



Stability in Syria: What Would it Take to Make it Happen?

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Abstract: The Syrian Civil War has taken a devastating toll on the country's civilian infrastructure and population. Tackling the legacy of the conflict and restoring a measure of stability will constitute a monumental and generational challenge. The article addresses the "day after" in Syria by mapping out the main issues that a future post-conflict recovery, reconstruction, and reconciliation process would need to address in order to attain some level of stability and to be sustainable. It then describes and analyzes one of the most complex challenges of a future post-war transition, namely the need to reign in the proliferation of non-state armed groups and to ensure a process of disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) of former combatants, including those hailing from the jihadi camp. Finally, the article briefly addresses the role that local actors can play in beginning to build stability.

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Arguably the “worst humanitarian disaster since the end of the cold war,”¹ the Syrian Civil War has taken a devastating toll on the country’s civilian infrastructure and population. The political, social, and economic impact of the hostilities is profound and generational. Tackling the legacy of the conflict and restoring a measure of stability in the war-torn country will constitute a monumental challenge. It will require both massive financial and political capital as well as a long-term vision for a political transition and reconciliation process. This article addresses the “day after” in Syria by mapping out the main issues that a future post-conflict recovery, reconstruction, and reconciliation process would need to address in order to attain some level of stability and to be sustainable. It then describes and analyzes one of the most complex challenges of a future post-war transition, namely the need to reign in the proliferation of non-state armed groups and to ensure a process of disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) of former combatants, including those hailing from the jihadi camp. Finally, the article briefly addresses the role that local actors can play in beginning to build peace and stability.

Crucially, a *sine qua non* condition to begin addressing the political, social, and economic legacy of the conflict and to build a sustainable peace would be for the conflict to end with a legitimate political settlement that accounted for the interests and grievances of the main actors. Yet, presently, the dynamics on the ground—with the Syrian regime consolidating its military gains and with pervasive and persistent external intervention—suggest the unlikelihood of this outcome and highlight that neither a negotiated end to the conflict nor an inclusive and sustainable transition are likely to take place in the near future.

Overcoming the War: The Legacy of Conflict in Syria

In early 2011, a wave of popular demonstrations erupted in Syria. The protests took place in the broader context of the regional wave of social and political mobilizations spurred by the Arab Uprisings. In Syria, like elsewhere in the Middle East and North Africa region, the demonstrations started in protest of regime brutality and coercion and evolved into demands for change within the political system. Protesters saw the regime as authoritarian, corrupt, unrepresentative, and unfair. In addition, the demonstrations also were fueled by frustrations over growing social inequalities within the country.² For example, in the ten years before the uprising, income inequality had increased between Syria’s main urban centers, like

¹ Quote by United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees Antonio Guterres in Howard LaFranchi, “World Refugee Day: UN Calls Syria ‘Worst Humanitarian Disaster’ Since Cold War,” *Christian Science Monitor*, June 20, 2013, www.csmonitor.com/USA/Foreign-Policy/2013/0620/World-Refugee-Day-UN-calls-Syria-worst-humanitarian-disaster-since-cold-war.

² “Popular Protest in North Africa and the Middle East (IV): The Syrian People’s Slow Motion Revolution,” *International Crisis Group*, Middle East/North Africa Report 108, July 6, 2011, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/eastern-mediterranean/syria/popular-protest-north-africa-and-middle-east-vi-syrian-people-s-slow-motion-revolution>.

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