

Syria in ruins – and what the media are not telling us

von Karin Leukefeld*



Karin Leukefeld
(Photo ma)

(Globalbridge/cm) In a highly topical report, Middle East correspondent Karin Leukefeld – who does not write from the comfort of an office in Germany, but lives in the Middle East – makes it clear how the media, once again, describe

the geopolitical situation in a one-sided way, suppressing important facts and blaming the wrong parties. Above all, the significant involvement of the US and the EU in the economic misery in Syria, with their sanctions, is simply not mentioned.

As during the war since 2011, Western and Western-oriented “quality media” are again telling the world what is happening in Syria. For years they kept silent about the consequences of foreign interventions, about secret arming and training programmes for the armed rebels of foreign secret services. They kept silent about the occupation of Syrian raw materials and Syrian territory by foreign troops, which is contrary to international law. They kept silent about the effects of the far-reaching, one-sided economic sanctions imposed by the European Union, which were intended to “bend” Syria and its government. They kept silent about the effects of the “Caesar Act”, which was unilaterally imposed by the USA and criminalised any investment or trade with Syria by the USA, punishing it with financial sanctions. The effects of these measures,

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the repeal of which was repeatedly demanded by the majority of states in the UN General Assembly and repeatedly rejected by the rich Western states – including Germany – were blamed on Syrian President *Bashar al-Assad*.

Now, the same media are telling the public that jihadist groups have conquered Damascus and overthrown the “Assad regime”. For 14 years, Bashar al-Assad “destroyed half of his country to stay in power,” according to a German daily newspaper. “In the end, it took the rebels only ten days to overthrow his hollowed-out regime,” the article begins, entitled “The Night the Dictator Fled.”

The Syrian President resigns

In fact, Damascus was not “conquered”, but the inhabitants of the Syrian capital allowed the combat units to enter. The army and police were instructed not to put up any resistance and to withdraw, and the city’s population had already remained at home since the previous day, waiting. After direct and indirect talks with Arab Gulf States (United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia), with Turkey, Jordan, Iraq, Iran and Russia, Syrian President Al Assad weighed up his chances. To avoid further bloodshed, he ordered the withdrawal of the armed forces, the army and the police, and thus acted very responsibly. Assad chose to go into exile, taking his family with him. He did not flee in secret, but was flown to Moscow, presumably from the Russian military base at Hmeimien (Latakia). There the Al Assad family was granted humanitarian asylum.

Presumably Assad had no alternative. He was under pressure from all sides, and he was unable to solve the economic problems caused primarily by the war and the EU/US sanctions. On the evening of 8 December, the situation for outside observers was that the president was leaving, the government was staying to prevent the destruction of ministries and institutions, and to clarify the political transition with the jihadists. Prime Minister *Mohammad Ghazi al-Jalali* ordered that the ministries should remain occupied and called for democratic elections. Jihadi leader *Abu Mohammad al-Jolani*, who had recently reverted to his original name *Ahmed Hussein al-Shar’a*, de-

clared that *Al-Jalali* should temporarily run the government until a new government had been formed. Various media outlets spoke of a temporary “government of national unity”.

Supporters of the jihadists

The advance was planned and there was an order from the president not to resist. The rapid advance was no wonder. The jihadists were reportedly well prepared, the fighters were well equipped, they had petrol for their vehicles and motorbikes and had also been supplied with large quantities of drones by Ukrainian fighters and trainers. The combat units were accompanied by journalists, photographers and videographers – including Western media. CNN broadcast an interview with the reformed Jolani, aka al-Sha’ra, who presented himself as a statesman. In this respect, the jihadists’ advance was also a media show, with the corresponding images and sounds being distributed almost in real time, i.e. live worldwide.

The fighting forces were supported by Turkey and Arab Gulf states, as well as by the US, UK and Israel. And not just now, but since the beginning of the Syrian war in 2011. The *Nusra* Front, now *Hay’at Tahrir al Sham* (HTS) – once an offshoot of *Al Qaeda* in Syria, which now presents itself as having been reformed – benefited, along with dozens of other armed groups, from the secret CIA programme “Timber Sycamore”. From 2012, the armed insurgents were not only armed, but instructors were also sent to train the fighters in the use of weapons and military tactics. The CIA programme, which was approved by then US President *Barack Obama*, was supported by the British foreign intelligence service MI6, MIT, the Turkish military intelligence service and the secret services of the Arab Gulf states. The latter were also primarily responsible for the financing.

Perspective

It is difficult to predict the future for Syria. Fighting between the factions is looming. In particular, there are clashes between the armed Kurdish forces in the north and northeast of Syria and the Turkish-backed and financed *Syrian National Army*, which brings together former Islamist anti-government fighters.

The actors are not Syrian political parties, which used to exist in the actual opposition. The Syrians are now dealing with heavily armed combat units that are unlikely to give up their

weapons anytime soon. Chaos could ensue as a result of fighting between the groups for power and influence. There could be religious violence against other religious and ethnic groups. An observer in Damascus points out that “the destruction of religious plurality in Syria” is particularly pleasing to Israel. It paves the way for an Islamic theocracy. Israel sees it as a kind of justification for its own religious Jewish state.

It remains to be seen how the various regional and major powers will position themselves in Syria. Currently, everyone is calling for calm and an orderly transition. But the interests at stake in Syria are very different and it is still unclear whether the cooperation between Iran and the Arab Gulf States – also in the BRICS alliance – that is being promoted by China and Russia will continue. Or whether the Arab Gulf States will give in to the pressure from the US, EU, NATO and Israel and build a new front against Iran, Russia, China and also against BRICS.

Behind the scenes of the armed takeover by jihadists in Syria, there must have been a lot of bargaining and haggling. In Syria, many are wondering why Russia and Iran – as well as Assad – have adopted a defensive position. Has Syria been sacrificed by Iran and Russia in order to prevent the US and Israel from starting another war? Will the US and EU ease their unilateral economic sanctions against Syria, Iran and Russia to benefit from the reconstruction?

Donald Trump

Much will depend on how the new US President *Donald Trump* determines his foreign policy goals and ambitions in the region. Judging from the experience of Trump’s first term, he will strengthen Israel. Israel is fighting a war on seven fronts – according to *Benjamin Netanyahu* – and the ultimate war goal is Iran. As can be seen from the war against the Palestinians and against Lebanon, Israel is supported by the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany and other European countries, as well as by NATO. Iran and its allies (Russia, China) are seeking a balance, which has not yet been achieved. With the destabilisation of Syria, regional balance and cooperation in Syria have receded into the distance. In the face of Israeli threats, Iran has made it clear that it will certainly not surrender without a fight.

In view of the jihadist advance in Syria, Donald Trump recently described the situation in Syria

as “chaos” and stated, “this is not our fight”. What exactly Trump meant by this is unclear. He could also have meant that while it is not the US’s fight, but that Israel has described Syria as one of seven fronts, it could also mean: “It’s Israel’s war, we are allies, so we have to support Israel”. A destabilised Syria would once again become a battleground for any new war.

The intentional destruction of Syria

While the population in Syria is waiting and only gradually learning what is happening, Western countries are already celebrating the “fall of the regime”, which they have been working towards since the illegal US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003. The British Prime Minister is celebrating “the end of the barbaric Assad regime”, and Berlin and Brussels are promising support. German Defence Minister *Boris Pistorius* even wants to travel to the region because he sees “new opportunities for us to contribute to a more stable Middle East.” He wants to “visit the German soldiers in Jordan and Iraq” in the next few days and “intensively exchange ideas and coordinate” with the Iraqi government.

Since early summer 2011, the German government and the European Union had contributed to the economic deprivation of the country with unilateral economic sanctions against Syria, preventing reconstruction. The US went even further with the “Caesar Act”, threatening individuals, companies and states with sanctions if they traded with or invested in Syria. For almost 10 years, US troops have occupied the Syrian oil wells in the northeast of the country and, in coordination with the troops of its allies Turkey, Jordan and Israel, control almost all of the country’s borders.

Bashar al-Assad, who succeeded his father *Hafez* as president after his death in 2000, has been under open pressure from the USA since the illegal Iraq war in 2003 at the latest: in 2002, then US Secretary of State *Colin Powell* demanded that the Syrian president open up his country and borders to US troops advancing into Iraq, as Jordan had done. In vain: Syria sided with beleaguered Iraq, which was ultimately invaded and occupied by the US – under the pretext of possessing weapons of mass destruction. The weapons were never found because they did not

exist. Iraq was destroyed, millions fled, thousands were killed in a fuelled interreligious war.

The pressure on Damascus continued. Syria was told to cut its alliance with Iran, according to the demands from Washington. Damascus was to leave the Golan Heights to Israel and had to stop supporting the Palestinians. In return, Syria was promised flourishing landscapes, and the population was to be content and happy in the peace of the US-American hegemon – and its regional guard Israel.

Syria stuck to its sovereign policy, opened internally and externally and prospered. The Syrians supported the young president, who had made their lives much easier. It was precisely at this time that the war began in 2011. Jihadi fighters from more than 150 countries moved to Syria to wage a “holy war against the Assad regime”. Turkey and Jordan facilitated their passage, while the US and Arab Gulf states supplied the weapons. Syria was devastated and divided. The resource-rich areas – cotton, water, olives and oil wells – were occupied and deprived of the land.

In November 2019, *Dana Stroul* of the Center for Strategic & International Studies (CSIS), a pro-Israeli US think tank, described the US strategy at the event “Syria in the Grey Area”:

Assad is being politically and diplomatically isolated, and the “architecture of economic sanctions” is important, which is directed against both Iran and Syria. Reconstruction aid could reach the areas controlled by the (Kurdish-led, *kl*) *Syrian Democratic Forces* (SDF) in northern and eastern Syria and Syrians outside Syria but should not be granted to the “Assad regime”. All these measures have led to “the rest of Syria lying in ruins,” said Dana Stroul. “What the Russians want and what Assad wants is economic reconstruction,” which the US can prevent through international financial institutions and cooperation with the Europeans. “As long as the Assad regime does not change its behaviour, we should maintain this line and prevent any reconstruction aid and prevent technical know-how from returning to Syria.”

Syria was deliberately destroyed because it refused to submit to US geopolitical interests.

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