

Anti-Syrian Sanctions Relief Would be the Right Move for All the Wrong Reasons

Nobody's saying that it shouldn't happen, but just that if it ever does, don't expect it to be done with pure intentions at heart.

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There's been speculation lately that the EU might remove some of the anti-Syrian sanctions that it promulgated over the past six years, which would be a godsend to the millions of people who are suffering from the attendant lack of medicine and other humanitarian necessities. Russian, Iranian, and other aid has been pivotal in keeping the population alive during this time, as have of course Damascus' heroic efforts in doing the best in its ability to provide for its people under such challenging circumstances.

Nevertheless, the West's anti-Syrian sanctions have still left an indelible impact on society, and it would be a welcome and long-overdue move if they were repealed, which could conceivably happen now that it's obvious to all that President Assad won't be ousted from office by the "moderate rebels". The impressive gains of the Syrian Arab Army (SAA) since the beginning of Russia's anti-terrorist intervention over the past two years, as well as the rapid ones which occurred all throughout this summer, have led observers to conclude that Daesh is on the brink of defeat and that a Moscow-brokered "political solution" might finally be on the horizon.

It's in connection with the latter forecast about the end of the war becoming a realistic prospect that the EU might sense the "convenient opportunity" to lift the anti-Syrian sanctions in order to advance its own interests. To explain, Brussels might try to link this game-changing humanitarian move to Damascus accepting certain levels of refugee-migrant resettlement, and/or it might make this dependent on Syria agreeing to specific political demands from the "opposition" related to the [Russian-written "draft constitution"](#) or other pertinent issues. This tactic of "strings-attached" sanctions relief only works if Syria is desperate enough to go along with it, which is becoming less the case with each passing day.

Thus, it's worthwhile to wonder whether the EU would provide unconditional sanctions relief to Syria instead, though this move, just like the other one, wouldn't ever occur unless the US gave the go-ahead for it to happen. In the event that it does, then Washington's motives would be to use this as a way to help EU firms counter the reconstruction and other deals that Russia, China, and Iran have already been promised by Damascus or are slated to obtain. Although it makes sense for Syria to reward its allies for their loyalty, the economically beleaguered state might come under pressure from Western-backed "civil

society” forces because of this.

“Opposition”-leaning citizens might try to stir up trouble by alleging that this is nothing more than “wasteful political corruption” and that the people’s money would be “best served” through an EU-participating open tender bidding process instead. The argument that they’d be basing this off of is that European companies sometimes provide better quality services than their counterparts for a more competitive cost, meaning that the war-torn country could save some of its precious funds by contracting Western firms instead of Eastern ones. The point here isn’t to discuss the merits of this argument, but just to warn that it might become a weaponized infowar tool in the future.



Syrian citizens hold portraits of President Bashar al-Assad as they protest against sanctions outside the EU offices in Damascus, Sept 2011.

So long as the EU lifted its unilateral sanctions against Syria, then Damascus could theoretically include some of its companies in this prospective bidding process if there’s enough “grassroots” pressure for it to do so, though taking care to only allow “semi-friendly” nations who haven’t directly contributed to its people’s suffering to take part, such as Hungarian and Swedish ones for example instead of French and British. Even in the event that this scenario doesn’t come to pass, that doesn’t mean that unconditional anti-Syrian sanctions relief couldn’t also strengthen Western interests in the post-conflict country.

For instance, the EU might give tacit preferential trading rights to the “moderate rebels” so that they could attempt to monopolize some industries (whether in the “de-escalation zones” or beyond) and gain an edge over the competition in order to compensate for some of their political-territorial losses. It’s unlikely that the West will cut all of their ties with the proxy forces that they’ve supported for years already, and the same goes for those said surrogates not wanting to snip the umbilical cord that connects them to their patrons, so this could become a creative way for the US and its allies to attempt to establish asymmetrical influence in Syria after the war.

Ultimately, whether it’s the overt [Hybrid War](#) weapon of “strings-attached” sanctions relief or the much more clandestine one of unconditionally removing the economic-humanitarian restrictions on Syria, it can be expected that the West will only do the “right thing” for the “wrong reasons”, and that Syria has every right to be skeptical of the EU’s intentions if such a move ever came to pass. That doesn’t imply that millions of regular people wouldn’t stand to benefit from this, but just that Damascus would do well to be wary of what might actually turn out to be sly maneuver designed to destabilize it with time.

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