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Reconstructing Syria: the need to break the mold

In late May the World Bank ran a feature story on “The Importance of Planning Syria’s Eventual Reconstruction,” which advocated innovative use of satellite imagery and social media analytics to assess physical damage and prepare not for “the day after,” but for “the day before.” Of course, the Syrian conflict is far from over and there is little prospect yet of the kind of orderly, integrated, and timely policy interventions that the World Bank and similar agencies specialize in. The blueprints they may devise will inevitably be overtaken by events and have to be redesigned. But planning is crucial, because it compels political as well as technocratic actors to identify needs and priorities and to develop the skills and resources that will be necessary for such a momentous task.

However, although forward-looking approaches of the kind advocated by the World Bank are absolutely necessary, they need to break out of the mold of international practice to date. Post-conflict reconstruction evolved into a distinct field of policy praxis following the end of the Cold War, but its track record since then in bringing real “peace dividends,” generating security (or preventing a renewal of armed conflict), creating jobs, and building the basis for

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genuine, equitable, and sustained economic growth has been very uneven.



Yezid Sayigh

Not only have there been more failures than success stories – think Afghanistan, Democratic Republic of Congo, Iraq, Lebanon, Libya, and Palestine – but the failures have left populations in the affected post-conflict countries worse off than before in social and economic terms. (For those who regard some of these instances as qualified successes, they are at best in a state of suspended conflict, characterized by intensified economic cronyism, rampant corruption, and deep state erosion.)

For effective reconstruction to be even remotely possible in Syria, relevant local and international actors and agencies must think through the dynamics that will shape the actual course and outcomes of any effort they invest there. Planners, policy- and decision-makers, and activists alike must look beyond bricks and mortar and the macro-economic or sectoral level of design needs. Too often, the focus is on physical reconstruction, and the provision of

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associated technical and managerial skills. But no less important are the intangibles – social, political, and institutional dynamics – that will be generated by – and shape – post-conflict reconstruction in Syria and the associated repatriation of refugees and internally displaced persons.

Numerous challenges stand in the way, but three stand out.

First is to alter how international donors and national elites conceive the task, in ways that take their perspectives and interests as the primary reference point. Despite endless talk of “lessons learned,” international donors tend to reapply the same policies and strategies as in previous post-conflict reconstruction efforts in other countries. A principal example is their tendency – welcomed by local national elites – to focus on strengthening central state institutions in order to deliver results effectively and swiftly. But claimed gains in efficiency are rarely borne out.

In Syria, especially, devolving and decentralizing decision-making, program design and priority-setting, and command of resources may be more effective. Certainly it is more likely to reflect better the particular needs of vulnerable sectors such as women, refugees, and rural communities or clans – who risk being more marginalized by the end of reconstruction processes than at the start – and to produce better societal buy-in.

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The risk that national elites or powerful networked actors will skew resource flows and use their control to increase their power reveals the second challenge: enabling local communities to exercise meaningful governance. Western donors tend to approach reconstruction with a basket of ready labels such as “stakeholders,” “ownership,” “accountability,” “transparency,” and “best practice,” but often these are a poor guide to how governance – a much-abused term – is actually conducted.

The complex make-up of Syrian society necessitates building any governance model around the highly localized nature of social dynamics, economic opportunity and access, and institutions that deliver services and governance. Devolving responsibility for choosing priorities and managing implementation to local communities across Syria may be the most effective way to achieve meaningful legitimacy and accountability, and also to mute sectarian and ethnic differences. Whatever the precise detail, reconstruction programs should be designed around genuine “ownership” by, and accountability to, Syrians – not by and to donors, which is far and away the predominant pattern.

Third, as with any area of policy or program design, a central question is who actually sets the agenda? To take a paramount example, most political actors involved in the Syrian crisis formally avow free-market economics. But preferences and expectations differ widely among urban

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versus rural communities, the merchant class versus the state salariat, and established parties such as the Muslim Brotherhood versus newcomers such as the Salafists. No less pertinently, both international and regional actors will use the offer of reconstruction aid and investments to promote their own commercial interests, generating potentially dysfunctional dynamics and counter-productive incentive structures in the post-conflict political economy of Syria.

With Bashar al-Assad looking set to remain in power for the foreseeable future, it may seem premature to think too ambitiously about reconstruction. But as and when it becomes feasible, the challenges raised above must be addressed. Otherwise reconstruction will simply empower those who already possess key political levers and social capital, and produce skewed results in terms of reintegration of refugees and displaced persons, societal reconciliation, and sustainable, equitable economic development.

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