

IN SYRIA, RECONSTRUCTION BRINGS LITTLE HOPE FOR PEACE

Humanitarian organizations can play a great role in reconstructing Bashar Al-Assad's Syria. But while maintaining the status quo for the time being might seem the easiest option, it is also the worst possible one

By Jasmine El-Gamal

Over the last two years, experts and policymakers have discussed the prospects for reconstruction in a Syria that, against all odds and efforts to oust him, is still ruled by Bashar Al-Assad. The discussion has largely centered around the role of external actors in reconstructing “Al-Assad’s Syria” to include the role of humanitarian organizations, with some recommending a “decentralized reconstruction” approach while others warn that, without major behavioral change on the part of Al-Assad’s government, even well-meaning, humanitarian-focused efforts will likely bolster the regime and harm ordinary Syrians. Some argue that the West should stay away completely while others still predict that Western reconstruction funds will merely serve to shift the discussion from one of political transition to how the regime will manage its own survival. The debate, however contentious, clearly highlights the paucity of options that exist today to enable long-lasting, genuine peace and stability in Syria.

For now, given the low likelihood of an external effort to remove the Al-Assad regime from power and the lack of coercive options to force him into making any type of concession, countries that wish to maintain a principled stance on Syria have only one viable scenario before them. First, they should focus on bolstering resilience among Syrian communities to lay the groundwork for future peacebuilding efforts and second, plan for a scenario where the regime’s hold on power eventually begins to falter.

Destruction and Consolidation

Beginning in 2016, thanks to assistance from Russia and Iran as well as a reluctance by the West to expend the necessary resources or leverage to secure a different outcome, it was clear that Al-Assad was moving toward a military victory. Today, as the conflict in Syria enters its ugly final stages, we can reasonably expect that Al-Assad will continue to punish dissent, preventing “undesirables” from ever



returning or detaining those who do. Ceasefires and so-called “reconciliation agreements” have proven to be little more than part of Al-Assad’s “destroy and consolidate” strategy, in many cases amounting to what human rights organizations have labeled “crimes against humanity”.

△ Poster of Bashar Al-Assad in the Hamadiyya gold market in Damascus, April 9, 2019. *John Wreford/ Alamy/ Phocal*

While the regime now militarily controls a majority of Syrian territory, any modicum of stability that exists today is based not on a resolution of root causes of the conflict, but rather on fear, trauma, and loss made possible only through immense destruction and displacement. A grim reality has emerged, where the aggressor regime appears to be victorious and is attempting to systematically eliminate any future threat to its dominance. And as the Syrian regime focuses on retaking the last bastions of opposition control, consolidating its gains and preventing future uprisings, Al-Assad is employing reconstruction and humanitarian assistance as a tool to reward loyalty, penalize rebellion, and construct a Syria that is entirely beholden to the regime. Should the current status quo prevail, it is difficult to see a path forward that leads to any kind of healing within communities inside and outside Syria or any semblance of a true rebuilding of a cohesive Syrian state.

In a truly “post-conflict” peacebuilding environment, multiple stakeholders across affected communities are involved in rebuilding the physical and social

infrastructure of the state. In the case of Syria, where in many areas the conflict continues to be waged through non-military means, physical reconstruction is being controlled by the regime in a way that rewards loyalists and ensures external allies reap some level of return on investment. The war has bolstered Syria's elitist politics, including significant increases in corruption and cronyism, by reinforcing regime allies, capitalist cronies, and other wartime supporters by economic means. For example, the regime recently approved a number of luxury developments surrounding Damascus, and reports show blatant favoritism and cronyism in all parts of the construction process. Primary holders include a number of companies established by the regime to dominate the private sector, such as the Damascus Holding Company, the Damascus Joint Stock Security Company, and Ramac Projects, which is owned by Al-Assad's EU- and U.S.-sanctioned cousin Rami Makhoul. Billed by the developers as "the Damascus dream," these luxury properties are expected to be built by and accessible to a specific class of wealthy Arabs, while the area's original residents are to be evicted from the neighborhood entirely.

Al-Assad also controls the distribution of external aid to regime territories and will likely continue directing incoming aid flows to achieve his goals. International organizations, including the UN, are forced to work through Syrian organizations run by regime loyalists and members, including the state-owned fuel supplier, Syria's national food bank, Syria Trust Charity (owned by First Lady Asma Al-Assad), and Al-Bustan Association (run by Makhoul). Under this system, UN efforts are forcibly aligned with regime goals.

When it comes to the reconstruction of Syrian society, the prospects are similarly bleak because of several factors, not the least of which is that there are simply not many Syrians, relatively speaking, left to do the job. Twelve million Syrians have been displaced through the course of the war, millions tortured and disappeared in Syria's labyrinth of prisons, and as many as 511,000 killed, according to Human Rights Watch. Of those who escaped a more terminal fate, many have reported extreme trauma due to the war. Calling Al-Assad's victory a "prize of ruins," the *Economist* reported in June 2018 that psychologists in Syria were warning of societal breakdown; years of trauma, broken families, destruction, disease, and death have taken their toll.

Additionally, the man at the top controlling it all is not interested in reconstructing the society which, in his eyes, was the cause of the war. In a defiant and victorious 2017 speech at the Ministry of Foreign and Expatriate Affairs, Al-Assad declared that "we have a better society now" and that the revolution (that is, the opposition) was mistaken to think that "a country like the Syrian Arab Republic could be controlled by traitors and agents of their kind".

A New Syria?

Al-Assad will continue to keep his enemies far and his allies close, resulting in a much less populated nation as the regime decides which citizens deserve to live in the “new Syria”. To enforce this exclusive attitude, the regime began to pass legislation permitting the physical transformation of spaces to change political outlooks. For example, Law 10 of 2018 permits the creation of redevelopment zones with a limited period of time for landowners in those zones to provide proof of ownership before the land is redeveloped. Syrians living abroad generally don’t have the ability to provide this on site, meaning that many will lose ownership of any assets they left in Syria. According to a 2017 study by the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), just 9 percent of refugees have their property title deeds with them and in good condition, and nearly half of them said that their home had been destroyed or damaged beyond repair by the war.

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Future Syria will also undergo a massive demographic shift, as Al-Assad uses state tools such as zoning, construction, and redistribution of resources to privilege select areas, groups, and minorities (namely those that supported him in the war), while those previously associated with the opposition will remain underdeveloped, insecure, and cut off. In the eyes of the regime, punishing the opposition with resource withdrawal will prevent them from rising again.

Finally, Al-Assad’s reliance on his allies will continue into the non-military phase of the conflict. Iranian and other Shia militias intend to maintain a presence in Syria even after the war to ensure their soft influence is enshrined in the post-war landscape. For Iran in particular, the primary goal of such a continued presence is to increase its leverage and presence in Syria as a way to manage wider political goals throughout the region. Given their critical role in supporting the Syrian regime throughout the last eight years in the context of an overarching rivalry with their Sunni neighbors in the region, the Iranians are likely to become a regular presence in everyday Syrian politics, culture, and the economy, contributing to the sectarian fragmentation of the country and preventing genuine peacebuilding efforts from coming to fruition.

Russia will likely remain involved as well, as is evident with its deep involvement in the regime’s efforts to retake the northwestern city of Idlib. But unlike Iran, the Russians have little interest in Syria’s internal sectarian disagreements. Rather, they seek to secure a foothold in the region, continue to equalize their stature to that of the United States as a great power player, and obtain financial benefits for Russian businesses in the reconstruction process.

Fragile Stability, Elusive Peace

The Al-Assad regime, having barely eked out a military victory thanks to assistance from external allies, will find it difficult to retake the remainder of opposition-held territories while also stemming the simmering discontent among its supporters and fending off a jihadist enemy intent on regrouping in Syria. The potential for future instability or security vacuums is therefore high, particularly if Al-Assad maintains his current no-compromise stance and assistance from the broader international community remains inaccessible to the Syrian government.

In addition, Al-Assad's "destruction and consolidation" approach to the conflict

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has rendered the potential for imminent, genuine peacebuilding activities slim to none. A regime that has bombed, starved, and tortured its opposition into submission is not one that is likely to compromise or provide any future openings for even the most peaceful means of protest. A truth-and-reconciliation type of process, which would be necessary to help Syrians overcome the trauma of the war, seems out of reach under a regime that labeled both

the opposition and innocent civilians under opposition-held areas as "foreign agents" and "terrorists".

It is clear that, having "won" the war, Al-Assad has no interest in winning the peace and risking a future threat to his dominance. It's not that the regime is incapable of providing peace; it's that it just doesn't want to.

The Way Forward

It is unlikely, then, that there will be a near-term rebuilding effort which considers all elements of society and addresses root causes and grievances, and in which the Al-Assad regime will be a willing partner. Having historically refused to concede under pressure, it seems improbable that Al-Assad will change his behavior now that he considers himself to have "won" the war and is aware that, for much of the international community, coercive military options are no longer on the table. As long as the regime remains the primary and most powerful actor on the ground, Al-Assad is also unlikely to cease his efforts to create a more homogenous Syria that will never again pose an existential challenge to his rule.

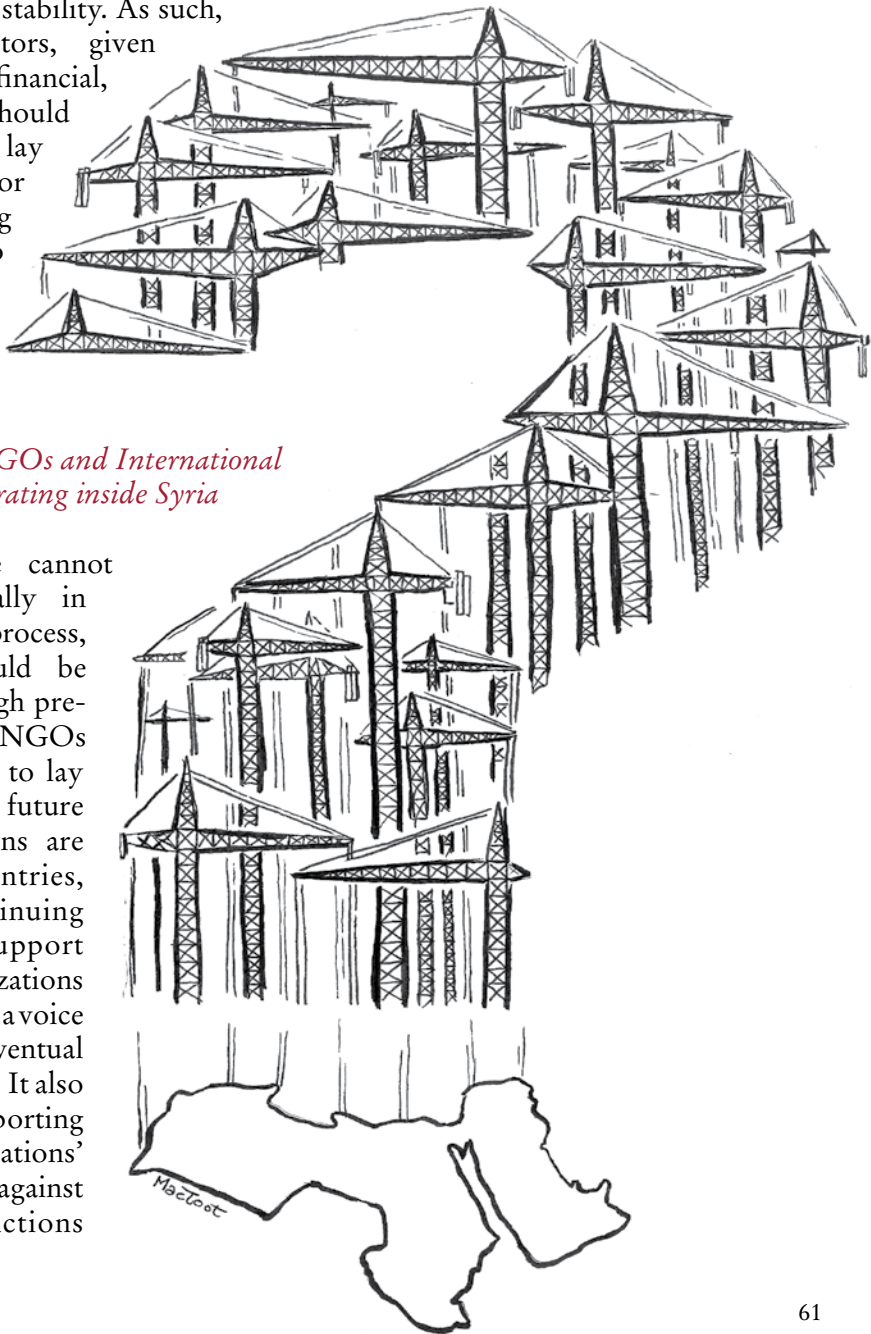
Western states, moreover, will likely have little success tying reconstruction or financial assistance to conditions that may threaten the regime's survival. Al-Assad himself indicated in his 2017 speech that Western economic pressure is unlikely to cause massive behavior change, declaring that "we [Syrians] have

to turn politically, economically, and culturally to the East. This East today possesses all that we need”.

As external actors, policymakers should instead define their specific interests in Syria and allocate their resources accordingly, while ensuring that those resources are in line with a sustainable and realistic long-term political strategy. As an example, EU and U.S. interests align when it comes to combatting terrorism, preventing new waves of migration, and ensuring regional stability. As such, those particular actors, given their diplomatic, financial, and military means, should align their efforts to lay the groundwork for future peacebuilding efforts while also preparing for a future scenario of instability. Specifically, external stakeholders should:

Increase Support to NGOs and International NGOs (INGOs) Operating inside Syria

Because the regime cannot be considered an ally in the peacebuilding process, external actors should be prepared to act through pre-existing networks of NGOs and INGOs in order to lay the groundwork for a future peace when conditions are ripe. For donor countries, this means continuing to financially support humanitarian organizations and ensuring they have a voice at the table in an eventual peacebuilding process. It also means vocally supporting humanitarian organizations’ efforts to push back against the regime’s restrictions



in public statements as well as in private diplomatic interactions with regime representatives.

Support Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) with Life-Saving and Resilience-Building Assistance

When it comes to refugees and IDPs, the international donor community can do more to ensure that they do not become an entirely lost generation. This includes maintaining critical assistance to host countries in the region; exercising diplomatic pressure on countries that might try to force refugees to return home prematurely; increasing the amount of funds allocated to psycho-social support for those most traumatized by the conflict; and fulfilling resettlement quotas for the most vulnerable.

Address the Fate of Foreign Fighters and Families inside Syria


Former fighters of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and their families held by the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) pose a set of moral, legal, and physical challenges that must be immediately addressed. With no clear strategy on the part of Western countries with regard to their citizens who joined ISIS, these foreign fighters, as well as the thousands of family members also being held in Syria, are at risk of becoming a threat whose defeat will once again require a global coalition and billions of dollars. If the last eight years have proven anything, it is that a strategy of “containment” cannot be applied to non-state actors as malleable as ISIS and Al-Qaeda. Maintaining the status quo, while perhaps the easiest option today, is also the worst possible one, with severely detrimental, long-term ramifications for all parties involved.

Reach a Diplomatic Agreement with Turkey Regarding the SDF

Given the role that the SDF played in the territorial defeat of ISIS and their current governance role in the northeast, not to mention the thousands of ISIS families in camps under SDF jurisdiction, it is essential for influential external actors to resolve the Turkey–SDF standoff. A Turkish assault on the SDF that results in a breakdown of the current system would be catastrophic for current northeast residents as well as future prospects for peacebuilding in that region. It would also provide Al-Assad with an opportunity to extend control of his regime over the northeast, hampering essential humanitarian and capacity-building programs currently underway and further minimizing the chances of genuine peace in the future.

Prepare for All Future Scenarios

External actors should also recognize that Al-Assad may not be able to

maintain his grip over Syria indefinitely, particularly if more than one scenario simultaneously comes to fruition, such as an uptick of attacks against government entities in regime-controlled areas as well as an all-out assault against the SDF in the northeast by Turkey, which would create a massive security vacuum. Should this occur, actors who have vested interests in regional stability must start planning now to ensure that the alternatives are not once again “Al-Assad or chaos”. A particular focus in future Syria planning should be given to IDPs and former ISIS fighters and their families, as well as currently active jihadists operating in the northwest. Given the international community’s poor record of post-conflict planning that has played out elsewhere in the region, it would be wise to prepare for all options sooner rather than later. 

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