

## The politics of reconstruction in Syria

Analysts say Al Assad is using the reconstruction process as a way to solidify his control in the country



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Dubai: As Syria's seven-year civil war slowly wraps up a debate is raging on how to rebuild the war-torn country.

Syrian President Bashar Al Assad has arguably won the war—largely due to the support of his chief allies Russia and Iran. The 'victory', however, came at an enormous cost.

While the international community typically steps up to provide reconstruction support when civil wars end, it has been reluctant to do so in Syria.

“A number of Western states have been appalled at the way Al Assad has prosecuted this war,” Tamara Coffman Wittes, a senior fellow at Brookings Institution said in a recent podcast, pointing to his “willingness to ravage the entire country, displace half of the population, destroy civilian infrastructure and engage in massive war crimes, including the use of chemical weapons.”

What started out in 2011 as a pro-democracy uprising against the Syrian regime—which had been in power for more than 40 years—quickly spiraled into a conflict which has been described the United Nations as the ‘greatest humanitarian catastrophe in modern times’.

The repression of protests quickly turned violent as protesters were shot, arrested and tortured.

Hundreds of deaths, turned into thousands. Entire neighbourhoods were flattened as protests mushroomed across the country at lightning speed.

Then came sieges, starvation, barrel bombs, and chemical weapons.

Desperate Syrian families threw their children into rubber dinghies and crossed the Mediterranean in order to reach Europe where they hoped they could secure a better future for their children—many drowned.

International players joined the fight with each country investing in their own personal agendas which further complicated the conflict.

This of course played to Al Assad’s advantage. He positioned himself as a bulwark against chaos and terrorism.

Iran quickly jumped in to support him through its proxy militias, most importantly the Lebanese Shiite militant group Hezbollah.



Migrants make their way on foot on the outskirts of Brezice, Slovenia October 20, 2015. Slovenia's

interior ministry raised the possibility on Tuesday of setting up physical barriers along its southeastern border if the numbers of migrants increased. Reuters



**The regime is telling the world: ‘We won, get over it. Either help us or you will suffer with outflows of radicals and refugees’”.**

***-Steven Heydemann | Non-resident senior fellow at Brookings***

While it helped him in the short-term it was not enough to sustain his war efforts. At one point Al Assad’s grip on territory shrunk to only Damascus and his bastion on the Mediterranean, Latakia—it looked like his end was approaching.

However, the tables turned in 2015 when Russia stepped into the fray—sending war planes and soldiers to hand Al Assad a decisive victory.

Since then, the emboldened Syrian president has shown little interest in a politically negotiated solution to end the conflict—which killed more than a half a million people.

Speaking to *Gulf News*, non-resident senior fellow at Brookings, Steven Heydemann, says he is doubtful Western states will be involved in the reconstruction process.

“Western governments have shown impressive commitment to the principle of no funding without a meaningful, inclusive political transition. While some countries in Asia could be willing to provide support in exchange for economic benefits, there is no appetite in the West, at the moment for reconstruction.”

But Al Assad’s international backers will surely be rewarded by the Syrian regime for their support in what Heydemann describes as a “clear quid-pro-quo system”.

Already some Russian firms have been handed contracts to rebuild lucrative oil fields damaged in the war—Iranian and Chinese firms have been handed reconstruction contracts as well.

“Given how much Iran thinks it’s worth to have Al Assad in power, one would imagine that they have incentive to continue to entrench him through reconstruction,” Wittes says.



A bulldozer removing rubble from war damage in the Lairamoun district of the Syrian city of Aleppo, among the most heavily destroyed urban areas in the seven-year civil war. AP

“Also, it’s good business. Let’s not forget the scale of destruction is so vast—entire city blocks have been reduced to rubble. There is a lot of money to be made in rebuilding Syria,” she adds.

Given the amount of money Russia and Iran invested in keeping Al Assad in power, rebuilding offers them a chance to recoup some of the profits from their investment, Wittes explains.

However, the scale of destruction is so massive that such help will barely scratch the surface of the cost to rebuild which has been estimated to be between \$100 to \$300 billion. Al Assad, however, doesn’t seem to care.

“He wants to control every aspect of reconstruction, even if that means he will not receive all the assistance he needs to do so,” Heydemann says.

He cited new laws being passed by the regime, such as Law 10, which aims at re-organising and re-defining private and public real estate in Syria, especially in war-affected areas.

In rebel Syria, a race to save precious property deeds

The law, which is yet to go into effect, gives owners a 30-day grace period to prove that they own a plot of land or home, by providing property documents either by showing up in person or through relatives up to the fourth degree.

Those who fail to do so suffer the confiscation of their property and either its transferred into government hands or sold at public auction.

“There is a campaign underway by the regime to purchase properties from those it views as insufficiently loyal to the regime and to make those properties available to regime loyalists,” Heydemann said, predicting large scale demographic changes in the future.

Another law being discussed would control which NGOs would be involved in the reconstruction process.



Mohammed Bayraqdar sits with his son Abdul-Awal on the staircase of their burned-out house in Khaldiye, one of the worst damaged neighborhoods in the Syrian city of Homs. AP

All of this, Heydemann says, proves that the regime is not sincere its commitment to reconstruction but rather “is using the process as a way to solidify its control in the country”.

“Al Assad’s goal is to use reconstruction to create what he calls a ‘healthier and more homogenous society’ with the intent to prevent the return of refugees,” Heydemann tells *Gulf News*.

The Syrian president could be banking on the notion on the European fear that if it does not help out with the reconstruction, refugees living there will have little incentive to return home.

Wittes describes it as a “chicken and the egg” scenario, where the West believes Al Assad’s exclusionary and repressive policies are the direct cause of radicalism and the proliferation of refugees.

“The West is saying if you don’t fix yourself and reform with more inclusive political and economic structures, you will foment chaos and we don’t want to invest in that. But the regime is saying, ‘either help us or you will suffer with outflows of radicals and refugees’,” he says.

It remains to be seen whether international players will buy into the argument. Wittes believes it will come down to who feels the pain first and who gives in.

“Usually the international community steps in to rebuild after a civil war as a way to solidify peace and prevent the relapse of conflict and to create conditions which refugees could return home, but in Syria it fears such a move would solidify Al Assad’s rule over the wreck that is Syria,” Wittes says.

“There is a concern that if support were to be provided to the Al Assad regime in the moment when he has achieved a decisive military victory over his opponents that he would take that as a signal to reimpose his authority and rebuild institutions even more repressive and exclusionary than before,” Heydemann says.

Wittes agrees and says the case of Iraq should be studied as a cautionary tale.

“From 2011 to 2014, US President Barack Obama was reducing US funds and presence in the country at a time where a very fragile sectarian agreement was holding Iraq together. Instead of constraining Iraqi premier Nouri Al Maliki from his sectarian policies, we leaned backed. This created the conditions for Daesh to emerge and US troops had to return to Iraq to fight the terrorist group,” she said.

Wittes believes political reconciliation and inclusion is far more important than reconstruction.

“Without this, Syria’s Sunni population will inevitably turn to extremist groups for protection.”

She says that Al Assad may have won the war, but he’s setting the ground for the next round of conflict by creating the conditions for a backlash.

Heydemann agrees adding that he is doubtful the Syrian regime will learn its lesson from what happened in Iraq.

“Reconstruction is not just about removing rubble. Its about knitting back together a society that has become deeply polarised.”