

Lift Sanctions Against Syria to Lessen Sufferings of the People Caused by the Earthquake

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The International Movement for a Just World (JUST) urges the American, British, Australian, Canadian, Swiss and some European Union and Arab League governments to lift the unjust, immoral sanctions against Syria in order to lessen the immense sufferings of the people caused by the massive earthquake of 6th February 2023.

A number of local groups including the Syrian Red Crescent Society have already made this call. Among individuals and groups at the international level who also want sanctions lifted is Helga Zepp LaRouche of the Schiller Institute. It is reported that the US and EU have suspended temporarily their sanctions. But this is not enough because it means that they can be re-imposed at any time. If sanctions have to be terminated once and for all, it is because there were no justifications for them in the first instance.

The US began targeting Syria in 1979 by placing it on the list of state sponsors of terrorism. This was largely because of the support that then Syrian president Hafez Azad gave Palestinian, Syrian and other Arab freedom fighters seeking to liberate Palestine, Syria's Golan Heights and other Arab territories from Israeli occupation. It is an indication of the degree of influence that Israel and Zionism exercise over US foreign policy in West Asia and North Africa (WANA). Between March and August 2004, sanctions were intensified as a result of new allegations of Syrian interference in Iraq and Lebanon which impacted upon Israel. By this time, the Syrian government's relationship with Hamas in Palestine and Hezbollah in Lebanon and its close fraternal ties with Iran were at the core of US animosity towards the resolutely independent minded nation. Needless to say, Israeli interests were prominent in all these US stances.

However, it was only after 2011, camouflaged by the so-called Arab Spring, that organised, aggressive US led attempts to overthrow the Syrian government of Bashar Azad, supported by some of its European allies and WANA friends, gave birth to a whole range of new

sanctions from travel bans and asset freezes to prohibitions on exports and restrictions upon the oil sector. The EU also joined the US in embargoing the oil sector. 20% of Syria's GDP came from oil. It has been estimated that the country has lost 107 billion US dollars from its oil and gas earnings since 2011.

Some Arab League states also froze Syrian government assets as did Türkiye in 2011. But none of these actions had as severe an impact upon the Syrian economy and State as the capture of territories containing oil and producing wheat and cotton by rebel groups linked to governments, ethnic movements or terrorist outfits in the region. These groups collectively known as the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) are led by Kurds with longstanding grievances against both the Syrian and Turkish governments and are supported by the US. They occupy parts of North West Syria badly affected by the earthquake.

It is this fractured and fragmented country that Bashar Azad presides over. It is a country in which 15.3 million people out of a population of 21.3 million are in need of humanitarian aid. Bashar's power and authority have been further weakened as we have seen by loss of control over vital resources and by crippling sanctions. It is understandable why his government was not able to respond quickly and effectively to the earthquake catastrophe which as of 11th February has killed at least 3,500 people. It is of course much smaller than the more than 22,300 children, women and men who have perished in neighbouring Türkiye.

Nonetheless, the Syrian tragedy demands a response that goes beyond rescue and recovery operations. It is a colossal tragedy complicated by sanctions which impede not only on-going operations such as the flow of basic necessities and the arrival of much needed personnel but also hinder medium and long-term relief and rehabilitation work. This is why sanctions have to be lifted immediately. This is why both peoples and governments everywhere should make this their priority plea.

The conflicts between competing groups the majority of which are armed should also be brought to an end as soon as possible. It is not going to be easy. One hopes that this mammoth catastrophe will persuade some of the principal actors in these conflicts to reflect deeply on what has happened — the unfathomable suffering of millions of human beings on both sides of the Türkiye-Syria border. If their suffering is to have any meaning at all, let it herald the end of conflicts and killings along the border and in other parts of Syria. In this regard, it is encouraging that the United Nations has appealed to all warring parties to observe a ceasefire with immediate effect to enable humanitarian assistance to be channelled to the victims of the earthquake.

There is another glimmer of hope. Even before the earthquake, on the 5th of January 2023, the president of Türkiye, Recep Erdogan indicated that he wants to meet up with the Syrian president, Bashar Azad, to discuss and resolve their differences. Let us hope and pray that both men will work towards such a meeting — a meeting which will result in a mutually acceptable solution to their problems. If the two leaders who enjoyed a close friendship some time ago make peace with one another, there is a strong possibility that Türkiye and Syria will be able to come together on a firm footing and most of the other protagonists will also be able to bury the hatchet.

If that happens, the deaths of thousands — especially little children — in one of the greatest tragedies in recent times would not have been in vain.

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Featured image: The earthquake destroyed buildings in the town of Jandaris, near Afrin, Syria. Credit: Rami al-Sayed/AFP/Getty

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