

The “Reconstruction” of Syria: A War By Other Means

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Brief Analysis

The current drive for the “reconstruction” of Syria—spearheaded by the Damascus regime and its backers in Russia and Iran—is not a legitimate effort of rebuilding and relief, despite recent consideration from regional and international actors. Rather, the proffered “reconstruction” efforts promise the continuation of the Syrian war by new means now available to the regime. The Russian and Iranian backed media campaigns’ characterization of re-imposed U.S. sanctions on Iran and Western skepticism vis-à-vis this project as impediments to progress in post-war Syria should not be believed. In fact, Washington’s position on sanctions and Assad’s “reconstruction” efforts, together with its European allies, constitutes the rational reaction to the new cynical maneuvers of the regime and its backers. No true reconstruction effort can be productive as long as the current despotic regime is in place.

The devastation suffered by Syria is immense and virtually unquantifiable. Even by the most conservative estimates, the war’s death toll is in the hundreds of thousands, with a similar number maimed and incapacitated. The destruction of infrastructure and all signs of civilized life, while clearly uneven, condemns large swaths of Syria to a long period of pre-modern existence. With more than half of the population displaced, and with warlordism and predatory practices prevailing, the social fabric of this once proud nation is deeply damaged.

Many external actors ought to be held responsible in the Syrian tragedy—either for their actions or a failure to act. However, the Damascus regime, oppressive and despotic long before the 2011 uprising, bears the primary responsibility. Yet backed by Russia and Iran, two stakeholders openly complicit in the actions of their shared protégé, the regime is in the process of declaring victory and demanding its reinstatement in the international community as the legitimate government of Syria. The call for international participation in the “reconstruction” of Syria is part of these efforts to normalize the regime. Even if the desire to rebuild were sincere, the regime’s crimes should preclude any such accommodation.

However, claims of “reconstruction” efforts are far from sincere. It is a multileveled opportunity for the regime to continue its efforts at subduing and annihilating its opponents, restore its rule of terror over the Syrian population, and reward its circle of cronies that have proven useful. Numbers floated by the regime put the “reconstruction” price tag at up to \$400 billion. Yet Russian estimates are nearly half the amount, at \$250 billion, while the regime’s own secondary stratum of businessmen, ready to benefit from the endeavor, privately indicates that \$100 billion may suffice. The wide range of numbers cited is both reflective of the variability of the “reconstruction’s” intended scope and of the intention to build in a hefty margin for graft and self-reward. What is evident is that neither

Damascus, Tehran, nor Moscow has the financial or entrepreneurial capacity to undertake the effort. Gulf entities' official and private signals that there is a willingness to engage in partnerships also seems to be viewed as a point of entry to lure European businesses and potentially dilute the current U.S. stance against the regime.

The argument being advanced by Moscow officially and through the network of Russian and Iranian controlled media is one of "realism": The regime has won, and it is time to recognize that the interests of all parties today is to rebuild what the war has destroyed.

The Regime's 'Victory'

The regime is indeed entitled to its "victory": it has regained control of much of the Syrian territory, and is set to launch an offensive that would complete its reconquista once the troubled and mismanaged last stronghold of opposition forces in Idlib province succumbs. One exception in the foreseeable future will be the northern border areas, the self-declared autonomous area in the northeast, now subject to Turkish military action with the abrupt US decision of withdrawal, as well as the areas in the northwest, loosely controlled by Turkish-backed militias. The abdication of the United States of its role in Syria may prod Turkey to further accommodation through Russia.

However, victory by the regime's standards allows for Syria's destruction as an acceptable price for the regime's own survival. While Damascus is apparently prevailing, its grip on its subject population remains precarious. Its imperative in the next phase is to strengthen its hand internally and re-establish its stature internationally.

For such purposes, the regime indeed seems engaged in a type of grandiose plans. These plans, however, are not benign forms of "reconstruction" but malevolent demographic re-engineering. The patterns of destruction and displacement map onto the interests of the regime in securing a contiguous, docile, and useful central territory under its control, even as it denies its enemies the ability to maintain a presence in the hinterland. Russia has enabled this approach, while Iran has participated in its implementation at a level that indicate full complicity.

The Case of Qalamun

An indicative case of "reconstruction" as displacement is that of the Qalamun area, the strategic corridor linking Damascus to loyal territory along the littoral. The calculus involved in the depopulation of this region is revealing of the extent both the regime and Iran were willing to venture in their demographic re-engineering of Syria. The Lebanese Hezbollah—as Iran's primary agent—was tasked with a leading role in the operation, where it overwhelmed successive Syrian localities—controlled mainly by disparate factions of the Free Syrian Army—and force their population to vacate for refuge.

Much of the devastated population sought refuge in Lebanon, creating a paradox: the official rationale adopted by Hezbollah, under a claim of autonomous decision-making, was that its interference in Syria was designed to protect Lebanon from terrorist action from the Syrian opposition. While the Damascus regime engaged in its own lethal terrorist campaign within Lebanon before being thwarted by Lebanese security forces, the mass relocation of Syrian refugees to Lebanon—with the intensified grievance of having some Lebanese responsible for their plight increasing potential conflict Lebanon—in flagrant contradiction of Hezbollah's stated purpose. Hezbollah and other Iranian proxies took on these risks in order to radicalize the opposition to the regime and, in turn, drain sympathies away from it. Risking the destabilization of Lebanon and sacrificing Hezbollah's regional reputation were an acceptable price in helping the Damascus regime realize its demographic and strategic reshuffle.

In the Qalamun, as elsewhere, it is possible for the population that fled to return. Yet this option is partial and conditional, requiring the acceptance of a new and different reality in their old locales demographically, economically, and legally. Returning populations continue to be dispossessed through the open confiscation of the property of "traitors"—insurgents, suspected opposition loyalists, and their families. Returnees also contend with

“re-organization” of real-estate tenure in anticipation of “reconstruction” shaped by formalities and deadlines impossible for absent owners to meet and the obliteration of ownership records and the destruction of land registries, replaced by competing claims and falsified records. The regime’s promise of redress for these grievances amounts to little more than a trap designed to bring dissidents into the hands of the regime for recruitment, punishment, or both.

The decades long record of the regime, as well as its conduct of warfare during the past few years delineate clearly its modus operandi for “reconstruction”: it is the reinforcement of the regime’s own infrastructure of oppression, as well as a system of reward and punishment for the subject population as a function of its loyalty and subservience. In its futurist appeal, the “reconstruction” discourse may provide some of the embattled Syrian population still outside regime control with the incentive to yield.

The focus on “reconstruction” is viewed by regime backers as consistent with the shift in discourse away from combating terrorism, in line with Western interests, and is now intended to serve as a lure for investment capital on the path to normalization. In all instances, there is virtually no concern in these propositions to address the grievances of a population that has paid a devastating price for expressing them. Instead, “reconstruction” seems conceived as means to continue Syria’s return to its oppressive past. The cynicism of Moscow, Tehran, and Damascus in exploiting the continued plight of the Syrian people needs to be exposed. ❖

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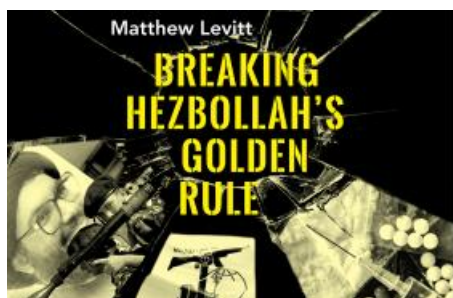
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