

04

Towards Inclusive and Sustainable Peacebuilding and Economic Recovery

“Syrian identity is pluralistic and expressive of Syrian cultural diversity and cannot be reduced to any one of its components only.”



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A. Introduction

The scale of the conflict coupled with its geopolitical complexity implies recovery and reconstruction is of global importance, not just for Syrians in desperate need. Before the conflict, the Syrian Arab Republic was classified as a middle-income country but gains in development have been reversed. While the country was at 112 in global HDI rankings in 2012, it dropped to 154 in 2019.¹⁴² All socioeconomic indicators have significantly deteriorated. Each Syrian has been affected differently, but the conflict has negatively impacted the lives of nearly all people and households.

The formation of the 150-member Constitutional Committee in September 2019, under terms agreed by the Government and the Syrian Negotiation Committee, facilitated by the United Nations in Geneva, marked an important step towards a political solution. The Committee is significant in that it entails both the Government and the opposition recognizing the other as interlocutors in the political process.

But the Committee is just a beginning in what should be a comprehensive process of peacebuilding and recovery. This chapter discusses a basic framework through which to understand peacebuilding and recovery in the Syrian Arab Republic. The suggestions are not a blueprint nor roadmap for reconstruction, a comprehensive survey or prioritization of issues. They are neither a substitute for political discussions, nor an attempt to impose solutions or to support or undermine the legitimacy of any stakeholder. There is no substitute for recovery that is an outcome of an inclusive Syrian-led national dialogue on the Syrian Arab Republic's needs and priorities.

Rather, they originate from ESCWA's research and consultations, including under the auspices of the National Agenda for the Future of Syria programme. Hosted by ESCWA, it has served as a platform for discussion for a broad spectrum of Syrian stakeholders, based on collaboration between networks of actors in civil society, the private sector, and national and international institutions. This inclusive and technical approach has set it apart from other platforms. The NAFS Programme was launched – and continued – at a time when polarization within society was significant. It succeeded in bringing together Syrians who, despite their disagreements, shared common values and principles.

Those taking part discussed a future vision for the Syrian Arab Republic based on four fundamentals that can be

summed up as: (1) Syria is a unified country; (2) Syrian society can rebuild the Syrian Arab Republic and achieve comprehensive economic development; (3) Syrian society is diverse and creative; and (4) the Syrian Arab Republic has a unique geopolitical position that gives rise to challenges that need to be taken into consideration.¹⁴³ These, and the principles that follow from them, are basic common ground that in the view of Syrian experts are worthy of guiding all representatives of Syrian society.¹⁴⁴ They are not meant to be sufficient for a holistic, inclusive and sustainable process of reconstruction but starting points for dialogue; a basis around which Syrians may begin to craft a joint vision and new social contract to shape the future of the country.

The Syrian Arab Republic has witnessed severe destruction and is in dire need of reconstruction that goes beyond just restoration. Implicit in the idea of reconstruction is a return to the previous status quo. The objective of reconstruction, within a discussion on the Syrian Arab Republic, would be to restore the structures and frameworks that existed in 2011, problematic given that many were part of the root causes of conflict. To reconstruct in this way, therefore, would be to restore not only the structures that existed, but also the internal flaws manifested in them. Another argument is that the objective would be to restore the idealized economic indicators that existed prior to March 2011.¹⁴⁵ Again, these indicators did not exist in a vacuum. Rather, they were part of a larger package that included significant rural and urban inequalities that, as studies have indicated, were linked to the protests of 2011.¹⁴⁶ It would not be sensible to aspire to replicate the conditions that helped create the climate for conflict.

The second and more aspirational notion of reconstruction is a change towards a different and better future than the previous or current status quo. Reconstruction in the Syrian Arab Republic must be holistic in that it views recovery as more than just building what was destroyed, a comprehensive, interlinked process that includes transformation at economic, social and governance level. It is inclusive in that it promotes a the Syrian Arab Republic for all Syrians, with particular attention to the role of women. Recovery must move away from the victor and vanquished logic of the conflict and acknowledge all sectors of society, be they inside the country or refugees. Finally, the process must be sustainable. Sustainability refers not only to the ecological sense but, crucially, given the likelihood that external assistance may fall well short of what is necessary, also to indigenous processes for recovery, reconstruction development and growth.

B. Principles of peacebuilding

For the Syrian Arab Republic to engage in meaningful peacebuilding, the political culture must move away from the zero-sum logic and extreme polarization of the military conflict. This includes accepting the “other” in practice, and in speech and political repertoires. Political struggle is normal in all societies and the task during the peacebuilding process is to move it from violent to non-violent means.

The priority is to forge a new social contract and enhance State legitimacy through consensual decision-making to reform governance structure and rehabilitate political institutions in a representative manner, undo the impact of the war economy, rehabilitate public administration and implement appropriate measures for administrative and fiscal decentralization. By combining relevant United Nations resolutions and the ESCWA-convened deliberations of Syrians from various walks of life, the following propositions are put forward:

(a) A political transformation based on United Nations Security Council resolution 2254 that guarantees transition towards a the Syrian Arab Republic where a culture of democracy is built and practiced, mutual trust re-established between political players, and the rule of law, equality and citizenship established. Based on United Nations Security Council resolution 1325, attention should be paid to the role of women, as victims of the

conflict and leaders in the peacemaking process;
(b) The right of the displaced and refugees to a safe, dignified and voluntary return to their homes, or any other location inside the country where they voluntarily choose to return;

(c) A national reconciliation to which all Syrians are invited and encouraged to contribute;

(d) A balanced and equitable citizen-centred development that: (i) directly contributes to stability, peacebuilding and reconciliation at local and national levels; (ii) is tangible and felt in the availability of rehabilitated social and physical infrastructure; and (iii) empowers people, especially the most vulnerable and poor, to attain their basic needs;

(e) A move towards a governance framework and national administrative structure that is comprehensive, participatory, transparent, can be held accountable and increases gender equality.¹⁴⁷

In the current reality this may appear idealistic, but a recovery phase that does not address such ideas will prolong suffering and risk creating or entrenching existing inequalities and injustices, as well as potentially contributing to conflict relapse even if along a different dimension. Even a partial move towards the desired end would have a positive impact on reconstruction.

C. Challenges for recovery

The challenges for the Syrian Arab Republic are widespread and overwhelming. Recovery will be long and complex. It is important to set it on the best possible path by simultaneously addressing issues in the short to medium run.

All actors, including the Government and international community, must consider the interconnected nature of recovery and attempt to address it in a holistic manner. Key areas of concern that require attention in the peacebuilding phase include: (a) emergency response, services and basic needs; (b) political and administrative governance and institutional reform; (c) social cohesion, reconciliation and revival of civil society; and (d) economic recovery and undoing the war economy. Several cross-cutting themes require emphasis. These primarily include attention to gender equity and women’s representation, as well as the human rights of all Syrians. Second, due to the international dimension, the rights of refugees and displaced populations must be respected and considered. The principle of voluntary repatriation and *non-refoulement*¹⁴⁸ must be observed, while creating the conditions for a dignified return for all refugees. They must also be protected from retribution and persecution on their return.



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1. Emergency response, services and basic needs

Initially the focus must be on ensuring life-threatening humanitarian needs are met. The emergency response process has different stages, including the emergency (or initial) response, and the continuing (or ongoing) response. Violence has diminished in many areas, but the humanitarian and basic needs of Syrians inside the country and in neighbouring countries as refugees remain substantial. The Syrian Arab Republic is witnessing a slow pattern of return, primarily IDPs and a small number of refugees. While stressing the principle of voluntary repatriation and non-refoulement, it is important to prepare for the return of refugees, and to guarantee their personal safety and well-being and alleviate their fear of persecution and arrest. Delivery of basic needs and services should be equitable and non-discriminatory, either in appearance or practice. Anything else signals a continuation of the conflict.

In 2019, more than 11.7 million people, including 5 million children, were still in need of at least one form of humanitarian assistance, 5 million of these in acute need. These needs related to food security, basic health and education, and access to livelihoods. According to multidimensional poverty indices, acute poverty and poverty have sharply increased, with poverty estimated to have exceeded 50 per cent in 2017.

Improved access to basic needs and services has a crucial role to play in the peacebuilding process. Unfortunately, in the Syrian conflict there has too often been a direct targeting of the basic infrastructure essential for food security, health and education. At the very least, all parties should cease the targeting of civilian infrastructure.

Research on conflict relapse has emphasized the importance of quality of life indicators, including health and education indicators such as mortality rates, life expectancy, adult literacy and poverty.¹⁴⁹ Attention to basic needs should incorporate and respond to local priorities in an inclusive manner and allow local people a central role in articulating them. It is particularly important that governance structures be receptive to the possible return of displaced populations. As a result, local

response approaches should include civil society and other representative governance bodies to incorporate a spectrum of voices, particularly women, and to address the needs and concerns of marginalized populations and those with special needs.

Sectors requiring attention include food security, water, sanitation, hygiene, health care, education, shelter, direct poverty alleviation and livelihood provision, energy and electricity, and telecommunications. The dire need situation implies that policies are emergency or humanitarian in nature. But policies should also show a progressive shift, and seek to link these immediate concerns with a longer focus on sound and sustainable approaches that revive economic growth. For example, assuring food security is a basic focus that includes food availability and access. This can help the agricultural sector by stimulating employment and growth, particularly important given its historical significance. Policies at national level should complement rather than inhibit agricultural potential.

For this “focus” to rehabilitate society rather than fragment it further, there should be a national strategy for basic needs and livelihoods that respects human rights and gender equity, and promotes horizontal equality throughout governorates and regions. Such a strategy should be based on a comprehensive needs assessment, particularly of the most vulnerable populations, and on available economic and natural resources and service delivery infrastructure. It must examine the toxic impact of conflict, including environmental degradation, landmines and unexploded ordnance, and come up with ways to mitigate their impact. Such a national strategy can play a dual role, reviving local councils and societal initiatives to promote partnership and service provider accountability, which will provide employment for local populations or returnees.

It is imperative the property and residence rights of displaced populations, be they IDPs or refugees, be safeguarded against arbitrary seizures from de facto powers or through unjust reconstruction laws and processes.

2. Political and administrative governance and institutional reform

Issues related to governance, rule of law and political life were some of the root causes of conflict. There is now an opportunity to consider “big” governance issues, such as the constitution, separation of powers and rule of law, and also basic rights and freedoms, to promote sustainable development and rebuild the social fabric. Building an inclusive legal framework implies a move away from the zero-sum game of winners and losers towards a consensus-based exercise that recognizes the rights of Syrians from across the political spectrum inside

the country or in locations of refuge, respects their human rights and empowers women.

The governance reform process should be a period in which all sides come together to form the new rules. Consensus building rather than competitive proceedings over contentious issues should be the focus of peacebuilding. There must be space for all voices to be heard in a meaningful manner on key governance issues, such as constitutional reform. These processes should

be fast enough to avoid setbacks but remain inclusive. Similarly, a rush to elections or referendums must be avoided, particularly at national level, when conditions are not conducive. Elections are by their nature contentious, and this must be a time of consensus building. They are not likely to be viewed as legitimate in a conflict-torn country where the electorate is shifting and unstable.

The Syrian Arab Republic will be at a critical juncture: a moment with immense challenges but also the potential to positively transform societal relations and the relationship between citizens and the State. During the peacebuilding phase, a social contract must be negotiated in a participatory and transparent manner. It is the time to establish effective and just governance frameworks, reform key institutions in ways that elicit societal buy-in and develop a culture of accountability that lends legitimacy to processes. The prevalent institutional norms and values will cast a positive or negative shadow over the country for many years to come.

It is essential for the governance process to have national ownership, and be conflict sensitive. Policies require a highly nuanced sense of context, which includes listening to all stakeholders, particularly those likely to be marginalized. The process is a crucial element of national sovereignty and must be led by Syrians – the Government, State organs, civil society organizations and ordinary citizens. National and local ownership of political reform is essential. Ownership means local actors have the responsibility for decisions with respect to objectives, policies, strategies, programme design and implementation modalities.

In the period 2011-2015, the Government passed or initiated a series of laws and reforms on all aspects of political governance and life, though these were criticized as being inadequate in process and substance, given the conditions in the country.¹⁵⁰ There are issues here concerning their legitimacy. These were passed and implemented in the midst of a conflict, with massive death and displacement and without the possibility of a consensus process, particularly as many of the laws have a direct and at times irreversible impact on the basic human, political and economic rights of large sections of the population. That context gives them the same zero-sum connotations as the conflict. Without an inclusive political settlement, their legitimacy and intention will continue to be a source of national division.¹⁵¹

Policies implemented during the peacebuilding phase should aim to restore trust in the State, with attention given to reforming governance structures that impact people's daily lives. Reforming judicial and security sector institutions in ways that adhere to the principles of the rule of law and human rights should be prioritized.¹⁵² Judicial reform policies fall into three categories: those that reform the judicial system, those that enable judicial oversight over the executive branch, and those that enable judicial oversight over the legislative branch. The judiciary can only fulfil its monitoring and oversight role over the executive and legislative branches if it is guaranteed full

independence. Autonomy of the judicial sector must be explicitly stated in any constitutional declaration/interim constitution.

The goal of security reform should be to achieve a democratic and human rights-compliant sector. It should seek reform while aiming for the long-term resumption of State monopoly of the legitimate use of force within its territory. Security sector organizations should be reformed in ways that make them accountable to civilian authorities, independent oversight agencies and civil society. Security sector reform and disarmament, demobilization and reintegration are closely linked and should be coordinated.

Similarly, there are issues related to administrative governance and decentralization stemming from long-standing challenges with capacity, public administration, public institutions and the civil service, as well as the centre-periphery relationship, and inequality between governorates. These have been impacted by the conflict, with the rise of local councils, NGOs and foreign donors fundamentally changing aspects of administrative governance and service provision. Centralization and decentralization, and their relationship to administrative governance, lie at the heart of governance issues. The Syrian Arab Republic's administrative structure was characterized by extreme centralization, and the de facto decentralization of power as a result of the conflict is likely to have lasting effects. Presidential decree/law no. 107 of 2011 should be assessed as a potential starting point, and amended as necessary to ensure appropriate fiscal and administrative decentralization policies, more autonomy from the central State and judicial accountability.

Rehabilitating public administration, as well as implementing appropriate measures for administrative and fiscal decentralization, are key to forging a new social contract during the peacebuilding phase. The core of public administration is an effective civil service and public sector that function in accordance with good governance

“Moving towards a governance framework and national administrative structure that is comprehensive, participatory, transparent, accountable, and increases gender equality.”

standards. The civil service operates at the contact point between citizens and government, and citizens are likely to trust the government when civil servants deliver services in a timely fashion, are accountable and act in an ethical manner, are responsive to people's needs, and can identify with those they serve. Civil servants are more likely to fulfil these expectations if they are close to the local context and realities on the ground.¹⁵³

Stabilization initiatives in public administration should be implemented with the aim of enabling it to respond

to urgent needs, including managing and implementing government laws, regulations and decisions, and providing public services. Policies that favour social inclusion, such as health care and education, are crucial in post-conflict scenarios, but less so in conventional macroeconomic policies. At the same time, the peacebuilding process should be the point when unhealthy links between political and administrative governance are severed, allowing a professional, meritocratic, accountable and transparent civil service to thrive.

3. Societal reconciliation, social cohesion, media and revival of civil society

Social and national reconciliation, the third area of concern, can begin only if hostilities end and all parties meaningfully commit to finding a political solution. Negotiations to end the military conflict and national reconciliation, the two parts of diplomatic activity, must accompany and be informed by one another. The aspiration is to benefit Syrian society rather than achieve a minimal level of agreement or bargain between the opposing parties. It is important to recognize that a comprehensive reconciliation process is intimately connected to rebuilding national identity and social capital degraded as a result of the conflict and polarization.

The process is necessary to start what will be a long-term commitment to healing and rebuilding society. This cannot be done through one programme or approach, rather an accumulation of efforts at all levels of society and throughout the country. Those affected have the right to justice, equality and citizenship within a new social contract, and all parties should be held accountable for their involvement in the conflict.

The complexity of the conflict, due to both internal societal problems and external intervention, necessitates a sustained effort to undo the damage. All Syrian sides need to recognize each other and accept that all Syrians, regardless of political perspective, have the right to live and be part of society. Further, the efforts of war entrepreneurs to invest in sectarian politics, hate speech and polarizing repertoire need to be countered.

There is no universal model for reconciliation. The conflict has generated multiple sub conflicts and localized disputes. Reconciliation efforts should draw on Syrian culture and its long history of dispute resolution at societal level. But there are important concepts of identity that have evolved over the years, and these should be upheld. Firstly, Syrian identity is pluralistic and expressive of Syrian cultural diversity, and it cannot be reduced to any one of its components. Secondly, each Syrian carries multiple identities (religious, sectarian, ethnic, cultural, class, localized) but equality of citizenship builds towards a common identity. That being said, laws and legislation must emphasize equality, citizenship rights and the right to democratic participation without discrimination based on

religion, sect, ethnicity, race or gender. Furthermore, denial of citizenship based on discriminatory policies deprives Syrians of their right of belonging, which undermines the basics of a social contract.

The peacebuilding phase is crucial for instituting a culture of public accountability and debate to allow the revival of Syrian society and expression. Policies must be geared towards establishing a free press and guaranteeing freedom of expression, spoken and written. Developing an appropriate legal framework and code of conduct for print and broadcast media is necessary and should include clear guidelines defining rights and limits on provocative and hate speech, as well as the publication of material posing a serious threat to the life, safety or security of any person.

Policies that guarantee the independence of civil society must also be put in place. In addition to NGOs, this should include independent labour and professional unions and syndicates, peasant organizations and social movements. These organizations, many of which are already active throughout the Syrian Arab Republic, have a key role in monitoring and overseeing government institutions, as well as contributing to benchmarks and goals in governance reforms. Accountability and transparency cannot be left to the media and civil society. Instituting internal mechanisms of accountability, educating citizens about their own function, and maintaining accessible data systems must be integrated into the work of government institutions themselves.



Photo credit: Samir Barazi

4. Inclusive economic revival and undoing the war economy

Reviving economic activity and undoing the legacy of the war economy is the fourth area of concern. It is necessary to look beyond emergency measures and humanitarian aid towards economic growth. To that end, the emergency response process should be linked to long-term rehabilitation and economic development.

At the very least this includes sustained investment in human capital, rehabilitating physical infrastructure and selecting strategic sectors, such as agriculture and manufacturing, for targeted support. At the same time, the Syrian Arab Republic must confront the legacy of the war economy which has entrenched warlords and promoted distorted development, illegal forms of wealth accumulation and illicit transnational transfers. The unilateral restrictive measures (sanctions) imposed by major western countries have complicated the scene, aggravating the consequences of the conflict. While sanctions are not the drivers of destruction, they are barriers to recovery.

Economic policies during this time period should be prioritized according to standards on which there should be a minimum of national consensus. Criteria suggested by Syrian experts from the NAFS Programme have included: (a) contribution to peacebuilding; (b) role in securing basic needs; (c) contribution to employment, GDP and accelerating economic recovery; (d) diverting resources away from violence; (e) addressing destruction; (f) institutional capacity; (g) importance to value chains in the economy; and (h) availability of resources.

Economic recovery should be a path to the reintegration of all Syrian territory, through the revival of internal trade and mobility, and societal reconciliation through equitable employment and balanced growth across the country. Historically, regions such as those in the east have had the lowest investment, despite being the source of the Syrian Arab Republic's wealth. Horizontal equality during the economic recovery process is vital for a successful peacebuilding phase.

The war economy is defined as both the way violent conflict shapes basic economic function and how it provides an opportunity to further finance conflict as well as benefit from it. Aside from the war economy, the scale of destruction has given rise to a multitude of practices and, increasingly, laws that attempt to regulate the reconstruction process. These laws, which affect almost all Syrians directly or indirectly, are passed with minimal social input, raising legitimate fears of unjust land grabs and depriving Syrians of their basic rights. Additionally, many undermine each other, creating a confusing legal apparatus that increases fears of abuse.

The destruction of physical infrastructure, the massive displacement of people within and outside the country, the rise of a war economy and the ad hoc construction processes have created the conditions for significant land and property disputes. The Government, as well as other

de facto governing powers, have passed laws that regulate reconstruction, and housing, land and property issues. These laws have exacerbated rather than lowered the potential for conflict and abuse, having a whiff of victor's justice about them that deepens polarization rather than reducing it. Addressing housing, land and property issues in a fair manner that respects the rights of all Syrians should be central to any political agreement and transition. Given the importance of these material issues for ordinary Syrians, how they are dealt with will enhance or detract from public trust.¹⁵⁴

The Syrian Government has not entirely neglected housing, land and property issues, in particular focusing on a series of laws addressing the impact of the conflict, and the significant destruction. It has attempted to regulate the reconstruction process and safeguard property rights through strictly monitoring buying and selling of property. For example, the Ministry of Justice has mandated for: stricter verification of ownership claims to prevent forgeries in purchase and sale agreements (mandate no. 20, 17 March 2014); a personal identity card only as proof of identity for notaries public (mandate no. 16, 25 July 2012); verification of power of attorney privileges (mandate no. 15, 24 June 2014); and banning purchase and sale of all types of property in military zones (decree no. 11, 2016).

But the government has also passed laws regulating the reconstruction process. These include laws on foreign ownership (law no. 11, 2011), laws and decrees regulating processes of real estate development (law no. 25, 2011, decree no. 66, 2012, law no. 23, 2015, law no. 10, 2018), a law regulating removal and destruction of informal housing and building violations (decree no. 40, 2012), a law regulating local administrative development (decree no. 19, 2015) and a law regulating public private partnerships (law no. 5, 2016).

These have created tremendous fear,¹⁵⁵ the sequence of decree no. 66, 2012, law no. 23, 2015 and law no. 10, 2018, in particular, causing widespread alarm regarding possible abuse, including land seizures and the deprivation of displaced people's property rights.



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D. Ways out of the deadlock

Guiding principles for an inclusive peacebuilding process have been outlined, in parallel with concerns that must be addressed for such a process to be comprehensive and sustainable while minimizing the chance of conflict relapse. But the bitter legacy of the conflict has left an understandable gap in trust. The result has been a stalemate on the political front. The military and security dimensions of the conflict have been prioritized, followed by urgent humanitarian care. The question of how this can be broken remains, and of the practical steps that can be taken to restore confidence, de-escalate tension and ultimately launch the process of building peace.

Important breakthroughs are happening, however small. The main actors have openly and repeatedly declared their commitment to a political solution. There is widespread recognition that military and security actions have diminishing returns, and that serious social and economic problems need to be addressed urgently. In the second half of 2019, diplomatic efforts were stepped up, by the United Nations and regional countries, including Iran, Russia and Turkey, resulting in the formation of the Constitutional Committee.

While these are hopeful signs, more is needed. A series of suggestions on practical steps out of the political deadlock are presented, reflecting long-held beliefs of Syrians from all walks of life. Many of their components, such as those on humanitarian aid and political detainees, have been reiterated in United Nations statements and resolutions, including 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2393 (2017) and 2449 (2018), as well as in statements from regional countries; for example, the letter of August 2019 from the representatives of Iran, Russia and Turkey to the President of the Security Council.¹⁵⁶

Movement needs to be simultaneous at internal and external levels ; de-escalation requires multiple actors pushing in the same direction. A key issue confronting the recovery process is that the internationalization of the conflict discussed in chapter 1 implies the Syrian Arab Republic's challenges are internal and external. For example, there are important policy discussions around four conflict related themes: economic sanctions, economic resources for recovery, political governance and institutions, and refugees and displaced populations. For countries imposing them, economic sanctions are tied directly to the political process and transition within the country, and reforms in governance and political institutions. Blanket sanctions, which have been shown to hurt the most vulnerable, inhibit the economic recovery process as they block external funding. Likewise, voluntary and sustainable return of refugees is contingent not just on successful reform of governance structures and institutions, whereby they feel safe from persecution, but also on the availability of basic services and the prospects for economic livelihoods and jobs, which are tied to the availability of economic resources for development and growth.

It is important for parties to undertake confidence-building measures and actions, and for them to be formally acknowledged when they do. The minimizing of all positive actions on the grounds that they are insufficient are insufficient is a disincentive for any actor to continue engaging. While the end goals must always be kept in sight, progress towards them must be incremental and agreed by all, providing the basis for further movement. The repertoire of public political bargaining must be at a minimum. Equally, there has to be open acknowledgement of unnecessary retractions or deviation from declared commitments.

The following recommendations are put forward for the consideration of all relevant parties:

1. Formal and informal policies that directly improve the quality of life of all Syrians throughout the Syrian Arab Republic and in neighbouring countries without discrimination based on political affiliation.

Humanitarian relief and livelihood revival are a minimum and should not be a bargaining position. This includes a commitment to protect all civilian populations and to cease bombardment of civilian areas, and the lifting of all restrictions on humanitarian access. As previous United Nations reports have demonstrated, the easing of restrictions on cross-border operations has significantly improved humanitarian access in various locations. For example, in June and July 2019, 1,160 trucks (30 consignments) delivered life-saving assistance to more than 1 million people through cross-border deliveries, including food assistance for some 827,000 people.¹⁵⁷ In January 2020, however, as delivery from Jordan and Iraq was eliminated and authorization only renewed for a six-month period, cross-border aid delivery points were reduced. In principle, these and related issues should be addressed as part of a broader package, one that includes discussion of sanctions. In reality, the practical necessity of cross-border aid means its politicization will lead to acute shortages for many dependent Syrians.

Overall reforms should also include a reappraisal of the blanket sanctions that harm Syrians and impose a huge barrier on all economic transactions – even those intended for daily needs – due to the possibility of violating sanctions. While much of the discussion on this topic has revolved around reconstruction funds, a more logical step would be to revisit blanket sanctions.

2. The release of detainees and clarification over the fate of tens of thousands of missing people.

This has been repeatedly emphasized by Syrian civil society and the United Nations, and recently by the tripartite letter to the United Nations from Iran, Russia and Turkey. Reforms should include an end to arbitrary arrests or detentions, or those based on political affiliation

or suspected political affiliation, and revisit the sentences passed by the "Counter-Terrorism Court" established in 2012 following a series of decrees and laws which started in April 2011 by lifting the State of Emergency that had been in place since 1963.¹⁵⁸

3. A broader spectrum of Syrian voices and revival of Syrian societal initiatives.

One of the tragedies of the conflict is that Syrian society has been side-lined as an agent of change in its own future. Syrians inside and outside the country must be given the space to make informed decisions about their future, both in formal negotiations and the public arena. This includes paying special attention to women's organizations, youth representation and refugees in neighbouring countries. The greatest successes in dialogue and conflict resolution have happened through bottom-up societal initiatives. While these have not been translated into high-level political solutions, now is the time to provide more platforms or forums to amplify their reach.

4. Joint economic, cultural and social cooperation at local level.

One of the strengths of Syrian society was its social capital and sense of connectedness, an attribute that has been deeply eroded by the conflict. Instead, a sustained investment by war entrepreneurs in degrading social capital has stoked hatred, and fear of the other. Rebuilding social capital is not easy, and is part of a wider healing and reconciliation process. However important work is being done by Syrian civil society, researchers and think tanks, which are using evidence-based research to address these issues head-on.¹⁵⁹

A wide range of Syrian experts have stressed the importance of local measures in bringing together Syrians from different political affiliations and uniting them through joint local economic and social initiatives. These revive economic interdependency, provide livelihood opportunities and serve to build positive social capital.