

On-site investigations in Syria

by Karin Leukefeld, Damascus*



Karin Leukefeld
(Picture ma)

(cm.) In Syria, almost everything is different from one day to the next. A new order? It's more of a new situation. Everyone is doing what they can and as they please. Above all, however, many prices, especially for essential food-

stuffs, have risen dramatically. For large sections of the population, survival is not easy – while clever companies, including foreign ones, are already present with completely new offers. Karin Leukefeld sent us a brief report on the atmosphere from Damascus.

The border crossing at Masnaa, through which one enters Syria from Lebanon, is besieged. Cars are parked all over the place, crowds of people stream into the much too small customs building, where the departure is documented by a stamp. For holders of a foreign passport, the process is quick, and then it's a short walk across the border, past the vehicle checkpoints, until the driver from Damascus waves on the other side and quickly takes the luggage. The journey continues on foot through the lines of cars to the car that the driver has parked behind a truck.

"Mabruk Syria – Congratulations, Syria," beams the driver as he stows away the luggage. He quickly drives past the long lines of congested cars on both sides of the road. In the direc-

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Damascus, Christmas 2024. Bab Touma, old town, HTS-Security fighters of the Syrian Salvation Government's Idlib branch ensure security at the Bab Touma gate. (Photo Karin Leukefeld)

tion of Lebanon, lorries are parked bumper to bumper, waiting to be processed. In the direction of Syria, cars with Syrian and Lebanese number plates are parked. This is where contraband changes hands: boxes of coffee, milk powder, chocolate, plastic bottles filled with petrol, empty gas bottles are exchanged for full gas cylinders. A lot of money changes hands in a very short time, then weighed down, fully packed vehicles drive towards Syria and the Lebanese vehicles turn back to Lebanon. "Everything is available," the driver assures us, saying that life has suddenly improved with the departure of Assad and "his people", who fled in a hurry. "Everything is going to be better."

Shortages in Syria had become increasingly widespread since the coronavirus lockdown (2020/21) and the since US financial sanctions have come into force. The US Treasury's so-called "Caesar Act" threatened financial penalties for anyone who wanted to do business with Syria and invest in the country. This applied to individuals, companies and states. The occupation of Syrian oil fields in the east of the country by US and Kurdish troops drove up electricity, heating and transport costs, which in turn affected the price of every single tomato.

Constantly rising taxes, which were collected by the tax authorities with a heavy hand, led to the mass closure of businesses and drove up unemployment. Citizens received nothing in return for

the taxes they paid. The Assad government not only had to fill the pockets of profiteers but also had to repay debts to Russia and Iran for military support and oil deliveries. Syria was unable to control any of its borders with sovereignty, except for the borders with Jordan and Lebanon. While the Turkish and US-controlled parts of the country in the northeast and northwest flourished, the economy of sovereign Syria was stifled.

“We now have KitKat”

Now the country is being flooded with people and goods. Every day, tens of thousands of Syrians take the opportunity to return home without any border controls on the Syrian side: young men who have escaped military service, families who want to check on their homes, young people who are looking forward to seeing relatives and friends after many years.

The absence of a border and customs is a vendor's paradise for a completely uncontrolled market. The old authority has disappeared, and the new rulers have not yet established a new system of order and security. The starved Syrian market is like a sponge and absorbs everything that comes in through the unguarded borders. “We now have KitKat,” grins J., who has been accompanying the author in Syria for years. On a tour around Bab Touma in the old town of Damascus, he stops in front of numerous market stalls overflowing with sweets. “Everything on these stalls comes from Turkey,” he says, holding up biscuits and chocolate. “We have delicious biscuits, good chocolate and sweets here in Syria. But even if our products are cheaper, people now buy the stuff from Turkey. KitKat, Hurriya, freedom! Everyone can do as they please.”

Bread has become much more expensive. Previously, depending on their size, families received at least two rapta “chubus” a day, as the flatbread is called, which is considered a staple food in Syria. One rapta consists of seven flatbreads. At present, bakeries are only supplied with a certain amount of flour. When that is used up, the bakery is closed for the rest of the day. There are long queues from early in the morning to get bread, which now costs 4,000 Syrian pounds per rapta. Previously, a rapta cost 500 Syrian pounds.

High prices, uncertain supply

The new rulers have stopped the previous state subsidies for petrol, gas and heating oil.

Smuggled petrol from Lebanon is offered for sale in large quantities by vendors who presumably work for entrepreneurs. The lively, central Abassiyen Square in the eastern part of the city has become a trading centre for all types of energy sources. Gas is being transferred from a tanker into gas cylinders, which the Syrians need for cooking and heating. Next to it is a smaller tanker that is filling up with “Masud” – heating oil – which the Syrians need in winter for their stoves or to run generators. Next to it, a man is sitting with his son, offering dozens of plastic bottles of petrol, and finally there is a large vegetable stand.

The prices for many foods fluctuate from day to day, as does the exchange rate for one US dollar. Every currency should be accepted in Syria from now on, it is said. A friend reports from Aleppo that the population has been asked to exchange their Syrian pounds for US dollars or Turkish lira because the Syrian currency will soon no longer be accepted.

Shortly before Christmas, new security forces appear on the streets of Damascus. There are masked fighters from *Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham* (HTS), the “Alliance for the Liberation of Al-Sham” (Levant), who were sent by the “Syrian Salvation Government” in Idlib, a government set up by HTS. There are street police in light purple shirts and volunteers wearing yellow safety vests trying to maintain order. But nothing can regulate the dense traffic on the streets of Damascus better than the Syrians themselves. They manage it with honking and daring driving manoeuvres in zigzags between pedestrians, mopeds, delivery vans, taxis and stalls that are pushed back and forth. The visible everyday life of the people continues as usual, albeit in a confusing manner. But much and many are not seen.

On Qassioun

After the upheaval, there is a lack of clear organisation in the city of Damascus, which is home to millions. Authorities such as the Zablalani registration office, which had just been reopened and equipped with the latest computer systems, was destroyed, looted and set on fire. The electricity supply is still inadequate; in the outskirts of Damascus, households only receive electricity for one hour every five to six hours. Millions of employees and pensioners do not know whether they will receive their salary or pension at the

end of the month. It is also unclear how schools and universities will continue after the holidays.

Nevertheless, many are taking advantage of the routes that are no longer closed to them. One route takes people up Qassioun, the local mountain, which rises more than 1100 metres above the Syrian capital. Before the war (since 2011), the mountain was a popular excursion destination. Along a road that runs around the mountain below the summit, there were small cafés, restaurants and viewing platforms where people enjoyed the view of the city and the fresh air on summer evenings, holidays and weekends. During the month of Ramadan, many people would go up the mountain at night to have breakfast before the start of the daily fast. When the war began, the road was closed. Qassioun became a military exclusion zone, and the cafes and restaurants were abandoned. The Syrian army base at the back of the mountain was expanded, and radar and telecommunications towers were built. In the years after 2012, when armed groups fired on Damascus from the suburbs of the eastern Ghouta and wanted to enter the city from there, the army fired from Qassioun at their positions in Jobar, Harasta, Douma and Arbeen.

Now the way up Qassioun is open, and crowds of people are streaming up the road to the mountain in cars, on motorbikes or even on foot. At the top, chaos reigns. Vehicles are parked haphazardly, traders rent tables and chairs to visitors, and others have already started building the foundations for new buildings. Huts and platforms are built with cement, stones, wood, sheet metal and plastic to offer food and drinks or to build new cafés. There are no rules. First come, first built.

HTS security staff from the military police and the Ministry of the Interior are observing the events. The military police are wearing khaki-coloured uniforms, while the Ministry of the Interior forces are dressed in black. Not all of them are armed; they usually move around in groups of four and have their faces covered.



HTS Military police on Qassioun, the mountain near Damascus. (Photo Karin Leukefeld)

Suddenly there is movement among the people. Some of the security forces run to a large excavator that has started to dig up soil. Presumably someone wants to build a building on the site, but the HTS forces are stopping them. Some men, whose origin is unclear, come with picks and shovels and destroy the freshly built platforms and walls. Most people watch the events apathetically, some support the actions of the security forces. "That's right," says one man. "This wild building must be stopped immediately."

The return journey leads around the summit of Qassioun down to the city. The military base of the Syrian armed forces lies abandoned. The author glances at her phone to see if she has any messages. The Syrian provider MTN has disappeared, replaced by a new, unknown provider called *Cellcom*. The text message signal announces a new message. In it, the German contractual partner points out that they have arrived in a new country. "Welcome to Israel," the message reads. "To use data (e.g. internet or email), you need one of the following offers ..." An Israeli mobile phone provider is active in the middle of Syria, in the middle of Damascus. Hurriya, freedom, the masses rejoice. The freedom of the country, the sovereignty of Syria, has already been sold.

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