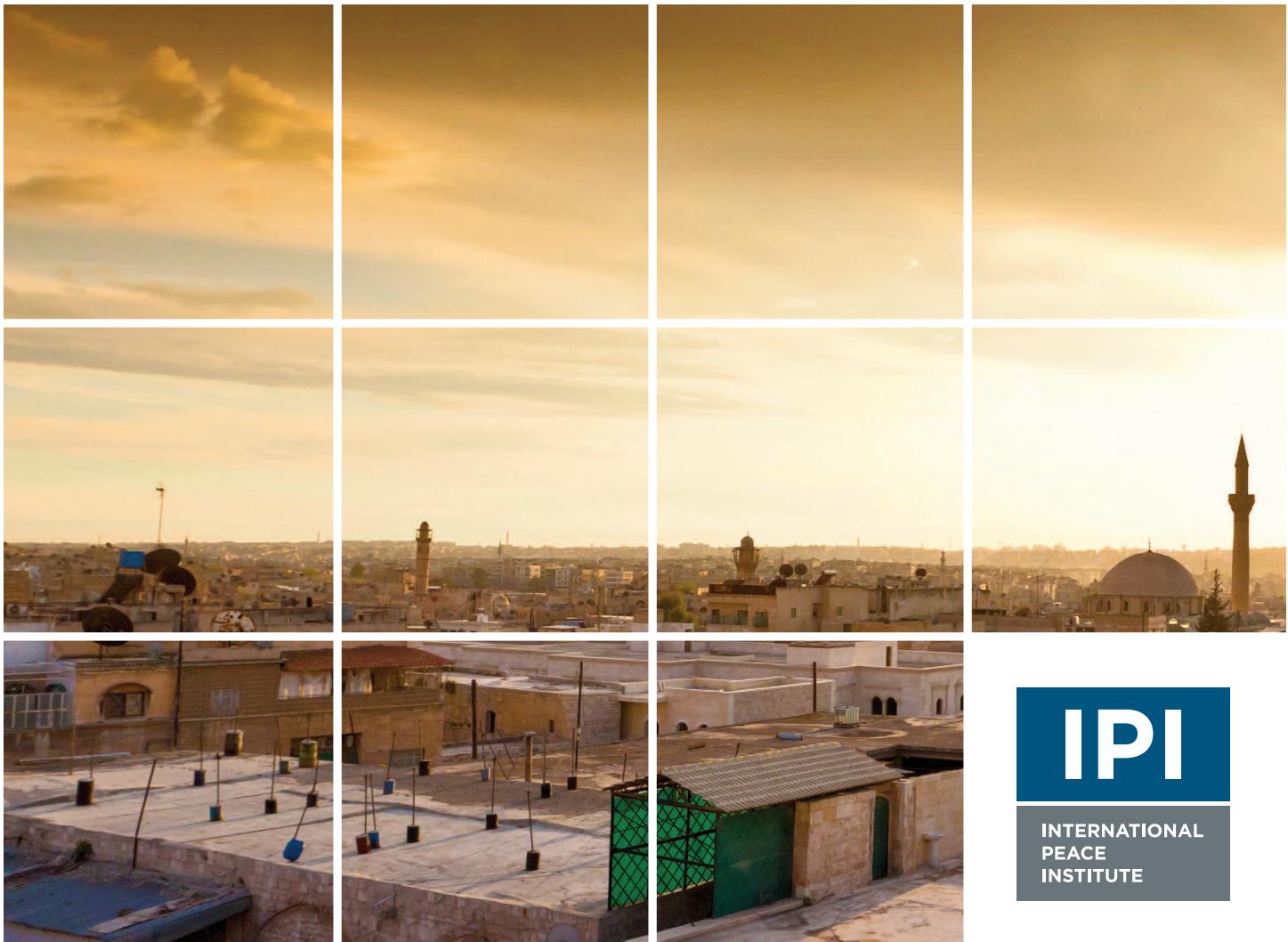


Planning Ahead for a Postconflict Syria: Lessons from Iraq, Lebanon, and Yemen

CHRISTINA BENNETT



Cover Image: Aleppo, Syria, 2011.
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Executive Summary

Though the violent conflict in Syria shows few signs of abating and scenarios for any postconflict solution are numerous and vague, renewed interest in peace talks presents an important opportunity to discuss the parameters of peace and reconstruction in Syria.

There are many recent examples of postconflict transition in the Middle East, and particularly in places of complex socio-religious composition and high strategic interest. Focusing on the immediate postconflict reconstruction in Iraq (2003–2005), the Taif Agreement in Lebanon (1990) and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) Initiative in Yemen (2011), this report examines themes such as importance of balancing “hard” reconstruction with “soft” reconstruction and how collective engagement among neighbors can contribute to regional security and stability. While the transition from conflict to peace is different for every country—and the future of Syria is far from certain—the report aims to extract those lessons that may be useful for a peaceful transition in Syria.

Dismantle the regime, not the state. In Syria, there may be a valid need to break up the power structures of the current regime in an early transition phase. However, Iraq’s de-Baathification scheme demonstrated that efforts to reduce or redistribute the power of the regime are not effective in promoting stability and growth unless accompanied by efforts to shore up the state, including by encouraging the return and engagement of Syria’s talented civil service and business class.

Economic revitalization must keep pace with political reform. There may also be an inclination to pursue a rapid shift to a market economy in Syria. However, Iraq was declared “open for business” before a legitimate authority was in place and without support to its state-owned enterprises, the bedrock of the Iraqi economy. In Syria it will be important to pursue economic growth alongside—and not ahead of—political stability, and to forego rapid privatization in the name of promoting stability and sustainability in the Syrian economy and its institutions.

Combine long-term vision with short-term gains. As in Iraq, early reconstruction priorities in Syria are likely to be focused on repairing Syria’s

battered utilities and reviving essential social services. But unlike in Iraq, any reconstruction plan should be based on Syrian priorities and a realistic assessment of needs and capacities at national and subnational levels. This will not only help to create the peace dividends critical to Syrian optimism and investment in the future, but also peace assets—NGOs and civil society groups—that may emerge as part of reconstruction in spite of sectarian differences.

Focus on establishing a national identity. The Taif Agreement in Lebanon was a model agreement on paper. However, in its implementation Taif allowed sectarian structures and identities to remain in place. Syria would do better to eliminate sectarian association by establishing a clear conception of a Syrian national identity and initiating a national dialogue process that takes into account the new, nonsectarian local and regional networks and economies that have emerged in wartime.

Return and reconstruction must be an engine of reform. The implementation of the Taif Agreement also failed to use reconstruction as an important lever for reconciliation, including by failing to return hundreds of thousands of internally displaced persons (IDPs). Any political solution in Syria would do well to include a viable and well-funded reconstruction plan focused on restoring essential services in areas of IDP and refugee return, many of whom will become agents of change if given the right incentives and tools.

Regional action equals regional security. Just as Gulf countries came together to support stability and reform in Yemen following its uprising in 2011, Syria’s neighbors and Western governments might find common purpose in supporting Syrian refugees and host communities. Such international cooperation would provide a foundation for the type of common action regional security and stability requires, and may prove to be a catalyst for greater information sharing and dialogue on more divisive political issues.

Cooperation can prove greater than the sum of its parts. Most of Syria’s neighbors have considerable experience in dealing with refugees—both as places of origin and as host countries. Just as Gulf states and the UN brought their individual alliances, expertise, and leverage to bear on Yemen’s crisis through the GCC, so could Syria’s neighbors use their collective experience to bring

creative solutions to Syria, particularly on the thorny issues of Syrian refugees' status, joblessness, and land use.

Common action, tangible benefits. Just as the GCC Initiative in Yemen linked national transition priorities with technical support and funds, a regional cooperation framework for Syrian refugees might help transform the massive refugee challenge from a bilateral problem to a regional solution. This could allow for more comprehensive needs assessments and more coordinated approaches on issues such as budget support, debt relief, and renewed attention to long-standing development challenges in host countries.

Introduction

Since 2011, the situation in Syria has evolved from a civil uprising to a large-scale humanitarian and political crisis, destroying infrastructure, displacing millions, and reversing development gains in a country once on track to achieve many Millennium Development Goals. The Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC) estimates the two-year death toll to be more than 100,000 people. According to the latest UN appeal, more than 16 million people are projected to be in need of humanitarian assistance in 2014, including more than 9 million people inside Syria and over 4 million refugees.¹ Clashes among government forces and more than 2,000 opposition groups are increasingly common, and key humanitarian access routes have been cut off by fierce fighting. Neither the Syrian government nor the opposition is able to provide basic services in the areas that they control.²

Syria is also in a state of economic and social collapse. Syria's economy has shrunk by close to 40 percent since 2012, inflation has doubled, and foreign reserves have been extensively depleted.³ Unemployment has reached 48.6 percent in 2013.⁴

Oil production has been cut in half.⁵ The civil war has also destroyed much of Syria's manufacturing base and critical infrastructure, including 60 percent of hospitals. More than 3,000 schools and a significant number of mosques have been damaged or destroyed, forcing more than 2 million Syrian children to drop out of school with long-term consequences not only for the children themselves, but for the future society Syria will need to rebuild.⁶

The conflict continues to spill over into neighboring countries, as border regions are subject to shelling and as refugees continue to escape the fighting. The UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) estimates there are more than 2.28 million refugees in neighboring Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey, a number that increases by tens of thousands of people weekly.⁷

This month, the UN appealed for \$6.5 billion—the largest appeal in its history—for the humanitarian response inside Syria and to support those countries hosting refugees. Even though, as of November, donors had put forward only around 60 percent of the \$5 billion appealed for in June.⁸

Peace talks, now scheduled for January 22nd, have been stalled for months over questions about participation and legitimacy. Many continue to question what a peace process could hope to achieve when there is still interest in and energy for continuing the conflict. Others feel that although a peace agreement is not likely in the near term, bringing parties together now may bring about progress on the humanitarian front and create the diplomatic space for ending the conflict and identifying the parameters of peace.

It is with this opportunity in mind that this report aims to provide some critical thinking on priorities for stabilizing Syria and the region once conflict has subsided. Using recent examples of postconflict transition in the Middle East, the paper

¹ United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, "Overview of Global Humanitarian Response 2014," December 16, 2013, p. 22, available at www.unocha.org/cap/appeals/overview-global-humanitarian-response-2014.

² ACAPS-Syria Needs Analysis Project, "RAS—Crisis Overview, Part I (Syria) and Part II (Host Countries)," November 2013, available at www.acaps.org/reports/downloader/regional_analysis_for_syria_ras_report_november_2013/68/syria.

³ Syrian Centre for Policy Research, "Syria—War on Development: Socioeconomic Monitoring Report of Syria," Second Quarterly Report (April–June 2013), October 2013, available at http://scpr-syria.org/att/1382759391_c6yBX.pdf.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ US Energy Information Association, "Syria Overview," February 2013, available at www.eia.gov/countries/cab.cfm?fips=sy.

⁶ Syrian Centre for Policy Research, "Syria—War on Development."

⁷ ACAPS-Syria Needs Analysis Project, "RAS—Crisis Overview, Part I (Syria) and Part II (Host Countries)."

⁸ UNOCHA, "Overview of Global Humanitarian Response 2014"; United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, "Financial Tracking Service," December 2013, available at <http://fts.unocha.org/pageloader.aspx?page=emerg-emergencyDetails&appealID=1007>.

investigates the successes and failures of other countries' experiences, and identifies creative approaches that Syria and its neighbors might consider to achieve peaceful, sustainable solutions to the current crisis.

This is the third paper published as part of the International Peace Institute's project on Middle East in Transition: Catalysts for Regional and International Cooperation on Humanitarian and Development Affairs, which aims to contribute to the both the policy and practice of ending the crisis in Syria and its smooth transition to peace.

APPROACH

There are many precedents in the Middle East region for ending complex and protracted conflicts in places of socio-religious and economic diversity, so any plans for a transition in Syria should be informed by experience. Focusing on the examples of the initial postwar reconstruction in Iraq (2003–2005), the Taif Agreement in Lebanon (1990), and the Gulf Cooperation Council Initiative in Yemen (2011), this paper examines the importance of balancing “hard” reconstruction—restoring basic services, state infrastructure, and jobs—with “soft” reconstruction—return of the displaced, national reconciliation, and dialogue—from the outset. It draws on desk research and interviews with actors and thought leaders in the region, and analyzes how collective engagement among neighbors can contribute to regional security and stability. While the transition from conflict to peace is different for every country, and the future of the Syrian regime is far from certain, the paper aims to extract those lessons that may be useful for Syrian reconstruction and recovery irrespective of the political outcome.

The Importance of Rebuilding the State: Hard Reconstruction in Iraq

On May 22, 2003, after the fall of Saddam Hussein, the UN adopted Security Council Resolution 1483, which recognized the United States and the United

Kingdom as the occupying forces of Iraq and authorized the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) to administer the occupied territories until a native, legitimate, and representative government could be formed.⁹

At that point, the coalition strategy in Iraq shifted from one of regime change to one of “occupy and rebuild,” whereby the newly formed CPA and its Iraqi counterpart, the Iraqi Governing Council (IGC), would launch and implement an ambitious reconstruction program aimed at liberalizing the country economically, politically, and socially.¹⁰ The US Congress allocated an initial \$18.4 billion for the transition period, after which authority would be handed over to the Iraqis in 2004.¹¹ Though the broad objectives for this transition plan were sound, several misguided assumptions coupled with some early missteps meant the CPA, and later the international community, found it difficult to reach its reconstruction and rehabilitation goals.¹²

DE-BAATHIFICATION

An initial miscalculation occurred with the immediate dismantling of Iraqi state institutions and the power structures of Saddam Hussein’s regime in the name of stabilizing the country and creating a new political order.

Under the rubric of “de-Baathification,” a concept borrowed from the US experience with de-Nazification in Germany at the end of World War II, the CPA introduced a series of legal and administrative measures that dissolved the regular Iraqi armed forces, the Republican Guard, party militias, the Ministry of Interior, the Iraqi Women’s Association, and other key organizations that might afford Baathists opportunities to return to power.¹³

The impetus for de-Baathification came from CPA officials, who saw it as a final step of regime change, and from returned Iraqi exiles, who believed that a liberalized Iraqi economy would become an engine for reform in the Middle East. However, neither the CPA nor its Iraqi advisers—

⁹ UN Security Council Resolution 1483 (May 22, 2003), UN Doc. S/RES/1483, preamble.

¹⁰ Faleh A. Jabar, “Postconflict Iraq: A Race for Stability, Reconstruction, and Legitimacy,” Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, May 2004.

¹¹ Total appropriations would top \$60 billion by 2010. Stuart W. Bowen, Jr., “Learning from Iraq Reconstruction: Final Report of the Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction,” March 2013.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ A. Al-Saiedi, and M. Sissons, “A Bitter Legacy: Lessons of De-Baathification in Iraq,” International Center for Transitional Justice, March 2013.

who hadn't lived in Iraq for decades—had current information on or understanding of the make-up or capacity of the Iraqi civil service.¹⁴

As part of de-Baathification, party members were not individually assessed or vetted based on objective criteria. Rather, they were dismissed from government service depending on their rank in the civil service or in the Baath Party. There was no attempt to distinguish the "Baathists," who might have joined the party to advance their careers, from the "Husseinists," who were part of Saddam's ideological inner circle.¹⁵ There was also no attempt to separate the "good" institutions made up of many dedicated civil servants, such as the Ministry of Education, from the "bad" institutions, such as the Olympic Committee, comprised of Saddam Hussein's cronies. The result was an institutional purge based on guilt by association rather than objective evidence of individual wrongdoing, a process that decapitated the top three tiers of the Baath Party and left many key state institutions gutted of core staff.¹⁶

While some party cleansing may have been necessary to dismantle Saddam Hussein's power base and some shrinking of a bloated and inefficient civil service important for reform, the sloppy and incomplete way de-Baathification was undertaken only paralyzed state institutions, destabilized the country, and stalled early reconstruction.

Dissolving the regular Iraqi armed forces, for example, created a security vacuum, not only because it dismantled key security institutions but also because it abruptly terminated the livelihoods of qualified and proud professionals, including a very high proportion of Iraqi women who worked in the education sector. This turned what could have been partners in the stabilization effort into a pool of humiliated, antagonized, and politicized men and women, who may have contributed to the insurgency that followed.¹⁷

De-Baathification also did not take into account

the need to maintain a functioning civil service, as ministries were unable to function when so many skilled workers were removed from their jobs. In some cases, it put meaningful reconstruction on hold. For example, Iraq's education ministries had high numbers of Baathist members, given the party's penchant for distributing propaganda through schools. Both the Ministry of Education and Ministry of Higher Education lost so many core staff in de-Baathification that many schools opened late in 2004.¹⁸

Instead of stabilizing and liberalizing the state, de-Baathification only intensified social, sectarian, and political divisions. It polarized Iraqi politics and contributed to severe instability in the Iraqi military and government—effects that were only dealt with when Iraq revised its de-Baathification restrictions in 2013.

OPEN FOR BUSINESS

In May 2003, two months after the US invasion and a month of the fall of Baghdad, Ambassador L. Paul Bremer III, the US civilian administrator of Iraq declared, "Iraq is open for business!" He began to usher in a new era of reforms that would transform Iraq's industrial sector into a thriving marketplace for private sector growth and foreign investment. While it was clear that part of reviving Iraq's economy and revitalizing its industry meant reforming some 190 inefficient and unproductive state-owned enterprises, rushing the process only had the opposite effect. This rapid shift in approach was too much, too soon for an economy regaining its footing from war and for a political transition that had yet to begin.¹⁹

Iraq had long operated on a centrally planned economy that prohibited foreign ownership of business and non-Arab foreign direct investment; imposed high tariffs to keep out foreign goods; and ran on large state-owned enterprises that provided essential public goods and services, including oil. Such policies combined with the effects of three wars and a decade of economic sanctions, meant

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Telephone conversation with Miranda Sissons, November 1, 2013.

¹⁶ David Phillips, *Losing Iraq: Inside the Postwar Reconstruction Fiasco* (New York: Basic Books, 2005).

¹⁷ Jabar, "Postconflict Iraq."

¹⁸ This is based on anecdotal evidence only. More research would be required to make this connection definitively. Telephone conversation with Miranda Sissons, November 1, 2013.

¹⁹ Kenneth M. Pollack, "After Saddam: Assessing the Reconstruction of Iraq," Saban Center Analysis Paper Series No. 1, Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, January 2004.

that 90 percent of Iraq's industrial capacity was physically degraded, asset-starved, obsolete, and overstaffed.²⁰ A modernized Iraqi economy would require external investment, new technologies, and improved management, elements the current Iraqi state would not be able to provide.²¹

However, by making such a declaration, the CPA failed to recognize that conditions on the ground were not so business-friendly. The security vacuum created by the fall of the regime and dismantling of the army caused violence to spiral out of control with continual looting and destruction of state manufacturing and oil infrastructure. Such violence would only increase if the process of streamlining the state-owned enterprises put thousands more Iraqi men and women on the street without other job options.

Moreover, neither the CPA nor the IGC had the political authority or the capacity to see this scheme through. The CPA was an occupier and therefore limited by international law as to how much it could change the legal structure of Iraq's economy. The temporary IGC was weak and reviled by Iraqis, who saw many of its members as self-serving. A true Iraqi transitional government was a year away and democratic elections a distant possibility.²²

Despite these warnings, however, the CPA stuck to its plans to rapidly privatize Iraq's state-owned enterprises and open Iraq to foreign ownership and investment. Through executive order,²³ the CPA abolished Iraq's ban on foreign investment, allowing foreigners to own up to 100 percent of all sectors except natural resources. State-owned enterprises, including those in the electricity, telecommunications, and pharmaceutical industries, were privatized. Iraq's corporate tax rate was lowered from 45 percent to a flat rate of 15 percent. Although foreign ownership of land remained illegal, companies or individuals would be allowed to lease properties for up to forty years.

The CPA soon realized that the reality of the situation made such reforms implausible, if not impossible. By January 2004, two months after the

privatization order was issued, the CPA abandoned the plans that had preoccupied it for more than a year.

RECONSTRUCTION: LONG ON VISION, SHORT ON RESULTS

The CPA's preoccupation with large, bold economic reforms also prevented the type of reconstruction Iraqis wanted and needed, missing a critical opportunity for peace dividends and for creating pan-Arab support for the country's rebuilding.

At the time of the US-led invasion, most Iraqis suffered from shortages of basic services, such as healthcare, education, electricity, running water, and sewage, as a result of the devastating effects of the war. Central to the CPA's reconstruction plan were large-scale projects that would put these services back on line and demonstrate large-scale success to Iraqis and US taxpayers. While in some cases minor improvements resulted, most projects were never completed, and critical reconstruction plans delivered much less than promised.

Such failure was partly due to the CPA's lack of consultation with Iraqi men, women, and experts on reconstruction priorities, project selection, or contractor management. Iraqi arguments for early capacity-building programs went largely unacknowledged. This meant the CPA focused on large projects that were not a priority for Iraqis and were beyond the capacity of Iraqis to both complete and sustain. Projects were poorly designed and improperly executed by ill-informed US contractors, generating financial waste and diminishing the impact of the overall reconstruction effort.

An example cited by a recent report of the US special inspector general for Iraq reconstruction illustrates the point.

Years of neglect, war damage, and looting left Diyala province's prisons in deplorable condition. In May 2004, the CPA awarded Parsons Delaware an \$80 million task order to build the Khan Bani Sa'ad Prison, which would add 3,600 beds to the province's correctional capacity.

²⁰ In 2003, state-owned enterprises employed 500,000 of Iraq's 4-million workers. World Bank, "State Owned Enterprise Reform in Iraq," Reconstructing Iraq Working Paper No. 2, Washington, DC, July 2004.

²¹ Ibid.

²² The Law of Occupation, a weak area of international law drawn from the Hague Regulations of 1907 and the Fourth Geneva Convention, limits the ability to implement major economic and legal reforms. Some argue that the CPA's Order 39 sought to shape Iraq's economy in the interests of the coalition countries, but against the interests of the Iraqis themselves.

²³ Coalition Provisional Authority, Executive Order 39, September 19, 2003.

In February 2006, three months after the scheduled completion date, Parsons submitted notification . . . [of] a 990-day schedule slippage. In June 2006, the US government terminated the contract for “failure to make sufficient progress on the project” and “massive cost overruns.”

Still believing the prison was wanted by the Iraqi Ministry of Justice, reconstruction managers awarded three successor contracts to complete the work. In June 2007, the US government terminated all work on the project for convenience, citing security issues.

At the time of termination, the United States had spent almost \$40 million, but no building was complete. Two months later, [US Army Corps of Engineers] unilaterally transferred the unfinished project to the [government of Iraq] even though Ministry of Justice officials told USACE they did not plan to “complete, occupy, or provide security for” the poorly and partially constructed facility The site still sits dormant in Diyala and apparently will never be used.²⁴

By jump-starting reconstruction with large projects that were not the priority of and beyond the capacity of Iraqis, the CPA created a bunch of stalled programs, promoted corruption, and engendered resentment among the Iraqi leadership and people. Iraqis were left bitter and dissatisfied that so much investment had resulted in so little progress and so few improvements to their daily lives.

LESSONS FOR SYRIA

In 2011, Syria’s economy was in far better shape than Iraq’s was in 2003. Syria had a diversified economy supported by strong institutions, well-developed and well-maintained physical infrastructure, and high levels of human capital. Designated a lower-middle-income country by the World Bank, Syria’s 2010 revenues topped \$10 billion from oil and tax revenues, along with surpluses from several publicly owned enterprises. Syria operated a budget deficit equivalent to 3.8 percent of gross domestic product (GDP) and a debt equal to 23 percent of GDP.²⁵ Also unlike in Iraq, the Syrian conflict began as an internal one and was not instigated by foreign invasion, which makes the reconstruction context different.

But like Iraq, Syria is now facing challenges often found in low-income countries and failed states,

after decades of international sanctions and, now, two years of a brutal civil war. These include significant reconstruction and rehabilitation needs and unprecedented capacity-building requirements, against the backdrop of a state-controlled economy and a potential reconstruction gold rush of foreign interests and companies. A successful Syrian transition will depend on the state’s ability to provide basic services, generate sustainable livelihoods, and avoid massive levels of corruption in what will likely be a fragile political, security, economic, and institutional context for some time. In this regard, the following lessons from the early reconstruction period in Iraq may be instructive.

Dismantle the Regime, not the State

In Syria, as in Iraq, there may be a valid need to break up the power structures of the current regime in an early transition phase, not least because it will be important to signal the end of an era and change the public narrative from one of fear to one of renewal and opportunity.

However, any move to reduce or redistribute the power of the regime should be accompanied by efforts to shore up the historically strong institutions of the Syrian state and encourage the return and re-engagement of Syria’s talented civil service, technical class, and business class as a means of maintaining stability and generating growth.

If dismantling the Baathist Party becomes a reconstruction priority in Syria, a distinction should be made between dismantling the power structures and party allegiances and dismantling the civil service. This will be particularly important when dealing with such an entrenched security apparatus as the Syrian army, which is made up of an officer corps of party loyalists but also a cadre of young conscripts from all segments of Syrian society whose families depend on their employment.

This could be achieved by ensuring a solid understanding of the make-up and capacity of the civil service, by setting up a more nuanced and objective vetting process for its purge, and by convening a diverse and independent monitoring and oversight mechanism drawn from all parts of Syrian society and multilateral institutions. Any

²⁴ Bowen, “Learning from Iraq Reconstruction.”

²⁵ Ibid.

major reform of state institutions should also be informed by public opinion and be accompanied by a public information strategy that communicates vetting criteria and key aspects of the reforms.

Economic Revitalization Must Keep Pace with Political Reform

As in Iraq, Syrian political and economic stability will be linked to the stability of its state institutions. And, as in Iraq, there may be a tendency to pursue a rapid shift to a market economy and privatize key state-run sectors in the name of capital accumulation and growth. However, as demonstrated in Iraq, it will be important to pursue economic growth alongside—and not ahead of—political stability, and to forego rapid privatization in the name of promoting stability and sustainability in the Syrian economy and its economic institutions.

Reviving the Syrian economy will mean waiting for a viable Syrian authority, ideally an elected government, before enacting any major economic reforms. In the short term, this means investing in, not dismantling, Syria's state-owned enterprises, allowing the Syrian government to retain control of its industry (including its oil industry), and supporting Syria's long-standing fuel and agricultural subsidies to sustain two important economic sectors. This will help to maintain stability, retain jobs, and encourage Syria's talented civil servants and business class—many of whom are displaced inside and outside Syria—to return home. Pushing reconstruction through locally elected governing councils would also ensure greater ownership and sustainability.

Such measures might be coupled with capacity support programs, such as job training and technical assistance, and support for the rebuilding of key infrastructure, particularly transportation, water, education, and health systems. The international community might also want to consider reviving prewar discussions on concessional loans and direct budget support to finance reconstruction and shore up Syria's balance of payments and foreign reserves.²⁶

Combine Long-term Vision with Short-term Gains

As was envisioned in Iraq, the priorities for reconstruction in Syria could focus on repairing

Syria's battered utilities and reviving essential social services. However, whereas Iraq was long on vision, it was short on pragmatism and implementation, and this is where the Syrians and the international community can do better.

Developing a long-term vision for Syria will be important to set a tone of promise and opportunity. This will be critical to building legitimacy and trust with any transitional authority, by ensuring a peace dividend associated with better living conditions, by giving impetus to various groups to work together, and by encouraging the displaced to return home.

But such a vision could be accompanied by a reconstruction plan that is based on a technical assessment of current physical infrastructure and human capacities and needs, particularly in Syria's cities and towns; a limited number of reconstruction priorities, identified by Syrians representing different regions and religious or political affiliations; and the frameworks and funds for implementing it at both national and subnational levels. Special measures should be taken to harness what is an already active women's movement in Syria to make reproductive health services, education, and political participation central to Syrian reconstruction. Consideration might also be given to independent oversight to limit large-scale corruption from a potential gold rush of foreign interests and contractors.

The Importance of Healing the Country: The Taif Agreement in Lebanon

The National Accord Document, or the Taif Agreement as it came to be known, brought a formal end to the civil war in Lebanon. It was an agreement that was discussed, negotiated, and concluded by Lebanese parliamentarians in the town of Taif, Saudi Arabia, in October 1989 under the auspices of Riyadh and the Arab League, with participation of Iran, the support of the US, and under the direct supervision of Syria.

The Taif Agreement engineered a cease-fire; called for a disbanding and disarming of all militias and the building of a nonsectarian national army

²⁶ Telephone conversation with Omar Dahi, November 4, 2013.

and police; and provided for parliamentary elections and the mutual recognition of the rights of all religious and ethnic groups. It demanded the immediate withdrawal of Israeli troops and the departure of Syrian peacekeepers within two years. At the time, the agreement was heralded for both its far-reaching political reforms and for the inclusive nature of its negotiations. However, over time, the Taif Agreement became effectively a cease-fire agreement with ambitious—but hollow—promises.

The Lebanese civil war began in 1975 as a battle between the country's minority, poor Muslims against elite and wealthy Maronite Christians. In 1975, politically conservative Maronites held 40 percent of government jobs, Sunni Muslims held 27 percent, and Shias 3.3 percent. The Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), headquartered in Beirut since the early 1970s, joined the fight on the side of the Muslims, while the Israelis allied with the right-wing Christians. Israel invaded Lebanon in 1978 and 1982, when it occupied a stretch of southern Lebanon. After years of conflict with Hizbullah—a Shia political movement and militia that emerged largely to resist this occupation—Israel withdrew in 2000. In 1975, the Arab League authorized the deployment of a force of largely Syrian peacekeepers to Lebanon.

By the end of 1989, the warring factions were exhausted. Different religious and ethnic groups had consolidated military and political power in various regions of the country, and no side thought it could win militarily. A war-weary public supported a quick settlement based on a unified Lebanese state and a central political system. The time was ripe for compromise and rebuilding.²⁷

CONFESIONALISM BY ANOTHER NAME

The negotiations in Taif were aimed at addressing its underlying problems linked to sectarian divides in the country's cities and towns and the “confessional” political system. This system had distributed power proportionately among Christian, Sunni, and Shia communities, an arrangement that

favored the Christians based on their slight majority as recorded in the now-outdated census of 1932.

The Taif Agreement sought to introduce a new political and practical plan that would stop the war, preserve the Lebanese state, and abolish confessionalism in favor of a system that gave equal power and “a life in common” for all Lebanese.²⁸ At the center of these political reforms was a new power-sharing formula that modified the proportionate Christian-Muslim ratio of parliamentary seats to an even 50:50 and of high-ranking posts to 5:5. However, the agreement put Syria in charge of implementation and offered no timeline for actualizing the reforms, making vague reference to implementation according to a gradual scheme.²⁹

Immediately following the Taif Agreement, the conflict subsided, state institutions re-established their authority, and economic deterioration slowed. Without an implementation plan, however, political reforms languished. The Christian majority dug in their heels and refused to cede power. The US, now refocused on the 1991 Gulf War, never insisted on the withdrawal of the Syrian peacekeepers. Israel also ignored calls for its withdrawal, and Hizbullah refused to disarm, arguing that it was a resistance force to Israeli occupation. Other political parties also covertly maintained their militias.

What resulted was not an elimination of confessionalism but a reproduction of confessionalism under a new, albeit more balanced, formula, which perpetuated competition among religious groups and left the door open to further divisions and a relapse into conflict.³⁰

RETURNS AND REHABILITATION

The Taif Agreement also aimed to regain national cohesion by rehabilitating the fragmented Lebanese society, rebuilding national and local institutions, and resuscitating the economy.³¹ However, the agreement failed to create an enabling environment, both physically and psycho-

²⁷ Elizabeth Picard and Alexander Ramsbotham, eds., “Reconciliation, Reform and Resilience: Positive Peace for Lebanon,” London: Accord, June 2012.

²⁸ The Taif Agreement, September 1989, English translation.

²⁹ Hassam Krayem, “The Lebanese Civil War and the Taif Agreement,” in *Conflict Resolution in the Arab World: Selected Essays*, edited by P. Salem (Beirut: American University of Beirut, 1992), available at <http://ddc.aub.edu.lb/projects/pspa/conflict-resolution.html>.

³⁰ Elizabeth Picard and Alexander Ramsbotham, eds., “Reconciliation, Reform and Resilience: Positive Peace for Lebanon,” London: Accord, June 2012.

³¹ Krayem, “The Lebanese Civil War.”

logically, for rehabilitation and reconstruction to occur.

At the height of Lebanon's civil war, up to 1 million people were internally displaced, driven from their homes by violent militias, who systematically divided the country into Muslim and Christian sectors, and by Israeli military invasions.

In many ways, the Taif Agreement offered a model mechanism for IDP return. It put the reintegration of the displaced high on its agenda, declaring the return of the displaced necessary for national reconciliation and sustainable peace. The agreement also acknowledged the right of citizens displaced since 1975 to go back to their place of origin and pledged financial support. The right of IDPs to return to their homes was formalized in 1990 through an amendment to the 1926 constitution. The government created a Ministry for the Displaced and a Central Fund for the Displaced to implement and finance the returns. Ten years after the Taif Agreement, however, 450,000 people—close to 14 percent of the population—had yet to return to their place of origin.³²

Politicization at top levels—notably by the minister of the displaced, a former warlord—meant that the return and reconciliation programs were targeted at areas of interest, not need. Officials ignored local traditions and customs, and reinforced sectarian identities when undertaking reconciliation activities. Those displaced were explicitly excluded from discussions on returnee policy, while some reparations were made conditional on recipients accepting official “reconciliation agreements.”³³ Politics also prevented the enforcement of an Israeli withdrawal, whose incursions were a primary reason for a lack of return.

Moreover, reconstruction projects were uncoordinated. Major reconstruction projects were focused on Beirut, not Lebanon's villages from which most people had fled. Local infrastructure projects that managed to be completed were not coordinated with areas of high return, while cash payments were made to returnees to rebuild homes in areas where social services were inadequate or

nonexistent. The government did not prioritize social and psychological services to encourage peaceful coexistence of returnees.³⁴

This meant that citizens had neither the means nor the desire to return, reinforcing rather than mending social and political segregation.

LESSONS FOR SYRIA

When taken at face value, the Taif Agreement looks like a potentially interesting model for Syria: It was an endogenous and inclusive agreement that included the provisions for a cease-fire, the disarming of militias, and the removal of foreign interference and arms. It created a space for a plurality of views and put in place measures for political reform and social rehabilitation toward a peaceful and unified state. However, the agreement provided little more than “cosmetic democracy,”³⁵ as few of its important reforms were ever realized. As such, a political solution in Syria would do well to avoid institutionalizing sectarian divides and focus instead on articulating a vision for the country’s future alongside a means for its implementation.

Focus on Establishing a National Identity

As in Lebanon, the Syrian civil war is also a proxy war where both internal and external stakeholders will want to shape a political solution according to their own interests. Where Taif failed to abolish confessionalism and instead allowed its structures and identities to remain in place, Syria would be better served by avoiding a focus on sectarian associations and promoting a unified national identity for all Syrians, as challenging as this may be. Such a process could involve an inclusive national dialogue process that takes into account the historic tradition of co-existence in Syria, as well as the new, nonsectarian local and regional networks and economies that have emerged in wartime as a means of survival.

Return and Reconstruction Must Be an Engine of Reform

The implementation of the Taif Agreement also missed an opportunity to use reconstruction as an important lever of reconciliation and a foundation

³² Georges Assaf and Rana El-Fil, “Resolving the Issue of War Displacement in Lebanon,” *Forced Migration Review* 7 (April 2000): 31–33.

³³ Picard and Ramsbotham, “Reconciliation, Reform and Resilience.”

³⁴ Assaf and El-Fil, “Resolving the Issue of War Displacement.”

³⁵ Ibid.

of political reform. Any broad political resolution in Syria would do well to include a viable and well-funded reconstruction plan that underpins a national vision and political process, and is focused on restoring essential services, particularly in areas of IDP and refugee return. Such measures should also recognize that Syria's displaced include the country's educated men and women: business people, skilled professionals, civil servants, and entrepreneurs, who will become agents of change if given the right incentives and tools. It will be by finding common purpose in rebuilding that Syria may be able to overcome its many divides.

The Importance of Regional Cooperation: The GCC Initiative in Yemen

During Arab Spring-inspired mass protests after ten years of civil unrest, Yemeni security forces fired on protestors in Sanaa on March 18, 2011, killing fifty-two people. Key military commanders defected to the opposition and encouraged mass desertion from the army. Then-president Ali Abdullah Saleh began to look for an exit from power and turned to the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) for help.³⁶

The GCC Initiative accord, developed in April 2011 and signed in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, in November of that year, ended President Ali Abdullah Saleh's thirty-three-year term and installed Abdrabuh Mansur Hadi, his then-deputy, as interim president. Brokered by the GCC, with the support of the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council and the European Union, the initiative and its accompanying Transition Implementation Plan, committed Yemen to a two-stage change process by reforming the military, tackling corruption, addressing tribal grievances, and hosting early parliamentary elections in 2012. It then called for a six-month national dialogue process to bring together political parties, social groups, women, youth, and regional

actors to work out the terms of a new constitution and hold fresh local, parliamentary, and presidential elections by 2014.

The GCC, formed in 1981 to bring about economic and cultural cooperation in the Gulf, had not been known for its role in regional policy-making. The group's relatively small size, the weakness of its structures and secretariat, and the lack of foreign policy coherence among its six member states meant that it had never operated as a political bloc or peacemaker.³⁷

The GCC decision to intervene in Yemen was based on the conclusion by Gulf states, and most prominently Saudi Arabia, that Yemen was becoming a threat to their security and their economic interests. Unfriendly rebel movements were increasingly active on Yemen's borders. Changing demographics within Yemen, notably an increasingly vocal disgruntled youth and the rise of al-Qaida, meant that longtime methods of buying influence through the political and financial support of tribal allies would no longer be effective. Moreover, they believed that the Yemeni government had become too corrupt and needed to be fundamentally reformed. Riyadh calculated that stability in Yemen, and regional stability, required a more coordinated approach with its Gulf partners and more collaboration with Western donors.³⁸ The GCC helped to convene a formal Friends of Yemen³⁹ group to help shore up Yemen's economy and deal with its corruption problems.

The GCC Initiative, hammered out in two weeks by the GCC, the United Nations, and key Yemeni reformers, was broadly supported by Gulf and Western states. At the initiative's signing, donors pledged nearly \$8 billion for Yemen's recovery, including a \$1 billion deposit to the Yemeni central bank—a vote of confidence in Yemen's transitional government and reconstruction priorities.⁴⁰

More than two years on, progress has been uneven. Parliament passed controversial legislation at the end of 2011 guaranteeing immunity for former president Ali Abdullah Saleh, who is still

³⁶ Edward Burke, "EU-GCC Cooperation: Securing the Transition in Yemen," Doha: Gulf Research Center, 2013.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Telephone conversation with Edward Burke, October 25, 2013.

³⁹ The Friends of Yemen group is composed of four GCC countries (Saudi Arabia, Oman, Kuwait, and the United Arab Emirates), the European Union delegation, and the permanent member states of the UN Security Council. The more informal Group of 10 included the Yemeni embassies of these governments.

⁴⁰ This included \$3.25 billion from Saudi Arabia targeting infrastructure projects, \$214 million from the EU, \$311 million from the UK, \$158 million from Germany, and \$100 million from the Netherlands.

very active in Yemeni politics. The divisive issue of southern secession is still unresolved, and rebel movements in the country's north still spark deadly protests. The national dialogue process is off schedule, and the GCC Initiative is still regarded with suspicion by many in Yemen, including the youth movements and southern separatists, who feel that the national dialogue process has been set up to reinforce—not reform—traditional Yemeni politics and corruption. Women in particular, who formed part of the revolution but were not consulted as part of the GCC Initiative, feel no ownership over the process. Conversations about the “appropriate representation” of women in government called for by the document have been vague and stalled. The failure of the initiative to articulate formal implementation mechanisms means that billions of reconstruction dollars tied to the initiative’s reforms remain largely untapped.

However, the GCC has succeeded in averting what was nearly a full-scale civil war, steering Yemen through the initial stage of its transition and spearheading many important security, political, and economic reforms.

LESSONS FOR SYRIA

The GCC cooperation in Yemen and the GCC Initiative are both unprecedented and encouraging with regard to the GCC’s future role as a regional political actor and broker of peace. However, there were elements very specific to the Yemeni case that made GCC cooperation possible but that make direct comparisons with Syria difficult.

First, the relative homogeneity of the GCC states and their enduring alliances and influences in Yemen made alignment of interests relatively straightforward. This was not only true of Saudi Arabia, which has traditionally used Yemen as a proxy regime, but also of Oman, which is influential with Yemen’s southern separatists, and of the United Arab Emirates (UAE), whose close ties to the West allowed it to act as a diplomatic lynchpin.⁴¹

Second, the positive desire by GCC states, and particularly Saudi Arabia, to improve security and stability in Yemen drove them to operate collectively. This represented a shift for Saudi Arabia,

which realized its own limitations and dwindling influence in Yemen, as Shia communities and al-Qaida groups gained a foothold in the country. Making the GCC an actor in its own right also allowed Gulf states to collaborate more transparently with the EU and other Western actors.

Finally, the GCC’s capacity to end the crisis and avoid a relapse into conflict was also due to its ability to offer a pragmatic and face-saving alternative to the Yemeni regime, namely a graceful and safe exit from power to President Saleh and his family as part of the transition deal.⁴²

Many of Yemen’s success factors are not present in Syria, making regional cooperation more difficult. Syria has a more varied composition of majority and minority socio-religious groups that makes it internally more polarized and geopolitically more complex. In the Syrian context, international alliances are intricate and entrenched, and international engagement—including through the UN Security Council—is fraught with suspicion and shifting policies and tactics.

In addition, while the Syrian crisis is rooted in civil unrest, it has now become a proxy war, offering little incentive for regional and international actors to solve internal tensions and divisions. And unlike in Yemen, the general fear of al-Qaida and the threat of Islamic radicalism may not be large enough to bridge historical and entrenched antagonistic positions. Even positive signs for international cooperation, such as a US-Iranian rapprochement, might have counterproductive regional effects by pressuring Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states to act as spoilers if a Syrian solution means a more powerful Iran.

In terms of regional organizations, Saudi Arabia’s historical distrust of Syria makes any GCC-led cooperation a nonstarter and financial support by Gulf states unlikely in the near term. Both the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and the League of Arab States (LAS), perhaps more natural interlocutors, are internally too weak and divided to take a stronger leadership role. Moreover, while both groups could be commended for their bold moves to sever ties with the Syrian government, such actions may prove

⁴¹ Telephone conversation with Edward Burke, October 25, 2013.

⁴² Ibid.

counterproductive when the current regime may play an endgame role. The international community too, through the Friends of Syria mechanism, has thrown its weight and funding behind the moderate opposition, which is showing increasing signs of fragmentation and lack of focus.

Where regional and international interests do intersect, and where regional cooperation might be possible, is around the future of Syria's refugees, whose presence in five of Syria's neighboring countries threatens to both destabilize the region and reverse costly development gains.⁴³ It is here where lessons from Yemen might be useful.

Regional Action Equals Regional Security

Just as Yemen's neighbors felt compelled to act jointly to protect mutually held security interests, Syria's neighbors and Western governments might find common purpose in supporting Syrian refugees and host communities.

Syria's neighbors have shown generosity in accepting large numbers of refugees into their countries, but this is unsustainable. The refugee situation is both creating high levels of need among refugee populations—many of whom have been displaced for the second time—and placing enormous pressure on host countries, whose own infrastructure and service delivery are not equipped to deal with the additional load. Moreover, in places like Jordan, where Syrian refugees make up an estimated 10 percent of the population, the influx of refugees risks shifting already tense political and social dynamics.

Countries in the region, either through regional organizations or individually, would be wise to put narrow national interests aside and find common purpose in supporting Syrian refugees and host communities. Such cooperation, with the support of Western donors and multilateral institutions, would provide a foundation for the type of common action that regional security and stability requires. However, any cooperation framework should not assume protracted displacement as a foregone conclusion, and must go hand in hand with efforts to create an enabling security and

political environment that allows refugees to return home.

Cooperation Can Prove Greater than the Sum of its Parts

Most of Syria's neighbors have considerable experience in dealing with refugees—both as places of origin and host countries. Just as Gulf states and the UN brought their individual alliances, expertise, and leverage to bear on Yemen's crisis through the GCC, so could Syria's neighbors use their collective experience on solutions for Syria. Regional cooperation would provide essential neighbor-to-neighbor support for humanitarian assistance and protection to refugees, particularly women and girls who experience sexual violence in camps, and for building the resilience of host communities to be able to support these sizable new populations. A coordinated approach would also help sort out laws, policies, and monitoring mechanisms to deal with the thorny issues of refugee status, joblessness, and land use, and might prove to be a catalyst for greater information sharing and dialogue on divisive political issues.

Common Action Can Produce Tangible Benefits

Just as the GCC Initiative in Yemen linked national transition priorities with technical support and funds, a regional cooperation framework for Syrian refugees might help transform the massive refugee challenge from a bilateral problem to a regional solution, allowing for more comprehensive needs assessments and more coordinated approaches on issues such as budget support, debt relief, and renewed attention to long-standing development challenges in host countries.

Conclusion

While in many ways, the examples of postconflict transitions in the Middle East described above are different from the situation in Syria today, there are common lessons that might find resonance in a Syrian transition.

The first is a lesson true of all postconflict scenarios, but one that, in the first blush of a new

⁴³ Syrians continue to flee to neighboring countries at an alarming pace. On November 24, 2013, the number of refugees registered and waiting to register stood at more than 2.8 million people. This includes approximately 1 million Syrians in Lebanon; 700,000 in Turkey; 600,000 in Jordan; 300,000 in Egypt; 208,000 in Iraq; 47,000 in Europe; and 17,000 in North Africa. ACAPS-Syria Needs Analysis Project, "RAS—Crisis Overview, Part I (Syria) and Part II (Host Countries)."

peace agreement, is repeatedly ignored. That is, above all, prioritize security and stability before any meaningful reform, reconstruction, or rehabilitation takes place. A lack of security diverts energy, time, and funds from political reform and reconstruction. It prevents economic renewal by raising production costs, discouraging investment, and making the ordinary flow of goods and people across a country difficult. It delays the return of millions of refugees and IDPs—sometimes for generations—depriving the country of talent and ingenuity and depriving men and women of an opportunity to shape their own future.

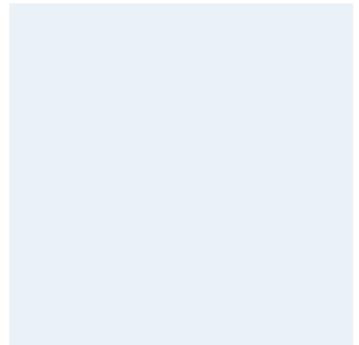
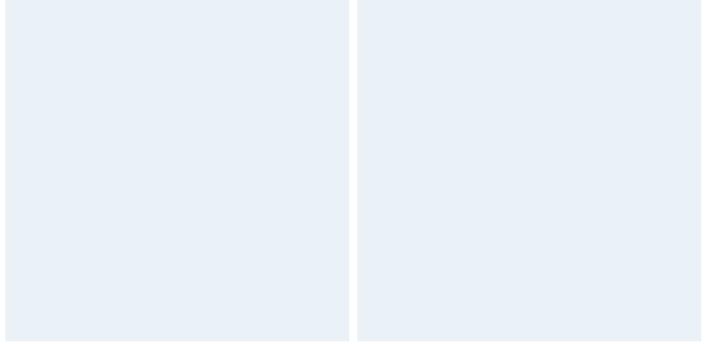
A second lesson is to start small and local and concentrate on early reconstruction wins. This not only offers the peace dividends necessary to build support among a population for its own rebuilding, it also creates peace assets in the form of active local government councils, a skilled workforce, small businesses and entrepreneurship, and NGOs and civil society groups that may emerge in spite of sectarian differences and that can be drawn on over and over again to keep a state and a society moving forward.

A third is to combine both “hard” reconstruction

in supporting the state institutions, infrastructure, and civil service at national and subnational levels with “soft” reconstruction, or efforts to bridge political and religious divides and reconstitute the damaged social fabric of a country emerging from conflict. These are processes that must be undertaken in parallel and at the same pace.

There were many interviewed for this report that said it was too soon to be thinking about transition in Syria, with so much oxygen left in the conflict and so much distance between interests and views. But in many ways, it is never too early to be planning for Syria’s transition, which will require a national vision, underpinned with evidence, analysis, options, and plans—all time consuming and labor intensive processes—as soon as the opportunity for peace occurs. “The best time for planning is when the bombs are falling,” said Abdallah Al Dardari, Syria’s former deputy prime minister and now director of economic development and globalization at the UN Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia, “so that on day one of a new Syria, whenever that takes place, its new leaders can begin with a vision for its future and options for how it will take place.”⁴⁴

⁴⁴ Telephone conversation with Abdallah Al Dardari, November 7, 2013.



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