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# A difficult reconstruction

## Perspectives of European Initiatives in Syria

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**Even though the war in Syria is by no means over, concessions and orders for the incipient reconstruction of the country are already being distributed among the partners of Bashar al-Assad in many places. As Damascus and its allies will hardly be able or willing to reconstruct the state on their own, however, it is above all the wealthy European states that face the question of whether to increase their commitment in the country on the Euphrates. Europe needs a stable Middle East and should therefore participate in the reconstruction of Syria. Even if this means working with Assad.**

### The situation in the country

The war in Syria has been raging since 2011 and has already claimed half a million lives. More than a million people have been wounded and an estimated 12 million people, half of the pre-war population, have been displaced. Measured against what the civilian population has suffered, the comparisons that are often drawn to the Thirty Years' War are not entirely unjustified. Even though most media only pay comparatively little attention to this war – every now and then, there are reports about a Trump tweet on Syria –, it is far from over. The north and east of the country remain firmly in the hands of opposition forces. Only last September, the situation between Russia and Turkey concerning the last remaining rebel stronghold of Idlib threatened to escalate. Together with the Syrian and Iranian units, the Russian forces intended to help in liberating the province and its almost three million inhabitants from the opposition Islamists who currently have control of it. While an offensive could be averted by a provisional deal between Ankara and Moscow, a lasting solution has not yet been found. President Erdogan of Turkey nevertheless recently announced that offensive operations on Syrian territory were imminent.

The areas in the northeast, that are mainly populated by Kurds, and almost the entire country east of the Euphrates are under the control of Kurdish and opposition Arab units, most of which are supported by the US. Now, with the US preparing to withdraw its forces and the Kurds facing a Turkish intervention, they are turning to Assad. The fact that he is not loath to seek a compromise with the Kurds is evident not least from the handover of the city of Manbij, which was previously occupied by Kurdish forces, to Syrian government troops. Whether such a compromise will really be achieved and what it might look like remains to be seen. The Islamic State is largely defeated, but is mounting fierce resistance in a few enclaves along the Euphrates, for example, in as-Suwayda and Hajin. The threat potential of the Islamic State nevertheless remains high due to its going underground, as evidenced by the renewed increase in attacks in neighbouring Iraq.

It is not possible to precisely foresee exactly when peace will come and of what kind of peace it will be. There is no prospect at present either of an end to the military conflicts or of the achievement of reconciliation between the different factions. What is clear, though, is that the Syrian government troops and their allies will play a decisive role in determining the post-war order due to their strong position in most parts of the country. Yet this victory will come at a high price. Irrespective of what millions of people have suffered, it is alone the damage to the infrastructure and the destruction of cities, villages and state structures that have thrown the country back decades. In August 2018, a UN commission estimated that the war had caused damage in the order of USD 388 billion. This contrasts with a pre-war gross domestic product of almost USD 60 billion. The losses in human life and know-how are not factored into this figure. Simply clearing the debris from the streets of Aleppo, up to 70 percent of which have been destroyed, is reckoned to take up to six years.<sup>1</sup>

It is clear from this that Damascus will not be able to manage the reconstruction of the country on its own. This is also evident from the poor way in which construction and repair work has started in Homs and Aleppo, where mainly symbolic and military construction projects are being taken forward. The public sector is suffering from underfunding, and salaries are still being paid too late, only in part or not at all. How can such a project of the century be conducted without planning agencies, regulated award procedures and functioning supervision? Added to that is a shortage of basic humanitarian and logistic resources that is even being exacerbated by the sanctions against the regime.

### **Reconstruction is already being organised**

The annual Damascus International Fair is meant to be of help. It is an event at which contacts are meant to be made, construction projects planned and capital procured. While the fair was largely avoided by investors in recent years, the largest delegations of business representatives, especially from Russia and Iran, swarmed in in September 2018. The Chinese and Indians do not want to be excluded from the economic redistribution of the country either and are constantly holding out the prospect of more and more new projects and investment plans. While China is mainly banking on new infrastructure projects between Lebanon and inland Syria as part of its *Belt and Road Initiative*, India is focusing on the Syrian industrial sector. For example, Indian funds are being used to build a new USD 240 million thermal power plant south of Damascus and the Indian company *Apollo International* is building a new recycling plant near Hama with a Syrian partner. In addition, the Asian players are not only interested in oil concessions, but also particularly in mining rights for the exploitation of phosphate reserves in the interior of the country.

While Moscow, Damascus' most important military partner, is hoping for the offshore areas off the Syrian coast, the interior of the country, in particular the large settlement centres, is dominated by new projects being implemented by the other military partner – Iran. The sanctions imposed on both Syria and Iran cannot prevent Iran from participating massively in the reconstruction process. Since the end of 2017, the restoration of the energy sector in particular has been promoted, especially by Iranian consortia that have been awarded contracts for the reconstruction of five major Syrian cities. Alongside the energy sector, the mobile communications network, which is intended to be completely modernised by the Iranian company *MCI Hamrahe Avval*, is planned to become the second large Iranian pillar in the country. Like most of the Iranian companies engaged in Syria, MCI is a so-called *Bonyad*, a large company that is mainly the property of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards (*Pasdaran*). Iran also maintains numerous military bases which are continuously being expanded, for example, in the province of Daraa, near the border with Israel. Tehran intends to use them not only to expand its economic corridor to Lebanon, but also to strengthen its threat potential vis-à-vis Israel, creating new political leverage for Iran to negotiate with its regional and international opponents.

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<sup>1</sup> Wagner, Patrick (2017): Wiederaufbau Syrien, Die Einsätze, in: *Zenith* (4), pp. 54–59.

## **Europe has an interest in showing a commitment**

Both the IS-inspired terrorist attacks and the migration movements of recent years have shown that the EU has a vital interest not only in rebuilding Syria, but also in establishing a stable post-war order. The Syrian regime is currently still profiting from the war. As long as fighting goes on in Syria, it can present itself as a lesser evil for Western states against the background of the fight against the Islamic State and Al-Qaeda-affiliated Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham in Idlib. As soon as peace reigns, however, Assad will have to deliver. The emerging middle class in particular will not put up with power failures and defective infrastructure forever. The trouble is that the regime has no money for the necessary large-scale projects.

The young men who have lost relatives in the war will be the first to radicalise or to go abroad if they do not find a place in post-war Syria. The members of the opposition who have no prospect of being reintegrated into society will continue to fight to the end underground. Some people are already under general suspicion because they merely come from known opposition areas. The deeds of ownership and residence permits of Syrians living abroad are expiring because they cannot be renewed. Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey will only be able to integrate the millions of refugees into their societies at the expense of new social tensions, if indeed at all. Furthermore, a whole generation of Syrian children has not attended school sufficiently or at all in the last seven years. Assad lacks both the means and the will to face all these problems and to offer people a perspective. If things continue as they are, there will be no lasting peace. European participation in reconstruction is therefore not only desirable, but also necessary for reasons of pragmatism. None of the problems that led to the war has been solved. The everyday lives of many Syrians are characterised by shortage, oppression and denunciation. Without pressure from the international community, nothing will change.

## **Problems and starting points for a commitment from Europe**

This is still wishful thinking and real moral and practical hurdles stand in the way of reconstruction. Firstly, it is difficult to communicate why, after years of political, economic and military fighting, the opposite should suddenly be done and an unscrupulous regent should be showered with gifts worth billions. Even if this moral dilemma can be overcome, purely practical sanctions would still stand in the way of the provision of European or even international financial aid. It would be careless to lift these sanctions without concessions from Assad, yet the international community has been waiting for such concessions for no less than seven years. It is also unlikely that the US government will resign from its hard position. Washington is too focused on confrontation and too unwilling to accommodate Assad, Russia or even Iran in any way. Europe, however, should go ahead on its own if necessary, because Europe is suffering considerably more from the spill-over effects of this war than the US. It could only do so to a limited extent, however, because unilateral US sanctions also affect companies that do business in the US or use the dollar for global payment transactions.

Ultimately, a successful European initiative for the reconstruction of Syria will also depend on concessions being made to Tehran and Moscow, as they are exerting the key influence on Syrian government circles. Neither power will be willing to give up the hard-won field by having Western actors extend competition to the economic sphere. Tehran in particular will resolutely oppose many of Europe's ambitions as long as Iran itself is affected by severe sanctions. Moscow, however, would be more open to such a development. President Putin of Russia has already called for a commitment from Europe to the reconstruction of Syria at several meetings because Russia itself is unable to provide the key means and is hardly willing to tie up forces in the country.

Yet it is known that Russia would be no easy partner if new international funds were indeed made available for Syria, since not only the question of ensuring the safety and sustainability of the relief funds would have to be answered together with Moscow, but also the mediation between the individual security interests would have to be organised with a very country that Europe is often rightly critical of. The actual implementation of the announced withdrawal of US troops would make it easier for an understanding to be achieved between

the opponents and supporters of the Assad regime since it was after all the US that insisted on a future without Assad. The emerging rehabilitation of Assad in the Arab League also offers a number of chances. The establishment of an investment council supported by the UN could be a viable option. It could manage the relief funds collected and organise a fair award procedure. However, the success of this, too, depends on whether the international community can come to terms with Assad remaining in power – at least for a transition period.

## **Conclusion**

The question of aid for the reconstruction of Syria is in particular a question of what is the greater evil for the European actors. On the one hand, there is the moral requirement to end suffering and instability in a country that is as far away from Berlin as the tourist centres in southern Spain. On the other hand, there are reservations about working with actors who are suspected of having made multiple use of chemical weapons against civilians. In the end, however, pragmatic arguments will have to prevail, because the formation of new blocs in the region will not allow the current situation to be maintained any longer and also Germany's and Europe's interests will inevitably lead to the gradual establishment of peace in Syria. The fact that this cannot be achieved without mutual concessions from Paris, Berlin and Moscow is beyond question. New diplomatic initiatives are therefore needed to ease the pressure between the parties, even if this means making unpleasant concessions.

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