

The Subtle Art of War Profiteering:

Arab Countries Normalize Relations with Syria

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More than a decade has passed since civil strife began in Syria. Beginning in 2011, citizens protested the oppressive and anti-democratic policies of President Bashar al-Assad's administration. They were inspired by the efforts of demonstrators in Egypt and Tunisia in a movement that became known as the Arab Spring. Within months, the interaction between demonstrators, the police, and the military spiraled into barbaric violence, including the use of chemical weapons by the government.¹

Other countries, eager to protect their political and economic interests, transformed the dimensions of these civil conflicts into a drawn-out proxy war. The United States and Turkey supported the Syrian rebels with arms, while Russia and Iran backed the Assad regime by providing air and ground forces.² Some nations even exploited the conflict in Syria to counter their political rivals. Iran, for example, supported Hezbollah—a Lebanese Shia militant group aimed at dispelling Israeli and Western influence in Lebanon—to fight alongside the Syrian military. Iran and Hezbollah are both aligned ideologically against the State of Israel, following the 1979 Islamic Revolution, specifically because of the plight of Palestinians under occupation that represents a greater threat to Muslims globally.³ While the United States' involvement allegedly stems from ideological principles of human rights and refraining from the use of bio-

logical and chemical weapons, its political and economic goals certainly seem to take precedence, due to the presence of oil and Russian influence in Syria.

As nations exploited the political dynamics of the war in Syria to deter competition from rivals, the economy of the country collapsed, due to destruction of infrastructure and immense loss of life.⁴ Yet another factor contributing to the deteriorating economy was the international sanctions placed on Syria in response to Assad's use of brutal force against his citizens and lengthy record of human rights violations. A large number of internally displaced persons soon resulted out of fear of persecution, most of whom resided in northern Syria, along the border with Turkey—notably hundreds of miles away from the regime's capital in Damascus. Eighty percent of the Syrian population is in poverty and more than 12 million are food insecure.⁵ Crime and terrorism infiltrate the country through narcotics trafficking and low-level insurgencies.

Despite the degree of alienation and uncertainty for Syria's people and their place in the world, major leaders across the region are restoring ties with the country. These leaders are purporting the normalization to be a long-awaited restoration of diplomacy. Russia and Iran, for example, were key players in stabilizing Assad's position during the years of heightened violence between 2012 and 2016; so, it is unsurprising to see his allies look

for opportunities to recoup their investments.⁶ Similarly, most of the relations between Syria and countries such as the United Arab Emirates and Jordan concern plans to reopen trade and investment. The success of these countries to avert the public calls for democratic and constitutional reforms during the Arab Spring could mean a shift to profit and trade-related interests, given the context of an increasingly globalized and capitalist world economy. The poor standing of Syria internationally seems to be of little relevance to the benefits of restoring economic relations.

At the World Exhibition hosted in Dubai, the foreign trade ministers of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Syria expressed mutual commitment to encourage trade and business between the two countries. King Abdullah of Jordan has also spoken with President Assad regarding efforts to enhance cooperation. In fact, soon after, he reopened a border crossing with Syria to boost investment and trade.⁷ The weakened labor force and trade relations of Syria seem to be immaterial to the governments leading this trend in rapprochement. With 90 percent of the population living in poverty and deteriorating trade relations due to international sanctions, it seems like the money to be made in Syria is for foreign business people.⁸ For Syrians, stagnancy is a permeating facet of the economy, exacerbated by the ongoing conflict and high unemployment rates. Foreign investment

will not be the key to economic growth in a country continuing to face high social and financial war costs. For investment to restart the economy, a stable currency and interest rates are usually imperative, both of which do not exist or are controlled by the US-blacklisted Central Bank of Syria.⁹ Without approval from a major trader like the US, Syria is essentially excluded from the global economy and foreign direct investment.

The UAE and Jordan remain strong allies of the United States in the Middle East through their open trade relations and counterterrorism support. While the US has repeatedly stated their intention to maintain sanctions with Syria, they have refrained from calling out or placing repercussions on the two countries undertaking business with President Assad. In some cases, the US has even become increasingly lenient with these sanctions.¹⁰ For example, the opening of an Egyptian pipeline to transport natural gas to Lebanon, passing via Jordan and Syria, received a

sanctions relief from the US, despite its violation of their typical guidelines.¹¹ Officials representing the US government have repeatedly denied that this energy deal violates the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act—a policy that discourages foreign investors from trading with the Assad regime to deter revenue from reaching the hands of war criminals. However, the Assad regime would receive tens of millions of dollars in payments from this pipeline deal.¹⁰ In spite of this, it must be noted that the sanctions do have a counterproductive effect of destabilizing the Syrian economy and creating dire humanitarian consequences. Consequently, left to the forces of the profit-hungry global economy, war-torn countries do not fare well.

The vehement opposition to trade and business with Syria posed by Western and Arab countries during the first years of war seems to have simmered down. As violence and human rights abuses against Syrians no longer occupy the news or the

collective memory of those outside the country, policymakers feel less pressured to take precautions in vilifying the Syrian government and its leaders. The Emirati and Bahraini embassies have also reopened in Damascus. Leaders of the Middle East are formulating this rapprochement as a method to compel Assad to grant concessions for political and social reforms. In their opinion, a revitalized economy will open a new door of opportunities and freedoms for Syrians, unlike the totalitarian police state that currently exists. However, the normalization of relations will indisputably benefit the welfare and economies of the countries engaging in trade with Syria, no matter the destruction and instability that continues to ravage their close ally.

