

The Geopolitics of Syria's Reconstruction

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1. Introduction

In its tenth year, the Syrian civil war is entering a new phase. The Syrian government has pitted fighting groups against the war-weary civilian population, and rebel factions have steadily been losing ground. With the support of Russia and Iran, Syrian government forces and regime-friendly militias have re-established themselves across much of the country. The only rebel-held region that remains is Idlib in northwestern Syria, “a real-life dumping ground for defeated opposition fighters and their families from elsewhere in the country.”¹ The situation in Idlib was complicated in 2019 when the Turkish army entered northwestern Syria to combat the Syrian Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD). To Ankara, the PYD is an extension of the Syrian Kurdish wing of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK), a militant Kurdish nationalist party that has waged a prolonged insurgency against the Turkish state. In 2018 and 2019, Turkey and Russia brokered two “de-confliction zones” to stabilize the region. Further complicating the geopolitics of Syria, the PYD’s military wing – the People’s Protection Units (YPG) – constitutes the bulk of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), the US’ main partner on the ground against the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Since the fall of ISIS’ capital in Raqqa in 2017, the US has relied on the SDF to control northeastern Syria, and Washington’s partnership with the SDF has strained US-Turkey relations. The regime of President Bashar al-Assad is therefore relatively secure, but whereas he has won the war on the ground, Assad is yet to win the peace.

Key to the restoration of the Assad regime in the long run is the reconstruction of Syria after a decade of civil war. The cost of rebuilding Syria’s cities and key infrastructure is immense: The UN Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia estimates that the “volume of destruction in physical capital and its sectoral distribution ... reached over \$388 billion US dollars, while the actual physical cost of destruction was close to 120 billion dollars.”² In addition, there is the stark human tragedy of the Syrian conflict: From a pre-war population of 22 million, around 500,000 Syrians have lost their lives and more than 13.4 million have become displaced. The majority of these, 6.7 million, remain internally displaced within Syria, and 5.6 million Syrians have sought refuge in Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, Iraq, Egypt and Europe.³ The Syrian war economy has been remarkably resilient throughout the civil war, bolstered by investment and loans from Syria’s allies, Russia and Iran. But in late 2019/early 2020, the regime’s economic situation collapsed. The value of the Syrian pound has plummeted, and the regime’s currency reserves are depleted.

The Syrian government has scrambled for hard currency. It has cracked down on currency traders and exchanges. But these policies have also provoked a backlash, and the regime has had to crack down on street protests. For the regime, these protests are extremely worrying.⁴ Street protests put pressure on the regime from below, echoing the 2011 protests that precipitated Syria’s collapse into war. In January 2021, the government began issuing 5000-pound notes, prompting fears of hyperinflation, as well as tightening fuel and flour rations, sparking outrage.⁵ At the top, economic hardship has exposed cracks in the Syrian leadership, where family, security and prosperity are one and the same. In April 2020, long-standing tensions between Assad and regime-insider Rami Makhlouf became public. Makhlouf, a key financier of the regime, and Bashar

al-Assad's cousin by marriage, had accumulated a large fortune in offshore companies in Lebanon and tax havens such as Jersey and the British Virgin Islands that the regime needed. In May 2020, Assad froze Makhoul's assets.⁶

The 2020 economic collapse and the fall of Makhoul came after US president Donald J. Trump signed the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act into law in December 2019, but before it came into effect on 17 June 2020. "Caesar" is the alias of an anonymous informant who provided Human Rights Watch with photographic evidence of systematic torture in the Assad regime's prisons.⁷ The Caesar Act mandates that the United States employ "diplomatic and coercive economic means" to punish the regime for its massive human rights violations and compel Russia and Iran to end their financial, material and military support for Assad. The Caesar Act further expands US sanctions on key Assad regime individuals, including the Assad family and high-ranking officials in the army, intelligence services, and the Syrian central bank, with the express purpose of holding the regime "accountable." But, with Syria largely pacified and the regime's survival all but guaranteed, Iran and Russia are hoping for a peace dividend in a Syria desperate for investment. And it is this peace dividend that the latest round of US sanctions aims to destroy so that (primarily) Russia and Iran force Syria back to Geneva to accept a compromise. But how will the Caesar Act influence the geopolitics of the Syrian civil war, and how does it fit in with US policies in the Middle East generally? Will the United States' sanction policy gain traction internationally, or will the United States, perhaps unintentionally, emerge as a "spoiler" in a struggle to rebuild Syria? Assad is emerging the victor in Syria, but the Biden administration seems determined that Assad remain a pariah in the international community.

The Biden administration's Syria policy is yet to be clearly enunciated, even as the US maintains a contingent of 900 troops at al-Tanf in Deir ez-Sour in eastern Syria to forestall a potential ISIS resurgence and to deter Russian, Iranian or Syrian encroachment on the region's fields.⁸ On August 26, 2020, a Russian armored patrol vehicle rammed an American patrol column in al-Hasekeh with Russian attack helicopters providing overwatch. One US soldier was injured.⁹ When Trump pulled the bulk of US forces out of Syria in October 2019, he initially left the SDF at the mercy of Turkey, which intervened a few days after the US withdrawal, but was persuaded to retain a smaller force, ostensibly to "secure the oil" for the Kurds. In August 2020 it emerged that the Trump administration had blessed an agreement between Delta Crescent Energy, a US oil company, and the SDF to resume production.¹⁰ According to the *Financial Times*, Washington "turns a blind eye" as the oil is sold on the black market in Iraq. The illicit trade netted the SDF an estimated daily income of \$3 million.¹¹ In this way, the Trump administration has given the SDF an economic lifeline the Biden administration is unlikely to sever.

Biden's Syria policy, however, is subsumed to the administration's larger policies in the Middle East, chiefly Biden's ambition to restore a US-led multilateralism in the region, including restoring US-Iranian dialogue to revive the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) between

Iran and the five permanent members of the UN Security Council and Germany, which Trump unilaterally left in 2018.¹² Moreover, key personnel in the Biden administration differ on how to approach Syria. In a May 2020 interview with CBS, Secretary of State Antony Blinken, at the time the Biden campaign's foreign policy advisor, said that it "is virtually impossible for me to imagine" a normalizing of US relations with Assad. Blinken, a consistent advocate for increased US engagement on Syria, wants the administration to take an active role. Blinken sees the US troops at al-Tanf as leverage over the Assad regime: "That's a point of leverage because the Syrian government would love to have dominion over those [oil] resources [in eastern Syria]. We should not give that up for free" in a diplomatic settlement of the civil war.¹³ Blinken's approach, however, does not reflect the rest of the administration, including voices on the National Security Council and the State Department. Members of the Syrian opposition have already voiced concerns with the appointment of Robert Malley as Iran envoy. They fear Malley will prioritize the Iran deal at Syria's expense.¹⁴ Trump's former Syria envoy, Bret McGurk, has been appointed to Biden's National Security Council. McGurk resigned in protest over Trump's decision to withdraw US forces, but has since argued that Washington should focus on the "achievable goal" of "preventing Syria from becoming a staging ground for attacks against the United States or its allies," such as Iranian encroachment on Israel.¹⁵

2. The Efficacy of US Sanction Regimes and the Biden Administration's Syria Policy

US economic sanctions on Syria are nothing new. Syria has been a designated “state sponsor of terrorism” since 1979 for its support of radical Palestinian factions against Israel in the 1970s, but US sanctions have been ineffective. Syria has historically been unreceptive to US pressure. Syria has prioritized regime security at the expense of economic development and access to the European and North American markets. Instead of changing course, Damascus has balanced against Washington by leaning on US adversaries for support. During the Cold War, Syria aligned with the Soviet Union, and in return received large quantities of Soviet weaponry and economic aid. The historic rationale for Syria’s geopolitical alignment – opposition to the United States’ role in the Middle East due to its role in the Arab-Israeli conflict – remains strong and has been strengthened by the civil war. Syria’s historical partners, the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Russian Federation, have provided economic assistance and military support. In 2003, Syria was placed under further sanctions under an executive order of the George W. Bush administration pursuant to the Syria Accountability and Lebanese Sovereignty Restoration Act for its occupation of Lebanon.

In 2011, in response to the violent regime crackdown on protestors, the Barack Obama administration and the European Union began implementing sanctions on the Syrian leadership in an effort to isolate what was then believed to be a faltering regime and, in the words of a State Department spokesperson, “send an unequivocal message to President Assad, the Syrian leadership and regime insiders that they will be held accountable.”¹⁶ By way of executive orders, the Obama administration increased the pressure on the Syrian leadership, targeting them with travel restrictions, asset freezes and trade embargoes on key industries such as the Syrian petroleum sector in 2011. In late 2019, the Trump administration imposed additional sanctions.¹⁷ These kinds of economic sanctions are often referred to as “smart sanctions,” as they are designed to hit only those deemed responsible for e.g. human rights violations, and not societies as a whole.¹⁸ However, the efficacy of “smart sanctions” is debatable.¹⁹ If history is any guide, sanctions are unlikely to successfully push Iran and Russia out of Syria.

The Caesar Act forms the baseline of US policy toward Syria: to push Iran and Russia out of Syria, and in this way pressure Assad back to the negotiating table. “The Assad regime and those who support it have a simple choice,” US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said in June 2020, “take irreversible steps toward a lasting political solution to the Syrian conflict in line with United Nations Security Council Resolution 2254 – which stipulates a UN-led negotiated solution to the Syrian civil war – or face ever new tranches of crippling sanctions.”²⁰ Resolution 2254 represents the consensus of the UN Security Council veto powers, and hence, the basis for a lasting settlement of the Syrian civil war acceptable to the international community. The Caesar Act sanctions, moreover, should be seen in conjunction with existing US sanctions policies on both Russia and Iran. Russia has been under economic sanctions by NATO countries and the European Union since Russia annexed Crimea and the war in Eastern Ukraine in 2014. Since the Trump administration left the “Iran deal,” Tehran was subject to a “maximum pressure”

campaign in the form of economic sanctions. However, both have developed economies that are resilient to US pressure.

Per the Caesar Act, all territory under the control of the Syrian regime, Russia or Iran is subject to sanctions, and consequently, anyone who engages in economic activity in these areas will be subject to the US Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC). OFAC can implement economic sanctions on persons and organizations (including businesses), and has the authority to freeze assets, impose visa and travel restrictions and issue large fines. The Caesar Act sanctions will not be lifted until several conditions are verifiably met, including an end to Syrian and Russian bombing of civilian targets, the safe return of Syrian refugees without risk of reprisals, "verifiable steps to establish meaningful accountability for perpetrators of war crimes in Syria and justice for victims of war crimes," and a negotiated end to the conflict in accordance with UNSCR 2254. Biden has the power to waive sanctions. Humanitarian aid is exempt, however, as is the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria of the SDF, the US' erstwhile ally against the Islamic State in the northeast.²¹

The Biden administration has not indicated that Syria is a priority. Sanctions will therefore serve as a placeholder that keeps the pressure on Syria and its Russian and Iranian sponsors. The main objective for the Biden administration, meanwhile, is to revive the Iran deal that Trump left in 2018, while at the same time not rewarding Iran for its resumption of enriching of uranium. This balancing act has already been demonstrated. The Biden campaign pledged to build on the Abraham Accords, the "normalizing" of relations between Israel and a growing number of Arab states. However, on 4 February 2021, in his first major foreign policy speech as president, Biden declared an end to the US support of the Saudi-UAE-led war in Yemen where they are fighting the Houthi militia, calling the war a "humanitarian and strategic catastrophe."²² Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates view the Houthis as an Iran proxy. Biden's speech is a shot across the bow to Riyadh: The US will no longer let Saudi Arabia and the UAE run roughshod over Yemen. But the White House is careful not to alienate its allies – or let the Iranians run roughshod over Iraq and Syria. On 25 February, the US launched airstrikes on Kataib Hezbollah and Kataib Sayyid al-Shuhada, two Iranian-sponsored Iraqi militias, on the Syrian-Iraqi border. The strike, ostensibly retaliation for rocket attacks on US contractors in Erbil in Iraqi Kurdistan on 15 February, has been read as a signal to Iran: "an attempt to set boundaries of acceptability with Iranian proxy forces."²³ The Biden administration, as its predecessors, sees Syria as part of a proxy war with Iran over its regional influence and nuclear program.

3. Understanding Iran and Russia's Motivations in the Syrian Civil War

The novelty of the Caesar Act is how it is geared toward punishing Assad's allies. Since 2012, Iran has spent around \$16 billion in Syria, and the Russian intervention since 2015 has been estimated to cost anywhere from \$1.2 to \$2 billion.²⁴ There is an assumption in the Caesar Act that Iran and Russia's continued economic patronage of Assad is a *sine qua non* for the Assad regime's survival. But it remains an open question whether economic pressure alone will change Russia and Iran's calculus on banking on Assad.²⁵ For two relatively isolated powers, Syria has strategic value as a diplomatic ally and trading partner. For both Iran and Russia, Syria serves as a springboard to expand their influence in the Middle East and the eastern Mediterranean. However, Russia and Iran's visions of a post-war Syria do not congeal well. Iran on the one hand has sought to expand its informal and clandestine networks of influence on the ground and among the Syrian elite. Russia on the other hand seeks to institutionalize and legitimize Assad's battlefield victory in the international community.²⁶

Syria is a crucial ally for Iran. Since the 1979 revolution in Iran, Damascus has repeatedly taken the side of Tehran in regional conflicts. "Syria is the golden ring of the chain of resistance against Israel" said Ali Akbar Velayati, Iranian foreign minister from 1981 to 1997, who now serves as Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei's senior foreign policy advisor, in a 2012 speech.²⁷ Iran has fostered a regional network known as the "axis of resistance" consisting of pro-Iranian (often) Shia militias and individuals in key positions in governments in the region from Central Asia in the east to Lebanon and the Gaza Strip on the Mediterranean in the west, where Hezbollah and Hamas act as Iran's proxies and as a first line of defense against Israel. These activities are coordinated by the Quds Force of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), which has around 7,000 troops in southern and eastern Syria. Combined, the IRGC controls around 30,000 foreign fighters in Syria, including around 6–8,000 Hezbollah fighters from Lebanon, as well as Iraqi Shias and Afghans. Iran has used these forces prolifically, and often not in consultation with the Assad regime.²⁸ Iran's relationship with the Assad regime is highly personalized. Iran has courted the Syrian elite, especially financiers, such as Rami Makhlouf, to circumvent US sanctions on Iran. The late Quds Force Commander Qassem Suleimani had been the architect of Iran's involvement in Syria since protests began in 2011, where he had mobilized thousands of militiamen on behalf of the regime, but these militias are, crucially, beholden to Iran – not the Syrians. Iran's "axis of resistance" is portrayed as a "Shia crescent" by US "moderate" allies, such as Israel, Jordan and Saudi Arabia, which view Iran and its proxies as an existential threat. Tehran has used the Syrian civil war to construct military infrastructure in southern Syria that has provoked Israeli airstrikes, and the recent thawing in Israel-Gulf relations was part of the Trump administration's attempt to build strategic consensus on Iran. While Biden wants to distance himself from Trump's overly pro-Saudi Arabia, pro-Israel stance, he welcomed the Abraham Accords.

Russia, however, is uninterested in Iran's brand of "resistance." Moscow's involvement in Syria is part of a project to restore Russia as a great power with clout in international affairs by opposing what it sees as US-orchestrated regime change. Russia sees popular protests in geopolitical terms

and has used its diplomatic influence to protect Syria from international scrutiny in the UN Security Council. Russia has signed onto the major communiqués, including the 2012 Geneva communiqué and as well as being a member of the International Support Group for Syria (ISSG) that laid the groundwork for UNSCR 2254 in 2015. Neither of these documents demand Assad's departure; instead they call for an internal Syrian political process to determine the country's future and to respect Syria's sovereignty. The Russian outlook is immediately supportive of regimes it sees as embattled by outside or "unconstitutional forces" such as popular protests – as in Syria in 2011 or Ukraine in 2014. Russia wants to revise the UN Charter to reflect this view: that overt support for a state's opposition movements by another state is a form of aggression, and hence illegal per international law.²⁹ Russia has the quiescent support of China in this endeavor in the UN Security Council.³⁰ By intervening on behalf of the Assad regime, Russia could relaunch itself as a patron of embattled human rights offenders in the Middle East. Russia has also encouraged Assad to engage with, or at least entertain, an internal political process; the constitutional committee composed of the regime and various opposition groups, which is to write a new constitution for Syria. Russia's hope is that these two processes will serve to legitimize Assad's battlefield victory in the short run, restore Syria's sovereignty in the medium term, and ultimately, rehabilitate Syria in the international community. To this end, Russia needs a diplomatic solution, approved, preferably, by the UN, to ensure that Assad's Syria will not remain a pariah state.

Russia also has geopolitical and geo-economic concerns in Syria, but the former supersede the latter. Russia's military footprint in Syria has greatly expanded: the lease on Russia's Soviet-era naval base in Tartous was extended through 2066 free of charge. Airbases, such as Khmeimim and Palmyra, have been upgraded. Russia, moreover, has assembled a significant Integrated Air Defense System, and has also sold arms and weapons systems such as S300 surface-to-air-missiles to Syria, which have been bought on Russian credit, though the efficacy of this system has openly been questioned by the Syrians as it has failed to detect and neutralize Israeli cruise missiles.³¹ Regardless, Syria has provided Russia's military-industrial complex a marketing opportunity for Russian weaponry, and Russia has concluded major arms deals in a region that has long been dominated by the United States.³² Since 2011, Russia has exported arms to Syria for at least \$1.7 billion.³³ But given Russia's own economic predicament since 2014, Russia's economic assistance comes in the form of loans, not grants. And Russia demands payment. Rami Makhlouf's fall from grace was likely due to Russian pressure: When Assad deferred on payment, Russia halted the advance on Idlib and pointed to Makhlouf's sons' flaunting of their lavish spending habits on social media, the implication being that Assad should get the money from Makhlouf and pay immediately for Russia to resume fighting.³⁴ With so much invested in Syria, deputy prime minister of Russia Yuri Borisov has vowed to "break through" US sanctions.³⁵

4. The Struggle for Postwar Syria

Without reconstruction, Syria's ruinous present will continue indefinitely. The Syrian economy is in shambles: A 2019 World Bank research paper estimates that Syria's economic output, measured in gross domestic product, sunk by approximately 12% annually between 2011 and 2018, "with the level of GDP declining to almost one-third the pre-conflict level."³⁶ Though there is a clear consensus internationally that Syria needs international aid to rebuild, there are serious misgivings as to who will provide it. The Covid-19 pandemic and the global economic downturn will also impact countries' political will to pledge large sums for international aid. However, it is the geopolitics of the Syrian civil war that is the biggest hurdle to overcome.

Both the United States and the EU have refused to provide large funds for Syria – beyond immediate humanitarian aid to international aid organizations – in lieu of substantial political reforms and a diplomatic solution to the conflict.³⁷ Instead, the reconstruction effort has been significantly hampered by the lack of any substantial progress. The EU-UN-led Brussels V virtual conference, which included state actors as well as Syrian civil society and humanitarian agencies, pledged \$4.4 billion in humanitarian and resilience funding for 2021 and beyond and \$5.7 billion in loans,³⁸ but how the funds will be disbursed in Syria is unclear.

Russian entrepreneurs will likely need government inducements to weather the impact of US sanctions. But Russia is unlikely to push for a diplomatic solution and will only pressure Assad to make merely superficial constitutional reforms. For Russia, the geopolitical gain from the Syrian conflict is an end in itself; geo-economics is secondary. Sanctions alone will not be enough to change Russia's calculus in Syria. In 2020, Raymond Hinnebusch, political scientist at the University of St. Andrews, posited that sanctions may make the United States a "spoiler" as Washington "may prefer to see reconstruction fail since its success would be a victory for Russia and Iran and its failure would bog them down in [Syrian] quagmire."³⁹ The Caesar Act should also be seen in conjunction with the Trump administration's "maximum pressure" campaign against Iran's nuclear program. The Trump administration charged that Iran was in violation of "the spirit" of the nuclear agreement, citing among other factors Iran's funding of regional allies such as Syria and Hezbollah.⁴⁰ American unilateral action failed to convince the other five signatories to the multilateral JCPOA. To apply pressure on France, the United Kingdom and Germany, the Trump administration successfully pressured the Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication (SWIFT) to cut any association with Iranian banks. SWIFT, a payment messaging system, is vital to secure cross-border capital flows. Any company that conducts business in Iran will be sanctioned by OFAC and barred from international markets.⁴¹ If similarly applied to Syria by the Biden administration, the Caesar Act will greatly discourage international entrepreneurs, including those of US allies such as Turkey or in the EU. This grants the Biden administration great influence over any large-scale international effort to rebuild Syria's infrastructure without sanction waivers.

China will also influence the struggle for Syria's reconstruction. In December 2019, Syria signed onto the Belt and Road Initiative, China's infrastructure and investment program, but China has

been quiet regarding reconstruction. Iran and China, moreover, have been elaborating their strategic and economic cooperation since 2016. In March 2021, Wang Yi, the Chinese foreign minister, visited Iran to sign a 25-year cooperation agreement. The terms of the signed agreement are not known, but a leaked draft included joint military exercises in the Persian Gulf and \$400 billion worth of Chinese investment in Iran's oil sector, of which China is a large market.⁴² Iran's ability to weather US sanctions has largely been due to Chinese demand for Iranian oil.⁴³ With Russia and India, China is also taking the lead in developing the Cross-Border Interbank Payment System (CIPS) as an alternative to SWIFT.⁴⁴ The Trump administration's strong-arming of international financial institutions may, unintentionally, have eroded US financial and economic power. Taken together, China's maneuvers indicate a greater engagement in the Middle East generally, and with Syria and Iran in particular, that will dilute the Biden administration's ability to impose and maintain unilateral sanctions regimes.

Will then the US become a "spoiler" in the reconstruction of Syria? The Biden administration's Syria policy remains muddled. The February 25 airstrike in Syria shows that the Biden administration sees Syria as an arena of proxy conflict where it can hurt Iran – or its proxies – and perhaps force Iran to the negotiating table. A diplomatic solution to the Syrian civil war, as Secretary of State Blinken has called for, however, would entail a serious engagement with Russia. "All players – including the Syrian government and opposition, and key international players – would need to be ready to identify not only what they realistically hope to achieve, but what they can put on the table," said the United Nations Special Envoy for Syria Geir O. Pedersen. He puts his hopes on "quiet diplomacy."⁴⁵ Whether the Russians and Americans are prepared to engage in discussions on Syria – beyond "quiet diplomacy" – remains to be seen.

There is little to no indication that the international community can find a workable diplomatic resolution to the civil war in Syria. The war may go on for years to come. If the recent histories of neighboring Lebanon or Iraq are any indication, Syria may become part of a depressing trend of Middle East conflicts that do not end, but grind on as more or less permanent fixtures of instability in the region. In 2020, it took the UN Security Council four attempts of differing resolution proposals to allow UN aid agencies mandate to cross into Syria at the Bab al-Hawa on the Syrian-Turkish border. But UNSCR 2533 is limited to 12 months – the border will be closed if the resolution is not renewed – setting up another round of negotiations in the Security Council in July 2021. On 26 May 2021, Bashar al-Assad will be reelected in a sham presidential election for another seven years. The Assad regime is going nowhere.

The US' interests in the Middle East may also be on the wane, but the Biden administration will keep the pressure on Assad through the maintenance of the economic sanctions and its Kurdish proxy in northeastern Syria. This gives Biden leverage over Syria, but how he will use it remains unclear. Biden's announcement of the US' withdrawal from Afghanistan after 20 years may herald the end of the war on terror. The US' "pivot to Asia" is long in the making.⁴⁶ Both the Obama

and Trump administrations made similar promises to end US involvement in Afghanistan and Iraq. In the meantime, as Syria's economy implodes and the Covid-19 pandemic takes its toll, the differing visions of a postwar Syria and how to rebuild the fragmented country – as different in Damascus, in Moscow and Tehran or Beijing, as in Arab capitals and Jerusalem – US sanctions will serve as a deterrent to any attempt to jumpstart the reconstruction of the country without the assent of the United States. ■

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The Geopolitics of Syria's Reconstruction

After ten years of civil war in Syria, the brutal regime of Bashar al-Assad remains in power. However, in 2020, Syria was hit with new US sanctions, sending its economy into a freefall. These newer sanctions also target Russia and Iran, Syria's key allies. The Biden administration hopes to pressure Syria and its allies to accept a compromise solution to the civil war under UN auspices. The US retains a small-scale military presence in eastern Syria to act as further

leverage in a UN-orchestrated settlement. In this report, we examine the geopolitics of Syria's reconstruction, emphasizing the role of US economic sanctions on Syria, as well as why Russia and Iran have so consistently supported Assad, as both have long-term interests in the survival of the Assad regime. Syria, Russia, and Iran have, historically, found common ground in opposing the US' role in the Middle East. With US-Russian relations at a low-point, and prospects for

a US-Iran rapprochement increasingly dim, the tragedy that is the international community's inability to end the civil war in Syria remains deadlocked.

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