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Sovereignty and reconstruction or war and handouts?

Syria as the theatre of the struggle for a multipolar world order

by Karin Leukefeld

The situation in Syria remains tense. The government is forced to cut subsidies on petrol, oil and diesel, the cost of transport and food is skyrocketing, the population is facing new hardships in basic services, and the Syrian pound continues to lose value. Salaries for doctors, teachers, army personnel, state employees and civil servants are being doubled, but people are in shock.

Protests in different parts of the country blame the government for the economic hardship. In Sweida, the capital of the Druze province in the south of the country, the governor admitted at a public rally on Thursday that the economic situation of the population was very serious and that the government was working to find solutions.

Mazen M., a translator from Damascus, described the demands to the author as "understandable". The supply situation is very bad and life has become very expensive. Not only in Sweida, but also in the suburbs of Damascus, there were protests with "several hundred people". Although around 250,000 Druze live in suburbs such as Jaramana and Sehnaya - half of the Druze population in Syria - no Druze took part in the protests there. Everything remained calm and there were no clashes.

In Sweida, there were slogans against the government and against President Assad, but they had a "separatist background". These people were not concerned with the supply situation, said the interlocutor, but wanted to create a mood against the government. A picture of the president had not been burnt, he said, that was a false report spread by Syrian opposition websites and also picked up by the German Press Agency.

Search for ways out

In Cairo, the "Syria Liaison Committee" at the Arab League - consisting of Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria and the AL Secretary General - is looking for a way out of the economic crisis in Syria.

Israel continues to attack military bases in Syria in constant breach of international law, Turkey is waging a deadly drone war against the Kurdish-led "Syrian Democratic Forces" (SDF). Remnant units of the "Islamic State" are attacking and murdering Syrian soldiers in the east of the country. Turkish-sponsored combat units of "Hayat Tahrir al-Sham" (Alliance for the Liberation of the Levant, HTS) shell Syrian civilians beyond Idlib, their area of influence in Northwestern Syria. Russian fighter jets bomb "HTS" positions and weapons depots, claiming that "HTS" is not a "rebel group" as claimed in Western reports, but a UN-listed terrorist organisation. In the skies over Syria, Russia and the USA are challenging each other with drones and fighter jets in "tests of courage".

Blockades in the Security Council

On Monday, the humanitarian situation in Syria was again on the agenda in a "private session" of the UN Security Council. The subsequent deliberation took place behind closed doors. In preparation for the "private meeting" of the UN body, journalists received background information. Brazil and Switzerland, which hold the "lead" for the "Humanitarian Syria Dossier" in the Security Council, had requested the meeting. Both states had unsuccessfully submitted a draft resolution in July for cross-border aid from Turkey through the Bab al-Hawa border crossing into the northwest of Syria's Idlib

province. Russia vetoed a nine-month extension. The USA, Britain and France rejected the six-month extension proposed by Russia.

Meanwhile, the UN has agreed directly with the Syrian government on a six-month extension of the Bab al-Hawa border crossing, which leads into the area controlled by "HTS". Two other border crossings, which were put into operation with the consent of the Syrian government after the earthquake, are to remain open initially until November.

The Security Council's "private" meeting on Monday was to discuss "details of the UN-Syria deal" in "an open exchange" with the head of the UN's Emergency Response Programme (OCHA), Martin Griffiths, it said. Syria and Turkey were invited to the meeting, it said.

Permanent Security Council members the US, Britain and France want Syria to remain under UN Security Council control in the area of cross-border humanitarian aid. Russia and China, which are also Permanent Members, consider this mechanism an exceptional rule and want to discontinue it.

Syrians in a state of shock

Observers on the ground report that Syrian society is "in a state of shock". Those who have jobs earn no more than 300,000 Syrian pounds (20 US dollars) a month. Ninety per cent of the people live below the poverty line.

In 2022, Syria was on the ground, reports a Damascus-based interlocutor who advises foreign aid organisations in Syria. The earthquake at the beginning of 2023 "punched holes in the ground", and now Syria is sinking deeper and deeper. The "Western community", Turkey and Qatar should change their attitude towards Syria, the desperate appeal said. "Return to humanity. Stop the sanctions. Stop funding and supporting the hardline opposition and return to honest diplomacy. Negotiate peace for Syria so that Syrians can live in dignity again and start rebuilding their homes. Reach out to Syrians instead of stifling them."

The EU and US unilateral sanctions are preventing the import of vital technical, electronic and medical spare parts that are desperately needed for reconstruction. They also block aid from other states, as announced by the Arab League. Unilaterally imposed sanctions also violate the UN Charter and international law, because only the UN Security Council may make such serious interventions in the economy of a sovereign state.

USA troops, who are also in breach of international law in the Northeast of the country in the area of the Syrian oil fields, have for years been plundering Syrian oil, which, like cotton and wheat, is illegally transported to northern Iraq and sold there.

"On the brink of direct confrontation"

The USA is coming under increasing pressure in Syria. Attacks by Syrian-Iraqi Iranian militias on the illegal US bases have increased. The Pentagon has now increased the number of soldiers, which according to official figures is 900, to more than 1,000, multiple rocket launcher systems HIMARS have been stationed not far from the Syrian Konoco oil field (Deir Ez-Zor) and F-22 fighter jets have been made operational. Russian fighter jets, which are engaged in increasingly frequent "tests of courage" with US aircraft, were in the target range of US fighter jets' automatic defence systems eleven times in July alone.

Military observers speak of a situation "on the brink of direct confrontation", especially since an original agreement between Russia and the USA to "stay out of each other's way" (deconflicting) in Syria and to communicate respective deployments has not been renewed. USA General Michael Corella, commander for Middle East operations said "the Russians are trying to drive the USA out of

Syria". Russian President Vladimir Putin again made clear that Russia was not seeking a military confrontation with the US in Syria, but was "prepared for any scenario".

Syria is the scene of a confrontation between the USA and the US-led NATO alliance against Russia, according to a mid-August analysis by the Centre for Arab Unity Studies (CAUS, Beirut/Lebanon). This confrontation has existed since the Cold War, which began after the end of World War II. The reason is the USA's claim to sole control of the world, its resources and political systems.

The wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Syria and Yemen were the new prelude to the US-Russian conflict. The war in Ukraine, where the USA is trying to prevent Russia's efforts to create a multipolar world order, is the climax for the time being.

This conflict is spreading to other war zones and trouble spots in the world, and Syria - like Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya and Yemen before it - is also such a theatre. Both powers are trying - directly and through proxy wars - to weaken the influence of the other, even at the cost of plunging the country into chaos.