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Moving Westward: The Chinese Rebuilding of Syria

by Dr. Gideon Elazar

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: As the Syrian civil war enters its final stages, China appears determined to take on a central role in Syria's reconstruction. One factor motivating China's involvement is the presence of a large number of Uighur jihadists among the anti-government forces. Another is the "One Belt-One Road" initiative – a planned attempt to establish and control a modern day Silk Road connecting China, the Middle East, and Europe. The increasingly active role China is playing in Syria might mark a shift in the geostrategic reality of the region.

With the gradual collapse of ISIS and the impending conclusion of the Syrian civil war, it is becoming clear that China will play a major role in the reconstruction of Syria. Indeed, Chinese involvement in Syria has been on the rise over the past several months. This summer, China hosted the "First Trade Fair on Syrian Reconstruction Projects," during which officials pledged \$2 billion towards the rebuilding. In addition, the Chinese Ministry of Civil Affairs has already approved a number of initial aid projects. In September, China's intention to participate in reconstruction efforts was affirmed by the Chinese news agency Xinhua.

The Syrian ambassador to China, Imad Mustafa, explained that China's projected role in the reconstruction process is a direct result of Chinese aid to Assad's regime during the war:

"China, Russia, and Iran have provided substantial support to Syria during the military conflict. Therefore, it is these three countries that should play a major role in the reconstruction of Syria. If the work were to be carried out by other countries, even by those who participate in the damage to the Syrian infrastructure, it would be very unfair."

China's role in post-war Syria has also been addressed directly by Syrian president Bashar al-Assad. In an interview with a Chinese journalist in March of this year, Assad stated that China is involved in several industrial projects and may be active in the future "in every sector with no exception." In what might be a gesture of friendship towards China, the interview concluded with a discussion of Assad's son's study of the Chinese language. Assad said he strongly supports the study of Chinese and noted that Chinese-Syrian relations are developing rapidly.

Since the inception of the Syrian civil war, Beijing has played an essential role in providing an umbrella for the Assad government by blocking decisions at the UN Security Council intended to impose sanctions on Syria. While Beijing has refrained from direct military operations, it dispatched a small number of troops to Syria to provide medical and engineering training for the Syrian army. At the same time, China's special envoy to Syria, Xie Xiaoyan, has been traveling the region in an effort to negotiate a peace agreement between the parties and regional powers.

Chinese companies, meanwhile, are deeply invested in Syria. The China National Petroleum Corporation owns large stakes in two of Syria's largest oil companies, the Syrian Petroleum Company and Al Furat Petroleum. In addition, in 2015, Chinese telecommunications company Huawei signed an agreement to support Syrian efforts to set up broadband technology in Syria by 2020.

From the Syrian perspective, the central role reserved for China in the country's reconstruction can also be ascribed to the fact that Chinese support of Assad comes with no political strings attached. As the war winds down, the regime is drawing up plans for the post-war era – plans that that will significantly change Syria's demographic makeup. While the EU would find it difficult to support these initiatives, the same cannot be said of China.

One reason often cited to explain China's support for the Syrian regime is the presence in Syria of up to 5,000 Uighur Muslim jihadists from Xinjiang who are fighting alongside the Syrian opposition. (This may be a conservative estimate – according to a report aired by the Dubai-based Al Aan TV in March 2017, Uighurs in Syria may number over 10,000.) For the most part, Uighur fighters in Syria belong to the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP), an organization that has already struck Chinese targets outside China, such as the 2016 attack on the Chinese embassy in Kyrgyzstan. TIP in Syria is associated with Al Qaeda and is concentrated mostly around the city of Idlib, not far from the Turkish border. (Indeed, it would seem that many of the Uighurs who arrived in Syria did so with the assistance of the Turkish authorities). A significant percentage of the Uighurs in Syria arrived with their families, settling in abandoned Shiite and Christian villages on the Turkish-Syrian frontier.

Eliminating the threat of radical Islamic elements is a mutual Chinese-Syrian goal. Indeed, Beijing would prefer to eliminate the Uighur Islamists on Syrian ground rather than deal with them back in China.

From the Chinese perspective, investment in Syria must be viewed within the larger context of the One Belt-One Road initiative – the heavily promoted modern day version of the ancient Silk Road. It is likely that China is hoping to turn Syria into an important terminus of its economic web, perhaps centered around the Mediterranean ports of Latakia and Tartus.

It should be noted that Chinese promotion of the One Belt-One Road plan has been greeted with significant interest by several countries in the region. At the same time, China is making efforts to exert its influence on the region by expanding the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) as a counterweight to NATO. Significantly, Iran has expressed a clear interest in joining the SCO, a move that is supported by Chinese authorities.

A tightening of relations between Iran and China was visible in 2016, with the arrival of the first cargo train from Zhejiang to Tehran. While Iran's membership in the SCO has not yet materialized, it is reasonable to believe that other Arab countries in the region, including Iran's client state of Syria, will show similar interest in Chinese patronage. Thus, the approaching conclusion of the war in Syria in Assad's favor may have considerable implications for the geostrategic future of the region – a future in which China will be playing a considerably expanded role.

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