Between Patchwork Peace and Splintered Reconstruction: Assessing Post-War Challenges in Fragmented Syria

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This March, Syria entered its seventh year of war with over 300,000 human fatalities, 6.5 IDPs, 4.5 external refugees and an estimated $ 250 billion in economic losses. The economy has contracted in real terms by 57% since 2010 and experts envisage that if the war ended in the next year, it would take at least two decades to recover the pre-war GDP figures (Gobat & Kostial, 2016). While housing and physical infrastructure are the most damaged sectors, no segment of the country's economy has been spared by the war; whose devastating effects pose monumental challenges not only in terms of economic and urban/rural re-development, but also concerning social reconciliation and community resilience. Moreover, given the unprecedented proportions of physical destruction and the tremendous impacts on human capital, Syria features as a country to be entirely re-developed, lacking the indispensable economic and human resources to fulfil the task.

Against this background, post-conflict reconstruction in the country – and the Middle East in general – has been a rather popular topic in recent months; raising the interest of institutional figures, commentators and political analysts, both from within and outside the region. Nonetheless, the debate has developed more as an array of speculations over who should pay for rebuilding war-torn countries in the MENA, rather than as a fruitful discussion about the challenges to be faced in each post-war context. This attitude towards the subject – often toying with the idea of a regional "Marshall Plan" for Syria, Libya, Iraq and Yemen – also seems to wrongly conceive post-conflict reconstruction as a neutral practice, linked by a cause-effect relationship to pacification. Yet, while it is safe to assert that inclusive and sustainable re-development strategies are inherent preconditions for long-term reconciliation and durable peace, an excessively normative and sequential link between the two may overlook the contextual complexities of each crisis.

In an ideal peace-building scenario, the reconstruction should reflect the outcomes of a nationwide political settlement; one that accounting for all the actors involved succeeds in delivering a comprehensive framework for recovery. However, given the unprecedented territorial disintegration experienced by these countries, and the reiterated international community's failure to overcome divergences, such a scenario is unlikely to materialize in the upcoming months; nor is there any sign that this could happen anytime soon. Indeed, as political and social fragmentation becomes more entrenched across the entire Syrian territory, the most realistic development is that of a patchwork peace with a splintered reconstruction; matched by increasing foreign interferences and deeper internal divisions. Although analogous considerations could be made for Libya, Iraq and Yemen, the Syrian crisis provides a rather unique case in this regard.

Civil Strife and Its Socio-Spatial Impacts

The Syrian Civil War officially broke out in March 2011 but began as an escalation of widespread popular protests violently repressed by the government. While external actors have played a prominent role in fuelling the conflict since its earliest stages, rapidly turning a popular uprising into one of the worst geopolitical quagmires of recent history,

the bulk of the rebellion's popular base was constituted by the impoverished rural communities and by the disenfranchised inhabitants of the urban and peri-urban areas.[1] The fact that these clusters of population were mainly Sunni represented an igniting factor only at a second stage – namely when foreign-funded jihadist groups started recasting the struggle in a religious framework –, yet it did not constitute in itself a motivation for them to join the protests.[2] On the other hand, the patterns of adherence to the loyalist cause were largely modulated according to the clientelistic networks created by the regime. These power practices have penetrated Syrian society at various levels for decades: on the one hand exploiting sectarian, ethnic or tribal identities to build loyalty and support, and on the other providing Assad cronies with better chances of investment, job opportunities, access to state services or positions in the coercive apparatuses. Finally, since these patterns of inclusion and exclusion had inherent socio-spatial reflections – particularly at the urban scale –, a deeper understanding of their structure and logics can provide fruitful insights into the roots of the hostilities, as well as into the urban fault lines emerging throughout the war.

With this in mind, and as a result of six years of conflict, Syria is now fragmented into four territorial entities. Namely the regime-controlled areas – Damascus, Homs, Hama and Aleppo, together with the coastal region –; the rebel-held zones – reduced to the Idlib region and other scattered pockets of resistance in the country's west –; the Kurdish region in the north; and the self-proclaimed Islamic State. In this context, the only legitimate political actor remains the Syrian regime; which, although considerably weakened by six years of conflict and economically buttressed by Russian and Iranian support, is the sole actor able to stage a reconstruction effort with the current state of affairs as they are. Furthermore, since Western powers seem now to be exclusively focused on eradicating the Islamic State from "Syraq," the regime and its backers are about to enjoy broader leeway on "useful Syria";[3] both in terms of military action and any reconstruction plans.

Between Recovery and Power Consolidation

The scenario depicted above is directly linked to the aforementioned prospect of patchwork reconstruction and introduces one of the most urgent challenges in this respect. Namely how to accommodate the need for economic, physical and social recovery in stabilized areas – stabilized" here meaning "recaptured by loyalist forces" – without subordinating the redevelopment process to current war-logics, and to the regime's agenda in particular.

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From the Syrian government's perspective, detaining a virtual monopoly over the reconstruction is both a guarantee of legitimacy and an essential tool for political control. Since the beginning of the crisis, Assad has always been concerned with maintaining an outward appearance of a functioning state; hence, his capability to launch targeted redevelopment pro-

[1] As of 2010, almost 40% of the Syrian population lived in informal settlements. Although these areas were not just the product of rural-urban migration and unplanned urbanization – many informal neighbourhoods were in fact provided with basic services –, they largely suffered from social exclusion, high unemployment and difficult access to economic opportunities (Clerc, 2014). On the other hand, rural communities, which mainly relied on farming, had been both largely penalized by the economic liberalization policies of the early 2000s and severely hit by protracted droughts (2007-10).

[2] The extent to which confessional identity contributed to fuelling hostilities in Syria has been a largely debated issue since the earliest stages of the conflict. Here, while acknowledging the importance acquired by sectarianism at certain junctures of the war – for instance in Homs, between Sunni and Alawite communities -, the crisis is analyzed as a more complex patchwork of political, economic and societal rifts; wherein sects represent a critical component, but only one part of the equation.

[3] The term "useful Syria" has gained wider currency over the last year, to describe the country's western region – and particularly the government-controlled areas – feeding off the assumption that the regime is now predominantly concerned with strengthening its grip on Damascus, Homs, Hama, Aleppo and the coastal region, to the detriment of the country's northern and eastern regions.

jects in key symbolic urban areas[4] represents a critical opportunity to both strengthen his domestic grip and to polish up his international image.

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On a different note, urban development and planning were tools for political control well before the beginning of the conflict and turned out to be essential auxiliary weapons when war broke out. In this regard, although the narrow links between pre-war spatial policies and the regime's power networks would require deeper unpacking for each Syrian city, it is safe to argue that the regime has always been aware of how to fracture the social body, acting on the urban space's socio-spatial configuration. This included both direct planning measures, taken either by the government or by state-owned companies, and a subtler array of strategies geared towards creating areas of influence or buffer zones across the urban fabric, and exploiting the religious identity and socio-political position of different communities.[5]

In this light, when the country was plunged into civil strife, the regime started making extensive use of targeted demolitions, forced expropriations and land and property rights systems in general, in order to complement its military action. This becomes particularly clear looking at the recent stages of the conflict: when the population swaps proposed by the government in Damascus, Homs and Aleppo are clearly part of a broader regime's strategy to repopulate formerly hostile areas with loyal populations. Moreover, these attempts to re-engineer the demographic composition of certain cities have also been accompanied by the destruction of HLP records in every retaken area, in order to prevent claims by displaced owners – if and when they ever return (Unruh, 2016). Some commentators have gone further, arguing that Iran would be actively encouraging these moves: pushing to displace Sunni Syrians towards the country's north, relocating Shia Iraqi or Afghani families in the freed parts of south-western Syria and planning a confessionally homogeneous corridor that would thus stretch from southern Iraq to Lebanon (Ghaddar, 2016). It goes without saying that if these population reshuffles should eventually sediment – and the current regime's capability to monopolize the redevelopment process is likely to shape this trend –, territorial reintegration and social reconciliation would be considerably hampered, especially since any linkage between urban and social fabrics is being deliberately torn apart. Concomitantly, the massive destruction affecting Syrian cities is already setting the case for major investment opportunities in real estate and construction, which the regime would keenly outsource to its foreign backers; notably Iran, Russia and to a lesser extent China.

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On a higher national scale, this socio-political landscape also poses a monumental challenge of political reorganization; particularly concerning the compounded issue of decentralization and how this relates to the undesirable prospect of a country's partition. In over forty years of Assad rule, the concentration of political power and economic opportunities in cities – mainly the capital – produced large economic inequalities both between urban and rural areas and across regions. This was particularly marked in the country's northeast, on which Damascus was heavily dependent for oil, gas, phosphate, wheat and cotton, yet where very little revenues were eventually allocated. As it is no coincidence that the fault lines criss-crossing Syria are partially reflective of these deep-rooted imbalances, com-

[4] See for instance the Baba Amr neighbourhood in Homs or Aleppo's eastern quarters.
[5] Ismail, 2013; Kheddour, 2015; Balanche, 2016.

mentators have rightly pointed at political and economic decentralization as a viable way to meet the demand for power redistribution and greater accountability (Yazigi, 2016). Nevertheless, given the emergence of ethnically and confessionally homogeneous enclaves across the country, any centripetal move in governance will have to accommodate power redistribution – especially at the district and municipal scale – with national integrity; without recurring to power-sharing agreements on a confessional/ethnic basis, for which both Lebanon and Iraq already provide dubious examples.

Conclusion

To conclude, while both external actors and the Syrian government have poured considerable economic resources into the military effort, very few redevelopment measures have been taken. With the exception of Iran – which might engage in short-term recovery projects to seek power consolidation, similarly to what happened in south Beirut after the 2006 war –, the majority of international stakeholders are unlikely to invest big amounts of money in economic or physical redevelopment, as long as the security situation remains volatile. On the other hand, while international organizations have been constantly delivering humanitarian aid since the beginning of the crisis, their involvement in long-term recovery projects remains highly curtailed by the regime. And although the latter has recently admitted that almost 50% of the state budget is being funded externally – especially by the UN –, it still staunchly opposes outsourcing any activity that could potentially erode its legitimacy to international organizations.

This not only jeopardizes social reconciliation in the long run, but also considerably hampers the capacity to reconstruct and tackle the conflict's social and economic root causes. For instance, the exclusively urban focus of the regime's reconstruction projects would leave the pre-war urban/rural divide largely unaddressed, which was a major factor of confrontations in Aleppo. Similarly, since 40% of the Syrian population lived in informal settlements in 2011 and given the targeted destruction of HLP records in the majority of hostile areas, the complicated issue of land will be key in any discussion about the aftermath. However, despite the very limited room for action and the uncertainty surrounding the political situation at the country scale, international efforts have to continue focusing at the local level, in order to: tackle the proliferation of war economy structures; avert further waves of displacement; increase the resilience and cohesion of communities and invest in small-scale economic projects, both in urban and rural environments. Finally, refraining from conventional state-building approaches and acknowledging that conflict and recovery will simultaneously unfold in mutual interdependence for many years, all these efforts have to reconnect challenges and priorities with both the roots of the hostilities and the morphing patterns of confrontation. Without this awareness, and given the current state of affairs, any discussion about recovery is destined to either reinforce current war geographies or await a Marshall Plan that is unlikely to be delivered.

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