

Footing the Bill

Russian and Iranian Investment and American Withdrawal in Syria

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The Assad regime's impending victory and the Trump administration's pending plan to withdraw from Syria makes the question of Syrian reconstruction more pressing than ever. This is especially the case as Russia and Iran—the two main allies of the Assad regime—vie to consolidate their economic and strategic gains in the country. Examining the economic groundwork that both countries have laid in Syria helps clarify the Russian and Iranian strategic visions for the country, providing pointers as to how the United States and its allies can remain influential even after a troop withdrawal.

Syria's civil war is, by far, the longest and most lethal winter to follow the Arab Spring. After more than six and a half years, casualties total between 400,000 and 500,000 dead and two million wounded, and of a population of 13.5 million, more than 11 million are estimated as being dispersed at home or abroad. In addition to the vast human cost, the country's economy has been assessed as being in worse condition than was the German economy in the immediate aftermath of the World War II.¹ The United Nations has estimated that reconstruction costs will amount to approximately USD 250 billion; the Assad regime estimates a figure almost double that at USD 400 billion.² As the war draws to a close, how the hefty bill for Syria's reconstruction will be footed and how an America poised for withdrawal and its weary allies fit into that picture are both questions that loom large.

The United States, the European Union, and the Gulf States have, over the past three years, conditioned their support for the reconstruction process on “a genuine political transition that can be supported by a majority of the Syrian people” as per UNSC Resolution 2254.³ The bloc's provisional largesse is, in this view, a carrot in a situation where sticks have decidedly been ruled out; in the words of erstwhile British Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson, Western funds for Syria represent a “big card left to play in a pretty poor hand” and a long-shot way by which to move the country “away from Assad.”⁴ Assad, for his part, “banned” Western donors in the summer of 2017, claiming “we don't need the West. . . . The West is not honest at all, they don't give, they only take”⁵; on another occasion, he rebuffed the cash-for-transition idea as a rouse by which his enemies would try to “accomplish through politics what they failed to accomplish on the battlefield and through terrorism.”⁶

President Donald Trump has long been skeptical of US involvement in the Syrian Civil War, tweeting before the rise of ISIS in 2013 that the United States “should stay the hell out of Syria,” warning his followers “WHAT WILL WE GET FOR OUR LIVES AND \$ BILLIONS? ZERO.”⁷ During the Trump campaign, the departure of Assad was never discussed, and candidate Trump even expressed a willingness to work with the regime against the infamous terror group.⁸ While at the time of writing, the US withdrawal is the subject of much confusion and indeed, contention within the Trump administration itself,⁹ given the priority given to ISIS during the campaign and with the would-be caliphate dramatically diminished in strength, it is reasonable to believe that Trump’s intentions are serious. The contention is how the return of American troops might square with the administration’s new primary goal in Syria, that being, in the phrasing of Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, to “expel every last Iranian boot” from the country.¹⁰



(US Army photo by SSGT Raymond Boyington)

Figure 1. Normalcy in Syrian territory under US coalition control. A group of children and parents await a bus to get to school in Ayn Issa, Syria, 31 December 2018. Coalition Forces continue to train, assist, and advise partner forces to maintain regional stability.

This is a sensible course of action for several reasons. An entrenched Iranian presence in Syria would mean that the country continues to be a focal node in a brewing regional cold war, threatening American credibility with its Gulf part-

ners and Syria's long-term stability.¹¹ This is in addition to the fact that Iranian grand strategy hinges on the mobilization and exacerbation of sectarian divides, further threatening Syria's internal cohesion. Israel's concerns for its northern border are yet another consideration: should Iran gain too considerable a foothold in Syria, the risk of a war between Israel and Hezbollah rises considerably, further endangering regional stability. As the conclusion of the civil war seems in sight, the pressing question is how to disrupt Iranian influence even in the event of an American withdrawal. It is here that the question of reconstruction funding is most relevant.

Examining the developing economic dimension of Russian and Iranian involvement in Syria adds perspective to the strategic interests of both countries, the extent of their entrenchment, and also the degree to which their long-term interests conflict. This article hopes to show, through examining their calculated investments in postwar Syria, both Russia and Iran have attempted to translate their contribution to the Assad regime's war effort into enduring strategic gains after the civil war's end and even if their military contingents are evacuated or significantly downsized. Following this examination, the article will consider ways in which the United States can leverage the conflicts of Iranian and Russian interests, which constitute an opportunity for the United States and its partners to gain something from the civil war's conclusion, even after the withdrawal of American boots from the ground.

Iran's Reconstruction Investments

Tehran's support for its "closest ally"¹² endured throughout the height of the international sanctions regime on Iran's nuclear program; an undisclosed Arab intelligence agency alleged that annual Iranian aid to the Syrian regime lies between USD 7 billion and USD 8 billion a year.¹³ This is in addition to contributing several thousand troops in combat and advisory roles and sponsoring both more than 1,200 fighters from the Lebanese paramilitary group Hezbollah and a "40,000-strong" Shi'a Foreign Legion.¹⁴ Official Iranian sources reported losses of over 2,000 troops from the start of the war to March 2018, the Shi'a legions enduring hundreds more.¹⁵ In January 2018, a senior assistant to the Iranian foreign minister stated that "once [the Iranian forces'] job is finished . . . they will withdraw from the Syrian territory."¹⁶ Notwithstanding the question of how high the bar for "a job finished" is,¹⁷ even if Iran were to withdraw, Tehran is, along with Moscow, one of the few dependable partners available to Syria for its reconstruction and has used that position to economically and strategically vindicate Iranian intervention.

Senior Iranian officers have been vocal about the importance of their long-term presence. The Iranian chief of staff claimed that Iran's acquisition of naval bases in

Syria is “more than ten times [the importance] of . . . nuclear technology,”¹⁸ and the intelligence director of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) commented in 2013 that Syria is “Iran’s 35th Province.”¹⁹ A consolidated Iranian presence in Syria after the civil war would be conducive to a number of Iranian geo-strategic aims, namely the creation of a contiguous “landline” through predominantly Shi’a and Kurdish lands. Such a corridor would stretch from Iran, through Iraq, ending at the Mediterranean, and would be especially valuable as a way to reroute goods and troops from the US Fifth Fleet in the Persian Gulf.²⁰ The Iranian military used this route for the first time in December 2017,²¹ and in April 2018, Iranian sources reported an agreement among Iraq, Syria, and Iran to build a highway over the next two years to transport goods among Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon.²² This geographic contiguity would also make it harder for Israel to thwart Iran’s efforts to upgrade Hezbollah’s stockpile of long-range surface-to-surface (SSM) and surface-to-air (SAM) missiles,²³ an effort that has triggered hundreds of Israeli strikes on weapons convoys over the course of the war.²⁴ Examining Iran’s biggest investments in Syria and this strategic context strongly implies a long-term strategy of locking in gains in hard-fought areas and presents an economic dimension to the notion of an Iranian corridor.

There is, firstly, the geopolitical dimension of Iranian investment. Tehran has invested in the northern cities of Homs and Aleppo, which Iranian forces played considerable roles in reconquering over the last two years.²⁵ In 2017, the Iranian Students News Agency reported that Iranian and Venezuelan companies will build an oil refinery facility near Homs at an estimated cost of USD 1 billion, which represents a potential avenue by which Iran could skirt sanctions on its oil exports.²⁶ Iranian companies have also extended their reach into real estate and property development. In August 2018, the Syrian Ministry of Public Works and Housing agreed with an Iranian economic delegation on the construction of 30,000 housing units in Aleppo and Homs, as well as Damascus.²⁷ In July 2012, a memorandum of understanding (MOU) was signed between the Iranian and Syrian Energy Ministries detailing Syria’s desire to “purchase electricity from Iran, [to be transferred] through Iraqi territory and transferred to Lebanon in two phases,”²⁸ with 1000MW being distributed to Iraq, 500MW to Syria, and 100MW to Lebanon.²⁹ In 2017, Iran declared its intention to create the “largest electricity supply network in the Islamic world,” connecting the electricity grids of the entire “Shi’a crescent.”³⁰ This is in addition to reports detailing how land and property in former opposition-controlled areas have been confiscated by the Assad regime and reallocated to private and state-owned Iranian companies,³¹ adding further to the speculation that Iran is pressing for demographic swaps between rebel fighters’ families and “Shi’a fighters” to cohere a “Shi’a space” in Syria.³²

The prominent role taken in reconstruction by the IRGC should also be noted. Firstly, numerous companies linked to and owned by the IRGC have added “lucrative contracts” to their portfolio “on a no-bidding basis,” the Corps today represents the bulk of Iran’s contingent in Syria and is a highly influential political and economic force within Iran. Recent analysis suggests that the paramilitary group has accrued a larger share of reconstruction bids than other private or state companies.³³ The breadth of these investments is impressive. IRGC-linked and IRGC-owned³⁴ firms have secured contracts to rebuild Syria’s destroyed telecommunications networks and to become the country’s third mobile operator.³⁵ The IRGC’s Khatam al-Anbia Construction Company³⁶ has signed several MOUs with the Assad regime to undertake various reconstruction projects.³⁷ The IRGC-linked³⁸ Mapna Group secured a EUR 130 million project to build five gas-powered power plants in the Aleppo region.³⁹ In addition to the clear strategic logic behind Iranian investment, the involvement of the IRGC is another way by which Iran can entrench itself in Syria in the long term. With that, Tehran’s contracts in Syria have raised Iran’s stakes in the country even higher, reconstruction shaping up to be the second stage of the realization of a greater Iranian strategy of which the civil war itself was stage one. A parallel might be drawn here between Iran’s postconflict investment in Lebanon following the Second Lebanon War of 2006, the end of the Syrian occupation and pressing need for investment creating the necessary conditions for Iran to sign some five major agreements and MOUs on economic cooperation and investment.⁴⁰

Russia’s Reconstruction Investments

Official Russian estimates place the country’s spending on the civil war at USD 4 billion (33 million rubles),⁴¹ and as of 2018, the Russian Defense Ministry estimates that 63,000 Russian troops have fought in Syria⁴² and nearly a hundred Russian soldiers have died since the beginning of the Russian intervention.⁴³ The Russian decision to intervene in Syria came in the midst of sinking oil prices, the aftermath of the 2011 NATO intervention in Libya, and a raft of sanctions passed against Russia during the 2014 Ukrainian crisis. As early as 2008, Russia has considered an expanded presence in Syria as a means of countering Western strategic advances, as tensions rose with the West over Bush administration plans to place antiballistic missiles (ABM) in Poland and continued NATO expansion.⁴⁴ The eruption of the Syrian Civil War and Obama administration’s vacillation over the meaning of its “red lines” provided an opportunity for Russia to counter America’s strategic gains and sanctions, while parrying perceived American interventionism.⁴⁵

Early on in the Russian intervention, observers speculated that Moscow joined the fray anticipating a “grand bargain” with Western powers, exchanging Assad’s

head for a settlement in Crimea.⁴⁶ As the tide of the war turned in Assad's favor, Moscow's strategy came to take a more long-term view of Russia's presence in Syria, adjusting to its status as a key interlocutor and player in the Middle East. Today, Russia holds frequent discussions about Syria with virtually all the region's main players and has engineered a close relationship with Turkey, while relations between the West and the Erdogan government in Istanbul continue to deteriorate across numerous different issues.⁴⁷ Moreover, Syria's continued lease to Russia of a naval base at Tartus today serves to complement Russia's Black Sea Fleet, supporting Russian power projection into the Mediterranean as the second base of Russia's Fifth Operational Squadron, formed in 2013. Another deal was signed in 2017, allowing Russia to maintain its leased air base in Hmeimem and keep 11 ships at the Tartus Naval Facility⁴⁸ for some 50 years, with automatic 25-year renewals.⁴⁹



(Photo courtesy of Office of the President of Russia)

Figure 2. Russo–Syrian agreements. Syrian president Bashar Assad and Russian president Vladimir Putin, Russian meet 21 November 2017 in Sochi, Russia, to discuss the closing phases of Russian support for operations in Syria.

In addition to these military prerogatives, Russian contractors have also received priority status in reconstruction projects, and Syria has made clear its hopes to integrate itself into Moscow-run economic forums, most notably the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU). In July 2015, Syrian prime minister Wael al-Halqi expressed interest in joining the EEU,⁵⁰ with negotiations slated to begin after the war's end.⁵¹ It has also been reported that Syria hopes to negotiate the creation of a free trade zone with Russia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan.⁵² The influence of domes-

tic Russian politics can also be seen in the lead role assumed by the Russian constituent republic of Chechnya in the reconstruction of several prestige buildings in Syria. The Chechen government financed the reconstruction of the destroyed Ummayyad Mosque, for USD 15 million, and a foundation chaired by the head of the Chechen Republic, Ramzan Kadyrov, further funded the reconstruction of the Khalid Ibn Walid Mosque in Homs.⁵³

Moscow has concentrated the bulk of Russia's investment in Syria in the energy sector. Russian experts have speculated that the country's powerful energy companies have wielded considerable influence in determining the course of Russian policy and investment in Syria.⁵⁴ These companies have also played a role on the ground by enlisting private military companies to aid the Assad regime in regaining ground in exchange for long-term contracts. The executive director of the Russian Union of Gas and Oil Industrialists stated in July 2015 that projects with a value of "at least \$1.6 billion" left unimplemented as a consequence of the civil war would be resumed after the conflict is resolved.⁵⁵ In December 2016, the Syrian government awarded 25 percent of Syria's oil and gas production to the Russian energy firms Evro Polis and Stroytransgaz.⁵⁶ In addition to this, a road map was announced in February 2018 confirming that only Russian companies will work on reconstruction projects pertaining to oil and gas.⁵⁷ The resumption of these contracts, in addition to this lion's share in the Syrian energy industry, secures Russia's long-term influence in the country.

In July 2018, the Russian Energy Ministry further announced that several Russian companies are exploring possibilities in the development of geothermal power plants, in addition to the construction and restoration of oil and gas fields, refineries, and other infrastructure.⁵⁸ The Assad regime has invited Lukoil and Gazprom Neft to help rebuild infrastructure destroyed in the conflict,⁵⁹ with "Stroytransgaz, Tatneft, Soyuzneftegaz and Uralmash" being mentioned elsewhere as candidates for reconstruction contracts in Syria's energy sector.⁶⁰ The Syrian General Establishment of Geology and the Russian engineering company Stroytransgaz signed a 50-year agreement with the Syrian government in March 2018, acquiring a 70-percent share of the production of phosphate from the al-Sharqiya mines near Palmyra, which have "an annual production of about 2.2 million tons and a geological reserve of 105 million tons."⁶¹ This agreement was described by *Al-Watan* as taking place in part "in exchange for [Russia's] support for Damascus in its war against the opposition."⁶²

There is also the intrigue of the arrangement between Russian companies and the Syrian government, whereby the former use mercenary companies to capture territory for the latter. In June 2017, the Associated Press reported on a 47-page contract leaked to the news agency the preceding December corroborating this

and detailing how Russian energy company Evro Polis would receive “25 percent of the proceeds from oil and gas production at fields its contractors [from the Wagner Group, a Russian paramilitary organization] capture and secure from Islamic State militants.”⁶³ These contractors have clashed repeatedly with American forces, including a three-hour long firefight last February that saw nearly 300 Russian casualties.⁶⁴ Mercenaries constitute the overwhelming majority of Russian casualties, working for between USD 4,000 and USD 5,000 a month.⁶⁵ This arrangement has served to limit the number of official Russian casualties and some of the Russian intervention’s political exposure, further consolidating Moscow’s long-term gains across the Syrian market. Russia’s dominance in the Syrian energy market entrenches Moscow in a sector often touted as a crossroads for Iranian or Gulf pipelines to the Mediterranean. If implemented, such pipelines would diminish Russian dominance in the European energy market.⁶⁶ Moreover, with these developments, just as in the Iranian case, major players in Russian domestic politics have made significant, long-term gains in Syria that compound the geopolitical significance of Russia’s successful intervention.

The Future of the Axis

Having outlined the scale and scope of Russian and Iranian investment in Syria’s reconstruction so far, the situational nature of the Iran–Russia alliance in Syria is clear. For Iran, Syria is a key node in connecting Tehran to the Mediterranean and a point of leverage over its regional rivals; securing this node is an aim that Iran, and the IRGC especially, has expended much to achieve. It is exactly this which makes Iran a liability for Russia’s own strategic and economic gains in Syria. Iran’s antagonism toward many of the region’s power players, particularly Israel, dramatically risks the stability of the postwar Assad regime. This risk, and the reticence of the United States and its allies to help reconstruct a Syria saturated by Iranian influence,⁶⁷ pose barriers to the true consummation of Russia’s victory. In addition, there is also the notion that Tehran and Moscow have divergent visions of how a postwar Syrian state would look. As one analyst succinctly stated, “Russia is interested in the unity and sovereignty of Syria, whereas Iran seeks to create a state within a state.”⁶⁸ For Iran, marshaling of sectarian division in Syria and elsewhere would serve best to maximize its influence in the region; for Russia, a strong Syrian state, free from insurrection and sectarianism, would better guarantee Moscow’s new influence in the Middle East.⁶⁹

Russian efforts to reconsolidate the Syrian state would seem to corroborate this narrative. Twice last year, Pres. Vladimir Putin insisted that “foreign forces” exit Syria as soon as possible.⁷⁰ Russia has, too, worked to place the various Shi’a militias operating in Syria under the rubric of the Assad regime’s Syrian National

Defence Forces,⁷¹ a move that would at once diminish the influence of Iran and Hezbollah on the ground and serve to centralize Assad's military power. Russia has also worked to undermine Iran's efforts at long-term military entrenchment. In March 2018, Israeli sources reported that Russia stepped in to forestall Iranian plans for a naval base in Tartus.⁷² Assad similarly rebuffed an Iranian request in 2016 to move SAM and SSM batteries into Syria and another request from Tehran to set up permanent bases.⁷³ In addition, Russia's frequent coordination with Israel and increasingly close relationship with Turkey further place Russia in a commanding interlocutory position between the two regional powers, leading Moscow to occasionally accommodate Israel and Turkey in a way that has compromised the full fruition of Iran's Syria strategy. Russia's benign stance toward Israel has enabled frequent strikes on Iranian positions, and a desire to prevent escalation allegedly led Moscow to press for Iranian forces to leave southern Syria in June 2018.⁷⁴ Moreover, Russia has frequently stalled a planned Syrian–Iranian offensive on the last rebel stronghold in Idlib, leading to the subsequent creation of a jointly patrolled buffer zone between Aleppo and the port city of Latakia.⁷⁵

Russia seems to enjoy a favored position in the reconstruction race, so much so that Moscow has in fact managed to wrestle contracts away from Iran. In June 2017, the Syrian government signed contracts with Iran earlier in the year giving that country the rights to “the exploration, extraction and investment of phosphate” in mines in Sawana and Khunayfis in the country's northwest, “the most important phosphate extraction areas in Syria.”⁷⁶ However, in March 2018, it was reported that Stroytransgaz started maintenance of the al-Sharqiya and Khunayfis mines, the Syrian People's Assembly having reallocated investment and extraction rights for the Palmyra mines to Stroytransgaz.⁷⁷ According to the Russian news service *RBC*, “a source close to Syrian government told *RBC* that the contract for the restoration of the Damascus mines was really going to be given to Iran, but in the end, the choice was made in favor of Russia.”⁷⁸ Iranian officials have taken note of such instances, and the Iranian media has expressed its consternation at Russia's seniority in the partnership.

Several official Iranian outlets have aired criticism of and consternation about Russian policy in Syria for a number of reasons, among them Russia's benign attitude toward Israeli policy in Syria⁷⁹ and an increasing premonition that Russia would throw Iran “under the bus” in exchange for economic and political concessions from the West.⁸⁰ Some outlets have reached into the store of history to invoke the historical specters of the Treaty of Turkmenchay and the joint Anglo–Soviet invasion of Iran in 1941 as a means by which to emphasize the contingency of the alliance in Syria.⁸¹ Another narrative gaining currency in right-leaning Iranian media is that Assad is secretly cooperating with Russia to the detriment

of Iran's interests. The website Baztab, founded by a conservative IRGC general, complained that "Iran . . . [is] sidelined from reconstruction" and that "should Iran desire to participate . . . it must negotiate with Russia!"⁸² Another website associated with the general purported that a secret agreement about the reconstruction process "between Moscow and Damascus" was "messing Iran over," denying the country full access to investment "despite the high costs incurred by Iran."⁸³

This narrative, it would seem, has diffused, one newspaper linked to Iranian president Hassan Rouhani colorfully attacking Assad as an "ungrateful, selfish, cowardly and pansy person" for his ostensible preference for Russia.⁸⁴ Iranian officials have also echoed this sentiment, with a senior military advisor to the Iranian Supreme Leader, who in September 2016 revealed his fears about a Syrian agreement being signed between Russia and the United States, stating, "[T]hat does not take Iran's share into account."⁸⁵ Moreover, in the almost immediate wake of senior American officials' speculation about Russian abandonment last year, Iran signed an agreement with Syria in August to ensure Iran's continued "presence, participation and assistance" in the country, Iran's defense minister using the occasion to underscore that "no third party can affect the presence of Iranian advisers in Syria."⁸⁶ Following the recent American withdrawal announcement, some Iranian commentators assessed that Russian preeminence in Syria will drastically undermine Iran's position.⁸⁷

Future Directions

Upon examining the investments made by Russian and Iranian state-affiliated companies and how those investments match both countries' long-term strategies for Syria, it would seem that both countries are pursuing similar, increasingly competitive strategies of investment in key sectors of the Syrian economy to translate their military contributions into long-term influence in Syria. It is important to take a sober view of competition between Iran and Russia even that, as has been pointed out, exaggerating a "rift" between the two would be to ignore the two countries' extensive economic and military cooperation outside the Syrian question.⁸⁸ Nonetheless, as has been shown, the shift in focus from short-term victory to long-term accommodation has led to incipient friction between the two countries, something that increasingly implies a divergence of interests. This is in addition to the fact that, given the poor state of the Russian and Iranian economies, their joint investment nonetheless leaves the reconstruction puzzle incomplete. It is at this juncture that the United States and its allies can bring their influence to bear.

In addition to removing Iranian boots from Syrian ground, undermining Iranian investment in the country should also be taken into consideration. The re-

construction contracts awarded to Iran prime the country for leverage over the Assad regime in the future, and the investment portfolio of the IRGC has been bolstered—its planned refineries on Syria's Mediterranean coast would open up options for the circumvention of sanctions, and its investments further lay an economic framework for the realization of a Shi'a corridor. A multilateral approach would be able to apply enough pressure on the Assad regime and its Russian ally, both of which are anxious to translate their military victory into a political one, to take steps to diminish Iranian influence across the board. The United States, the European Union, and the Gulf States should make investment in Syrian reconstruction contingent on a full Iranian military withdrawal from Syria and the reallocation of contracts, at least from IRGC-owned and affiliated Iranian companies. This is a pragmatic strategy that would at once address three major questions that must be answered if the Syrian crisis is to end once and for all: the reconstruction of Syria, the return of refugees to their homes, and, to a significant extent, the question of regional stability.

Earlier in January, the US Special Representative for Syria Engagement stated that the United States is withholding reconstruction aid until Iran withdraws,⁸⁹ this is an important step and represents a considerable carrot with which to tempt the Assad regime. Developing this approach into a multilateral strategy, arraying America's European and Gulf allies around the same goal, would help create the pressure necessary to force the Assad regime to reconsider its options. Within the European bloc, recent developments suggest that France would be the most influential and vocal ally of this strategy. Numerous European states, particularly Germany, are anxious to reach a full resolution to the conflict as soon as possible, given the political pressures of the refugee crisis, with Italy openly mulling reopening its embassy⁹⁰ and the United Kingdom allegedly preparing to renovate its embassy in Damascus.⁹¹ France, however, has consistently and forcefully backed the demand that Iranian forces leave Syria,⁹² French premier Emmanuel Macron appealing to President Trump on more than one occasion to keep America's contingent in Syria's northeast to prevent the consolidation of Iranian forces there.⁹³ The European Union has a significant stake in the resolution of the Syrian conflict due to the refugee crisis, although it has so far refused to commence reconstruction before the implementation of UNSC Resolution 2254, stipulating a full ceasefire followed by free and fair elections. The European Union should, in addition to this stipulation and along with the United States and the Gulf allies, make the radical diminution of Iranian influence in Syria another condition on Europe's contribution to Syrian reconstruction.

Even more than the European states, the Gulf States have an interest in dislodging Iran from Syria. While Qatar remains a committed opponent of the

Assad regime's rehabilitation,⁹⁴ the other Gulf States have poised themselves to take a more pragmatic approach. The Arab League is likely to vote to readmit Syria as a member at a March summit in Tunisia, with several Gulf States playing a leading role in this development,⁹⁵ and the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain reopened their Damascus embassies in late December 2018.⁹⁶ These three states doubtless conferred with Saudi Arabia before taking these steps, and given the regional context, it is likely the move was taken with diluting Iranian influence in mind. While Assad has insisted that the Gulf will play no role in Syria's reconstruction, given the massive cost of such an undertaking and the Gulf States' significant economic and diplomatic strength, it is questionable whether the Syrian government could withstand a generous, albeit conditional offer of aid, particularly a multilaterally coordinated one.

A final word about Russia. Moscow has successfully locked Russia into Syria, making itself diplomatically and militarily indispensable while scoring several lucrative contracts in key sectors of the Syrian economy. As illustrated, the extent of Russia's entrenchment in Syria and indispensability to the Assad regime is such that any Russian military withdrawal from Syria would be superficial. Russia's interest in locking in its gains once and for all should be leveraged to achieve an Iranian withdrawal from Syria, giving the Assad regime the necessary political support to demand both the evacuation of Iranian troops and proxies from the country. The formal conclusion of the war, the rehabilitation of the Assad regime as the legitimate Syrian government, and the financing of Syria's reconstruction are the last three hurdles to the completion of Russia's mission in Syria. The withdrawal of American troops from Syria is conducive to the former, although the latter remains a crucial point of leverage that can and should be used by the United States and its allies. One of the reasons Russian investment in Syria was highlighted in this article is to underscore that, even if Russia were to withdraw its troops, the extent of Russian influence in Syria is such that the withdrawal of Russian troops would be superficial and should no longer be seen as a trading chip as per Moscow's original aim. At the Helsinki Summit in July 2018, Syria was brought up alongside other issues in US–Russia relations, among them Crimea, American ABM sites in Poland, and Russian natural gas exports to Germany.⁹⁷ While of considerable importance, significant Russian influence in Syria is now a given, and reconstruction funding is a missing piece of the puzzle that only the United States and its allies can provide; as such, concessions should not be made elsewhere, especially in Europe, which has a far higher place in the Russian order of priorities.

The northeastern region of Syria, currently occupied by the United States and its local allies, contains 90 percent of Syria's oil and gas fields, major water re-

sources, dams, and some of Syria's most important agricultural land;⁹⁸ America's withdrawal from this area permits the subsequent reconquest of that region by the Assad regime and Russian forces, allowing for the conclusion of this long, painful chapter of Syrian history. While events on the ground change on a daily basis, examining Russian and Iranian investments is a useful way to glean insight into the two countries' long-term plans for, and key interests in, Syria, in addition to clarifying some of the domestic political motivations for continued intervention in the country's civil war. It is also a prism through which to observe the mounting friction between the two countries' long-term visions and through which to consider how this discord might be navigated to a settlement in Syria that will best serve the interests of the United States and its allies in the region.

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