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Center for Iranian Studies in Ankara

IRAN AND THE RECONSTRUCTION OF SYRIA

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Iran and the Reconstruction of Syria

Suriye'nin Yeniden İnşası ve İran'ın Konumu

بازسازی سوریه و موقعیت ایران

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Dr. Mohammad Abdolmajid graduated from Tehran University from the department of Persian language and Literature in 2006. He then continued studying in the same university where he obtained his MA degree in 2011 and his PhD in 2014 both in Persian Literature. His primary research interests are Classical and Modern Prose, Comparative Literature, Iranian thoughts as well as recent political developments in this country. Apart from his native Arabic, he speaks Persian, and knows English and Turkish languages.

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SUMMARY

- The Islamic Republic of Iran, which has spent an exorbitant amount of money on maintaining Bashar al-Assad's power, is trying to preserve its influence in Syria.
- Iran could secure permanence in Syria's future by actively engaging in rebuilding the country.
- Iran's contribution to the reconstruction of Syria faces serious impediments, including al-Assad's and Putin's counteracting activities against Iran's dynamic presence in this country, the rivalry with Russia, and lack of sufficient facilities and capabilities of Iran for ensuring its continuance in Syria.
- Despite the signing of several contracts and memoranda of understanding between Iran and Syria, many of these agreements have, after several years, still not come into force.
- Iran's revenues from economic cooperation with Syria are insignificant compared to the disbursements made for maintaining al-Assad in power. Iran's objective from such deals is to further establish a strong base for itself in Syria's future.

Keywords: Syria, Reconstruction, Iran, Russia.

ÖZET

- Beşşar Esed'i iktidarda tutmak amacıyla büyük maliyetler üstlenen İran, Suriye'deki nüfuzunu korumaya çalışmaktadır.
- İran için uzun vadede Suriye'nin geleceğinde yer edinmeyi garanti altına almanın yollarından biri Suriye'nin yeniden inşa sürecine katılmaktır.
- İran'ın Suriye'nin yeniden inşasında aktif rol almasının önünde, Esed ve Putin'in İran'ın önüne çıkardığı sorunlar, Rusya ile rekabete girmenin getireceği güçlükler ve İran'ın Suriye'yi inşa edecek yeterli kapasiteden yoksun olması gibi ciddi engeller bulunmaktadır.
- İran ve Suriye arasında imzalanan muhtelif anlaşmaların pek çok maddesi üzerinden geçen yıllara rağmen henüz yürürlüğe girmemiştir.
- İran'ın Suriye ile yaptığı ekonomik iş birliğinden elde edeceği gelir Esed'i iktidarda tutmak için yaptığı masrafa nispetle oldukça azdır. İran İslam Cumhuriyeti'nin imzalanan anlaşmalardan asıl beklentisi Suriye'nin geleceğinde söz sahibi olmaktır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Suriye, Yeniden inşa, İran, Rusya

چکیده

- جمهوری اسلامی که هزینه های گزافی بابت ابقای اسد در قدرت خرج کرده است، تلاش می کند نفوذ خود را در سوریه حفظ کند.
 - یکی از راه های پیش روی جمهوری اسلامی برای تضمین حضور بلندمدت خود در آینده سوریه، مشارکت فعال در بازسازی این کشور است.
 - حضور فعال ایران در بازسازی سوریه با موانع جدی مواجه است که از جمله این موانع می توان به موارد ذیل اشاره کرد: سنگ اندازی بشار اسد و پوتین جلوی حضور فعال ایران در سوریه، رقابت با روسیه و نبود امکانات و توان کافی در ایران برای تحقق این امر.
 - علیرغم امضای چندین قرارداد و تفاهم نامه بین ایران و سوریه، و با گذشت چند سال، هنوز مفاد بیشتر آنها وارد مرحله عمل نشده است.
 - درآمد ایران از همکاریهای اقتصادی با سوریه در مقایسه با هزینه ای که صرف ابقای اسد در قدرت کرده، ناچیز به نظر می رسد. هدف جمهوری اسلامی از این همه قرارداد، بیشتر.
- کلید واژه ها:** سوریه، بازسازی، ایران، روسیه.

Introduction

With the downgrade of military operations in Syria, Beshar al-Assad's allies, particularly Iran, have increasing concerns due to the vacillation and turbulence it feels regarding its status in Syria's future. Having spent a tremendous amount on maintaining al-Assad's power, the Islamic Republic of Iran is struggling to preserve its influence in Syria. One of Iran's strategies to ensure its presence in Syria's future is to earnestly engage in rebuilding the country. However, in this Iran is facing severe encumbrances. On the one hand, Putin and al-Assad are preventing Iran from being effectively present in the process; on the other, Iran has proved unable to play a prominent and leading role in its reconstruction operations for copious reasons.

Reconstruction or Restoration of Legitimacy?

Russian President Vladimir Putin is working to restore al-Assad's lost legitimacy and convince the international community that al-Assad is in charge of Syrian affairs and that other countries should acquiescingly cooperate with him. Moscow's objective is to accelerate the reconstruction of Syria, obtain economic privileges, and reinforce al-Assad's position in power. Moreover, although Moscow postulates that Europe's refugee crisis could be alleviated with support of the European countries in rebuilding Syria it largely failed to do especially in its attempt to persuade the US. Mike Pompeo, the US Secretary of State, responded to the Russian call for rebuilding Syria by saying that as long as Iran-backed forces remain in the country, the US will not contribute even a dollar for reconstruction.¹ The US and Europe call for a political transition as well as an UN-led public election as preliminary conditions to take part in the reconstruction effort. However, for Moscow making Syria's reconstruction contingent

on political transition can politicize the process. Also, Iran's commanding presence in Syria has also deterred wealthy Arab countries from engaging in Syrian economic activities. Russia is aware that it is impossible to perpetually support the Iranian military presence in Syria and that this patronage will at some point bring about dilemmas for Moscow. Thus, in order to persuade other countries to participate in the reconstruction of Syria, one of Russia's options is to diminish Iran's existence in this country.

Conflicting Calculations

From the Iranian perspective, time is ripe enough for al-Assad to compensate his wartime allies by granting them concessions. Furthermore, for Iranian officials, Syria's reconstruction can provide an opportunity to evade the crisis caused in their country by the newly imposed US. Also, Iran presumes that with its influence over the al-Assad administration, it can execute interest-related contracts in Syria and convince al-Assad to subsidize these contracts or to grant concessions to Iran. Rahim Safavi, the former commander of the Revolutionary Guards and the Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei's top adviser, was the first to mention compensating the prodigious costs of the Islamic Republic in Syria by contributing to its reconstruction. According to him, al-Assad is prepared to reimburse the country's loans through Syria's oil, gas and phosphate mines. Referring to a 49-year Russian contract with the al-Assad government based on which Russia was allotted a military base and economic and political privileges, Safavi called for signing similar long-term political and economic contracts with the al-Assad government.² Moreover, Karimi Ghoddousi, a member of National Security and Foreign Policy Commission at Iran's Parliament, spoke about major oil and gas reserves in Syria and argued that al-Assad is ready to render these reserves to Iran for the reconstruction of war-torn zones. He added that Syrians are willing to purchase Iranian con-

¹ "Pompeo: Syria's Reconstruction Depends on Iran's Exit From the Country", Mehr News Agency, 11 October 2018, <https://www.mehrnews.com/news/44272342018>

² "Syria and Iraq have been and will be the Venues for US-Russian Geostategic Competitions", ISNA News Agency, 17 February 2018, <https://www.isna.ir/news/96112815728>

struction materials at a higher price than they do from the EU countries, which is noteworthy given the factory shutdowns and the stagnation of many manufacturing workshops in the country.³ Nevertheless, such claims concerning Iran's recovering and reimbursing its financial losses in Syria, as well as the declarations that al-Assad's government prefers Tehran over Moscow due to religious and political affinities between the two, seem to be more of a domestic propaganda ploy.⁴

Russia, on the other hand, maintains a notably different position in the process. It does not only try to repudiate Iran from extracting energy resources, primarily phosphate, but also endeavors to expel Iran from lucrative reconstruction projects. On December 18, 2017, the Russian Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Rogozin said that only Russia will be involved in rebuilding the Syrian energy plants.⁵ In March 2018, phosphate extraction from the largest Syrian phosphate mine near Tudmur was granted and transferred to Russia for 50 years.⁶ In November 2018, the Syrian Ministry of Industry signed a contract with Russia's Stroytransgaz Company to invest in the only Syria-based fertilizer plant in Homs.⁷ As stated in the agreement, the Russian company will rebuild the plant and operate it for 25-40 years and the shared are split as 65% for the Russian company and 35% for Syria.

Although al-Assad referred to Iran as Syria's most salient economic partner in the reconstruction phase, he is cognizant that his survival in power is at risk as long as Iran is actively present in Syria. Thus, in practice Syria impedes Tehran's exertive presence in the country's reconstruction process. The US President Donald

Trump's argument regarding Saudi Arabia's readiness to finance Syria's reconstruction can be a strategy to encourage al-Assad to distance himself from Iran since obviously Saudis will not disburse this steep amount of money in Syria as long as Iran is there. Therefore, for Riyadh reducing Iran's influence in Syria and estranging al-Assad from Tehran is a precondition to provide financial support in the reconstruction process. Iranian officials realize that these promises remain hearsay and that al-Assad will not only give preference to Moscow over Tehran but also intends to attract Arab investors from the Gulf. The repeated statements by the Iranian officials about its willingness to partake in the reconstruction of Syria indicate that Tehran is unhappy about the reconstruction share it obtained so far. On July 5th, 2018, Behrooz Bonyadi, an Iranian MP, voiced the following unprecedented disapproval and criticism against Russia and Syria: "Today, we are witnessing that al-Assad obscenely has enhanced and increased his cooperation with Putin ... It's not far off that these two politicians will sacrifice Iran for their political benefits and for the sake of Netanyahu and Trump."⁸

In recent months, the Iranian media have reiterated that after suffering the consequences of fighting in Syria, Iran should prohibit other parties to exclusively benefit from the reconstruction process. Moreover, they warned of Russia's circumvention and ostracization of Tehran in the rebuilding process. For instance, Tabnak website criticized Iran's lag in Syria's markets in comparison to Russian economic activities. Qanun newspaper, in a piece titled "Nothing; Iran's share from the Damascus market", wrote the following: "After the extensive costs the Islamic Republic of Iran has paid in the country, the reconstruction contracts are registered in favor of Putin ... Bashar al-Assad should not be let to exclude Iran from the reconstruction process and the post-ISIS/ISIL period."⁹ Some time

³ "Iran's Small Share in the Middle East Trade", Basij News Agency, 12 August 2017, <http://bjc.basijnews.ir/fa/mobile/9045624>

⁴ "Iran's Private Sector will Reconstruct Syria", ILNA News Agency, 19 December 2018, <https://tinyurl.com/y9s5zeup>

⁵ "Deputy Prime Minister of Russia: Russia will Help Syria to Rebuild Energy Facilities", Reuters News Agency, 18 December 2017, <https://ara.reuters.com/article/businessNews/idARAKBNIECIJV>

⁶ "Russia Holds Syrian Phosphate for 50 Years", Al-Araby Al-Jadeed, 28 March 2018, <https://tinyurl.com/ydysmbca>

⁷ "Russia Takes Over the Sole Fertilizer Plant in Syria", Zaman Al Wasl, 1 November 2018, <https://www.zamanalwsl.net/news/article/96007>

⁸ "MP: Putin and Assad sacrifice us", Tabnak, 7 June 2018, <https://www.tabnak.ir/fa/news/812048>

⁹ "Iran's Share of Damascus Market: None", Ghanoon Newspaper, 18 January 2018, <http://www.ghanoondaily.ir/fa/news/main/95087>

ago, Mardomsalari newspaper spoke of Russia and China as serious rivals in the Syrian market, highlighting that Iran's position in Syria should not be taken for granted because any negligence will lead to the loss of this vast and organized market.¹⁰

Reality or Wishful Thinking?

Before the war ends, Iran is preparing itself to be existent in the post-war Syria and has therefore sought to impose treaties on the al-Asad government ahead of other actors. In January 2017, Iran underwrote five cooperation treaties with the Syrian government.¹¹ The signed agreements include the construction of a power plant in Latakia, the reconstruction of a thermal power plant in Aleppo, the reconstruction of the power plants in Homs and Deir Ez-Zor, the assignment of the third mobile operator to Iran, the extraction of phosphate from eastern Syria, the transfer of 5,000 hectares of land to Iran for agricultural development and a thousand hectares for the construction of oil and gas plants. Investments in the Syrian ports sector have been among the items of these agreements as well.

MAPNA Electric Company endorsed an agreement worth €411 million with the Syrian Power Plant on October 5 to build a 540-megawatt power plant in Latakia.¹² This includes the construction of a combined cycle power plant and a gas pipeline in the Latakia port.

Iran is seeking to furnish its private sector with access to economic activities and, in particular, to the reconstruction of Syria. During a meeting with the Iranian Economic Council on August 15, 2018, Syria's housing minister disclosed that Iran's private sector will take over the construction of 30,000 residential units in the provinces of Damascus, Aleppo, and Homs.¹³ In

November of the same year, an Iranian economic delegation consisting of 180 construction, oil, and iron companies proposed the establishment of factories to produce construction materials in Syria. Nevertheless, most of these "private" companies operate under the protection of The Organization for Mobilization of the Oppressed (*Sazman-e- Basij-e Mostaz'afin*) and are somehow connected to the Revolutionary Guards and the institutions supervised by Iran's Supreme Leader.¹⁴

Iran, which has yearned for ingress to the Mediterranean coast, is trying to access the sea via railway by the completion of the Shalamcheh-Basra Railway. With the opening of this route, Iran's railways will reach to the Latakia port through Iraqi lands. Iraq and Syria are linked by a special railroad- assigned for transferring goods- which starts from Latakia, and after crossing the city of Aleppo, arrives in Mosul and Baghdad, then reaches the port of Umm Al-Qasr near the Gulf. The US presence in northeastern Syria has hindered the realization of this goal but the prospective withdrawal of American troops from Syria this obstacle will also be removed. Moreover, by constructing this railroad, Iran will play a more prominent role in rebuilding Syria, thereby making it easier to access the Mediterranean coast and transfer arms to Hezbollah. Recently, following the visit of the Minister of Foreign Trade and Economic Affairs of Syria to Tehran, the media broadcasted the conclusion of a 20-year economic cooperation agreement between Iran and Syria on December 30. Accordingly, the Iranian media reported, all obstacles to joint economic, financial and banking cooperation between the two countries were lifted.¹⁵

Nevertheless, despite the endorsement of all of these contracts, many of them have still not come into force. For instance, following the agreement on cooperation in communications and information technology, in January 2017,

¹⁰ "Syria Reconstruction Market", Pishkhaan News, 4 March 2017, <http://www.pishkhaan.net/news/5960/>

¹¹ "Five Cooperation Agreements Between Iran and Syria" Dolat News, 17 January 2017, <http://dolat.ir/detail/287969>

¹² "Agreement on the Construction of a 540 Megawatt 411 Million Euro Power Plant Between Iran and Syria", ILNA News Agency, 1 November 2018, <https://tinyurl.com/y9y5c6n6>

¹³ "Reconstruction of Syria by Iranian Private Sector", Etamad Online, 19 August 2018, <https://tinyurl.com/y8bduw5u>

¹⁴ "Iran's Private Sector will Reconstruct Syria", ILNA News Agency, 19 December 2018, <https://tinyurl.com/y9s5zeup>

¹⁵ "Economic Cooperation Agreement between Iran and Syria", IRIB News Agency, 30 December 2018, <http://www.iribnews.ir/fa/news/2315230>

Iran was given the concession to launch Syria's third mobile operator, worth \$300 million, but the project has not entered the stage of implementation. Also, the contract for the establishment of a port in the coastal city of Baniyas for the export of oil as well as the agreement to form a joint bank named Alaman still remain on paper too. Ali Nikzad, Iran's Minister of Road and Urban Development announced, in December 2011, the construction of 50,000 residential units in different provinces of Syria in the form of MEHR housing (collective apartments), but no house has so far been erected.¹⁶

Reuters recently reported a decline in the sales of SAIPA, an Iranian automaker, in Syria from 60-50 cars per day in the pre-war period to 3-4 cars currently.¹⁷ This dramatic slump, which highlights Iran's tribulation in its economic plans in Syria, can be ascribed to the difficulty of transporting parts and equipment due to sanctions and the high cost of shipping and insurance as well as competition with similar Russian products. SAIPA manufacturing factory in Syria, 80% of which is owned by Iran's Pride and 20% by Syria, was launched in 2009 and after shutting down for several years resumed its activities in 2016. Subsequently, the assertion of Mahmoud Alavian, SAIPA's CEO in Syria that the factory has not only paid for itself also proved profitable seems to be farfetched.¹⁸

Iran is facing vexing problems in the Syrian market. In September 2018, Hussein Selahvarzi, vice chairman of the Iranian Chamber of Commerce, accused Syria of restricting the export of Iranian goods. Referring to the available cooperation capacity to reach a level of one billion dollars, he expressed displeasure with the current volume of Iran's export to Syria which amounts to no more than \$250 million.¹⁹ Iran's

unsubstantial exports to Syria is not the result of the war, since even prior to 2011, the volume of non-oil exports to Syria had never exceeded \$500 million per year.²⁰ Ali Asghar Juma'ee, deputy chairman of the Common Trade Chamber of Iran and Syria, said that due to a multitude of problems, Iran could not assume a decent position in Syria.²¹ The Iranian Development and Trade Organization believes that the predicaments stem from the Syrian government to seek financial aid instead of conducting trade exchanges. Moreover, according to him Syria's failure to meet their monetary liabilities and timely payment to companies are among the hurdles and challenges of bilateral trade between the two countries.

Is Iran Capable of Rebuilding Syria?

In August 2018, the UN estimated the cost of Syria's reconstruction as \$400 billion. Al-Assad and his allies' onslaught against the Syrian people caused widespread annihilation of residential homes, health centers, educational centers, administrative institutions and a large part of the country's infrastructure. According to the UN Office for Syrian Affairs, Iran spends at least \$6 billion in Syria every year.²²

Aside from the contention with Russia's and al-Assad's procrastination, Iran's ability to dynamically engage in Syria's reconstruction is ambivalent because the fulfillment of this aspiration requires astronomic expenditure that Iran lacks. Regardless of sanctions and an economic crisis, even under normal circumstances, Iran falls short of the facilities needed to rebuild Syria. Furthermore, Iran is in dire need of technological and foreign investment in various fields. According to the official news agency, Iran annually needs \$43 billion foreign investment²³ to

16 "Iran builds 50,000 residential units for Syrian Low-income Groups", Mehr News Agency, 3 November 2011, <https://www.mehnews.com/news/1475597>

17 "Challenges Faced by Iranian Car Factory in Syria", Reuters News Agency, 14 November 2018, <https://ara.reuters.com/article/businessNews/idARAKCNINJ2HC>

18 "Prayd's price in Syria is 132 million USD", Donya-e-qtasat Newspaper, 10 January 2019, <https://tinyurl.com/yb6rysyp>

19 "Vice-President of Iran's Chamber of Commerce: Iran-Syria Trade Cooperation Expands", IRNA News Agency, 17 August 2017, <http://www.irma.ir/fa/News/82634841>

20 "30 Thousand Billion Damascus Market is Waiting for Tehran", Tasnim News Agency, 25 October 2018, <https://www.tasnimnews.com/fa/news/1397/08/03/1861331/>

21 "Syria is a Potential Market for Iran's Exports in the Future", Exim News, 14 October 2017, <http://www.eximnews.ir/detail/News/22140/20>

22 "Iran Contributes \$ 6 Billion to \$ 15 Billion Annually to the Assad regime", DW, 10 June 2015, <https://tinyurl.com/yeyz69f4>

23 "Iran Needs \$ 43 Billion Foreign Investment Annually", Dolat News Agency, 18 January 2017, <http://dolat.ir/detail/288026>

bolster its economy, which in 2017, despite the lifting of sanctions and the entry of large companies into the country's market, did not exceed \$5 billion.²⁴ Further, according to the reports of the Plan and Budget Organization, there are about 84,000 half-finished projects for the completion of which Iran needs 500 billion tomans.²⁵ Thus, Iran cannot spend large amounts of money in Syria any more. The Revolutionary Guards, therefore, insist on the private sector to take part in the reconstruction process and will plausibly try to limit its efforts to auspicious projects and areas of strategic importance. However, Russia has thus far managed to keep Iran's hands off from advantageous reconstruction projects. On the other hand, some observers opine that, given Iran's influence over al-Assad, it can secure some deals from the Syrian government and relegate them to the Chinese companies for certain charges in turn.

push for the idea that Syria is about to enter the post-war period will remain futile.

Conclusion

While Iran is pressing for the restoration of war-torn Syria, surprisingly, it has not been able to re-erect the war-stricken zones within its own territories Iran, about thirty years after the end of Iran-Iraq War. Also, Iran has fallen short on renewing the damaged areas of the Kermanshah province two years after the earthquake with earthquake victims are still living in tents and containers. In addition, Iran's gains from supporting al-Assad are negligible compared to the costs it paid. Iran's main aim from signing deals with the Damascus regime is to consolidate its own status is Syria's future.

However, Syria's reconstruction is still an unrealistic idea as long as a political solution is found to the ongoing crisis. Therefore, given the current state of affairs and the precarious future of Syria, it is too early to talk of reconstruction process. It is mainly for this reason that the efforts of al-Assad and his allies, who are not in favor of a solution acceptable to all parties, to

²⁴ "How Much did the Amount of Foreign Investment Changed After the Event?", Tabnak, 6 June 2018, <https://www.tabnak.ir/fa/news/805677>

²⁵ "84,000 Semi-finished projects in the Country", Fars News Agency, 24 December 2018, <https://www.farsnews.com/news/13971003000615>

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