

Viewpoint

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War of words over who rebuilds Syria, how and how much

The bombs have not yet fallen silent in Syria but the international community is already squabbling about how to rebuild the shattered country.

The United Nations has said reconstruction would cost at least \$250 billion; other organisations saying it could cost three times as much.

Since the conflict began nearly seven years ago, half of Syria's people have fled their homes and some 13 million need humanitarian aid, including 3 million trapped in besieged and hard-to-reach areas, the United Nations said.

Even if the European Union is not pledging reconstruction, it is paying for aid and remains one of the biggest donors.

India, Oman and Kuwait have signed commercial investment deals in Syria and businesses from China, along with countries in the region such as Lebanon, Egypt and Iraq, are eyeing opportunities. They are focusing on parts of the country that were either not as badly affected by war or have returned to some semblance of normality.

Large-scale reconstruction efforts are likely to remain stalled amid big power bickering and the lack of a durable political settlement, analysts said.

"The war is winding down if you take out the Kurdish and some other areas," said Kamal Alam, a visiting fellow at London's Royal United Services Institute.

"The war is over in the big cities and reconstruction has already started there but nothing on a large scale. It's mostly small- to medium-sized companies doing projects such as basic housing and hotels. There isn't anything on a big scale yet and it's more likely to be China than the European Union or Russia which will do that."

This has not stopped Moscow from pressing the European Union to begin reconstruction efforts within the next few months. Vladimir Chizhov, Russia's representative to the European Union, told the Financial Times that European countries would "bear the responsibility" if they failed to start reconstruction work. It's "high time," he said, to back a programme likely to cost "dozens of billions" of dollars.

The Europeans are being urged by countries that host millions of Syrian refugees to help relieve their burden but the European Union has made clear that reconstruction funds will flow only after a peace agreement with a political transition is in place.

However, Syrian President Bashar Assad appears firmly in place while a peace conference in Russia ended with no more than an agreement to rewrite the constitution. Western countries that support a separate UN-led peace process did not participate.

Turkey began an air and ground offensive in January to target the Syrian Kurdish People's Protection

Units (YPG) militia in Afrin, displacing about 15,000 people. Near Damascus in Eastern Ghouta, about 400,000 people are under siege by government forces. In Raqqa, 112 people died because residents were allowed back to their homes before the town was cleared of bombs after recapture from the Islamic State in October, the United Nations said.

Beijing promised reconstruction efforts, while also urging a political settlement, and it hosted the first trade fair for reconstruction projects last July. "China is ready to take part in the post-war reconstruction of Syria. We will continue our assistance in keeping with our potential," said Xie Xiaoyan, Chinese special envoy for Syria, Tass reported.

Russia, whose military support has greatly helped Assad, was likely to play only a limited role in reconstruction, Alam said.

"Russia is not likely to get involved beyond the oil and gas sector while Iran doesn't have a lot of spare cash," he said. "European companies were never that big in Syria before the war and America was never a player and won't be now."

He also said Riyadh and Qatar would not engage on a government-to-government level with Assad. However, "you never know for sure with Saudi policy because it's always changing. As for ordinary businessmen, they will engage," he said. "There were regular Saudi-Syria flights until only a few months ago. They only stopped because of problems with aircraft, and they will likely resume."

Even if the European Union is not pledging reconstruction, it is paying for aid and remains one of the biggest donors. Ingy Sedky, spokeswoman for the International Committee of the Red Cross in Damascus, said the group was "helping with vital infrastructure such as electricity and water supplies."

However, she added: "People are returning to their homes in places such as Aleppo and Homs but it doesn't mean they have a job or even a home. While some areas of the country are more stable, the humanitarian needs are growing."



Who's going to pay? Syrian men work on reconstructing a damaged building in the northern Syrian city of Raqqa, on January 16. (AFP)

Conflicting agendas to determine reconstruction scenarios in Syria



When the guns fall silent. The scope of destruction at the Salaheddin neighbourhood in eastern Aleppo. (AP)

Samar Kadi

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Though the military conflict continues in parts of Syria, talk about post-conflict reconstruction is emerging now that the regime of Syrian President Bashar Assad, with the backing of allies Russia and Iran, has recaptured much of the country.

Reconstruction appears to be the next battle for shaping Syria's political order. The different actors are likely to use the process to push their political agendas, said Middle East policy experts hosted by Carnegie's Middle East Centre in Beirut.

"What we often think of as a sequential process in which conflict ends and reconstruction begins is not the way post-conflict reconstruction is unfolding in Syria," Steven Heydemann, senior fellow in the Brookings Institution's Centre for Middle East Policy, said on February 1. "In fact, a number of very difficult challenges have arisen around the question of how to structure reconstruction in Syria, notably which actors will play what kind of roles, etc."

Heydemann argued that, from the regime's perspective, "it is

very clear" that reconstruction is viewed as a dual-purpose project. "It is about rebuilding the country, particularly rebuilding the economy but it is also about reasserting (the) Assad regime's sovereignty and its authority over the entire territory of pre-war Syria," he said.

"The regime faces significant constraints in trying to implement its reconstruction agenda, especially the lack of resources and poor capacity of state institutions which have been weakened during the conflict," he said.

While reconstruction costs are widely assumed to be at least \$300 billion, the Syrian government is under severe financial pressure and the economy is struggling with inflation. This means that foreign powers will likely have to foot most of the reconstruction bill.

Russia is facing the challenge of normalising the Assad regime, Heydemann said, adding: "It is using reconstruction to enhance the sovereignty and legitimacy of the regime. This has defined the strategy that the Russians have used in engaging in reconstruction diplomacy with the EU, the UN and, to a certain extent, the US."

For Western backers of the Syrian opposition, reconstruction funds are viewed as their only remaining tool to exert leverage. "It is seen as an opportunity to impose conditions and secure concessions from the Assad regime on what the structure of a post-conflict political order will look like," Heydemann said. "Also, the West wants to ensure that the resources committed to reconstruction are not used in ways that reinforce the regime in unconditional fashion or contribute to the process of reconstructing its authoritarian (rule)."

With such differences in the political agendas of the various actors, the likelihood of finding a path for an effective strategy of reconstruction is relatively low and the probable result will be an extended deadlock.

If the West believes that it can use funding to win concessions from the regime, it is in for disappointment, Heydemann said. "Assad will not make any concessions to get Western aid and he has explicitly defined terms on which the regime will permit Western donors to support reconstruction... Only the governments that have been loyal to the regime in the course of the war will be awarded contracts."

Marc Lynch, a non-resident senior fellow at the Carnegie En-

dowment for International Peace, asked who would provide reconstruction assistance for Syria.

"(US President Donald) Trump is not going to give any money. It is 'America First' now. No particular EU investment is expected and no UN aid," Lynch said.

Lynch says Gulf countries are "partisans" in the war. "So, there is zero chance that aid given by those Arab countries will be politically neutral."

For potential Western donors, reconstruction funds are viewed as the one remaining tool of leverage on the Assad regime.

The universe of possible donors and investors is not limited to the West or Arab Gulf countries. However, none of the regime's key supporters will be able to provide significant levels of funding for reconstruction. The regime has structured Syria's economic and regulatory environment to absorb and distribute reconstruction contracts on its terms, giving priority to investors from countries that stood by Damascus.

"The likelihood is that we will see a regime-led, poorly funded, politically motivated strategy of reconstruction, which will probably benefit those who demonstrated their loyalty to the regime and penalise those that the regime identifies as opponents," Heydemann said.

"The process of reconstruction will be partial, unequal, not transparent and not accountable. It will be driven heavily by small-scale local initiatives, rather than by large-scale externally designed reconstruction efforts and that is more likely to lead us down a path in which Syria will experience neither stability nor economic or social recovery," he added.

Heydemann stressed that it was "critical" for Western actors to define the criteria that the Syrian regime will need to meet for receiving reconstruction funds.

"Governments and (monetary) agencies should be prepared to walk away if those conditions are not met," he added.

Samar Kadi is The Arab Weekly Travel and Society section editor.