



## SYRIA: THE YEAR OF RECONSTRUCTION?

JULIEN BARNES-DACEY

EUROPEAN COUNCIL ON FOREIGN RELATIONS

**A**fter nearly eight years of conflict, Bashar al-Assad has effectively won the civil war and Syria is now entering a new phase. While large parts of the country remain out of government hands and violence will undoubtedly continue as Damascus looks to reassert full control, domestic and international focus is increasingly turning towards the post-conflict phase.

In this context 2019 is likely witness a significant shift in the debate over Syria, with the issue of reconstruction cementing itself as the central fault-line in an ongoing fight over the legitimacy and sustainability of Assad's victory. The reality is that substantial reconstruction is unlikely to materialise, even if a degree of rebuilding is already underway. While on the ground needs are acute, the government has few disposable resources, and neither its external allies, nor its opponents, will put anything close to the estimated US\$ 300 billion needed to rebuild the country. Instead this will mostly be a symbolic debate centred on two competing visions over the fate of the country.

For the regime and its backers, a turn towards a reconstruction focus seeks to demonstrate that the conflict is conclusively over in Assad's favour. On the one hand the regime's attempts to launch limited re-development projects represent a means of consolidating its own position and providing some economic reward to its loyalist support base. Damascus can be expected to preside over a corrupt patronage network that exploits the economic gains linked to reconstruction for its own benefit. But, more broadly, Damascus is intent on using the outward appearance of an invigorated reconstruction focus to signal that government normalcy has returned. In this vein international support for this process is perceived as an important step towards securing wider

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*Julien Barnes-Dacey, Director of the ECFR Middle East & North Africa Programme where he focuses on European policy towards Syria*

legitimisation of Assad's victory. Russia's recent drive to lock-in European reconstruction aid appears to be driven by the political ambition of securing international recognition of Assad's victory, above and beyond the desire to see the country rebuilt.

Significantly, however, Damascus, unlike Moscow, does not want reconstruction support to come from the West. Instead, it is focused on securing regional and non-western assistance that will not undermine it from within as it believes will be the West's intent. With the recent reopening of Syria's border with Jordan and intensified talk of Gulf actors moving back into Syria, Damascus senses economic opportunity in regional reintegration. Towards this end the mooted possible return of Syria to the Arab League fold in 2019 would be symbolically important. Meanwhile other players, such as China, likely also see economic openings. It is these states, rather than Western actors, who are likely to be prime drivers of the limited reconstruction that does start to emerge in regime-held territory.

For their part, the opposition's western backers are determined to deny the regime the perceived legitimising card of reconstruction support. For the moment they will do what they can to continue to undermine Assad – including by using sectoral sanctions, which ultimately represent a greater tool of Western influence than reconstruction support, to block inflows from other countries. While Europeans and the US begrudgingly accept Assad's ascendancy and that a degree of reconstruction is inevitable, and that in time they are going to face increased pressures to offer more support, they are still trying to maintain a position that ensures they don't provide economic benefit or political legitimacy to Assad (or his key external backers, Russia and Iran). There is

also still some hope that Assad can be made to lose the peace, in part by denying him support in a manner that feeds domestic discontent, thereby exacerbating internal pressure on the regime which can be leveraged to secure political gains.

However, the December 2018 announcement by President Trump that the US will shortly withdraw its military forces from north-eastern Syria, threatens to throw this strategy into the air. The Western approach has until now partly been premised on keeping control of the resource-rich north-east in a bid to prevent Damascus from exploiting it for economic gain. Already it had become clear that the West was not going to commit meaningful resources to post-ISIS stabilisation efforts in Iraq, as well as non-regime-controlled territory in Syria. But the announced full US withdrawal will cement the narrative that the future lies with Damascus, which could well quickly move back into the area once US troops depart. A reassertion of central authority over the northeast would provide Damascus with important economic resources that could help stabilise the wider situation in the regime's favour, boosting its potential to advance reconstruction projects, and weakening any residual leverage that external actors have over the regime.

Over the coming year reconstruction is thus likely to move forward in the context of this polarised debate in a fashion that slowly but surely plays to the regime's advantage. Damascus is likely to make incremental gains in a process that steadily draws in increasing external involvement. International bodies such as the UNDP are already supporting a myriad number of stabilisation projects that blur the line with reconstruction, such as the refurbishment of power sta-



tions. The reality is that whatever one's views of the Syria regime, these on the ground priorities are desperately needed by the Syrian people. While the US is likely to remain firmly on the side-lines, some European governments, initially driven by a humanitarian imperative, may feel pressure to do more, slowly tapping away at the European consensus to hold back. This will be particularly true if emerging stabilisation gains encourage refugee returns, which remains a priority for regional and European states. Moscow has actively talked of reconstruction as a route to returns, looking to exploit Europe's political vulnerability on this issue.

Ultimately, the turn towards reconstruction over the coming year may not enjoy broad international support, nor will it significantly transform the situation on the ground. For the Syrian people it will remain vastly insufficient in terms of meeting their desperate, ongoing needs. But it will likely further consolidate the situation in the regime's favour, shifting the discussion away from one of transition towards the question of managing the regime's survival. In so doing it may begin to project a sense of normalisation that meet the regime's core domestic and international objectives.