreover, it permanently devalued the position of Geneva as a proven venue for negotiations. This is having a noticeable impact already – and, as always with sanctions, primarily on the lower classes and the poor. The following article from Syria by Karin Leukefeld illustrates how this works. (cm)*

\* \* \*

January 2023. There is a jostle at the Lebanese Syrian border crossing at Masnaa. A long queue of Syrian taxis is waiting for clearance. In a second queue are Lebanese vehicles bringing travellers to Syria.

The Syrian taxis are lying low on the road, despite having only a few passengers. Their tanks are filled to the brim, and there is a gas bottle in the trunk. Only taxis are allowed to transport a full tank and a gas cylinder from Lebanon to Syria. Due to the lack of passengers, transporting petrol in their own tank and a gas bottle has become a good source of income for Syrian taxi

\* Karin Leukefeld studied ethnology as well as Islamic and political sciences and is a trained bookseller. She has done organisational and public relations work for, among others, the Federal Association of Citizens' Initiatives for Environmental Protection (BBU), the Green Party (federal party) and the El Salvador Information Centre. She was also a personal assistant to a PDS member of parliament in Germany (foreign policy and humanitarian aid). Since 2000, she has worked as a freelance correspondent in the Middle East for various German and Swiss media. She is also the author of several books on her experiences from the war zones in the Middle East.



Sanctions never hurt "those at the top", but always the lower middle class and the poor. Children in Syria also have no prospect of a decent future as a result of Western sanctions.  
(Image OCHA)

drivers. Once home, the petrol is transferred from the tank into 10 liter bottles or canisters and then sold on the black market, i.e., on the side of the road or in the neighbourhood, for around 85,000 Syrian pounds (SYP, about \$12.80).

The official exchange rate for 1 US dollar is currently 4500 SYP. The common and tolerated black market rate for 1 US dollar is 6500 SYP. Twelve years ago, at the beginning of the war, 1 US dollar cost 50 SYP.

Like petrol, the gas cylinder is also sold. Gas is not only used for cooking but also for heating, especially in winter, because heating oil is scarce and very expensive. However, Syrian families only receive one gas cylinder every 100 days, subsidised by the government. The subsidised gas costs just under 12,000 Syrian pounds (about \$2). Those who are not entitled to subsidised gas pay 35,000 Syrian pounds (\$6) per cylinder. Those who need more gas because they have a business, a large family, sick relatives or a kindergarten to take care of, have to buy gas on the black market. There, a cylinder costs between 180,000 (27 US dollars) and 240,000 Syrian pounds (36 US dollars). This is equivalent to the monthly salary of government employees. In the private sector, up to 500,000 Syrian pounds can be earned monthly. Yet, even a salary of the equivalent of about 75 US dollars is not enough for a family in Syria today to cover their monthly expenses.

Lebanese are also trying to earn an income by smuggling petrol into Syria. On the highway section between the Lebanese border crossing at Masnaa and the Syrian border crossing at Jdeideh Jabous, many vehicles stand and fill petrol from their tanks into 10 liter bottles, which they sell to Syrian buyers. Some buyers even come on foot to load two bottles into a backpack and make their way back to Syria with one bottle in each hand on the right and left as well.

No one intervenes. Smuggling, the result of artificially created shortages and Western blockade policies, is part of the war economy.

### **Syria in the UN Security Council**

Political and humanitarian developments in Syria received the attention of the *UN Security Council* last Wednesday (25 January 2023). The body was briefed by the UN Special Representative for Syria, Norwegian diplomat *Geir O. Pedersen*, and by *Ghada Eltahir Mudawi*, OCHA's Acting Director for Operations and Advisory Services. OCHA is the *United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs*, under whose supervision all UN relief operations in Syria take place.

Nothing much changed on the Syria issue at the UN Security Council. The information presented by UN officials remains bureaucratic and confusing, and the veto powers in the Security Council exchange their familiar positions. New to the process was a statement by Switzerland and Brazil, which have been members of the body since the beginning of the year. Ireland and Norway left after two years.

Syria's UN Ambassador *Bassam Sabbagh* accused the United States in particular of destabilising the situation in Syria through its behaviour at the Security Council and in the Middle East. "The illegitimate foreign troop presence" threatens the country's security and territorial integrity, he said. Syria's resources are being plundered, "especially oil, gas and wheat", he said.

### **EU sanctions against Russia block Syrian talks**

Pedersen's report focused on the (stagnant) state of deliberations in the Syrian Constitutional Committee, which hasn't met since June 2022. Pedersen told journalists that this was also due to concerns expressed by Russia over Switzerland. The constitutionally neutral country

had bowed to EU and U.S. pressure last year and joined EU sanctions against Russia over the war in Ukraine. Since then, every new EU sanctions package against Russia has been adopted by the Swiss government. As a result, among other things, Russian government officials such as Foreign Minister *Sergei Lavrov* cannot travel to Geneva. (Something the Swiss government of the year 2022 and also Swiss people should be really ashamed of. Edit./cm)

Russia subsequently proposed at the UN Security Council a different, neutral location for the continuation of the Syrian Constitutional Committee talks. Western veto powers in the Security Council, the United States, the United Kingdom and France, have failed to respond.

All UN veto states (China, France, the United Kingdom, Russia, the United States) as well as Germany are considered guarantor powers of the political process that is to take place under the umbrella of the United Nations in Geneva between the Syrian government, a selected Syrian opposition and Syrian civil society groups. The basis on which this is to take place is UN Security Council Resolution 2254 of 2015. In the meantime, the process has stagnated.

### **No agreement among the "stakeholders"**

Pedersen has been trying to get the various stakeholders around the table. In December, he met Syrian Foreign Minister *Feisal Mekdad* in Damascus and Turkish Foreign Minister *Mevlüt Cavusoglu*. Pedersen spoke with Saudi Foreign Minister *Faisal bin Farhan Al Saud* on the sidelines of the World Economic Forum in Davos. And in Geneva (on 24 January 2023), Pedersen spoke with representatives for Syria from the United Kingdom, France, the United States and Germany about how to build "trust and confidence". No progress were reported.

Instead, the "Quad Syria representatives" from France, the United Kingdom, the United States, and Germany reinforced their position on Syria. They supported Pedersen in "achieving a political solution to the conflict in Syria in accordance with UN Security Council Resolution 2254", the joint statement said. The resolution is to be "the sole feasible option for resolving the conflict" and the group looks forward to cooperating "with partners in the region and with the opposition within this framework". The Syrian government is not mentioned in the statement.

### **Job recruiter for non-governmental organisations**

Pedersen is trying to find out what concessions the respective “stakeholders” would be willing to make if other “stakeholders” were to make concessions on their part. This involves abductees, prisoners, disappeared persons, humanitarian aid, and the so-called “early recovery projects” that can be used to circumvent the unilateral punitive economic measures imposed by the EU and the U.S. so that Syria has a chance to recover.

But the measures aimed at putting the population back to work and restoring the civil infrastructure appear to be creating more jobs for nongovernmental organisations than for the population itself. According to UN figures, at least 125 (!) humanitarian aid organisations successfully implemented 374 such projects in all 14 Syrian provinces last year. Donor countries are said to have transferred \$517 million for the programme.

### **Economic sanctions, the plundering of resources and illegal occupation worsen living conditions**

People in Syria have long since lost “trust and confidence” in the UN process. The reason for this is the continuing deterioration in living conditions for the vast majority of the population, regardless of where in the country they live.

In addition to the consequences of the war, occupying forces from Turkey and the United States are the cause of the economic crisis. With one-sided partisanship for highly varied government opponents, they are blocking internal Syrian dialogue and dividing the society. The U.S. supports the Kurdish-led *Syrian Democratic Forces* (SDF) in the northeast, while Turkey supports Islamists in Idlib and the northern outskirts of Aleppo. The occupation forces also prevent the Syrian government in the north, northwest, northeast, and south (Al Tanf) from controlling national borders, curbing smuggling, and extracting and using its own resources (oil, gas, water, cotton, wheat).

### **UN diplomat demands lifting of sanctions**

Another reason for the difficult living conditions in Syria are the unilateral punitive economic measures taken by rich Western countries and alliances. According to official statements, these measures are directed against the perpetrators of repression and oppression of the popu-

lation, but they affect precisely those in the country whom they claim to want to protect. The unilateral punitive measures have not been approved by the UN Security Council or the UN General Assembly but are in line with the political interests of the EU and the USA, which use economic sanctions as a means of exerting pressure against political opponents worldwide.

*Alena Douhan*, UN Special Rapporteur on the consequences of unilateral punitive economic measures (sanctions) on a country’s population, has for years criticised the punitive economic measures imposed upon Syria by the EU (2011) and the US (2019). They blocked the reconstruction and stabilisation of the country and they massively violated the human rights of the Syrian people, she said after a twelve-day stay in Syria in November 2022. She was shocked by the living conditions, she told journalists in Damascus. The punitive measures must be lifted immediately, she said.

### **Smuggling and wartime economy**

Economic blockades and punitive economic measures encourage smuggling and corruption, and this is not unique to Syria. In the northeast, in resource-rich areas under the control of the Kurdish-led *Syrian Democratic Forces* (SDF) and the U.S. Army, there are significant inequalities in supplies, according to residents from Hasakeh. A woman from Hasakeh, who is personally known to the author but who does not wish to publish her name, told the author that when it came to water, electricity, gas, and gasoline supplies, preference was given to people who were close to the SDF. Smuggling across the Syrian-North Iraqi-Kurdish border was flourishing, she said, with convoys of tanker trucks taking Syrian oil away almost daily. Even goods, medicines and people are smuggled across the border with Turkey for large sums of money.

### **The humanitarian emergency has been created**

According to the *United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs* (OCHA), 15.3 million Syrians are in need of livelihood assistance. According to the figures, 77 percent of households do not have enough income to cover basic needs. 8 percent of households are unable to support themselves at all, according to OCHA data.

While problems are nationwide, the UN Security Council continues to argue over whether aid

to Idlib should come “cross-border” from Turkey or be distributed through Damascus, in accordance with international humanitarian law. Under the so-called intra-Syrian “frontline cross-border” supply effort, which is to be reinforced in accordance with U.N. Security Council Resolution 2585 (dating back to 2021), only the tenth convoy consisting of 18 trucks was carried out on January 8, 2023.

Meanwhile, in 2022 alone, an average of 600 trucks carrying food and other humanitarian aid passed through the Syrian-Turkish Bab al Hawa border crossing into Idlib each month. The

area in the north of the north-western Syrian province is under the control of the al Qaeda offshoot Hayat Tahrir al-Sham.

On 9 January 2023, the controversial “cross-border aid” measure, which suspends Syria’s sovereignty, was extended for six months until 10 July 2023, amid applause from Western veto states France, the United Kingdom and the United States.

*Source: <https://globalbridge.ch/hunger-und-armut-in-syrien-die-folge-westlicher-blockadepolitik>, 30 January 2023  
(Reprinted with kind permission of the editor.)*

*(Translation “Swiss Standpoint”)*