

SYRIA IN THE TIME OF CORONA AND CAESAR

Archbishop Joseph Tobji of Aleppo condemns new US sanctions against Syrian people

Archbishop Tobji refers to 'targeted' sanctions of the Caesar Act as *"a lie that not even a child would believe."* He says it is clear that the goal is *"to increase the suffering of population to fuel popular discontent and thus produce regime change. But this way of acting is criminal. Putting an entire people in distress at a time like this, where there is also the spectre of the pandemic around the world is inhuman."* The fact that the US is willing to go to any lengths to pursue its goals, *"even to sacrificing millions of people, poor people and families, is a diabolical act."*

Vatican News, 17 June 2020

The few remaining battlefronts have been on pause for three months while Syria has waited for the eruption of the Coronavirus 'tsunami' predicted by the WHO and Western NGO Cassandras. One front however has been ablaze: that of the West's economic war on Syria.

Already weakened by the devastation of war, and now hit by a triple whammy of ramped up sanctions, lockdown and knock on effects from the economic crisis in next door Lebanon, the Syrian economy has indeed been reeling. The Syrian pound has slumped dramatically and basic commodities have become prohibitively expensive or unobtainable (especially medicines). According to the UN World Food Programme the cost of a basic basket of goods such as flour and oil has risen 111% in a year. 80% of Syrians are now reckoned to be living in poverty and by some (barely credible) Western media accounts 40% are unemployed.

Matters are not helped by continued US plundering of Syria's oil from the largely US-controlled North East wherein lie Syria's modest oil reserves. Reports (not denied) indicate that US forces have also firebombed local farmers who have had the temerity to sell their grain to Damascus, while their Kurdish puppets in the so-called Syrian Democratic Forces militia intimidate farmers face to face.

The US knee on Syria's neck has been felt above all in the shape of the new 'Caesar' raft of sanctions which entered into force on 17 June. 'Caesar', if he is a genuine person at all, was a defector who provided pictures of what he and his intelligence agency handlers claimed to be the bodies of thousands killed by torture, but which in fact were war dead. Based upon these spurious claims Syrian exiles and their allies in the US urged upon a hardly unwilling administration the imposition of a new layer of sanctions on top of the existing plethora. The sanctions' main immediate targets are third parties who might be thinking of participating in Syrian reconstruction, a very small element of the Syrian economy, but so imprecise is the legislation and so strident the Western media hype surrounding the sanctions' introduction that they have provoked panic among Syria's business class and ordinary citizens and a run on the Syrian pound.

In reality the sanctions should be no more fearsome than 'Corona', that other poorly understood panic which has been worsening an already bad situation. By mid-June Syria had suffered a mere 6 deaths attributable to the virus. (Neighbouring Jordan has had only 9 deaths and Gaza 1 so there is no reason to disbelieve the Syrian number. Nor are these low levels all that surprising considering age profiles, low levels of obesity and in the cases of Syria and Gaza imposed isolation.)

Western media and humanitarian organisations giving every appearance of eagerly anticipating the 'tsunami' which would sweep away the 'regime' where Western subversion, jihadi armies and sanctions had failed may have to contain their impatience a while longer. What has already happened however is that, forced to follow international models designed for more developed countries destined to end up with thousands of dead, the Syrian authorities felt obliged to inflict through punishing restrictions more damage on an economy already on its knees. The impact has been felt particularly on food supply.

As in the West, conditions were ripe for street protest. In early June hundreds marched through the streets of Suweida in the mainly Druze southern province of that name. Contrary however to the fevered speculations of the BBC, Guardian, New York Times and other curators of the establishment narrative on Syria these limited protests do not appear to represent a new second wave of rebellion. They have not touched off infections elsewhere, and the authorities have not fallen into the trap of over-reacting. The President has shown tactical flexibility by firing the Prime Minister and the Minister of Supply.

The hype around Caesar may even be playing into the hands of the authorities by lending credibility to the authorities' own narrative that all Syria's economic woes are down to sanctions. Many Syrians are bitter against middle class exiles with comfortable perches in Washington, London and the Gulf who have spearheaded Caesar and the recent renewal of equally insidious EU sanctions. One such, Akram Bunni, wrote exultingly but with refreshing truthfulness in the Saudi-owned Asharq Al- Awsat:

"The sanctions imposed by the Caesar Act will indeed be reflected in more damage and harm to the Syrian people... It will also motivate the majority of Syrians who are hungry to rebel and push them to stand against this regime... Perhaps the news of the return of peaceful demonstrations demanding the overthrow of the regime in As-Suwayda and Daraa is only the tip of the iceberg."

This is more honest and credible than the volley of defensive puff pieces for the new sanctions in publications such as Foreign Policy ('Sanctions in Syria will help not harm civilians' by Dershowitz and Adesnik).

Such cynical oppositionists and their fork tongued Western backers have also taken comfort from the outbreak in social media of a spat between the authorities and the prominent businessman Rami Makhlouf, a cousin of the President. What is clear in a murky affair is that the government have been moved to act against Makhlouf's business empire. Why the opposition and gullible Western media should interpret this falling out as evidence of the 'regime' falling apart at the seams, rather than a sign welcomed by many Syrians of a possibly

belated crackdown on corruption, can only be explained by wishful thinking of the sort which has led to constant Western underestimation of Syria's resilience for almost ten years now.

The triggering of Caesar sanctions has led to a frenzy of speculation masquerading as analysis along the lines of 'Time for a reality check by Assad' (Arab News). It is time actually for a reality check by Syria's enemies. It's true that the economic situation is as bad if not worse than at any time during the conflict. However if there is one thing the Baathists did which proved far-sighted it was to create a nearly self-sufficient Syrian economy. Even if the US has a partial choke hold on the grain of the North East new sources of grain are coming on stream in the recently liberated rich agricultural areas of Hama, Aleppo and Idlib provinces. Agriculture generally is experiencing a peace dividend, helped by the recent reestablishment of government control over the M4 and M5 highways linking Aleppo to the rest of Syria. External support from Iran, Russia, and increasingly China is solid if not spectacular. 'Caesar' in practice adds little to previous rounds of exhaustive sanctions. Not having a reconstruction boom causing inevitable inflation and other distortions may be a blessing in disguise. COVID 19 –related restrictions are now being eased.

The new sanctions are backfiring in the Kurdish regions harbouring US forces. Kurds resent the opening they create for introduction of the Turkish lira into the neighbouring partly Kurdish areas of the North West. Kurds are proclaiming 'we are part of Syria' and stepping up their Russian-mediated negotiations with Damascus. US military convoys are stoned as they pass through Arab villages unhappy at effective US imposition of Kurdish rule on them.

Idlib

The military situation in Idlib may be frozen but it has not been totally dormant. Turkey has reinforced its positions there, so that it could, if it wanted to, finally curb the excesses of the main terrorist group, Hayat Tahrir Ash Sham, as the ceasefire agreement provides that it should. Those excesses have included cease-fire violations which were met for the first time in months recently by Russian air retaliation. More likely however Turkey is preparing for the next round of fighting with Syrian government forces. Many behind the scenes discussions have been taking place between Turkey and Russia, but to no visible effect.

During the lull the plethora of jihadi groups have kept themselves busy fighting each other, not over ideology but over the spoils of war and the right to extort from the local population. One such flare up occurred in Jisr Ash Shugur, occupied by a Turkic-speaking group from Central Asia, and the focus was the houses of Christians who had been ethnically cleansed. These are the 'Syrian rebels' whose right to rule the roost in Idlib the West is effectively defending.

Outlook

Looking forward only two predictions can be made with confidence.

Firstly the new sanctions will not work. Syria will not be starved into submission. A few protest marches are not going to succeed where nine years of jihadi terrorism have failed. Neither will the Syrian administration make the political concessions tantamount to suicide

demanding by the West as the price for lifting sanctions. That it could be seriously argued that sanctions could work in this way shows either staggering hubris or diabolical cynicism.

Secondly it will not make the slightest difference if Biden replaces Trump. Biden's advisers have made this clear, as if it was not already clear that Biden is a classic liberal supporter of American exceptionalism.

One other prediction can be made with reasonable confidence: the situation on the ground in Northern Syria is likely to remain frozen until at least the end of the year. The balance of power between Syria and Turkey is not likely to permit either side to advance.

After that the crystal ball is very murky. Much will depend on whether the Corona tsunami ever materialises and how soon Lebanon stabilises its economy, Lebanon being one of Syria's economic lungs.

Will the Turkification of the North increase? Probably. Turkish post offices now dot the area and Turkey is paying officials' salaries in Turkish lira. HTS is increasingly behaving like agents of Turkish occupation. This process itself is destabilising with considerable opposition from among the other jihadi groups who are all fighting each other. Some realignment of forces with some jihadis making their peace with Damascus and common cause against Turkey is quite possible.

In the largely US-controlled North East the US itself is cementing its military position, demonstrating an intention to be staying for a long time, notwithstanding occasional brushes with locals and Russian forces operating often in the same areas. All pretence that this is remotely anything to do with suppressing ISIS is now more or less abandoned and it is acknowledged that the purpose is simply to bleed Syria and put bargaining chips into Washington's hands. This can go on for some time but not indefinitely.

The vultures may be circling around Syria but in the long run they seem destined to be disappointed.

"It was impossible to save the great Republic. She was rotten to the heart. Lust of conquest had long ago done its work. Trampling on the helpless abroad had taught her, by a natural process, to endure with apathy the like at home."

Mark Twain