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May 2020

Roots of Fuel Crisis in Syria:
Corruption, Displacement
and Regime's Fictitious
Reconstruction

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by Abdul Razzaq al-Hawassali

The ongoing fuel crisis is not the first in the Assad regime's era. In 2008, the country had experienced an equally severe situation despite abundance of oil at the time. The government triggered the shortage by removing subsidies on gasoline and diesel fuel. As a result, the fuel price increased three-fold in a very short time, additionally driven up by the rampant corruption in the distribution process.

Ultimately, the removal of fuel subsidies and the resulting fuel crisis had led to the weakening of the middle class and the desperation of the poor. A large percentage of crops were destroyed, as owners could not afford the cost of harvesting and irrigation, leading to a massive internal migration from the eastern regions.

In 2009, the regime reversed its decision of abolishing subsidies. It did so not because of adverse effects on the Syrian economy, but due to the negative impact on the black market, which thrived on the billions pumped into it by the beneficiaries of the corrupt regime. Their business got affected as the price of fuel increased to equal those in the neighboring countries, effectively stopping the cross-border smuggling.

As the prices came down, the smuggling resumed. Millions of liters of petrol and diesel were smuggled every day through channels controlled by [Aal Shalish \(one of the leaders of Assad's personal guards\), Mohamed Iyad Ghazal \(the former governor of Homs\), and Ahmed Abdel Nabi \(the officer who announced the military coup of 'the father' Hafez al Assad\).](#)

The war in Syria did not stop the smuggling. The only change was the increase in quantities after Hezbollah took control of the Syrian-Lebanese border in 2014.

As Syrians were expelled from their towns and villages along the Lebanese border, Hezbollah effectively erased the demarcation line between the two

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states. The smuggling rights became exclusive to Hezbollah's troops headed by [Abu Hadi](#) (a Shiite Syrian from the villages of al-Qusayr). Abu Hadi's group took a large share of the Syrian oil, including the oil coming from the Daesh-controlled areas, and directed it to Lebanon in quantities at least double the amounts previously transferred.

What used to be a clandestine, black market-driven smuggling usually done in small quantities, secretly and by night, under Hezbollah became a massive operation conducted in broad daylight and unsupervised by any entity including the Syrian government. A large portion of fuel usually destined for Syrians was now sold across the border.

On the other side, the delivery of oil purchased from the eastern regions and Iraq is in the hands of Hossam Qaterji, an agent of the regime and a member of the People's Assembly who is under [US and EU sanctions](#) due to his conduct. The quantities available from this source are affected by the corruption corroding the transport and distribution systems.

What gets through these channels is first distributed by local leaders and Shabbiha groups that take the largest share of fuel for themselves at the expense of the population, including families of fallen soldiers from Assad's forces. For example, in the Jarmana district of Damascus, the regime distributed butane gas three times over the past month at a rate of 200 cylinders at a time. The Shabbiha received 60 cylinders, the local dignitaries got 70, leaving less than 40 percent for the local population.

The Shabbiha are in control of almost everything; without their consent fuel convoys will not pass to the neighborhoods. Convoys intended to Tartous villages were repeatedly confiscated in the Mazraa' area, resulting in clashes with the State Security Forces trying to free the caravans and restore the cars and drivers.

And then there is another contributing factor to the current fuel crisis: the absence of a specialized workforce in Baniyas and Homs refineries, which caused a nosedive in the production capacity of these oil-producing facilities. Most of the technicians who kept these facilities running were either arrested or displaced. In Homs refinery alone, more than half of the total workforce of some 5000 workers have been detained or expelled. It is not only the fuel

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processing that has been affected in this way, most public companies and specialized private business have been crippled by the absence of skilled and young staff.

The local authorities - represented by city councils and governorates cannot do anything to improve the distribution process, as they are entirely preoccupied with matters other than the fuel crisis, including the fictitious reconstruction of various neighborhoods destroyed by the war.

This 'reconstruction' is entirely cosmetic in nature and designed to boost Assad's propaganda effort. For example, the governorate council in Homs financed a competition for the few remaining students of architecture at Al-Baath University to design low-cost rebuilding of facades and public squares in several neighborhoods. The facades of several main buildings were restored by installing murals of Bashar's father; Hafez al Assad, while the interiors of these devastated buildings were left untouched. This is the only form of 'reconstruction' possible under Assad's regime – it has no funds nor human resources for a proper restoration of infrastructure and residential areas destroyed in the war.

Even if foreign aid started flowing to the regime, this money would immediately disappear in the insatiable web of corruption that the regime relies on and the leftovers would be used in the same way – to restore public squares and Assad monuments, rather than the desperately needed infrastructure and social services.

The Syrians in Assad-held areas must realize that corruption and the absence of talented and qualified people exiled outside Syria are the main reasons for the current dire situation; not the sanctions against the regime.

Consequently, it is the voluntary return of the millions of the displaced Syrians, under the solution that would guarantee their safety and dignity, that would be signal the beginning of a solution for the disastrous situation they are living in.

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