Foreign Policy at BROOKINGS

POLICY BRIEF

THE FIRE NEXT TIME:

FINDINGS FROM A BROOKINGS-WORLD BANK-JICA WORKSHOP ON STABILIZATION IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA

TAMARA COFMAN WITTES AND BRIAN REEVES

MARCH 2018

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Civil wars across the Middle East have severely damaged regional stability. Middle Eastern countries, many of which are strategic partners of the United States and Europe, seek new methods of long-term mediation to address issues that were at the heart of the popular uprisings known as the Arab Spring: dysfunctional governance, coercion, and corruption. By engaging in post-conflict reconstruction and reconciliation, stakeholders seek to close authority vacuums caused by conflicts across the region, and particularly in Syria.

A limited capacity for reconstruction presses international donors to set focused objectives that are the likeliest to support long-term stability in Syria and the Middle East. One possible framework for directing international assistance is through planting the seeds for growth and development within the social and institutional fabric, not just rebuilding the country wholesale.

We suggest that the framework for international reconstruction of Syria and the Middle East should include the following goals:

- Avoid recreating the conditions that led to the eruption of conflict, including exclusionary governance and development, corruption, coercion, and weak social service provision.
- Policymakers and stakeholders should seek to reduce the incentives for violence and raise the costs of conflict relapse among local actors. It is important to prioritize institution-building in order to avoid elite capture and corruption.

Based on discussions at a July 2017 workshop hosted by the Brookings Institution, World Bank, and Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), this report finds that the best course of action in post-civil war Syria will be decentralization of government. It is crucial to ensure that Syrian leaders promote programs to advance inclusion and stability, rather than furthering division or exclusionary governance, or establishing de facto political authorities who lack local legitimacy. In practice, decentralization can oftentimes exacerbate societal divisions in a post-conflict environment. Therefore, it is important that international donors plant seeds for growth and development through smaller-scale projects that are ultimately implemented at the local level.

In July 2017, the Brookings Institution and the World Bank, with the support of the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), convened a three-day workshop to explore the landscape we face in planning for reconstruction of the Middle East and North Africa's (MENA's) conflict zones, and what approaches are necessary to rebuild sustainable states and state-society relations in the aftermath of war. The objective of the discussions was to bring policy practitioners, development experts, and political analysts together to build shared understandings and illuminate a path forward for post-conflict reconstruction in the region, including key principles and priorities for efforts to build a sustainable social contract in the wake of regional conflicts. The workshop was part of a joint project between Brookings and the World Bank on rebuilding sustainable order in the Middle East that is continuing through early 2018.

This paper summarizes insights drawn from the three days of discussion, which took place under the Chatham House rule. The views expressed here do not necessarily reflect the views of the workshop participants, but only those of the authors named above. These insights will be integrated into subsequent workshops convened by Brookings and the World Bank, into research, policy recommendations, and other efforts undertaken as part of this ongoing project.

INTERNATIONAL INTERESTS AT STAKE IN MENA RECONSTRUCTION

Workshop participants discussed the factors pulling Western and other international donors toward, and away from, investing in post-conflict reconstruction in Syria. The primary reason why international actors are prepared to engage in reconstruction efforts in Syria, Libya, Iraq, and Yemen is to prevent conflict relapse—the same motivation that drives most stabilization and reconstruction support around the world. In the MENA context, this core motivation is made even more compelling by the major effects MENA civil wars have had and are having on neighboring countries, many of which are strategic partners for the United States and Europe, and on European stability and security.

An additional factor for most international actors driving a desire to engage in post-conflict reconstruction in MENA is concern over violent extremism. Counterterrorism efforts drive a need to close down vacuums of authority that violent groups can exploit to establish bases of operations, as well as a need to reduce the alienation, grievances over economics, politics, and identity, and other socio-political factors that appear to cultivate receptivity to extremist appeals among local populations.

Finally, international actors are concerned to address the broader fragility of the MENA region as revealed in the 2011 Arab uprisings—a shared set of vulnerabilities that is evident across the entire region, and that has most severely (but not exclusively) affected the conflict-ridden states.

Because the MENA civil wars are viewed by international actors not as isolated or far-off conflicts, but as part of a destabilized region producing destabilizing impacts beyond the region itself, external contributors to reconstruction are concerned with ensuring that their efforts do not recreate the conditions of dysfunctional governance, coercion, and corruption that generated the 2011 uprisings, the reactionary state violence that led to civil wars in Syria, Libya, and Yemen, and the openings for actors like al-Qaida and ISIS as well as militia groups.

That said, reconstruction efforts in Syria are particularly fraught. The survival of a brutal, exclusionary, autocratic regime in Damascus seems likely, and raises questions of whether and how to engage with the central government in undertaking reconstruction projects. The significant military, political, and economic efforts by Iran and Russia on the regime's behalf press some to argue that the "Pottery Barn rule" (you break it, you own it) should apply, and these states should be left to manage Syria's reconstruction alone. This dynamic is further complicated by the fact that some major traditional donor governments have been providing

support to opposition actors and to communities freed from Damascus' control, as well as ISIS' control.

In addition, stabilization and reconstruction are inherently political activities in the context of an intercommunal conflict and a history of autocratic governance. Even when an end to the fighting is agreed upon, more negotiations will begin over a political settlement for the future governance of Syria. Every dollar donors spend on the ground will affect the balance of power between contending Syrian actors and affect those likely protracted negotiations.

Given that donor spending and engagement in the Syrian conflict have already affected the relative strength of various local actors, those engaged in reconstruction need to take responsibility for their political impact. It would be wise for reconstruction donors to map domestic Syrian "winners" and "losers" from the conflict itself, and from existing streams of assistance, in order to assess the likely political impact of any proposed stabilization and reconstruction programs. This analysis is crucial to ensure that programs advance inclusion and stability, rather than furthering division or exclusionary governance, or establishing de facto political authorities who lack local legitimacy.

CHALLENGES IN ENGAGING INTERNATIONAL RECONSTRUCTION EFFORTS IN SYRIA

In Syria, and in other MENA cases, we are unlikely to see international reconstruction assistance at the levels that we have experienced in other cases, such as in Bosnia or Iraq after 2003. This is largely due to tighter budget constraints in assistance, but in Syria it is also because of the role of Iran and Russia in supporting the Assad regime, and because Syria does not attract the interest of Western governments to the same degree as Bosnia or Iraq.

Since international reconstruction support will be limited in size and duration, it does not make sense to set objectives seen in other cases that featured greater investment—objectives like rebuilding of physical infrastructure or renovation of major state institutions and functions. And yet, a minimalist approach to stabilization that sets up basic security and essential services is highly unlikely to prevent conflict relapse—the primary concern of international actors—for it ignores longer-term issues of political and economic development.

The foregoing suggests that international actors must consider how to apply their limited reconstruction assistance toward objectives that are unlikely to be addressed effectively by other actors engaged in post-conflict Syria, such as Russia and Iran. For example, international donors may wish to focus attention on the projects and interventions that are likeliest to support longer-term stability (by incentivizing functional economics and politics and addressing sources of conflict), and those that advance citizen engagement and empowerment socially, politically, and economically.

Given these constraints, one possible framework for directing international assistance might be through an objective of **planting the seeds for growth and development** within the social and institutional fabric, not at rebuilding the country wholesale. This strategy would have the added benefit of insulating donors' efforts from adversely buttressing a regime if it remains in power (e.g., the Assad regime in Syria). Within that framework, our discussion suggested a few specific goals and guidelines for international reconstruction assistance.

First, avoid recreating the conditions that led to the conflict, including exclusionary governance and development, corruption, coercion, and weak social service provision. The pressure to revert to the old social contract is greatest during the post-conflict phase, when donors keen to stabilize areas and provide basic services to populations tend to prioritize short-term efficacy over medium- and long-term concerns over governance. In the Syrian context, this concern is particularly sharp for areas being liberated from ISIS control, where initial stabilization and reconstruction assistance is being driven by military concerns and a desire

for swift reduction in the presence of international coalition forces, rather than by consideration of the political consequences. Development agencies must engage directly and energetically with military and diplomatic authorities from Western governments to socialize a stronger understanding of how exclusion relates to extremism, and to shape early efforts on the ground. The legacies of authoritarian governance and broken political trust will pervert any reconstruction effort unless people are supported in building institutions to tackle these issues.

Second, donors should seek to reduce the incentives for violence and raise the costs of conflict relapse amongst local actors. Achieving this goal requires donors to take special account of how their programs affect the balance of political power, and the allocation and exercise of authority, in the post-conflict environment. This goal also suggests that donors should support accountability for major war crimes, as well as supporting dialogue and conflict resolution platforms at the local level to build trust and confidence between citizens, to enable the smoother return of refugees and internally displaced people (IDPs), and to prevent local grievances from sparking renewed violence. One guideline for thinking about these issues is to look at reconstruction efforts through the lens of "human infrastructure" rather than physical infrastructure. In other words, public services such as education and health care, and social or political institutions like media and government information clearinghouses, may be higher priorities for reconstruction than bridges and power plants.

In reflecting on objectives for international reconstruction efforts, our workshop also collected lessons on **what not to do**. The early Iraq stabilization effort in 2003, for example, epitomizes how dumping massive sums of money into physical infrastructure, not prioritizing institution-building, and ignoring risks of elite capture and corruption helped resurrect many of the economic and governance problems that had afflicted Iraqis under the Saddam Hussein regime. The pressure to deploy funds quickly, in ways that create visible impact, drives donors toward engagement that relies on or resurrects the old social contract of the pre-conflict authoritarian state. The pressure to fall back on that old social contract is greatest in the early phase of stabilization and reconstruction, and must be resisted. Instead, assess which local organizations or actors meet criteria for civilian status and political moderation, and that demonstrate the capacity to absorb and use funds effectively. Do not allow competition within the donor community to drive decisions on how to allocate resources.

DAMASCUS, DECENTRALIZATION, AND RE-CONSTRUCTION

Decentralization has become a mantra for international development actors and democracy promoters, as well as a go-to strategy among diplomats for ameliorating intercommunal conflicts. In the Syrian context, many advocate decentralized approaches to post-conflict reconstruction to avoid bolstering and reconstructing a highly centralized authoritarian state, to enhance government accountability and responsiveness, and to mobilize citizen participation. Some argue for assistance approaches in post-conflict Syria that would essentially compel decentralization from the bottom-up, by expanding assistance to local government and communal institutions, or even by providing cash vouchers to citizens so that government institutions must compete for and win resources for governance directly from local populations.

Certainly, the Syrian context emphasizes the mistake inherent in equating post-conflict stabilization with rebuilding state capacity, since capacity, and the ingredients for stable political, economic, and social development, can be found in both state and non-state institutions. Indeed, too much focus on rebuilding state capacity in a fragile post-conflict environment reinforces the notion of the central state as a prize for belligerents to struggle over, whether peacefully or through violence. Still, the

ongoing competition among belligerents and external proxies constrains non-state capacity, and may create a bias toward centralization.

But decentralization is not a panacea for state capture or corruption, and in practice can sometimes harden and exacerbate societal divisions in a post-conflict environment. In Syria, over the course of the war, autocratic rule has been decentralized as well, resulting in a fragmentation of authority without any reduction in coercion or corruption. In both regime-held and non-regime-held areas of Syria, authority is now wielded by sub-state warlords and militia leaders, sometimes in the name of and with the acquiescence or endorsement of the central state. Moreover, during the course of the conflict, cross-border assistance provided directly to sub-state and non-state entities has created an alternative set of fragmented local authorities. In the post-conflict environment, we can expect that some of these local authorities may shift their alliances or allegiances to best secure their own advantages as the new political structure of post-conflict Syria is being determined and implemented. Outside donors must be sensitive to the impacts of their engagement on this dynamic.

This context presents particular risk for the unity and integrity of the Syrian state. Current modes of assistance, in which some donors provide support to regime-held areas through the central government and others support non-regime-held areas through cross-border assistance to local authorities who are independent of Damascus, combine with the battlefield dynamics to set a trajectory for de facto partition of the country, at least as far as governance is concerned. To mitigate the risk that decentralized reconstruction assistance might exacerbate territorial and political divisions, participants noted the value of a conflict-ending political agreement that **clearly delineates the allocation of authorities** between the central government and local governments, leaving minimal areas of ambiguity. The Iraq experience demonstrated the challenges posed by a framework agreement on decentralization that was not sufficiently specific to enable implementation without provoking further hostilities.

The workshop confronted the challenges to reconstruction posed by the likely survival in place of the Assad regime. Assad will probably view international reconstruction efforts as hostile, especially to the extent that those efforts are directed at the objectives listed above. Donors must therefore be willing either to sidestep the regime entirely and operate only outside Assad's zones of control (a strategy that may invite state intervention), or to employ inducements and pressures on the Assad regime in order to allow international donors to implement their agenda. Should the Damascus government refuse to cooperate with donor objectives and programs, international donors must be prepared to walk away, difficult though that might be for multilateral actors charged with the reconstruction mission.

A few ideas were presented of ways international actors might seek to root their reconstruction efforts in frameworks that would be harder for the Damascus government to reject:

- Focus on youth unemployment, which the government views as a major threat to control;
- Reference Syrian laws to justify engagement, such as Law 107, which allows local partnerships on debt, taxes, and supervision of development projects; or Law 15 on microfinance that allows organizations like the World Bank to work outside the control of the government.
- Recruit the Syrian diaspora business community in reconstruction efforts, leveraging its participation to induce Assad's compliance in joint ventures with the central government; this will also allow donors to focus on the business community's chief concern, which is local corrupt services.

More broadly, actors seeking to support reconstruction and development in post-conflict Syria, and in the Arab world more generally, must grapple with the fact that decentralization is not a politically neutral concept in the region, especially in the current context. One or two Arab governments have embraced decentralization as an aspiration, and moved forward with election of local councils and limited devolution of governance functions and resource allocations to local levels. But for most governments, decentralization presents a fundamental challenge to the dominant structure in the Middle East and North Africa of highly centralized states that rely on rents and patronage, backed by coercion, for survival. Decentralization is thus a concept that shakes the foundations of the Arab state, both historically and in the current context, which many governments view as an existential struggle against "subversive" forces seeking to undermine security and stability.

In choosing a course for post-conflict reconstruction that avoids working through the central government and that favors direct engagement with and assistance to sub-state and non-state partners, international development actors must recognize that they are taking sides in a deeply political argument within the region. The body of accumulated evidence, and strategic objectives of development actors, may both support decentralization and make it a worthwhile pursuit—but resistance should be expected.

GEOPOLITICAL CONTEXT AND THIRD-PARTY SECURITY

The Syrian civil war, even more than Yemen and Libya, has become an arena for intense and expensive proxy conflict amongst regional and even global actors. The likelihood, then, is that a conflict-ending political agreement will only come about when external belligerents are prepared to withdraw their support for their proxies' continued fighting, and to pressure those parties to agree to a settlement. That means that a conflict-ending agreement will probably sketch internal political arrangements in post-conflict Syria in very broad terms, leaving much about the political transition and the allocation of authority across central and local governments to later negotiations. We should therefore expect political negotiations to be ongoing whilst the international reconstruction effort is underway, and perhaps afterward. This situation underscores the imperative for actors engaged in reconstruction activities to understand and deliberately address the political impacts of their reconstruction projects.

Geopolitical competition among regional governments, and between the United States and Russia, are evident in the Syrian conflict and present strong challenges to effective stabilization and security provision in the immediate post-conflict period. A review of the role of third-party actors in post-conflict cases from inside and outside the Middle East suggests a few important lessons for international actors seeking to support security and stabilization:

- The current, nascent effort to establish U.S.-Russia-coordinated "safe zones" largely codifies battlefield victories and may even result in more civilian displacement rather than less. Other cases suggest that safe zones can work to protect civilians, but only if international actors are prepared to put muscle into enforcing them. If insufficiently enforced, they will fail.

- Key conditions enable post-conflict stabilization and reconstruction: cooperation among the U.N. Security Council members and major international actors; the absence of a decisive military outcome; a capacity to impose boundaries around the conflict zone so that the proxy war can be managed without worrying about spoilers entering from outside; a commitment to international peacekeeping; and sufficient trust in the intentions of actors on all sides of the conflict. These are daunting requisites to achieve in the Syrian case, but the lessons of other post-Cold War cases at least illuminate

conditions that international actors can seek to facilitate.

- Third-party security roles appear an essential element in preventing conflict relapse. But third-party forces need not be independent actors—they can provide security support as "accompaniers" of indigenous security forces, not just as independent peacekeepers. Since an international (e.g., U.N.-backed) force is unlikely in the Syrian case, accompaniment and other models are worth exploring.

- The military is perhaps the single most important factor in stabilization. The Iraqi and Lebanese cases, among others, emphasize the importance of a national military in supporting stabilization and reconstruction. Without a unified and cooperative military, many organizations will not be able to operate in a post-conflict zone, and refugees and IDPs may not feel safe returning to their former homes. Unifying and reforming the army and security sector can greatly reduce sectarianism, and should be implemented **urgently**. Conscription can contribute to national cohesion and inclusivity, and prioritizing military/security reform as a means to absorb/disband militias also helps overcome the danger that militias pose for conflict relapse.

CONCLUSIONS AND AREAS FOR FUTURE EXPLORATION

The workshop uncovered both pitfalls and possible solutions in its attempt to chart options for international actors to lead effective stabilization and reconstruction efforts in post-conflict settings in the Middle East and North Africa. To prevent conflict relapse, donor governments and organizations must take precautions to avoid recreating the conditions of dysfunctional and predatory governance that generated grievances and led to the emergence of violent conflict. At the same time, the international community must not settle for a minimalist approach to reconstruction if it hopes to sustain security and stability as preconditions for socio-economic development. Instead, it needs to allocate its limited monetary and political bandwidth to addressing the factors that facilitate stability. Critical to this approach is the need to repair and cultivate *human infrastructure*, and not merely physical infrastructure, in order to reduce the likelihood of conflict relapse.

The complexity of the Syrian civil war and the legacies of exclusionary governance that preceded it highlight the importance of accounting for all key external, state, and local parties to the conflict, as well as the consequences of certain donor strategies. Because of the range and capacity of spoilers from inside and outside Syria, concerned outside parties must map the winners and losers of the current conflict in order to assess how their and their local partners' reconstruction activities will affect the balance of power amongst these actors and reduce the incentives for would-be spoilers. Decentralization of governance is an appropriate goal for international donors to work toward, in Syria and across the region. Yet this strategy will meet resistance from national governments already feeling constrained by internal and external challengers, as well as from belligerents looking to consolidate power in the aftermath of war. If not carefully implemented to ensure transparency and inclusion, decentralization schemes could reinforce wardlordism and exacerbate the de facto partitioning of states embroiled in civil war.

One concrete recommendation flowing from consideration of these dilemmas was for international actors to take a slower, smaller-scale approach to post-conflict reconstruction in Syria: to plant seeds for growth and development through small projects implemented at the local level, to cast those seeds widely, and to assess outcomes carefully before scaling up. The discussion also illuminated some key principles and priorities for international actors seeking to avoid the pitfalls described above. Future workshops can explore more concrete ways for actors to plant these seeds by examining the record of local programs that have

been undertaken by external donors in areas not governed by ISIS or the central government of Syria.

Finally, there is a clear need for further discussion on the root causes of state fragility and collapse in the MENA region, in order to develop priorities and standards for donor governments and agencies in engaging MENA governments on crucial issues of governance reform.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Tamara Cofman Wittes is a senior fellow in the Center for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution. Wittes served as deputy assistant secretary of state for Near Eastern affairs from November of 2009 to January 2012, coordinating U.S. policy on democracy and human rights in the Middle East during the Arab uprisings. Wittes also oversaw the Middle East Partnership Initiative and served as deputy special coordinator for Middle East transitions. Wittes is a co-host of Rational Security, a weekly podcast on foreign policy and national security issues. She writes on U.S. Middle East policy, regional conflict and conflict resolution, the challenges of global democracy, and the future of Arab governance. Her current research is for a forthcoming book, Our SOBs, on the tangled history of America's ties to autocratic allies. Wittes holds a bachelor's degree in Judaic and Near Eastern studies from Oberlin College, and a master's and doctorate in government from Georgetown University.

Brian Reeves was a senior research assistant at the Center for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution between 2015-17, where he worked with Senior Fellow Tamara Cofman Wittes as well as Fellow and Director Natan Sachs. His collaboration with Cofman Wittes dealt with issues of Arab state stability and U.S. foreign policy toward autocratic partners in the Middle East. Prior to that, he served as a visiting fellow at the Mitvim Institute, where he covered the role of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in U.S. politics. Today, Reeves is the director of development and external relations at Peace Now, an NGO striving to preserve Israeli domestic support for, and the possibility of, a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. His current work focuses on challenges presented by Israeli settlements, Israeli policy in the Occupied Territories, and reorienting Israeli perceptions of Palestinians and the conflict. Reeves holds a bachelor's degree in Islamic and Middle Eastern studies from Brandeis University and a master's in international relations from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors are grateful to the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) for support for this policy brief and the workshop behind it, and to JICA's Amman office for logistical support for our meeting there. We are grateful to our colleagues in the World Bank's MENA division, particularly Hideki Matsunaga, for his partnership in preparing and implementing this joint project. Finally, we are grateful to our colleagues at Brookings for their contributions to the project and to all our workshop participants for their engagement. Their insights were invaluable; still, the authors alone are responsible for the content of this policy brief.

Support for this publication was generously provided by The World Bank, Japan International Cooperation Agency, Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade.