



A Peace Plan for Syria IV

A Bottom-Up Approach, Linking Reconstruction Assistance to Local Government Formation

James Dobbins, Philip Gordon, and Jeffrey Martini

The Syria civil war is approaching, if not a conclusion, at least a hiatus that might be converted into a conclusion. More than six years of efforts to overthrow Syrian president Bashar al-Assad have failed. The United States and its European and Gulf Arab allies recognize that even the continued provision of military assistance to the opposition, now at much reduced levels, will not bring about that goal.¹ Instead, what leverage the United States and its allies still possess derives largely from their ability to offer or withhold reconstruction assistance. The United Nations–brokered Geneva peace talks between the Syrian government and the opposition are going nowhere, stymied by the inability of the parties to even meet face to face, let alone agree on the principles of a transition that would lead to Assad’s exit. In this paper, we argue that an approach to reconstruction offered on a community-by-community basis could foster a bottom-up political process, help consolidate the peace, reduce the regime’s reliance on

Russia and Iran, and make the reemergence of a terrorist movement like the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) less likely.

Deconfliction Zones and External Protection

In three previous Perspectives published since December 2015, we have argued that Syria was moving toward a potential interim equilibrium in which the Syrian government, assisted by Russia and Iran, would consolidate its control over most of the country, leaving several externally protected zones on its borders.² Rather than continue to resist that process by focusing U.S. and allied efforts on the unlikely goal of overthrowing the Syrian government, we suggested that those zones might become the basis of a long-term agreement that could help de-escalate, and ultimately end, the war. A decentralized Syria, we argued, was a more realistic goal than the continued pursuit of military efforts to overthrow the regime, which were merely perpetuating a conflict that was killing

and displacing millions, exacerbating sectarianism, and destabilizing Syria's neighbors.

In recent months, several such zones have been consolidated. In the northeast is the U.S.-protected zone controlled by the Kurdish-dominated Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). In the north around the town of Jarabulus is a Turkish-protected zone intended to separate that Kurdish-controlled area and a second Kurdish canton in the northwest called Afrin. In the southwest, adjacent to the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights, is a zone sponsored by Israel, Jordan, and the United States. And as an outcome of the Astana talks, several de-escalation zones have been established in the interior of the country, specifically in Ghouta and Homs. These zones lack external protectors and seem likely to eventually fall to government forces or be forced to reconcile with Damascus on its terms. More problematic is the area around the town of Idlib, dominated by an al Qaeda-affiliated opposition group, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham ("Levant Liberation Corps" or HTS, the most important component of which was formally known as the al Nusra Front). The future of this pocket depends on Turkey's orientation. The current trajectory suggests a gradual erosion of opposition control by a combination of regime and Turkish pressures. On the other hand,

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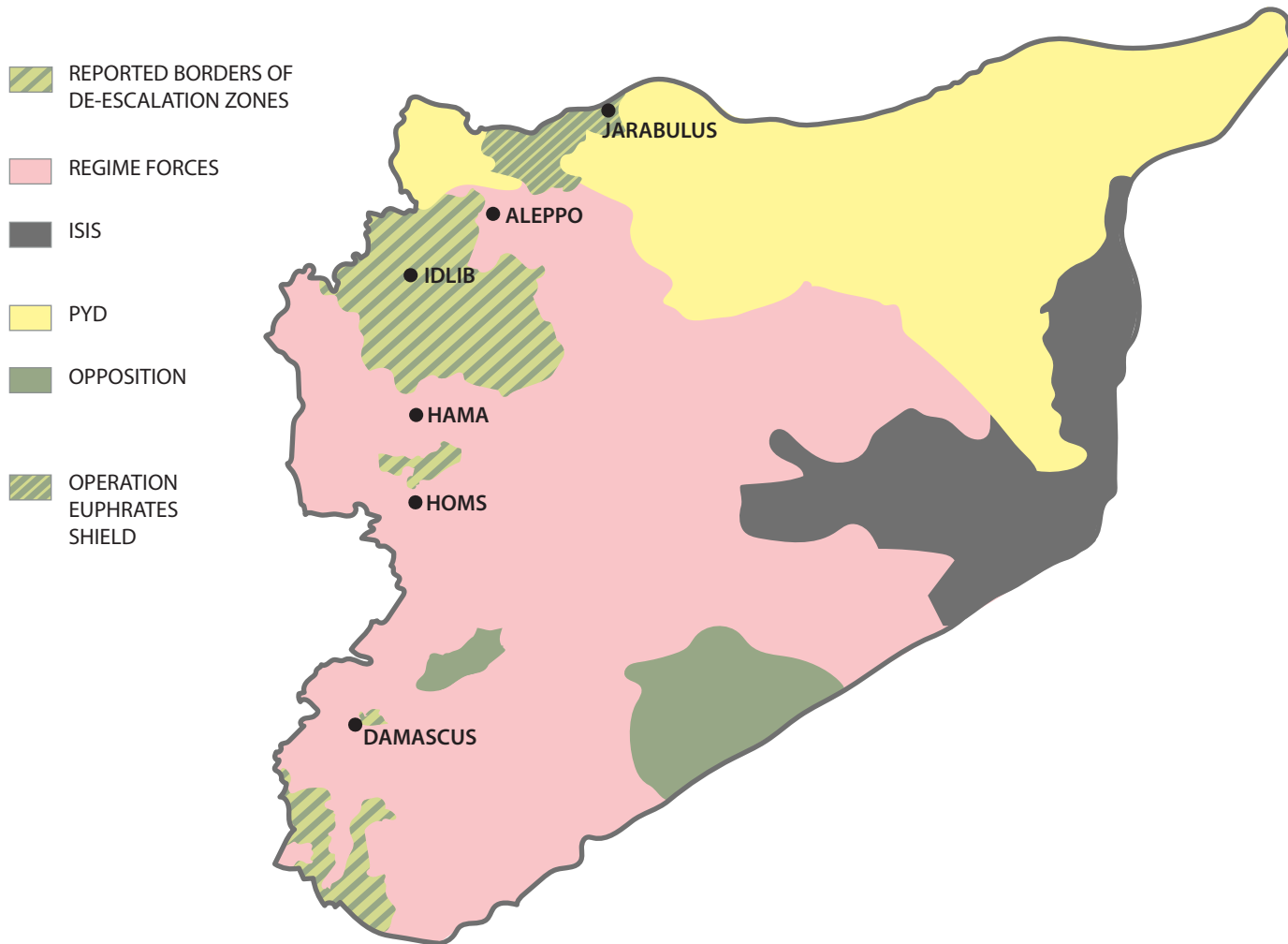
should Turkey allow the opposition resupply via Bab al-Hawa crossing, this pocket could remain an active insurgency for some time.

Finally, south of recently liberated Raqqa and straddling the Euphrates River is an area currently held by ISIS (see map). Both the U.S.-backed SDF and the Russian- and Iranian-backed regime forces have been competing to clear and hold this territory, which contains most of Syria's oil resources. Further clashes between the potential liberation forces may occur before a local equilibrium is reached. It now seems likely, however, that Syrian government forces will secure control of the major population centers to the south of the Euphrates all the way to the Iraqi border, while the U.S.-backed SDF forces may hold some of the oil fields north of the river.³

How long the externally sponsored enclaves persist will depend primarily on decisions made in Washington, Moscow, Ankara, Amman, and Jerusalem. The Syrian government, supported by Iran, wants to close the enclaves down, reasserting control over the entirety of Syrian territory. The Kurds will not willingly cede their autonomy, but they will likely require continued U.S. support to sustain it. Ankara will want to continue to interpose an obstacle between the eastern and western Kurdish enclaves along the Turkish border. Israel is determined to prevent Iranian or Iranian proxy forces from approaching its borders.

How long the United States will remain engaged militarily in Syria once ISIS has been driven out of its remaining strongholds is uncertain. The United States has been successful in cultivating a local partner, the SDF, for which the People's Protection Units (YPG) militia forms its leadership and most-competent fighting forces. Despite its Marxist ideology and close links to the anti-

Map. Syria De-Escalation Zone Boundaries and Territorial Control, 2017



SOURCE: This map was derived from the de-escalation zone boundaries reported by Anadolu Agency, "Syria 'De-Escalation Zones' Deal Enters into Force," infographic, May 5, 2017 (<http://aa.com.tr/en/info/infographic/5892>). The territorial control was derived from the information presented by Liveuamap, "Map of Syrian Civil War, Global Conflict in Syria," map, November 1, 2017 (<http://syria.liveuamap.com/>).

Turkish Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) terrorist movement, the YPG has been pivotal to the anti-ISIS campaign, and U.S. leaders may want to show some residual support for the group despite the costs to Washington's bilateral relationship with Ankara. A post-ISIS U.S. military presence in eastern Syria may also be useful in counterbalancing Iranian influence and providing leverage in negotiation over Syria's longer-term future. Washington's Gulf Arab and Israeli allies will urge the United States to remain in this part of Syria to prevent the extension of Iranian influence there, but the legal and domestic political rationale for such a longer-term U.S. military role in Syria will become problematic once ISIS is defeated. The recent referendum on independence in Iraqi Kurdistan and the resultant tensions between the Peshmerga and Iraqi government forces further complicate the picture because U.S. access to eastern Syria requires Turkish or Iraqi consent (or both), neither of which is certain once remaining ISIS strongholds have been reduced.

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The Geneva Peace Talks

The United Nations continues efforts via the Geneva process to bring the Damascus regime and the Syrian opposition together on a way to end the conflict and reform the Syrian state. The main Kurdish groups are not fully present in these talks, nor are the extremists (HTS), which dominate the largest remaining opposition enclave around Idlib. Meanwhile, the official opposition represented by the High Negotiations Committee (HNC) is facing pressure to include less-strident oppositionists (i.e., the so-called Cairo and Moscow platforms) in its ranks.⁴ The opposition negotiators in Geneva thus represent a diminishing constituency inside Syria. Their demand that Assad must step down as part of any settlement has little prospect of prevailing and prevents any realistic off-ramp to the conflict based on the parties' respective leverage.

Given the success of the Syrian regime and its allies on the battlefield, the most substantial source of Western and Gulf Arab influence over these talks, and thus the future of Syria, is the ability to provide or withhold desperately needed reconstruction funding, something neither Russia nor Iran is in a position to offer. The Syrian government will be wary of accepting such assistance, but it also knows that it does not have the manpower to govern these areas if the resistance continues. Therefore, the regime may see benefits in an end to the military phase of the conflict, particularly if the requirements are that the regime implement more-modest concessions than those envisioned in previous peace talks and acceptance is linked to reconstruction assistance that holds the promise of sustaining peace. Russia would welcome a means to end the war and begin rebuilding.

There is naturally great reluctance in Washington, as well as European and Gulf capitals, to assist rebuilding a country run by Assad and supported by Russia and Iran. Yet the United States, its European allies, Turkey, Jordan, and Lebanon have a major interest in ending the Syrian civil war and allowing millions of refugees to return home. Refugee flows have had a dangerously radicalizing effect on regional, European, and even U.S. politics. The Syrian civil war gave new life to al Qaeda and gave birth to ISIS. Any renewal of the conflict will likely produce similar results. Russia and Iran were influential in Syria before the war and will be so afterward, but the sooner the conflict ends, the sooner Assad will find their support less essential.⁵

Offering Reconstruction Assistance in Exchange for Bottom-Up Reform

In accordance with United Nations Security Council Resolution 2254, the Geneva peace talks have focused on efforts to establish a transitional government, devise a new constitution, and hold national elections. This effort at top-down reform has gotten nowhere, foundering—as it has for years—on the opposition demand that Assad should neither head the transitional government nor compete in any subsequent election. An alternative, unlikely to be favored by either Damascus or the externally based opposition representatives, could be a bottom-up approach to transition based on local elections to the communal councils called for in the Syrian constitution but never formed. The United States and its allies might be able to promote such a bottom-up approach to reform by offering to provide reconstruction assistance to any community that held internationally monitored local elections as

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long as the resultant local council remained an effective partner in the delivery of this aid.

Conditioning stabilization assistance on the formation of inclusive, representative local councils would support two outcomes advantageous to the United States and its allies. The first and most important is that it would facilitate the creation of bodies that enjoy local legitimacy and are capable of prioritizing needs and overseeing stabilization in their areas. Having a local partner in stabilization activities offers the promise of a sustained improvement in the security situation, with positive spillover for regional stability and for mitigating threats to the European and U.S. homelands. The second benefit is that it will create a foundation for decentralized governance that offers the best hope for political reform in light of the diminished prospects for the top-down transition envisioned in Resolution 2254.

Syrian Government and Opposition Reactions

A bottom-up initiative will not be immediately embraced by Damascus, which has made clear its desire to recover control over “every inch” of Syrian territory. Yet the envisaged decentralization represents devolution of only limited authority without challenging the composition of the central government. So while Damascus would have to accept limits on its authority, those limits would be confined to areas that do not infringe on the state’s “sovereign files” (e.g., foreign affairs and defense). The limits would also be compensated by the gain Damascus would make in restoring its actual sovereignty by creating the conditions for reducing its dependence on Russia and Iran for its survival.

Even if Assad resisted decentralization, there are still significant parts of the country outside of regime control, including the Deraa area in the south, the Kurdish-controlled northeast and northwest, and the Turkish-dominated zone between these. These are all potential sites for beginning community-based reconstruction, which could be staggered based on underlying conditions (e.g., relative security). Most of these areas already have local administrative councils, many of which already receive modest Western support.

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While the general criteria would be credible local elections leading to the provision of reconstruction assistance, in practice, several accommodations would need to be made. Some local administrative councils have already had multiple elections and are perceived as legitimate by the populations they serve. So, some flexibility would need to be shown toward councils that have already met the intent of this proposal. A second consideration is that not all councils will be capable of overseeing stabilization activities in their respective areas. Councils that are constrained by armed actors outside of the negotiation processes, such as those in Idlib under HTS sway, would not qualify for assistance. And other councils, even if democratically elected and well intentioned, will not have the capacity to absorb significant assistance, so early assistance would need to focus on building the capacity of the councils.

Linking reconstruction assistance to representative local councils would also likely meet with some initial resistance not just from the regime but also from the externally based opposition and Syrian Kurdish leadership. The émigré opposition would see its leadership role slowly shifted to internally based figures. And the Kurds may resist because the dominant actor in that sphere, the Democratic Union Party (PYD) of the YPG, adheres to a Marxist ideology in which multi-party politics, civil society participation, and dissent are anathema.⁶ However, the opposition leadership as represented by the HNC lacks the leverage to stop such an initiative. The HNC has already lost influence to local leaders in Syria’s liberated territory, so should the HNC resist a decentralization initiative, it would be at the risk of further diminishing its relevance to the peace process.

The United States also has significant influence over the Syrian Kurds. The Kurds have benefited greatly from a U.S. train-and-equip mission and from the United States deterring a wider Turkish military operation against them. And because the Syrian Kurds have nearly exhausted their military reach, their utility to the U.S.-led counter-ISIS coalition is in decline. The United States maintains residual goodwill toward this group, and pressing the Kurdish leadership to accept decentralization based on inclusive, representative councils would be a worthwhile use of U.S. leverage.

Forming Representative Local Councils

There are two basic approaches that the United States and its international partners could take in conditioning stabilization assistance to localities. The first would be to articulate *broad principles* to which local councils must adhere to qualify for assistance. These could include, for example, inclusivity as embodied in the representation of ethnic and religious minorities and women in their ranks. It could also include a commitment to civilian control of local security forces.

The mechanism for judging compliance might be embedded in a multilateral organization, such as the Syrian Recovery Trust Fund. If the broad-principles approach is adopted, there would be an element of subjectivity in certifying compliance; the authors of this paper would not advocate, for example, setting a quota of seats by sect or ethnicity or setting a mandatory threshold of female representation. Rather, compliance might be judged by a committee that would exchange visits with local councils to gauge their commitment to the principles. Syrian bodies, including the Syrian

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Interim Government's Ministry of Local Administration, Relief, and Refugee Affairs and the Local Administration Councils Unit, could also be integrated into the certification process.

The alternative approach would be to condition stabilization assistance on *internationally monitored local elections*. This would have the advantage of taking some of the subjectivity out of the certification process while also instilling adherence to democratic process. Such an approach would increase the legitimacy enjoyed by the councils and potentially create a demonstration effect in government-controlled areas where local populations would seek similar say. In some cases, elections might produce majoritarian outcomes that would not be adequately inclusive.

Providing Community-Based Reconstruction

Whichever of the two criteria for council selection is employed, the next step would be for local councils to undertake needs assessments, or build on existing assessments, that would become the

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basis for the efficient and targeted distribution of stabilization funds. This process would increase local ownership over stabilization and reinforce the councils' accountability over stabilization outcomes, incentivizing a productive use of resources. In a period of fiscal constraints, and with a Trump administration averse to nation-building, this process will be more palatable to those wary of repeating the open-ended, centrally driven aid programs in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The Trump administration is providing very limited humanitarian and stabilization assistance in areas of Syria not controlled by the regime and has stated its intention to provide no reconstruction assistance whatsoever, arguing that this should be the responsibility of donors that have not contributed so heavily to the anti-ISIS military campaign.⁷ Our proposal does not depend on the United States providing aid to or through the Syrian government. It does depend on the United States employing its influence with the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, the United Nations, the European Union, and other bilateral donors to allow reconstruction assistance to flow to both regime- and nonregime-held areas where the existence of representative local partners can

be identified. This will require some interaction with the Syrian government but not the direct provision of assistance resources to or through its ministries.

In addition to the provision of reconstruction funding, it will also be important, as noted earlier, to devote aid resources to developing the institutional capacity of the local councils. The current legal framework for Syria's local councils is Law 107, which was issued in late 2011 by the Assad government. Even in opposition-controlled areas, that law remains a point of reference, although it has been modified by localities in designing their own bylaws.

The United States and its allies are currently delivering limited humanitarian and stabilization assistance through local councils in nonregime-controlled areas. Extending this offer to include reconstruction—and to include regime-held areas where such councils are formed and given authority—will help develop a new generation of grassroots leadership throughout the country and facilitate a bottom-up transitional process toward eventual reform at the national level. Offering reconstruction assistance on a community-by-community basis will, at a minimum, allow some assistance to flow to some nonregime-controlled areas and thus reinforce

representative government in some communities. Even if Damascus prevents areas under its control from participating, nothing will have been lost by making the offer. If the regime allows local councils to form and work with the donor community, the beginning of a bottom-up reform process could be set in motion.

Providing assistance in this manner is obviously much more complex than working with and through the central government,

but there is little chance of that occurring as long as Assad remains in power and little prospect that he will depart anytime soon. This bottom-up approach therefore offers a better prospect that at least some areas will see increased economic activity and political development, some refugees will return, and some progress can be made toward reform of the Syrian state.

Notes

¹ According to press reports, in July 2017, the Donald Trump administration ended a covert mission to arm vetted Syrian opposition groups. See Mark Mazzetti, Adam Goldman, and Michael S. Schmidt, “Behind the Sudden Death of a \$1 Billion Secret C.I.A. War in Syria,” *New York Times*, August 2, 2017.

² James Dobbins, Philip Gordon, and Jeffrey Martini, *A Peace Plan for Syria*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, PE-182-RC, 2015; James Dobbins, Philip Gordon, and Jeffrey Martini, *A Peace Plan for Syria II: Options for Future Governance*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, PE-202-RC, 2016; and James Dobbins, Philip Gordon, and Jeffrey Martini, *A Peace Plan for Syria III: Agreed Zones of Control, Decentralization, and International Administration*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, PE-233-RC, 2017.

³ At the time of this writing, Albu Kamel is the only significant population center on the Euphrates still under ISIS control. The regime has already taken Deir Ezzour and Mayadin, two sizable towns south of Raqqa. To the east of the Euphrates, the U.S.-backed SDF has taken several oil fields, including al-Omar field, the largest in the area. See Fabrice Balanche, “The Race for Deir al-Zour Province,” Washington, D.C.: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Policy Watch 2846, August 17, 2017.

⁴ Caroline Akoum, “Syrian Opposition to Negotiate Under ‘One Delegation but Different Visions,’” *Asharq al-Awsat*, August 18, 2017.

⁵ It is instructive to remember how soon after the war in Vietnam ended that the Hanoi regime fell out with its Chinese ally, leading indeed to a brief shooting war between the two countries only four years later, in 1979.

⁶ Matt Bradley and Joe Parkinson, “America’s Marxist Allies Against ISIS,” *Wall Street Journal*, July 24, 2015.

⁷ See, for example, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson’s March 22, 2017, speech to the global counter-ISIS coalition, in which he stated,

We are not in the business of nation-building or reconstruction. We must ensure that our respective nations’ precious and limited resources are devoted to preventing the resurgence of ISIS and equipping the war-torn communities to take the lead in rebuilding their institutions and returning to stability. . . . To date, in Iraq and Syria, the United States provides 75 percent of the military resources supporting our local partners in their fight against ISIS. For humanitarian and stabilization support, the ratio is reversed, with the United States providing 25 percent and the rest of the coalition providing 75 percent. The United States will do its part, but the circumstances on the ground require more from all of you.

See Rex W. Tillerson, “Remarks at the Ministerial Plenary for the Global Coalition Working to Defeat ISIS,” Washington, D.C., March 22, 2017.

About the Authors

James Dobbins holds the Distinguished Chair on Security and Diplomacy at the RAND Corporation. He is a former Assistant Secretary of State and Ambassador to the European Community, and he is the author of *Foreign Service: Five Decades on the Frontlines of American Diplomacy*.

Philip Gordon is a Senior Fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations. He recently served as White House Coordinator for the Middle East, North Africa, and the Gulf Region (2013–2015) and Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs (2009–2013).

Jeffrey Martini is a senior Middle East analyst at the RAND Corporation, where he specializes in political and security issues. Martini has written on civil-military relations in Egypt, generational divides within the Muslim Brotherhood, Arab Gulf security, and the political transitions of the “Arab Spring” states. Martini worked at the U.S. State Department, where he was the North Africa lead for the Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations.

About This Perspective

This Perspective is the fourth in a series in which the authors argue for practical steps aimed at reaching a durable cessation of hostilities and separation of forces in Syria. As the international community continues to search for ways to resolve Syria's civil war, RAND researchers argue that an approach to reconstruction offered on a community-by-community basis could foster a bottom-up political process, help consolidate the peace, reduce the regime's reliance on Russia and Iran, and make the reemergence of a terrorist movement less likely. Such an approach offers a better prospect that at least some areas will see increased economic activity and political development, some refugees will return, and some progress can be made toward reform of the Syrian state.

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