

Opinion – China and the Rebuilding of Syria

Written by Roie Yellinek

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ROIE YELLINEK, MAR 23 2020

The relationship between China and Syria dates back to 1956, and relations between the two sides have remained largely consistent since. In 2010 (the last year the WITS measured Syrian output) trade between the countries amounted to \$2.2 billion and mostly went one way – from China to Syria. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute's database, China has sold Syria arms totaling \$76 million since 2000. On 5 August 2018, the Chinese ambassador to Syria published an article arguing that Beijing is entering a new era of deepening strategic partnerships in the Middle East and that China wishes to play a greater role in driving peace and stability in the region. On his country's relations with Syria he claims that China has supported the Syrian people politically and humanely and that the achievements of Assad's armed forces have strengthened the regime's stability. He said China wanted to strengthen cooperation between the two countries in the political, military, economic and social areas and to take part in Syria's rehabilitation. The ambassador summarized as follows: "we highly commend the Syrian 'Eastward' strategy and intend to cooperate more with Syria in the political, military, economic and social fields, to actively participate in Syria's economic reconstruction so that the Syrian side benefits from the Chinese economic benefits ... and establish the Exchange of knowledge in the fields of ideology, culture and government to contribute to the restoration of peace, stability and prosperity in Syria as soon as possible."

On 5 June 2019, Chinese President Xi Jinping visited Russia, and in a media interview said,

Syria is a country home to one of the most ancient civilizations with a long history, and it is also an important country in the Middle East ... As the process of finding a political solution to the conflict is forging ahead and the Syrian government and people are starting to rebuild their homeland, China stands ready to participate in Syria's reconstruction within its own ability and do the best to help the Syrian people resume their normal life and production soon.

Therefore, it is no surprise that China is perceived as the leading candidate to rebuild Syria after the long years of war which have done severe damage to the country. Besides laudatory statements like the ones quoted above all above, the reason for this perception is simple – there is no other country supportive of the Assad regime which has the ability to go for such a big scale project. The Assad regime have been enjoying from two more supporters, Iran and China, but they are luck China's economic capabilities. Estimates of the cost of rebuilding Syria start from a "modest" \$200 billion, while "pessimistic" forecasts speak of \$1 trillion. This raises the question – Does China want to serve as a kind of "Project Manager" in the reconstruction of Syria? To answer such a question would start with analysis the Chinese behavior during the Syrian civil war and its possible motivations. Based on the analysis and precedent for Chinese behaviors in the global arena, this article will offer possible projections for the development of Beijing's Syria policy.

While Russia and Iran have sent troops to take an active part in operations on the ground and have sold arms to the Assad regime, China has mainly given diplomatic support to Damascus. Nevertheless, there are some indications that there have been exceptions to this with Chinese personnel on the ground or in direct communication with proxies. For example, Xinhua, China's state news agency, quoted a senior Chinese officer as saying that "China wants to strengthen its military ties with Syria." In addition, the Chinese have given Syria small-scale economic aid. On 10 July 2018, Xi pledged a package of \$20 billion in loans, and about \$106 million in financial aid, to Middle Eastern nations as part of what he called an "oil and gas plus" model to revive economic growth in the region. It is

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unclear what percentage of the loan is devoted to Syria, but only 91 million US dollars have been set aside to Jordan, Lebanon, Syria and Yemen together. On 27 August 2019, China's Ambassador to Damascus Feng Biao said China will give the Syrian people number of new buses to strengthen the transport sector and emphasized "that his country [is] ready to provide more and more backup to Syria in all areas, and in particular to the transport sector".^[11]

The majority of Chinese support for Syria has been given in the diplomatic field. In UN resolutions, China stood with Russia in support of Assad, vetoing six of seven UN Security Council resolutions condemning the Syrian authorities for using force against its citizens. This backing by Beijing has given the Assad regime the time and moral support to fight against the rebels without pressure from the international community and the UN becoming debilitating. Another form of diplomatic support was seen in episodes such as on 31 October 2012, when the director of the Office of Foreign Affairs of the Communist Party Yang Jiechi announced a four-point proposal to establish a transitional governing body during talks with UN-Arab League Joint Special Envoy Lakhdar Brahimi in Beijing. This proposal did not include substantive action to solve the crisis, but demonstrated that was China engaged with Syria. In addition, China Expressed its willingness to mediate between the parties , a position that continued to develop as the years passed.

There are several explanations for Chinese support of the Assad regime: China tends to refrain from external interventions and criticizes Western countries whenever they become involved in domestic turmoil in other countries (such as in Yemen, Venezuela etc.). The Chinese ambassador to Syria said recently that: "We [the Chinese] will be proud of any sanctions Washington may impose on Chinese companies participating in Damascus International Fair", an indication that China is willing to use the Syrian people as part of the heated trade struggle between China and the US. China has also long worried about ethnic Uighurs from China's far western region of Xinjiang who have traveled clandestinely to Syria and Iraq to fight with Islamist groups and the fact that the Islamic State has killed at least one Chinese hostage and issued statements threatening to attack China has incentivized the Chinese leadership to support the Assad regime. One last explanation is that as the fight goes on, China has identified further possibilities than can be earned from acting like Assad's supporter and China is well-known for acting in the long run. Beijing is well placed to wait until it can reap the benefits later.

The scope of Chinese investment in Syria can be interpreted as a statement of intent for now. The evacuation of Chinese workers from Libya and Yemen is still a fresh memory in China and Beijing will therefore not be willing to have Chinese personnel in a war zone like today's Syria. This puts China in a position that it only makes sense to expect from them to be involved in the reconstruction of Syria when the reality will let them do so, meaning the war will likely have to be over before China will take any significant further steps.

About the author:

Roie Yellinek is a Ph.D. student at Bar-Ilan University in Ramat-Gan (Israel), a doctoral researcher at the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies, and a non-resident scholar at the Middle East Institute and adjunct researcher at IDF Dado Center. He is a specialist in the growing relationship between the Middle East, Central Asia and China, especially in regards to the soft power component of Chinese diplomacy. His research is based on fieldwork conducted in China, Israel and other countries.