

Iran, Russia Prepare to Battle Each Other Over Control of Post-war Syria

U.S. sanctions are pushing Iran to try and carve out even more profits from Syria's post-war reconstruction.



Russian Navy frigate Admiral Essen sails in the Bosphorus, on its way to Syria, in Istanbul, Turkey August 25, 2018\ YORUK ISIK/ REUTERS

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The events of the past days in Syria have one thing in common: as the war in Syria is entering its final stages, a new battle is emerging. Both Russia and Iran, who supported the Assad regime throughout the civil war, are expecting to reap the benefits of Assad's victory. While the two countries have long been allies in the Syrian arena, their interests sometimes diverge, especially as both are eyeing the financial rewards of Syria's upcoming reconstruction process.

The tensions in Syria escalated on Tuesday when Russia moved naval forces towards the Syrian coast and NATO criticized Moscow for its aggressive moves. Russian media called the deployment Moscow's largest naval buildup since it entered the Syrian conflict in 2015. The reinforcement comes as Russia's ally,

Syrian President Bashar Assad, is believed to be considering an assault on the last big rebel-held enclave, Idlib in the north.

The Russian naval force was sent to the region at the same time that the Syrian regime announced the signing of a new security agreement with Iran, following a visit by Iran's Defense Minister to Damascus earlier this week. As part of the agreement, Iran will help rebuild Syria's military and defense industries.

Israel believes the Iranians are sending a message: we are here to stay. The rehabilitation of the Syrian army, which is in very poor condition after the war, is not high on the list of threats that concern Israel.



The Russian Navy's frigate Pytlivy, followed by landing ship Nikolai Filchenkov, sails in the Bosphorus, on its way to the Mediterranean Sea, in Istanbul, Turkey, August 24, 2018. YORUK ISIK/Reuters

Russia and Iran have both supported Assad over the past seven years. During this time, they did not directly clash with each other in Syria, but Israeli officials believe the two countries are at odds on some issues related to Syria's future. The contracts for Syria's reconstruction, for which both countries are vying, will likely include some of Syria's oil reserves - at least those that have survived the war. A behind-the-scenes battle over who will control the Assad regime in the "new Syria" is now already under way.

>> Analysis: Everyone wants to get Iran out of Syria. But no one knows how to do it

One country that is likely going to stay out of the infighting over the reconstruction process is the United States. The Trump administration has no clear policy on the "day after" in Syria, except for one principle: No American money will be spent on it.

The American ambassador to the United Nations, Nikki Haley, made that point clear at a speech she gave on Tuesday in Washington, explaining that Russia and the Assad regime "own" Syria now. "You broke it, you own it," Haley said at a summit organized by the Foundation for Defense of Democracies.

Haley added that perhaps Russia and Assad expect the United States to lead the

reconstruction process of Syria, but “we are going to stay out of it.” Russia and the Assad regime, she said, “now own a great pile of rubble” in Syria.



The Russian Navy's frigate Admiral Grigorovich sails in the Bosphorus, on its way to the Mediterranean Sea, in Istanbul, Turkey August 25, 2018. \ YORUK ISIK/ REUTERS

The concern is that without any American involvement, the “great pile of rubble” could turn into a future source of income for Iran, exactly at the same time that its economy is being put under pressure because of U.S. sanctions. In Damascus, the Iranian Defense Minister spoke about Iran's commitment to Syria's reconstruction, hinting at such a calculation.

One of Tehran's goals is to take over Syria's telecom industry, which was damaged during the war, but not completely destroyed. Matthew Brodsky, a Middle East analyst in Washington, recently published a review of the Assad regime's financial situation, in which he mentioned telecom agreements between Iran and Syria that have already been signed, explaining that “the telecommunications sector is clearly important to Iran not only for the financial return but for eavesdropping on the population. Hezbollah's telecommunications contracts in Lebanon have paid enormous dividends in this regard.”

Brodsky, who is a senior fellow at the Security Studies Group think-tank, also mentioned a deal between Iran and Syria that will allow Iran to develop phosphate mines in Syria, although it is not clear if Iran will have exclusive rights to those mines or have to share them with Russia. In addition, he wrote about leases between Iran and the Syrian regime involving some 12,000 acres of land in Homs and Tartous provinces, which could be used for building oil and gas terminals.

Another financial benefit for Iran that could emerge from the reconstruction process is the transfer of agricultural lands in Syria, which were left behind by Syrian citizens turned refugees over the last seven years, into Iranian hands. Brodsky wrote about the Assad regime's “repopulation schemes” that would turn some of those lands over to members of the pro-Iranian Shi'ite militias, as a means of helping them entrench their presence in Syria. Some in Israel believe these lands will also, at some point, host new construction projects, which will be built by Iranian companies.

Two weeks ago, Ariane Tabatabai, an expert on Iran and a political scientist at the Rand Corporation, told Haaretz that Israel's goal of getting Iran out of Syria is unrealistic, in light of the Islamic Republic's expectation to make profits from the reconstruction process. "It's hard to see them going anywhere," she said. "The Russians don't have the will to take Iran completely out of Syria. The Iranians have a significant presence in Syria, and Russia has no incentive to try and force them out, something they may not even be able to achieve." The American sanctions only increase Iran's interest in carving out whatever profits it can from Syria's reconstruction, she added.

In order to see the benefits it hopes to get, however, Iran will also need other countries – mostly China, Europe and the Gulf countries – to invest in Syria's reconstruction. Over the last few days, there have been calls from human rights groups and former European officials not to invest in Syria's reconstruction as long as Assad continues to commit massive human rights violations.

We should not listen to Russian pleas for money to rebuild what they bombed in Syria. All signs point at Assad blocking returns and wanting to profit from reconstruction. My take for @ProSyn <https://t.co/ZNystx4QX1>

— Carl Bildt (@carlbildt) August 24, 2018

Carl Bildt, a former Swedish Foreign Minister, tweeted this week that "we should not listen to Russian pleas for money to rebuild what they bombed in Syria. All signs point at Assad blocking returns [of Syrian refugees] and wanting to profit from reconstruction."

Ken Roth, executive director of Human Rights Watch, expressed a similar view, writing in the British newspaper The Independent: "Long before any talk of providing reconstruction assistance for Syria, which in any event would require lifting separate targeted sanctions, European governments should call out Russia's complicity in Syria's war crimes and vigorously press the Kremlin to end these atrocities and stop underwriting Syria's repression."

It was the deployment of the Russian air force three years ago that tilted the scales of the war in favor of Assad, who at that time controlled only a quarter of the country's territory. Even today, Russia maintains its military presence in Syria to ensure the regime's upper hand. But it has other strategic interests, primarily

maintaining access to the Mediterranean through the port under its control in Tartous in northern Syria.

Last month, the Assad regime completed its takeover of the Syrian Golan Heights, and after Russia agreed with Iran that Iranian forces would be kept at a distance of 85 kilometers from Israel's border with one notable exception: Iranians are still present in and around Damascus.

In Israel, meanwhile, tension has been noted even within the close alliance of Iran and the Assad regime. In recent weeks, there were two incidents in the eastern part of Syria, close to the border with Iraq, in which the Syrian military attacked Shi'ite militias associated with Iran. These attacks appear to be part of a local, internal fight over dominance in that specific region, which is critical for Iran's plans of creating a "land bridge" to the Mediterranean through Iraq, Syria and Lebanon.

The same area was the site of an air strike two months ago, which some media outlets reported was conducted by Israel.

The bottom line is that the war in Syria has already been won by Assad. But now the fight over the "day after" is beginning, and it will include power struggles between all the different parties active in the Syrian arena.

Source: <https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/.premium-after-idlib-iran-russia-prepare-to-battle-each-other-over-control-of-post-war-syria-1.6429740>

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