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Syria - An Open Wound



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Syria has long fallen off the front pages, displaced by other issues and conflicts, most recently Afghanistan. Several regional and geo-political strands still run through its weakened situation, though, posing unresolved policy questions for the West. This piece sets out current realities and the uncertainties that persist.

There is little reporting on Syria these days, as newer and hotter crises absorb government and media attention. Like Yemen, it remains a conflict almost unremembered, absent from the immediate agenda. It has tended to feature in the Western media as a function of the United States' relationship with Turkey, through the at times uncertain US support for the Kurdish-led SPD controlling north-eastern Syria. Turkey for its part has occupied a strip of Syrian territory along the central part of the common border, in order to give itself a buffer zone. In the north-west sector the Islamist-controlled opposition-held enclave around Idlib continues to defy the Damascus government.

In all these areas some kind of economic life and provision of services has revived or continued, benefitting from links to the Turkish economy. People are coping, even though conditions are difficult and poverty widespread. The Idlib pocket holds 6 million, twice its normal population, the additions being Syrians displaced by the fighting in other parts of the country, above all Damascus. The stand-off with the government forces is policed by Turkey and Russia, Turkey is adamant that it will not allow a government assault which would propel another massive wave of refugees northwards. In this it is strongly backed by the European countries. Russia carries out airstrikes on selected targets, presumably Islamist groups. The government meanwhile uses its air force to bomb more widely, and to support its sporadic attempts to capture territory.

For all this, life in opposition-held Syria is better than for many in the government-controlled areas, where economic collapse has bitten hard. An acute shortage of dollars constrains the government's ability to fund itself and its war, and hampers both reconstruction and the ability to import crucial components and supplies. Raising dollars has become a top priority. The massive production of Captagon, a synthetic narcotic drug smuggled into Saudi Arabia and elsewhere, has been a major element, providing hard currency and enriching the regime's insiders in the process. Pressure on bankrupt Lebanon to keep subsidising fuel and medicines, which are then smuggled into Syria and resold at high prices, is another part of the solution. The sale of confiscated land to outside buyers

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also helps: all those Syrians (at rough count, eight million) who have fled their homes, and who feel unsafe to come back to prove their title, lose it. A massive development around Damascus, in the form of a doughnut, has transferred expropriated properties in the potentially valuable (now ruined) suburban areas to favoured buyers. A similar story is told in prized coastal areas such as Latakia.

Unrest in and around the southern provincial town, Dera'a, where the uprising began in 2011, continues in the face of sporadic government attempts to impose itself by force. Here the Russians also play a crucial role in maintaining a stand-off, effectively protecting local autonomy as a less bad option than renewed civil war. Russia's delicate calculations include taking account of Israel's strong concerns that Iranian forces, after all these years deeply embedded in the Syrian Army, should not be able to deploy missile sites south of Damascus that would threaten Israel. (Israel already faces the major threat from Hizbullah's missile presence in Lebanon, which serves as Tehran's deterrent against an Israeli attack on Iran.) Israel has been periodically attacking Hizbullah and Iranian military targets in Syria.

As if to remind us of the nightmarish chapter that began in 2014 with the explosion onto the scene of Daesh (ISIS) in both Syria and Iraq, it has regrouped in eastern Syria in remote areas, well-funded and increasingly capable. It falls largely to the Kurdish-led SDP with US, British and French support to deal with the threat. The Syrian armed forces, much weakened and partly reliant on Shi'a mercenaries brought in by Iran (for example Hazara from Afghanistan), can do little, and are the favoured target of the terrorists.

The regime in Damascus has shown its tenacity: having not hesitated to destroy its own country and drive half its population out of their homes, many into exile, it remains fixated on its own long-term survival. The President, Bashar Al Asad, has been ruthless with his own clan as he concentrates wealth and power in his own hands, recently dispossessing even his Makhlouf cousins of the large economic spoils he had allowed them over the past twenty years. Patronage is entirely in his hands and those of his wife, Asma. He can count on the loyal support of the grim security officials who, like him, would face international trial for war crimes if the regime fell.

The diplomatic opportunities facing the regime are considerable, given the low starting point. Israel has always maintained secret and pragmatic contacts, allowing the peaceful management of the common frontier on the Golan to continue over decades. This pragmatism also led to carving up Lebanon between the two countries, with US blessing, during its war of 1975-91. The Israeli occupation of the Golan in 1967 continues to be an issue of crucial importance to Syria and its defence of its Arab Nationalist credentials. The Trump Administration's recognition of Israel's claim to sovereignty is rejected by all other countries, as violating the UN Charter principle of the inadmissibility of acquisition of territory by force. Yet Syria's desperate economic plight might make it responsive to Israeli blandishments, to which the US would be sympathetic.

With that speculative possibility left aside the Damascus regime's relations with Western countries remain in the freezer when it comes to reconstruction, or financial aid of any kind. Western public opinion would simply not allow any softening of sanctions against what is rightly regarded as a regime of war crimes and crimes against humanity. The West is no longer the only source of funds, however, and there is no doubt that private capital from the Gulf has helped drive the redevelopment of prime property. Russian companies have been rewarded with industrial concessions including oil exploration offshore. Though little information emerges, it seems likely that Iran too has been granted

benefits for the large sums it has spent propping the regime up militarily: the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) is as good at big business as it is at fighting wars.

Like the elephant in the room, the regime's dependence on Iranian military and financial support is the huge but unmentioned reality facing Al Asad. He must absolutely hate it. Arab Nationalist, Alawite, clannish and obsessively monopolistic of power, being beholden to the IRGC is the very opposite of his view of how things should be. His craving for re-acceptance into the Arab League (which is beginning to happen) is important in itself for ending Syria's isolation in its region. It takes on an even greater significance when his main strategic challenge is to rid himself of the Iranian incubus. Without of course ever admitting that this was his aim. The UAE was the first to re-open its Embassy in Damascus. The Egyptians have long had pragmatic contacts behind the scenes for counter-extremism purposes. Eyes are on Saudi Arabia to see if it will follow the UAE's lead. The ultimate pragmatist, Jordan, has eased tensions and recently re-opened its border to traffic (the first day saw a massive load of Captagon bound for Saudi Arabia confiscated by customs).

Syria is too weak to control its destiny. Its unrepentant regime continues to manoeuvre and advance where it can. But reconstruction on the scale required after ten years of civil war is not remotely in prospect. Such funds as do arrive are absorbed into the kleptocracy. Yet the resourcefulness and deep culture of the Syrian people, formed by millennia of insecurity and at times oppressive rule, provide the strong human basis for recovery when and as it comes. In the West, constrained as we are by our loathing of the regime, I believe we must think constructively about what can be done to help. Failed states and jihadism, as we well know, are a toxic mix.

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