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Who Will Reconstruct Syria?

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The fighting in Syria, which began in 2011, between President Bashar Assad and the opposition forces, seems to have reached its final stages. It is almost certain that Assad will remain in power. He will be the one to lead Syria in the coming years, and he will have to deal with the reconstruction of the ravaged country. In the interests of the Syrian people as well as the West, including Israel, it is wise to support China in its efforts to lead the reconstruction.

The fighting in Syria that began in 2011 between President Bashar Assad and the opposition forces seems to have reached its final stages. It is almost certain that the Syrian president will remain in power. Assad will be the one to lead Syria in the coming years, and he will have to deal with the reconstruction of the shattered country.

From a national building point of view, Assad will need to create a new dynamic among all the groups that fought among each other and are now required to return to living together. Physically, Syria needs an extensive reconstruction of its destroyed infrastructure. The UN estimates that \$250 billion would be required to make Syria livable once again for its citizens. At present, the Western countries, as well as the Arab Gulf States, refuse to accept that Assad, who massacred his people, will remain in power. This means that the major countries will want to take part in the reconstruction are Iran, China, and Russia.

It is in the interests of the Syrian people and the West, including Israel, that China lead the reconstruction.

Diplomatic relations between China and Syria were established in 1956, but the first visit by a Syrian head of state was Assad's on June 24, 2004, demonstrating Syria's "Eastward Direction." After this visit and until 2010, China became one

of Syria's five largest arms suppliers. Apparently, the flow of weapons continued during the years of fighting, without much publicity.

Beijing's interests include maintaining stability in Syria's neighboring states and containing extremist elements within Syria. Also, the population and the secular Baath regime are a better match to China's communist ideology than other Middle Eastern regimes, and the anti-western ethos in Syria is compatible with Chinese philosophy.

The Uyghur Muslim minority in Xinjiang province in northwest China, and an unknown number of its descendants (estimates range from a few hundred to five thousand and sometimes more) have joined the anti-Assad jihadists. Beijing's interest that the Syrian regime will prevent the return to China of these trained and highly motivated fighters is another reason for Beijing to support Assad.

Of course, China's desire to win large-scale rehabilitation contracts in Syria is a key interest no matter who wins. If many projects are funded by Chinese loans or grants to the Syrian regime, Beijing will gain a strong footing in Syria. This is valuable for the Chinese president's main project, the Belt and Road Initiative. Furthermore, Beijing would gain an advantage over the US, whose intervention in Syria failed.

Of the three countries mentioned, China is the most balanced and was the least involved in the fighting. Russia and Iran, on the other hand, were deeply involved in fighting on behalf of the Assad regime, as well as for their own interests. If these countries lead the reconstruction of Syria, the Syrian opposition will continue to suffer from Assad's oppression, as he is supported by Moscow and Tehran.

Iran's interests in leading the reconstruction are the desire to gain a military foothold in Syria, first and foremost against Israel; to be closer to their Lebanese ally, thus strengthening the Shiite Crescent under its leadership; and to keep its ally, Assad, in power. Russia's interests include its desire to keep the naval facility in Tartus and forestall Western regional aspirations, which include the removal of Assad.

In contrast, China's interests are generally connected to economic development and maintaining stability. They are less personal. Therefore, if Beijing leads the reconstruction, all parties would be able to contribute to mutual economic growth. China's policy of non-intervention in the countries it does business with can be a stabilizing factor that could bring together Syria's factions. The Chinese also know how to conduct simultaneous relations with sworn enemies, which could be very helpful in this particular case.

Also, from Israel's perspective, it would be much better to see a Chinese aid program and Chinese companies rebuilding the Syrian Golan Heights rather than Iranian ones. Of course, China's economic capacity is superior to that of Russia or Iran, but since the other two have great influence over the Assad regime, they might tilt decisions in favor of a reconstruction program that would benefit them more than the Syrian people.

Chinese companies have already shown interest in the reconstruction. On January 24, 2017, the Syrian Minister of Transport discussed with a Chinese economic delegation ways to promote cooperation in the fields of air transport, ground transport, and railway construction.

It is hard to know what Assad and his allies really want, but their attitude towards China is quite positive. They will most likely be happy to adopt a reconstruction program that keeps them in power for years to come. The Chinese option seems able to provide this, whereas a plan led by Iran or Russia could lead to another round of fighting.

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