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The politics of reconstruction in Syria
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(MUSIC)

PITA: Hello, and welcome to Intersections, part of the Brookings Podcast Network. I'm your host, Adrianna Pita. In Syria today, the Assad Regime has reclaimed, if not all, a majority of the country's territory and the bulk of the large-scale fighting is that -- at an end. So, what comes next? In the aftermath of a long and cruel civil war, the questions of if and how Syria rebuilds itself as a nation, and who helps put the pieces back together, are especially thorny.

So, with us today to discuss the questions of, and recommendations for, reconstruction in Syria are Tamara Cofman Wittes, Senior Fellow in our Center for Middle East Policy at Brookings, and Steven Heydemann, a Non-resident Senior Fellow, here, at Brookings, and the Janet Wright Ketcham Class of '53 Chair of Middle East Studies at Smith College. Tamara and Steven, thank you so much for being here today.

COFMAN WITTES: Great to be here.

HEYDEMANN: Glad to be with you.

PITA: So, usually in post-conflict situations, there is the "break it, you buy it" principle, right? So, when it comes to a civil war, who buys it, and when we ask what happens next, in Syria, who are we asking, and why does this matter?

HEYDEMANN: Well, let's start, maybe, by just providing a bit of background about what the landscape looks like, in Syria, because that's really very directly relevant for the whole question of reconstruction, and what's important to recognize is that they're really four very distinct zones in which reconstructions are unfolding, and they're unfolding in different ways.

There's what we call the Western Backbone or Western Spine of Syria, which includes all of the major urban centers from Aleppo in the North all the way to Damascus in the South. That territory is now pretty firmly under the control of the Assad Regime, and it's in that area that questions about the regime's approach to reconstruction are really driving debates about the future of Syria and about what role outsiders are going to play in reconstruction. Beyond that, we have an area in the Northwest, which is still in opposition control, for the most part, but where Turkey has also intervened, militarily. Largely, to deal with it, perceives as a threat from Kurdish Armed Groups. Turkey is undertaking some reconstruction work in that area, but there's a very different dynamic in that part of the country.

In the Northeast, and the Eastern part of Syria, there are Kurdish Forces, with some Arab fighters participating, controlling a zone where the U.S. is present. It's outside of the regime's control, and there is a reconstruction discussion about what role the U.S. and others might play, which is really pretty much limited to that space. Then, we move to the South, where, again, we have opposition groups, armed groups, in control, and where there are security issues still unresolved, that have, in some ways, eclipsed a reconstruction debate. This is the space along the Israeli and Jordanian border, where Iran and Hezbollah have been struggling to establish a presence against significant pushback from Israel, and we find, in that area, the reconstruction conversation hasn't really begun yet. It's still a conversation about how to establish security conditions that would permit a reconstruction conversation to happen.

So, we have to be mindful that this is a fragmented space, and that the reconstruction issues that surface differ, depending on which of these spaces we're focusing on.

PITA: Great. Thanks for that orientation. Tamara, do you want to jump in on the question about the contentiousness of this issue?

COFMAN WITTES: Sure. So, I think that, typically, the international community, writ large, likes to jump in when civil wars can be concluded, or resolved, or have resolved themselves with reconstruction support. It's usually seen as a way of solidifying a peace and preventing a relapse of conflict, and also creating conditions in which refugees can return home, and conditions that will prevent non-state actors, like terrorist groups or organized crime, from permanently establishing themselves.

Now, the Syrian case is different from a lot of these, more typical cases, in that, number one, the international actors are very divided over the war in Syria; the U.S. and Russia, of course, but even within the region of the Middle East, you have Iran supporting the regime, and you have had, for a long time, a number of Arab states supporting different types of rebel groups.

So, even though those rebel groups seem to be losing this war with the regime, those regional powers are not yet ready to just embrace the reality of an Assad-led Syria into the future, nor is the United States, nor are a number of Western countries who have been appalled at the way that Assad has prosecuted this war, the extent to which he has

demonstrated a willingness to ravage his entire country, displace half of his population, destroy physical infrastructure, destroy civilian infrastructure, and engage in massive war crimes, including the use of chemical weapons, for the sake of defeating his internal opposition, and so there's a real reticence on the part of these outside parties to make any investment in reconstruction that would solidify the rule of Bashar Al Assad over the wreck that is Syria.

On the other hand, we've already seen this civil war provide space for extremists, like Isis, generate mass refugee flows into the surrounding region and into Europe, and thereby threaten to destabilize countries beyond Syria, itself, and so that's the contrary impulse. Those concerned with stability in the Middle East or with reducing migration flows to Europe see an interest in making it possible for people to return and live in Syria, and so the questions are is it time to do that yet, and is there a way to make it possible for people to return securely, without appearing to buy into or accept Bashar Al Assad's continued rule?

HEYDEMANN: Yeah. What was so important, I think, Tamara, about the way you characterized it is the link that you developed between reconstruction as a process of rebuilding infrastructure and supporting processes of social repair and the politics of reconstruction, and the concern on the part of a large number of external actors, that if support were to be provided to the Assad Regime, at that this moment, when it believes it's achieved a decisive military victory over its opponents, and when it sees the victory as an opportunity to reimpose its authority, and to rebuild institutions of governance, very similar, perhaps even more repressive, more exclusionary than those that operated prior to the conflict.

When reconstruction is conceived as a political project, with those ends in mind, external actors have the very, very appropriate concern that engaging in or supporting reconstruction in that context will be supporting the normalization of the Assad Regime, will re-legitimize the Assad Regime, will, in fact, foreclose possibilities for using reconstruction to address the kind of challenges that Tamara mentioned, like creating conditions that will be conducive to bringing refugees back, or creating a political context, in which the grievances that drove the uprising in 2011 will not be reproduced or amplified, and so there is this enormous, enormous divide between external actors, who think it's critical for the long-term stability of the region, of Syria, who think it's critical for providing an environment that will permit those

who've been displaced by conflict, or who've lost property in the conflict, to return to lives that offer them some possibility for a future that may look a little different than might have been the case under the Assad Regime's vision of reconstruction, for that kind of a vision to drive how reconstruction is organized.

Now, one of the consequences of the regime's victory is that it does not feel any particular need to move toward the conception of reconstruction that's been advanced by the European Union or the United States. It is really very firmly fixed in the perspective that the victor commands how the outcome of the conflict will be organized, and that has made it very difficult for external actors, even those who are concerned that the absence of reconstruction will fuel radicalization, that it will contribute to further outflows of refugees. It's made it very difficult for those actors to really find a way to engage in reconstruction that it feels would produce a more positive social economic political outcome, and so, so far, we have this enormous gap between the regime, which is telling the world, "We won. Get over it. We're here. Help us, or you will see outflows of radicals and refugees." and Western and other external actors who are saying, "No. Until you're prepared to use reconstruction as an opportunity to address problems that would cause radicalism and refugees, we're not going to engage." and that is, more or less, I think, the state of play, right now, with respect to those areas that the regime controls.

COFMAN WITTES: Yeah, and I think there's a little bit of a game of chicken inherent in the arguments that Steve just laid out. The regime is saying, "If you don't help us, chaos will ripple out from here." and those internationals, who have a different vision for reconstruction and for governance in Syria, say, "If you don't fix yourself, if you don't reform, and create more inclusive political and economic structures, you will be chaos, and we don't want to invest in that." So, you know, it's a little bit of who feels the pain first -

PITA: Mm-hmm.

COFMAN WITTES: -- and, therefore, gives in.

HEYDEMANN: Yeah. Although, you know, it's interesting because there's no question that the scale of reconstruction exceeds the ability of the Assad Regime to pay for it on their own. We've heard figures that range from \$100 billion to \$300 billion, as the amount that will

be needed to repair the damage caused by seven years of extraordinarily violent, violent conflict, and, yet, it seems as if the Assad Regime values its ability to control every aspect of reconstruction, even if that means that it will not receive all of the assistance it needs to move a reconstruction program forward on a comprehensive basis, rather than buy into or accept some of the compromises that have been asked of it from external actors, and we've seen, over the last three, four years, that the regime has built the legal architecture, through the introduction of new laws and new regulations that are intended to ensure that it will be in control of every aspect of reconstruction.

It's put in place laws, for example, that give local authorities the power to seize property and to offer them to private individuals, to private firms, for redevelopment. It's put in place laws that control which NGOs are able to participate in reconstruction. It's put in place laws governing how refugees are able to prove their ownership of property that they fled during the height of the conflict, and all of these measures are signaling that, from the regime's perspective, this is a process, that it will control, that it will not permit external actors to shape this process, even if that means that it doesn't receive the funding that would be needed to do the work of reconstruction on a national basis, and what that tells us, I think, is that, from the regime's perspective, it's political objectives, in using reconstruction as a way to solidify its control, really outweigh its commitment to the rebuilding of Syria.

PITA: Now, what's the role of their allies, of Iran and Russia, in terms of either their interest in, or capacity to do, some of that reconstruction for the regime? How much are they counting on them?

COFMAN WITTES: Well, look, the Iranian Regime has been willing to invest a lot of money, as well as some of its own soldiers and militias that it has brought in from outside the country, to invest all that in sustaining Bashar Al Assad in power. So, given how much they think it's worth to have him there, one would imagine that they have incentive to contribute to entrenching him, through reconstruction.

The question is, I think, what are the mechanisms for that? I think you could make the same claim, although, perhaps, a little bit less, with regard to the Russians. The other thing to remember is that reconstruction, itself, can be very good business.

PITA: Mm-hmm.

COFMAN WITTES: These cities and anyone who's seen images on the news from places, like Aleppo, has seen the scale of destructions, just, you know, whole city blocks reduced to rubble. There will be a lot of money to be made in rebuilding cities in Syria, in selling off that real estate, to people who are returning and trying to rebuild their lives, and so I think whether it's the multiple companies, Iranian companies, owned and run by the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps, or Russian Oligarchs who have companies that do construction. There's lots of money to be made there, and I imagine that those governments expect that their companies-

HEYDEMANN: Right.

COFMAN WITTES: -- will be given a preferential role, by the Assad Regime, in reconstruction, and a chance to sort of recoup some of the profits from their investment in Assad.

HEYDEMANN: Yeah. That's exactly what we've seen unfolding. Assad, himself, has said that the governments that provided support to the Syrian Regime during the conflict will be the ones who benefit from reconstruction. There's been a very, very consistent pattern of allocating contracts, rebuilding contracts, to those governments of offering them concessionary terms. For instance, with respect to the oil sector, which is really important for the regime as a generator of revenue, there are some Russian firms that have been provided contracts to redevelop oil fields that were damaged during the conflict.

Iranian firms, as Tamara said, are being given privileged opportunities to take part in reconstruction, and Chinese firms are as well, and so there is this very, very clear quid pro quo that's driving how the Assad Regime is structuring the allocation of reconstruction funds, and, in fact, what we've heard about, for example, and this signals the link between reconstruction and the regime's political vision for the future, we've heard that there is a campaign underway, by the regime, to purchase properties from those it views as insufficiently loyal to the regime, and to make those properties available to Iranians and to regime loyalists, and so what we see is that, at pretty much every step along the way, whether it's in the allocation of reconstruction funding or in identifying who the contractors are who will participate in reconstruction, or in using the excuse of reconstruction to try and achieve some form of demographic changes, that,

from the regime's perspective, will remove communities that it views as insufficiently loyal.

All of these things are wrapped up in how the regime has proceeded, and, so far, I think it's very clear. The vast majority of reconstruction contracts have gone to firms associated with foreign governments that supported the regime.

COFMAN WITTES: I think there's another element, here, that's worth noting, which is that the kind of reconstruction we're talking about, as we talk about what the Assad Regime is doing and intends to do with these big contracts, this is physical reconstruction. This is only one dimension of what we mean when we talk about reconstruction, as a post-war endeavor.

So, they're talking about rebuilding oil field production, rebuilding roads, rebuilding housing, rebuilding schools and hospitals, rebuilding energy generation plants, agricultural irrigation systems. This is physical infrastructure. Now, all of that is essential to human life, to a functioning economy, and it's essential to refugee return, but what that's missing is all of the other dimensions of reconstruction that also, and in some ways more heavily shape the political and social and economic reality that people live in; so, reconstructing local government, reconstructing the community infrastructure of a local market.

How do people get their food? How do people get their kids into what kinds of schools, where they are being taught what material, and what's the connection between these local communities, where people come back in small clusters and try to reestablish their lives, what's the connection between that and the central state, and so, to the extent that, as Steve is describing, the central state run by Bashar Al Assad, becomes the only locus of funding, of support of mechanisms for all of that social life -

PITA: Mm-hmm.

COFMAN WITTES: -- the more control it has, and in the areas that have been, over the last years, not under the control of the Assad Regime, we've seen efforts, by Western donors and others, to try and cultivate different forms of social and political and economic structures, using small-scale reconstruction aid, if you will -

PITA: Mm-hmm.

COFMAN WITTES: -- at the local community level, and so, in those places, you know, these alternate structures have been established, and, if and when those territories become

reintegrated into a central Syrian state, what will their relationship be with an authoritarian government in Damascus? So, you know, this is another dimension of the kind of political consequence of reconstruction aid, and we don't know how this is going to play out down the line.

HEYDEMANN: Now, we still have some uncertainty about what the fate will be of the institutions and the civil society organizations and the grass roots kinds of institutions that have emerged in areas outside the regime's control, what their fate will be once they are retaken by the regime and reintegrated into some national political system, but the experiences, to date, are not terribly reassuring about the ability of those kinds of institutions to survive and that's another signal that's given pause to external actors because we, now, have, since the regime began rolling back opposition control in late 2015, after Russia intervened militarily, in a very powerful way, to tip the military balance, is that the areas that the regime have retaken have witnessed the suppression of the institutions that emerged in the period when those areas were not in the regime's control, and the re-imposition of the predatory and corrupt styles of rule that tended to define how the regime ran things in the period, even before the uprising, but certainly since the conflict gained steam in 2011, and so what we're seeing is that the regime has not been tolerant of the kind of infrastructure, governance infrastructure, community infrastructure, that was built in areas outside its control, and so when we look at under what conditions it might make sense for the U.S. or the E.U. to engage in reconstruction, we're really getting very, very few positive signs that engagement would produce the kind of reconstruction trends that we would view as positive, and it gets, very directly, to something that Tamara was saying, which is reconstruction is not just about removing rubble and rebuilding power systems.

It's about knitting back together a society that has become deeply, deeply polarized as a result of conflict, and what we see from the Assad Regime is that, rather than pursue a serious policy of reconciliation supported, for instance, by something as simple as the fair, equitable distribution of reconstruction funds -

PITA: Mm-hmm.

HEYDEMANN: -- to all communities, without regard for whether they were seen as pro-

opposition or pro-regime, during the conflict, what's happening instead is the discretionary and arbitrary allocation of the very limited reconstruction funds that the regime has, favoring communities of loyalists, and treating other communities in a punitive fashion.

So, when we look at these broader dimensions of reconstruction, going beyond, simply, putting buildings back together, we see an additional dimension in which the regime is behaving very much as if reconstruction is an opportunity to build a, sort of, Syrian society that will be more compliant, easier to control, will have excluded those viewed as not sufficiently loyal to the regime, and, frankly, that's an approach that I think, quite appropriately, raises a lot of very deep questions among the E.U., the United States, but also at financial institutions that often play a huge role in reconstruction, like the IMF and the World Bank.

PITA: You both, in two different papers that you both have written, most of your recommendations were on this "Go local. Go slow." approach. Can you talk a little bit about some of your specific recommendations for the places where it's appropriate to start certain reconstruction efforts? Talk about what those projects would look like. Talk a little bit more about that "Go local." approach that you've just started talking about, Tamara.

COFMAN WITTES: I'll start, and I know Steve will have a lot to say on this as well. I think that in the paper, that I wrote with Brian Reeves, a premise there was that we were talking about areas that were not under the direct control of the Assad Regime, and so the primary concern, there, was, "Look, Assad or no Assad, this is a society that has been at war with itself." and there are whole sets of divisions amongst and between communities that have been reflected in the fighting, reflected in population displacement, and so, as outsiders come in and provide reconstruction assistance, there are ways in which they might provide that assistance that could exacerbate those social conflicts, rather than help to ameliorate them, and so Brian and I were really trying in that paper to provide some guidelines that would mitigate that risk, and to focus in on helping donors understand the existing power relationships that are reflected on the ground, that they might either reinforce or soften with their reconstruction assistance, and also to look at specific ways in which international donors can invest in community reconciliation.

So, one example, I think, that flows very much out of the experience in Iraq, is where

you have an ethnic or sectarian division within a community, and you've had a lot of population displacement from one ethnicity or sect. It's important to recognize that, you know, you might do reconstruction in that town to make it possible for people to come back, but then, when those people come back, that itself can spark new rounds of conflict, and so you need to do the work with the community to prepare for refugees and IDPs to return -

PITA: Mm-hmm.

COFMAN WITTES: -- but you can also do work with those refugees and IDPs, wherever they are, in a camp or in another city, to prepare them to engage peacefully and resolve differences peacefully as they go back home.

There are places in Iraq where that was done well, in the wake of the civil war of the mid-2000s, and there are places where it was not done so well, but it's the kind of thing that, certainly, large donors don't look at first. They look, first, at the physical infrastructure. Can we get the power back on?

HEYDEMANN: Right.

COFMAN WITTES: Can we make sure that there's basic medical care? Can we get schools open, and this other stuff is all thought of as for later, or as a luxury, and I think our main point was if you don't address this stuff up front, you might just end up back in a conflict situation pretty quickly.

HEYDEMANN: Yeah. I think, that framed it very, very well. If we accept, as a starting point, that every dollar that touches the Assad Regime is likely to be misused, is likely to be misdirected toward purposes that will not support the kinds of reconstruction that we, in the West, tend to view as desirable, then the question is are there strategies for using reconstruction funding in ways that are insulated from the Assad Regime, and that can be used to produce outcomes that would make more likely a reconstruction process that would really address both the infrastructure issues, but also the social issues associated with rebuilding a society after violent conflict, and, in arguing for the importance of going local and going slow, the idea was that, rather than work from the top down, and rather than work at a scale which is typical among development agencies, where very large sums of money are involved, and where there's some political pressure to spend money quickly, let's start from the bottom up. Let's

identify who the local actors are, who have something to offer in thinking about what the priorities are, from the bottom up, about where reconstruction can be pursued most effectively, and it may be very small scale kinds of things, rather than some of the larger scale activities that the big actors tend to invest in, things like, for example, just rebuilding a local irrigation system, or putting back in place local garbage collection operations, and if there are ways, in addition, to think about designing those priorities through processes that would help knit communities back together, where you could, for example, support local coalitions to go through frameworks that would help them identify local needs, and agree on local needs, and develop some sense of what it would cost to implement projects at the local level.

Then, we could provide some support for those activities, which would be far, far less expensive, which would not reproduce the local hierarchies that would support the regime's re-imposing itself and its vision of what these communities ought to be doing in these areas, and that would provide some immediate benefit, that it would be very, very difficult for the regime to appropriate and claim as its own, and so I think there is a kind of cascade effect, or a positive cycle, that can follow from working at the local level, from thinking small, in terms of what the investment in reconstruction will be, and, in moving slowly enough, that we are not simply spending money to satisfy some Washington-based agency's notion of what a burn rate ought to be, but are really working at a pace that is consistent with capacities on the ground.

Now, I will say that we have to be mindful that the opportunities to do work in that way are not open-ended, and that, as the regime continues to expand its control, we find the space in which we can work, in those ways, becoming more limited, but maybe even more important, what we have to recognize is that the areas outside of the regime's control, today, live under a quite extraordinary shadow, the shadow that the regime will return, and that's a very powerful factor, especially in Eastern Syria, where the U.S. has created so much uncertainty about whether it's going to stay or not, and if I were someone living in that area, and I wasn't entirely sure that the U.S. was going to be around for a while, I would be organizing myself in such a way that, once the U.S. left, I wouldn't become a target for the regime, and so we have to be mindful that the uncertainties we've created, that our unwillingness to make a long-term commitment to some form of presence in the areas where the U.S. is now operating is in and of

itself narrowing the opportunities to do positive forms of reconstruction, and that's something that I think we could deal with in the shorter term, that might open up opportunities to do the kind of work that might have some longer-term benefit.

COFMAN WITTES: Yeah, and, unfortunately, I think the trajectory that we're seeing from the Trump Administration, right now, actually cuts in precisely the opposite direction from the one that Steve is recommending because not only has he kind of created more uncertainty about the U.S. military presence and the U.S.'s interest at all in trying to shape the outcome of the civil war, but he's also suspended U.S. civilian assistance.

So, all of those little projects that have been ongoing over the last few years are now frozen, and new funding that was pledged by the United States, just a few months ago, at a donor conference, it's not clear whether that money will ever get supplied. So, right now, as we speak, there are these little sparks of alternative possibilities that are suffocating because their U.S. funding has been cut off.

PITA: I did want to ask you a little bit about the political will question, all right? It seems like it's, at least for a short time, it's usually pretty easy to convince people, like, "Look, that area's in trouble. There could be monsters. We're going to send our brave soldiers to go and fight them." but convincing people, "There could be trouble. So, we're going to go throw money at it." is not such a great sell. Aside from the Trump Administration, in Congress, in public, what's the state of the political will question, both in the U.S. and with the other European partners?

COFMAN WITTES: Yeah, well, you're absolutely right, Adrianna, to point out that civilian conflict prevention is always a harder sell, somehow, than sending the military, once a conflict has erupted, even though it's both more dangerous and far more expensive to send troops, but I think that it's often hard for the American public or for any public to understand the need for an investment abroad, until there's a danger staring them in the face, and, primarily, over the last decade or a decade and a half, I would say, the main political argument on behalf of what we would call reconstruction assistance or conflict prevention is a terrorism argument, essentially, that if we don't do this, bad guys will grow in this ungoverned space, and that's been a rationale that's been used for support in Southeast Asia, in the Sahel, in Sudan, in Iraq,

and now in Syria, and, you know, I think that, certainly, we can look at the experience of Iraq between 2011 and 2014 as a cautionary tale -

PITA: Mm-hmm.

COFMAN WITTES: -- and this is something that I wrote about a couple years ago, in the Atlantic, where at the same time that President Obama was removing our combat forces from Iraq, over the course of 2011, he was also cutting civilian assistance, economic assistance to Iraq, by 50%, and reducing our diplomatic and development presence in the country, and so, at a crucial period, when we could have been using that civilian support to stabilize a very, very fragile sectarian agreement, that was holding Iraq together, and sort of constraining the Iraqi Prime Minister from some of his more sectarian impulses, instead we leaned back -

PITA: Mm-hmm.

COFMAN WITTES: -- and that was the context in which Prime Minister Maliki made a lot of bad decisions that created real political rifts, rifts within the Iraqi military, and created the enabling conditions for Isis to emerge and run rampant across Iraq and, therefore, American troops had to go back in, in 2014, to combat that threat.

The Syrian civil war, of course, was also part of the context for Isis's emergence and its surge, and the U.S. has now expended a lot of blood and treasure ousting Isis from territory in Syria, and attempting to hunt down the remnants of this movement, but there's no question in my mind that if Syrian Sudanese, who are already alienated from and hunted by their government, feel abandoned by all outside powers, that they will turn to those who are offering them protection, and offering them some sense of dignity, and those people will be extremists. Those extremists are still there, on the ground, in Syria, whether it's Isis, groups that are linked to Al Qaeda, or independent Sunni extremist groups.

So, not only, without reconstruction support, are those groups likely to grow, without political reconciliation in Syria, more to the point, those groups will inevitably grow. I think everything that Steve is saying points to the fact that Bashar Al Assad is, right now, setting up the next round of conflict. He may think he's won this war -

HEYDEMANN: Mm-hmm.

COFMAN WITTES: -- but he's actually creating the conditions for a backlash, and so that

would be the way I would try to make the argument -

HEYDEMANN: Yeah.

COFMAN WITTES: -- to those in Washington, or in Brussels, or in London, who are contemplating whether it's worth investing money here, but for all of the reasons that we've been discussing all of the political and practical challenges of spending this money in a way that really does achieve those objectives, I understand the reticence.

HEYDEMANN: Yeah. This is where, I think, the key connections arise between a policy focused on countering violent extremism, countering Isis, which is unfolding a little differently in Syria than it did in Iraq, because, I think, there has been some recognition, especially within the Pentagon, that it's not productive to achieve some sort of military victory over extremists and then walk away.

COFMAN WITTES: Yeah. They've learned their lessons of Iraq, more than once.

HEYDEMANN: They've learned that lesson, and, yet, the argument that they're using to try to gain public support and support from the White House for a presence that would permit them to prevent the reemergence of Isis remains too narrowly focused on a counterterrorism mission, and has not adequately made the links to this broader political framework that is equally important if we are going to provide for longer-term stability and security in the area in a way that gives Syrians, themselves, a sense that the alternatives to extremism are preferable.

PITA: Mm-hmm.

HEYDEMANN: We haven't seen that link built into the policy yet. There's been enormous reticence to make that connection because it's seen as moving the U.S. into a position in which it would need to accept a longer-term engagement and a longer-term role in shaping the political future of Syria, and that is something that the Trump Administration seems allergic to -

PITA: Mm-hmm.

HEYDEMANN: -- and, yet, ultimately, if we don't accept that those links are there, and develop a strategy to respond to those connections, everything we're doing now is going to turn out to be very, very short-lived, and will confront us with the very high probability that we'll be back, and we'll be back in a way that we would prefer not to be back, and so I would

hope that a different kind of narrative could emerge around how to proceed in Syria, a more integrated narrative, one in which the political environment is seen as central to the future of the region's stability, and central to our interest in preventing a recurrence of conflict, central to our interest in preventing radicalization in the outflow of future waves of refugees, and all of that means that we're going to have to accept that there is an enormous amount of hard work to be done, through traditional channels of diplomacy, that will move the Syrian context in a direction toward the kind of political settlement that, for example, the European Union has defined as a core aspect of its policy toward Syria, as part of what the U.S. views as necessary for a longer-term settlement of the Syrian conflict.

COFMAN WITTES: I think that's very, very well put, Steve, and I guess my headline would be that the existing narrative, certainly in Washington, about this counterterrorism argument, this counterterrorism rationale, for reconstruction is that terrorism grows in ungoverned spaces, and I think what's very, very clear, out of the Syrian civil war experience, is that these spaces aren't ungoverned.

PITA: Mm-hmm.

COFMAN WITTES: They're governed by warlords. They're governed by militias. They're governed by ide -

HEYDEMANN: By tribes.

COFMAN WITTES: -- by tribes, by ideological movements. They are governed. They're governed by a horrifically brutal regime. The problem is not lack of governance versus governance. The problem that generates terrorism, is a certain kind of governance. It's exclusionary governance. It's coercive, oppressive governance, and so if we really want to counter violent extremism, it's not a question of simply imposing a governance. It's a question of helping communities build the kind of governance that makes violence unpalatable and unnecessary.

HEYDEMANN: It's interesting because I think the Trump Administration feels that the opportunities to deal with governance questions, are actually, perhaps, far more significant than, I think, they are at the moment.

As far as I understand it, and I can't claim to be a perfect interpreter of what's

happening in the White House, there's a very strong sense, among the folks who are handling Syria file at the National Security Council, that the Assad Regime's success is epeiric victory, that the conflict has weakened the regime, that the conflict has left the regime vulnerable and exposed, and that its weaknesses, because of the resources and the manpower it's expended in pursuing its victory, give us leverage to shape the future of a reconstruction process.

I find that a little bit puzzling and a little bit troubling, and at odds with my own sense of how the regime perceives itself, but also the effectiveness with which it's been able to reimpose its control over the areas of Syria that it's retaken. I don't see a regime that has been forced onto its back foot, or that is feeling exposed and vulnerable because of the costs of achieving this military victory. I see a regime that's feeling extraordinarily triumphal. I see a regime that has developed strategies for incrementally re-imposing its authority over the parts of Syria that it's controlled, and has been able to do so effectively, and so, I think, to the extent that we're counting on the regime's own weakness to create opportunities that we can then exploit, rather than using the existing context, which I describe differently, and looking for where we can find leverage, and where we can find possibilities for moving the regime, under those conditions, will leave us, I'm afraid, very much behind the trends on the ground, and unable to have an effective influence on how things unfold in Syria.

So, I'd encourage a very different interpretation on the part of the White House, of conditions on the ground, a recognition of the extent, to which without really systematic diplomatic efforts, and efforts at building coalitions with our allies, our increasingly frustrated allies in Europe, to try to achieve political changes on the ground. We will end up marginalizing ourselves, and making ourselves less and less relevant to Syria, so. So, I think there are a number of different aspects of how the Trump Administration is approaching this, that are going to turn out to be counterproductive in the long run.

I don't think it's too late to shift course, but I think it would take a significant recognition on the part of the folks in the White House, who are handling the Syria portfolio, that they need to step back and take a fresh look at where things are going before we might see that kind of change in how they're thinking about Syria.

PITA: Tamara and Steve, thank you very much. We're running out of time. There's just

so much to dig into here, but I do really want to thank you for the time you have spent with us, and recommend to our listeners, as always, that they check out the show notes. We'll be linking to several of your previous papers. Steve, I understand you have got a new one that's going to be coming up in a couple of months?

HEYDEMANN: I hope it'll be out within the next month or so.

PITA: Wonderful. We'll add that, when that does come out. As always, thanks for listening, and don't forget to follow us on Twitter @policypodcasts for more great audio content.