

In Syria, the West's Humanitarian Claims Crumble to Dust

The US said it wanted to free Syrians from a tyrant. Then it was willing to let them die of cold and hunger. The truth: for the West, Syria is only about power

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[US](#) President Joe Biden's administration relented last Thursday and finally lifted sanctions on [Syria](#). The change of policy came after four days of relentless and shocking footage from the disaster zone in southern [Turkey](#) and northern Syria caused by a [7.8 magnitude earthquake](#).

It seems as if [Washington](#) felt it could no longer sustain [its embargo](#) when tens of thousands of bodies were being exhumed from the rubble and millions more were struggling with cold, hunger and injuries.

The US could not afford to look like the odd man out faced with a global wave of concern for the devastated populations of Syria and Turkey.

Under the new exemption, the Syrian government will be able to [receive earthquake relief](#) for six months before the embargo locks back in.

But no one should be fooled by this apparent change of heart.

In the immediate aftermath of the earthquake, the State Department's first reaction was to double down on its policy. Spokesman Ned Price dismissed the possibility of lifting sanctions, [arguing it would](#) be "counterproductive ... to reach out to a government that has brutalised its people over the course of a dozen years now".

The truth is that the sanctions regime imposed by the US and its allies in Europe, Canada and Australia was a criminal policy long before the earthquake struck. The brief and belated exemption – under international pressure – does not fundamentally alter that picture.

Western claims of humanitarian intervention in the oil-rich Middle East were always a lie. It just took an earthquake to make that crystal clear.

Collective punishment

Sanctions are a form of [collective punishment](#) on the wider population. The West has been punishing Syrians for living under a government they did not elect but one the US is determined to bring down at all costs.

The West's embargo was imposed in parallel to a civil war, which rapidly transformed into a western proxy war, that ravaged most of the country. The US and its allies [fuelled and inflamed the war](#), sponsoring rebel groups, including jihadists, that ultimately failed to oust the government of Bashar al-Assad.

Many of those extremist groups flooded in from neighbouring countries, where they had been sucked into the vacuum left in the wake of the West's earlier "humanitarian" [regime-overthrow operations](#).

To avoid the fighting, many millions of Syrians were forced to flee their homes, resulting in endemic [poverty and malnutrition](#). Even as the fighting abated, Syria's economy continued to sink – not only because of western sanctions, but because the US and others had [seized](#) Syria's [oil fields](#) and its best agricultural lands.

This entirely man-made catastrophe preceded and compounded last week's earthquake. Already destitute, hungry and isolated, Syrians now have to cope with further calamity.

Ghoulish policy

The supposed logic of the West's decade-long policy [to immiserate Syria](#), fashioned to a template Washington regularly rolls out against official enemies, was simple. Desperate Syrians would be incentivised to [rise up](#) against their leaders in the hope of better things.

But the project visibly failed – just as it has done so often before in official enemy states such as [Cuba](#) and [Iran](#). Nonetheless, the programme of suffering continued to be enforced in the name of humanitarianism.

When Syria was hit by a 7.8 magnitude earthquake last week, Washington's insistence that the sanctions remain in place shifted the policy from the simply inhumane to the positively ghoulish.

But rather than assume US benevolence for temporarily lifting sanctions, the focus should be on why they are there in the first place.

The logic of the West's position was this: lifting sanctions requires recognising the Assad government, which in turn would be an admission of defeat in the battle to unseat him. Protecting the collective ego of Washington officials has taken precedence over the protracted torment of millions of Syrians.

That in itself gives the lie to any pretence that, in their fight to topple the Assad government, the US and Europe ever really cared about the Syrian people.

It also offers a revealing counterpoint to Ukraine's treatment. Apparently, no price is to be spared to save the ["European-looking" Ukrainians](#) from [Russia's invasion](#), even if it risks a nuclear confrontation. But darker-skinned Syrians will be abandoned to their fate as soon as

crumbling masonry is no longer on our TV screens.

When did this kind of racist discrimination qualify as humanitarianism?

No, it isn't compassion motivating the West in arming Ukraine – any more than, earlier, it was compassion motivating the West in sponsoring a Syrian opposition that quickly came to be dominated by [the very groups](#) the West labelled as terrorists elsewhere.

Battle for supremacy

The West's supposed humanitarian instincts can only really be understood by digging deeper. Much deeper.

Helping Ukrainians by arming them with tanks and jets, while depriving Syrians of bare essentials, aren't positions [quite as opposed](#) as they first appear. The inconsistency doesn't even qualify as a double standard, viewed from western capitals.

Both policies advance the same goal, and one that has nothing to do with the welfare of ordinary Ukrainians or Syrians. That goal is western supremacy. And more or less visible in the background in both cases is the very same official enemy the West wants to see [decisively “weakened”](#): Russia.

The Syrian government has been one of the last in the Middle East to stand by Russia, including by giving the Russian navy access to the Mediterranean via the Syrian [port at Tartus](#). That was one of the chief reasons why the West was so keen to see Assad's government smashed, and why Moscow propped up Damascus militarily against western-backed rebels, frustrating those efforts.

Ukraine, meanwhile, was gradually being transformed into an unofficial [forward base for Nato](#) on Russia's doorstep – a reason why Russia wished to see Kyiv cowed and why the US is so keen to prop it up militarily.

Punishing Syria isn't an ethical foreign policy. It is rationalised by viewing the world and its peoples through one lens only: how they can serve the naked interests of western and, primarily, US power.

As ever, the West is playing its colonial Great Game – power intrigues to line up its geostrategic chess pieces in the most advantageous arrangement possible. And those interests include global military dominance and control over key financial resources like oil.

Supreme crime

As Syria struggles to deal with the earthquake, the first instinct of the US and its allies was not how to relieve the suffering of its people. It was to play a game of switch and bait. Damascus was blamed for failing to allow aid to reach some of the northern regions hardest hit by the earthquake. These include areas still in rebel hands.

Mark Lowcock, the former head of UN humanitarian affairs, [complained](#): “It is going to require Turkish acquiescence to get aid into those areas. It is unlikely the Syrian government will do much to help.”

The [first shipments arrived](#) through a crossing from Turkey last Thursday. The Syrian

government [also approved](#) the delivery of humanitarian aid to areas not under its control in the earthquake-hit northwest of the country. In response, a spokesman for the HTS militant group, which controls much of Idlib, told Reuters it wouldn't allow aid in from government-held parts of Syria because "we won't allow the regime to take advantage of the situation to show they are helping".

But whatever the western narrative, the blame game over getting aid to northern Syria isn't simply the result of bloody-mindedness from Damascus.

Today, the Assad government may have secured a majority of Syrian territory, but it is far from in control of the Syrian nation. The US has helped carve out a large, autonomous north-east corner for the Kurdish population, and other chunks of the north are in the hands of an alliance of extremist groups, dominated by al-Qaeda off-shoots, as well as the remnants of the [Islamic State \(IS\) group](#) and Turkish-backed fighters.

This fragmentation is proving a massive obstacle to the relief effort. By their nature, governments wish to assert sovereignty over their entire territory.

But the Assad government has additional cause for concern. There are severe dangers for it in letting the local al-Qaeda franchise and other rebel groups take any credit for dealing with the emergency. This isn't just a public relations battle. If al-Qaeda is seen to bring succour to desperate communities in northern Syria, they stand to win hearts and minds among ordinary Syrians – and Arabs further afield.

Allowing al-Qaeda to be in charge of the relief operations is a recipe for Damascus to lose authority with large sections of the local population. That could serve as a prelude to reviving Syria's civil war and plunge Syrians back into fighting and bloodshed.

'Evil of the whole'

The point is not that no blame can be attached to Assad and his government. It is that, whatever western orthodoxy proclaims, meddling by outside powers to topple governments is never likely to lead to humanitarian outcomes. That is true even if a regime-overthrow operation can be achieved quickly – in contrast to the protracted impasse in Syria.

It was largely for that reason that the Nuremberg trials of Nazi leaders after the Second World War declared aggression against another nation's sovereign territory as the "[supreme international crime](#)" and one that "contains within itself the accumulated evil of the whole".

Attacks on sovereign states lead to a loss of the glue that binds a populace together, however imperfectly, and produces its own, usually unpredictable, consequences.

The West's 20-year occupation of [Afghanistan](#) created a crony state, where corrupt local officials siphoned off US funds meant for state-building and served as puppets for regional warlords. The violent chaos unleashed by Washington paved the way for the Taliban's return.

The US and UK's 2003 invasion of [Iraq](#), and then the disbanding of the Iraqi police and army, did not realise any of Washington's promises of "freedom and democracy". Instead, it created a vacuum of authority that tore the country apart and led to Iran and extremist groups vying for power.

The West's 2011 toppling of Muammar Gaddafi's government resulted in [Libya](#) becoming a country of [slave markets](#), as well as a sanctuary for extremists and a conduit for arms trafficking to other conflict zones, such as Syria.

Now we see in Syria the legacy once again of the West's humanitarianism. Debilitated by years of a proxy war and a western sanctions regime, Damascus is far too fragile and fearful to risk ceding any of its residual powers to opponents.

Those who will suffer once again – this time from the earthquake – are not governments in Washington, Europe's capitals or Damascus. It will be ordinary Syrians – the very people the West claims it wants to save.

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