

MEETING SUMMARY

SYRIA UNDER ASSAD: CHALLENGES FOR EUROPEAN POLICY

6 February 2018, The Hague

Summary of key points

- i. **A regime military victory can be expected.** It is likely that the regime of President Assad Syrian will win the Syrian civil war by military means. This means that the regime will dominate the process of reconstruction without having to make political compromises on how Syria is governed. The core principles of the regime's wartime strategy will echo in its reconstruction strategic. Its wartime strategy amounts to indiscriminate punishment of disloyalty to instill fear, selective co-optation and deal-making with opposition groups/figures where this offers a low-cost solution on regime terms, and safeguarding regime interests.
- ii. **The nature of reconstruction will echo this victory.** The reconstruction corollary of the regime's wartime strategy is that reconstruction will be organized to rebuild and strengthen the regime's powerbase, reward loyalists and punish (perceived) opposition groups. The urban reconstruction that has already started exemplifies precisely this logic. In consequence, while the toll that the Syrian war has taken on the country's population, infrastructure and social services is clear, it is not obvious that these problems can be ameliorated without also strengthening the Syrian regime.
- iii. **Policy challenges.** This analysis places European policy in a quandary. The EU's central condition for supporting the reconstruction of Syria – a meaningful political transition – is wishful thinking. Without such a transition, the alternative strategy that focuses on the welfare of the Syrian people instead, can only be pursued outside of Syria. Anyhow, this alternative overestimates the sustainability of keeping millions of Syrian refugees in Lebanon, Turkey and Jordan under present conditions. Greater reflection is needed on their long-term prospects, and the potential negative spill-over should European countries remain disengaged from Syria's reconstruction.

Introduction

1. On Tuesday 6 February 2018, Clingendael's Conflict Research Unit organised an intensive debate in The Hague between c. 50 experts, officials, policy-makers and opinion-setters on the question of whether European countries should engage, and if so how, in the process of reconstructing a Syria that remains under the leadership of Bashar al-Assad. This summary offers an overview of key insights of the day. It is not necessarily complete and features no attribution. Its authors are responsible for its contents.¹

¹ The meeting was mostly conducted under the Chatham House rule. Speakers came from The Century Foundation, the Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, ICSR, the Syrian Legal Development Program, the Brookings

2. More specifically, the meeting focused on developing a better understanding of the likely nature of the reconstruction of Syria and what the trade-offs this will create for European policies towards the country. Key issues identified include: i) the problematic nature of the EU's linkage of support for reconstruction to an inclusive political transition, ii) the nature and significance of the various financial revenue streams that the Syrian regime disposes of, iii) the likely impact of continuous low-intensity violence throughout parts of the country despite an apparent 'government victory', iv) the sometimes conflicting nature of regional interests in Syria's reconstruction, v) the internal power dynamics of (urban) reconstruction efforts, vi) the stakes for IDPs and refugees, vii) and how Syrian jihadist groups are likely to develop.
3. The event examined these issues in the expectation that the reconstruction of Syria will be an eminently political process and that this will considerably limit possibilities for European policymakers to develop policies that are normatively consistent and contribute to addressing the needs of the Syrian population inside of the country. A key conclusion of the event was that the reconstruction of Syria will likely be based on the regime's warfighting principles. Another that European countries might in fact prefer to contain the regime while supporting Syrian refugees outside of the country. But, to date, insufficient thought has gone into assessing the potential negative spill-over effects of this approach.

Key threads of the discussion

4. A major challenge for European policymakers is to balance the need for reconstruction, exemplified by mass destruction and humanitarian suffering in Syria, with the desire to avoid contributing to the re-consolidating of President Assad's authoritarian rule. Despite intensive discussion, the meeting by and large indicated that these objectives are not reconcilable because more than a façade / token accommodation of the Syrian opposition by the regime of President Al-Assad is unlikely.
5. In consequence, participants expected the reconstruction of Syria to occur under close regime supervision with a few important features.
 - It is expected to take place in a gradual manner, reflecting both the absence of sufficient reconstruction funds (if the EU and Gulf countries do not contribute) and the selective nature of the regime's efforts that will prioritize its supporters in areas of strategic relevance.
 - It will be the scene of intense regional competition to establish spheres of Iranian as well as Russian, and to a lesser extent Egyptian and even Turkish influence through reconstruction contracts and regime connections.
 - It will not allow for contestation of the regime and instead re-establish the regime's crony capitalist – cum - rentier economy from before 2011. In consequence, many refugees will remain outside of Syria and the country will likely feature significant levels of inequality over a long period of time, quite possibly enmeshed with

continued low-intensity violence in parts of the country. Real or perceived opposition areas will lag furthest behind.

6. Syria's protracted civil war has given 'birth' to a new generation of political, business and military (militia) elites that expect to be accommodated or rewarded during or after the war. The regime will have to allow a measure of renewal in terms of its composition and will primarily use the resources it still has to satisfy its principal supporters. The more resources it will dispose of, the more it is likely to be able to impose its will on its loyalists throughout the country.
7. While low-intensity violence in parts of the country will continue due to the proliferation of militias, arms, organized crime and remaining jihadist groups as well as sympathies, there are currently no signs of an emergent guerilla campaign against the regime. In part, this is the result of the depopulation of entire areas of the country and the indiscriminate nature of regime reprisals. The regime is nevertheless expected to use counter-terrorism intelligence as a way to pursue Western actors to re-engage with it.
8. As to the refugee situation, it needs to be recalled that the displacement rate outstrips the return rate by a factor 3 even today. Since most people fled the indiscriminate violence of the regime towards its own population – and not that of the Islamic State, as is commonly assumed – and since the regime looks set to remain in power while taking a dim view of those that opposed it, refugee return at scale is not to be expected anytime soon. The push factors that caused flight in the first place include the desire for safety, dignity and the fear of conscription. The fear factors that prevent return include continued concern about conscription, possible prosecution and/or intimidation and the risk of being socially/administratively labelled as 'traitor'.
9. In addition, it was the logic of the regime's wartime strategy that drove many Syrians out of the country in the first place and if the regime's reconstruction strategy will echo its wartime strategy, this is likely to keep them out of the country as well. Yet, this may suit the regime just fine as it facilitates the confiscation of property, reduces the scope of the reconstruction challenge and makes it easier to reconsolidate its power base. In line with this logic, the regime has kept full control over the civil registry and the issuance of personal documentation throughout the civil war. According to some, the regime is ready to stigmatize those that come back as 'returning to the homeland'.
10. Regional interests in Syria have in common that they prefer Syria to keep its pre-conflict boundaries, aspire to a permanent military footprint in the country and expect significant business opportunities in the reconstruction process – but on commercial and not on aid terms. Having said that, the interests of Russia, Turkey and Iran are not fully compatible. For example, Russia is more inclined to accommodate Syria's Kurds within the notion of territorial integrity of Syria than Turkey is. Russia also cares more about a comprehensive, internationally-sanctioned settlement to end the war – consider its efforts to keep the Sochi dialogue/negotiation on track and its desire to connect the Sochi and Geneva tracks – than Iran is. Iran, in turn, would probably prefer for a parallel paramilitary state structure to emerge in Syria more than Russia does, which is more likely to seek the full restoration of the Syrian state.

Potential negative spill-over effects of not supporting Syria's reconstruction

11. There are various costs that may arise from inaction in terms of not supporting the reconstruction of Syria. In turn, some of these costs can create negative spill-overs (from a European perspective). These costs include:
- The persistence of a dire humanitarian situation within Syria;
 - The lack of possibilities for refugee return and the continued existence of a permanent refugee community;
 - Continued radicalization and violence, in part due to low-intensity violence in particular areas of the country, and in part due to the regime's highly selective approach to reconstruction;
 - A complete lack of accountability for crimes and atrocities;
 - The re-consolidation of an authoritarian regime on the basis of its pre-conflict political-economy logic;
 - The regional geopolitical consequences of a 'victory' for Iran and Russia.
12. Specifically, it was observed that the existence of violent militant groups, including jihadist groups such as ISIS, is closely linked to the presence of authoritarian regimes in countries such as Syria. These authoritarian regimes impact the lives and opportunities of people negatively, which may lead them to seek more promising 'radical' alternatives, but such regimes also manipulate and promote sectarian strife in order to divide-and-rule. In a post-conflict Syria reconstruction under President Assad, these dynamics will likely remain unaltered.
13. Moreover, the notion that ISIS has been 'defeated' is too simplistic. ISIS is a multifaceted organization of which only the proto-state elements (the caliphate) have been pushed back. The ideas and grievances that gave birth to ISIS and likeminded groups, however, remain. Western support for reconstruction may even play into the hands of ISIS and other groups, since they may be seen as a tool of control, and as a reward for Assad. They may therefore reinforce the notion that 'the West' does not care about Syrians, but only about power and money.

Conclusion and policy pointers

14. The Syrian war has taken a huge toll on the country: major infrastructures have been destroyed, causing key services such as healthcare, electricity and water to be disrupted; homes and properties have been destroyed throughout the country (including severe damage in Homs, Aleppo and Damascus); unemployment has risen and the country's GDP has nosedived; and the territorial integrity of Syria is fragile. Yet, the Syrian regime is in the process of re-establishing its crony capitalist economic model that puts its own interests over that of its population, let alone those of opposition groups or areas. Concretely, this happens through, for example, its urban reconstruction policies. These policies establish public-private partnerships to secure loyalty and financial revenues from various business elites with the aim of building luxury (secondary) homes for elites – not to meet the vast demand for basic shelter.

15. There is an urgent need to reconsider many of the traditional premises of international post-conflict reconstruction strategies and approaches in the case of Syria. This concerns in particular the assumptions that: a) conflict creates a rupture that can be used to enact political renewal or reform; b) institutional reforms can solve the governance problems that contributed to the outbreak of conflict. Unfortunately, the EU, World Bank and many European countries seem to be basing their Syrian policies on these premises despite the fact they are not applicable in Syria. From this perspective, it is clear that greater reflection is needed on how Syria's ruling elites can be incentivized to work towards outcomes that they would normally resist (for instance, by ensuring attractive returns in the short-term in exchange for change in the longer-term).
16. The possibility needs to be seriously considered that the process of reconstruction will deepen the socio-economic inequalities that existed before the conflict, including all the associated elite privileges. Should this happen while the regime also pursues neo-liberal policies that stimulate its crony capitalist approach to rule – and which may, incidentally, be quite compatible with IMF and World Bank conditionality for their support – the scene could quickly be set for either another round of conflict with a jihadist dimension, or for the creation of a permanently destabilizing force in the Levant in the form of a securitized patronage state that is constantly on the lookout for opportunities and resources to ensure regime survival.
17. **Policy pointer 1 on the nature of reconstruction:** The event strongly underlined the need for a debate on the implications of a regime-dominated reconstruction effort for the current policies of the EU and its Member States. A clearer choice appears warranted between:
- Supporting an authoritarian regime to rebuild the country in the hope of softening its views and approaches in the long-run while addressing desperate humanitarian needs, but without the possibility of pursuing justice and with the risk of triggering more extremist violence, or;
 - Refraining from providing such support while containing negative spill-over effects and developing a longer-term strategy to support Syrian refugees outside of Syria on the assumption that many must be re-integrated elsewhere - since they are unlikely to return.
18. **Policy pointer 2 on refugees:** The event also suggested a few points of consideration for European policies and initiatives towards Syrian refugees: i) creating pressure to return without being clear about what a 'meaningful political transition' means, is likely to put people in danger; ii) there is a need for developing a long-term refugee strategy that takes proper account of the strains that currently exist in the Lebanese, Jordanian and Turkish societies and that comes to terms with the consequences of the undesirability of maintaining the status quo.

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16 February 2018

About the Knowledge Platform Security and Rule of Law

This event was made possible by the Knowledge Platform Security and Rule of Law, which strives to increase the policy evidence base, programming effectiveness and knowledge creation in the area of security and rule of law development in fragile and conflict affected contexts. The Platform's activities seek to re-conceptualise understandings of security and rule of law in such settings, innovate policy and facilitate mutual learning. To this end, the Platform acts as a network for experts, policymakers, practitioners, researchers and the business sector. It provides an informal meeting space – offline as well as online – and an intellectual stimulus that is grounded in practice. The Platform was established by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 2012 as part of its knowledge policy. (www.kpsrl.org/about-us)

Selected further readings

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