**UN, WHO work with Assad to starve eastern Syria of aid during pandemic**

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International organizations partnering with the Syrian regime are cutting off aid to the poorest and most vulnerable people in Syria during the global pandemic.

A recent report at Foreign Policy noted that the “United Nations informed its relief agencies several weeks ago that they were permitted to fund private charities operating in northeastern Syria only if they were registered in Damascus and authorized to work there by the Syrian government, which has proved unwilling, or unable, to meet the region’s health needs.”

This gives the Syrian regime a veto over aid to eastern Syria and a way to use it as a weapon. Turkey and Russia collaborated in the effort, as Turkey turns off water to 460,000 people in eastern Syria, and Russia supports the Syrian regime. The report indicates how dictatorships and regimes that abuse human rights come first at controlling UN and international aid, enabling them to use it only for charities linked to them and using it to empower loyalists and sideline others.

The World Health Organization has also stopped supporting eastern Syria, an area of millions of people who are recovering from ISIS atrocities, as the WHO also works through the Syrian regime rather than providing equal access to people on the ground in a Syria divided by conflict. It now turns out that people of eastern Syria are being increasingly isolated by great powers who want them to stop working with the US and either be controlled by Turkey or by the Russian-backed Assad regime.

The report notes that the UN Security Council, “acting under pressure from Russia, shut down a UN-sanctioned humanitarian aid hub on January 10 at the Yaroubia crossing on the Iraqi-Syrian border. That deprived the UN of an explicit legal mandate to serve in the region.” The crossing was used by the WHO and private groups, “delivering medical assistance into northeastern Syria.”

THE LARGER context is that Russia, Iran and Turkey want the US to leave eastern Syria. the people in eastern Syria are the victims because the local authorities were supported by America to fight ISIS. The local authorities are called the Syrian Democratic Forces and various civilian autonomous councils linked to them. The Syrian regime wants the SDF to be disbanded and become part of the Syrian regime’s forces.

Russia and Iran want the US to leave eastern Syria. Turkey, which works closely with Russia and Iran, also wants the US-backed SDF to leave; it invaded part of eastern Syria last year, sending extremist groups to attack civilians.

The pandemic has made matters worse. Desperate for medical support, the local authorities have complained that the WHO didn’t even inform them that a man who became sick in March in Qamishli had COVID-19. The organization reportedly informed the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), but it took another week to even tell the local authorities, because the UN only speaks to the Syrian regime in Damascus. Local authorities in Qamishli and Hasakah complained in a Voice of America report that the regime is concealing the number of coronavirus cases in eastern Syria and also allowing travel, despite attempts at lockdowns.

On May 7, Turkey and the extremists it backs in northern Syria cut off water to 460,000 people in eastern Syria. Turkey and the Syrian regime agree on trying to impose suffering on locals, isolate them and make sure they receive no aid.

THE WAY the UN works makes it so that no one who is not loyal to the Syrian regime receives aid in Syria. For instance, the UN’s World Food Programme conducted air drops to the Syrian-regime-run city off Deir Ezzor when it was under siege by ISIS between 2015 and 2017. The program conducted 309 airdrops at a cost of $37 million a year, according to its website. The assistance helped 200,000 people. But there were no UN-supported air drops for people in Raqqa, Qamishli, Kobane or Idlib, or in refugee camps or areas outside Syrian regime control.

The recent Foreign Policy report indicates that OCHA did ask the UN Office of Legal Affairs to look into the legality of providing relief to people who the Syrian regime didn’t want relief to go to. The experts “concluded that the UN could only fund agencies registered and approved by the Syrian government.” This means the government of Syria can decide who gets aid and can discriminate against those it doesn’t like, including for political, ethnic or religious reasons. That would appear to run contrary to all the lip service the UN and its various organizations pay to human rights and access to health care.

But the reality as it plays out in eastern Syria shows that even during a global pandemic, authoritarian regimes always come first, even if they can’t provide for their own people or don’t control most of their country. For similar reasons, people in Libya, Yemen and parts of Somalia receive no support during the pandemic.

THE SYRIAN regime has blocked aid going to eastern Syria unless local authorities will make sure it only goes to areas the regime wants. That has included blocking delivery of supplies by road from Damascus and making sure any aid flights to the regime-run airport in Qamishli are managed by the regime. The cut-off of aid is designed to isolate areas in eastern Syria and bring them to the bargaining table. The US had already walked away from some of these areas in October 2019, enabling a Turkish invasion and the rapid movement of Russia and Syrian regime forces to parts of northeast Syria.

US envoy James Jeffrey indicated in December 2018 that the SDF would need to work with Damascus and the regime, saying the US has no permanent relationship with non-state actors like the SDF. The US view of the SDF is temporary, tactical and transactional. The transaction today includes the SDF continuing to fight ISIS while the US secures oil fields near the Euphrates River to block Iran’s presence. The US calls this the Eastern Syria Stabilization Area.

As part of the transaction, US anti-ISIS envoy Jeffrey wants the SDF to continue to be subcontractors holding thousands of ISIS detainees. There was even some talk of having the UN support a coronavirus facility at Al-Hol camp where some families of ISIS detainees live, alongside other internally displaces Syrians. But that plan was also scuttled. Civilians who suffered under or even fought ISIS in eastern Syria will get no aid from the WHO or UN.

The US anti-ISIS coalition has tried to do what it can to help in eastern Syria. Under CENTCOM’s leadership, which is sympathetic to the people of eastern Syria and helping them in stabilization efforts after ISIS, some limited support has been delivered, including a multi-year electricity infrastructure effort. Had the area of Raqqa and other towns that once suffered under ISIS waited for the UN, they would still be in darkness.