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Syria Denies a Role for the West, Relies on the East: Can India Whisper Reforms?

Anchal Vohra

A boy stands next to the ruins of a hospital bombed by the Syrian Airforce in 2012. / Michal Przedlacki / Flickr

INTRODUCTION: NO ROLE FOR THE WEST

Sampling continental cuisine at the posh Four Seasons Hotel in Damascus, adviser to Bashar al-Assad and regime insider Bouthaina Shaaban says, “We are asking our people to look East.” One of the closest people to Bashar al-Assad and the face of the Syrian government to the outside world, she wears a classic

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short haircut and that day donned sparkling white pearls and a designer suit. Shaaban, holder of a PhD from Britain, was until 2003 a professor of Romantic poetry at the Damascus University.

In early August 2017, she agreed to speak to this author about the regime's reconstruction policy of laying a red carpet for those who did not oppose the Assad government during the years of war. Seeing no role for the West in rebuilding Syria, Shabaan also expressed a sense of rejection by the European countries.

"We have been socially oriented towards the West and now suddenly we say 'look east' so they don't understand it." Shabban speaks of Syria's business and political elites who are inclined towards Western mannerisms and are left perplexed at the West's opposition to a secular president. "The West is led by the US, and they are simply against us because of the Arab–Israel conflict. Israel wants our land, and we will never give that up."

In 1948, Israel occupied Palestine. In the seven-day war in 1967, it went further and captured the Golan Heights from Syria. It is still under Israel's control and is a constant source of irritation and mistrust between Damascus and Tel Aviv. Bashar had tried to crack a deal with the West: Golan Heights and good relations with the US in exchange for Syrian alliance with Iran. His loyalists have not forgotten how easily Washington abandoned the offer and sided with the opposition in the war.

Since the Syrian war, the schism between Syria and the West—i.e., the US and Europe—has deepened. Whatever pre-war "softness" there was because of French concessions to Assad's sect of Alawites in the colonial past, is now gone.

Inaugurating the Damascus International Trade Fair in August 2017 after a hiatus of six years, Bashar al-Assad reiterated that the West will not receive a share of the reconstruction gold rush. In his speech, he said: "There will be no security cooperation, no embassies, and no role for some countries that say they seek a solution—only after they sever their relations openly and unequivocally with terrorism... We will not allow enemies and adversaries to achieve with politics what they failed to achieve with terrorism."

The US supported a conglomeration of groups, including borderline moderates of the Free Syrian Army, and indirectly, its resources also ended up in the hands of the extremists. Moreover, the allies of the US—Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey—allegedly backed a wide array of extremist opposition to Assad, including Al-Qaeda-affiliated groups Jabhat al-Nusra, Jaish al-Islam

and Ahrar al-Sham. The presence of these groups does not mean that protestors demanding democracy and transparency from the regime do not exist. But they were either silenced or, fearing a backlash, themselves exited the scene. This gave the regime an opportunity to successfully weave a narrative of “Bashar versus the extremists”. It used the presence of terrorist groups as a scapegoat for the allegations imposed on the Assad regime.

The Western bloc claims that standing against Assad is based on the regime's crackdown on protestors, killing thousands by bombing large swaths of Syria to eliminate any kind of opposition and conducting chemical attacks. In September 2017, UN war-crime investigators concluded that the Syrian regime used chemical weapons more than two dozen times during Syria's civil war, including in April's deadly attack on Khan Sheikhoun. However, it is unclear how this will be used against Assad, who has won the war and seems unassailable at this point.



A picture of Assad on a road from Damascus to Aleppo. / Anchal Vohra

To turn on the pressure, US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson said, on 26 October 2017, that there is no place for Bashar al-Assad in the Syrian government. In September 2017, the “Friends of Syria” group—an alliance of mainly Western and Gulf Arab countries—met in New York on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly, where France and the UK emphasised that support to Syria was contingent on Assad's exit. UK Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson said, “We believe that the only way forward is to get a political process going and to make it clear to the Iranians, Russians and Assad regime that we, the like-minded group, will not support the reconstruction of Syria until there is such a

political process and that means, as Resolution 2254 says, to a transition away from Assad.”¹

Even as posturing continues, foreign-policy circles are filled with talk on how the West can exercise leverage over Syrian politics by spending money on Syria's reconstruction. Russia and Iran's support has brought Assad victory and added to the US' concerns of hegemonic Russia and the rise of Islamic Iran.

Sam Heller, an American analyst on Syria, has advised that the West must not fund Syrian reconstruction if it thinks that by spending money, it will succeed in influencing the political resolution. In a piece in *Foreign Affairs*, he argues, “The idea that Western money can somehow induce Assad to abdicate is an obvious fantasy.”² To think that Assad can be dethroned if Iran is lured with a dole is a gross misunderstanding of what motivates Iran and its goals in the region. The West cannot count on its financial muscle forcing the exit of Assad.

While the powers-that-be squabble over control, there is an urgent humanitarian need to support millions of refugees by providing them shelter and utilities, and redeveloping the industry. It remains uncertain what role the US or the European Union might play via private funders. The way forward for the West may be to allocate the funds in a way that the money reaches the Syrians and not Assad.

According to the World Bank, Syria needs a whopping US\$300 billion to rebuild the nation. With the West out, Russia, Iran, China and India will be Syria's leading partners in the post-war efforts, a major geopolitical development which effectively changes the balance of power in the Middle East.



Local militia boys guarding Aleppo. / Anchal Vohra

THE CHANGING BALANCE OF POWER IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Driving through the 350-km stretch from Damascus to Aleppo, one crosses at least 40 checkpoints, and endless carcasses of army trucks, burnt tyres and bullet-ridden homes. Midway through the journey, this author caught sight of Russian forces with Syrian soldiers travelling to oil-rich Deir Ezzor to secure the eastern border with Iraq. The alliance has vanquished ISIS from large parts of the city, but the fight is still on.

In Aleppo, Bashar wore a striking resemblance to Putin in the posters and hoardings hung outside government offices. Friends in arms, the two were donning similar sunglasses and army fatigues. The Syrian president owes his Russian counterpart for securing a landmark victory in the erstwhile financial capital of the country. But on the ground, not everyone is grateful for the Russian largesse. In West Aleppo, which was dominated by the regime, people professed gratitude to Putin for taking on the extremists. In the East, which was a stronghold of the rebels, the residents complained about indiscriminate bombings by Russia.

In 2015, the Kremlin said it engaged in the war because of the involvement of 5,000–7,000 citizens from former Soviet States in the terrorist groups in Syria and Iraq. Today, in most parts of Syria, the terrorists have been defeated and opposition to Assad, eliminated. Yet, instead of coming to an end, Moscow's role has only increased.

Propping up Assad means maintaining influence in the Middle East and military presence on the Mediterranean Sea. Just as the US has been providing security in the Gulf, Russia now has its own sphere in which to play protector and balance out American ambitions. It is also emerging as the major infrastructure developer and will also deliver banking services to the Syrians.

On 1 November 2017, the Embassy of Syria in Delhi sent out an email celebrating Russian involvement in Syria's reconstruction. It said that the Syrian government had decided to give huge facilities to Russian businessmen after the Sochi meeting last month. A Russian company called “Gigan” has now been assigned large parts of land in Lattakia, Tartus and Homs, and the construction plans are 70 percent ready. The 60,000 housing units built by Gigan will be sold at 50 percent less than the market price. Loans will be made available from Russian banks, which will open in Syria next year.

The Syrian government is boasting about how, for the first time, Syrian cities will have 40-storey residential towers, as if these will better the living conditions of its people uprooted by intensive bombing. It also leaves the most

significant question unanswered: Why should the Syrians, who were forced to leave their homes because of the war, pay anything at all to return home? Russia has achieved its goal of being able to exert itself in the Middle East through Syria, but it cannot be considered a responsible power or a peacemaker if it is seen making money out of a war-torn nation's struggling people.

The other beneficiary has been Iran. Backing Assad and incessantly supplying state and non-state actors to aid the Syrian regime has catapulted Iran into a regional power. The influence it so craved—to counter Saudi Arabia—has almost been a gift of the jihadi ideology of the Sunni terrorist groups like ISIS and Al-Qaeda.

At the Damascus International Trade Fair, Iran had the biggest pavilion. With its hand in every jar, Iran offered to sell juice, candy, cement, electronics and home appliances. Every stall was decorated with a picture of the Shia clerics Ayatollah Khomeini and Khamenei. Iran currently has limited capacity, but it hopes to use the Syrian reconstruction to boost its economy. Iranian firms have already signed deals to rebuild phone networks, power plants and an oil refinery.

In a move that could alter Syria's character forever, Iran and its proxies have started investing in real estate in Damascus, Homs and Aleppo. Controlling land enables Iran to control the demographics of Sunni-dominated Syria. It has already organised population swaps: for instance, Sunnis from Zabadani were moved to opposition-held Idlib and Shias from Fua and Kefraya were resettled in territories under the control of the regime.

Iran is focused on investments in Aleppo. Many of the 80 percent Sunni inhabitants of the city fled the war and became refugees. Iran may move Shias from Iraq to Aleppo, which lies on “Iran's arc of influence” from Tehran to the Mediterranean, and tilt the demographic balance against the Sunnis. According to *The Guardian*, “It [Aleppo] is likely to be a new centre of Tehran's geopolitical projection.”³

Like Russia, Iran has achieved its goal. But just as Russia can be accused of profiting from the misery of the Syrian people, Iran is feared to be committing a graver sin of segregating the sects to keep a firmer grip over the land, which might sow the seeds of the next crisis.

China has guaranteed US\$2 billion thus far for an industrial park with promises of much more. The old Silk Route once passed through Palmyra and Damascus before turning towards Beirut and Istanbul. Syria, therefore, falls under Xi Jinping's “One Belt One Road” initiative to boost international trade through the envisioned revival of the Silk Route.

The Chinese intend to grab more oil contracts, in addition to the construction projects in places that the war has left in rubble. Since China is not exactly known for tracking the Human Rights Index of the countries it does business with, as with Iran and Russia, there is little expectation that they will insist on Assad establishing check and balances.

NEED FOR A MORAL COMPASS

India is the tiniest cog in the wheel that might slowly drive Syria back to life. It has the capacity of investing US\$20 billion, a small fraction of the US\$300 billion needed. Recently, an Indian company, Apollo International, wrapped up one project worth US\$25 million and renovated the iron and steel plant at Hama. The US\$100-million contract signed by BHEL on the Tishreen power plant is in limbo. It was abandoned because of the conflict, and the work has not yet resumed. Another project to explore oil and natural gas in Deir Ezzor, a block won by ONGC Videsh Ltd, has yet to take off because of the ongoing battle in the eastern region of Syria. In addition, India has pledged Syria aid worth US\$4 million, which is yet to be sent.

As Asian giants seize the space in Syria, it is doubtful that Russia, Iran and China will do more than look after their own interests.

India backs the Assad regime, but it has always advocated a political resolution instead of an externally enforced regime change. New Delhi can play a constructive role in the post-war phase and become the voice calling for sustainable change.

In 2016, a top Indian diplomat told this author that Russia had advised India to organise a platform on Syrian reconstruction and invite the contributing nations. The Ministry of External Affairs sat on it so as not to upset the US, for the move might be considered "pro-Russia". Perhaps it is time that India uses its good relations with Syria to not only obtain projects but also do good for the Syrian people. Democratic reforms are urgently required and can be the first step towards reconciliation within Syria. India should push for them and offer assistance in institution building.

Assad has won, and his stature is incontestable. Someone on the table must convince him of the need for change; that someone can be New Delhi. [ORF](#)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Anchal Vohra is a journalist shuttling between Berlin and Beirut. She writes on the Middle East and Europe.

ENDNOTES

1. On September 18th 2017, news agency *Reuters* reported - Anti Assad countries will not be funding Syria's reconstruction until political process on track. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-un-assembly-syria/anti-assad-nations-say-no-to-syria-reconstruction-until-political-process-on-track-idUSKCN1BT1WP>
2. In an article for *Foreign Affairs* magazine, Syria Analyst Sam heiler writes - Dont fund Syria's reconstruction - The West Has Little Leverage and Little to Gain. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/syria/2017-10-04/dont-fund-syrias-reconstruction>
3. In a report published on 17th December 2016, Martin Chulav of the *Guardian* writes how Russian influence has risen but Iran is the real winner in Aleppo. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/dec/17/aleppo-fall-syria-iran-winner-influence-analysis>



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20, Rouse Avenue Institutional Area, New Delhi - 110 002, INDIA
Ph. : +91-11-43520020, 30220020. Fax : +91-11-43520003, 23210773
E-mail: contactus@orfonline.org
Website: www.orfonline.org