

The Big Picture

Envisioning a best-possible peace for Syria—and what it will take to reach it.

By Steven Heydemann

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Wars eventually end. Even the longest, most brutal, and most destructive conflicts ultimately give way to peace. Syria's civil war is no exception. All sides acknowledge that they are unlikely to prevail on the battlefield anytime soon, and both the regime of President Bashar al-Assad and the opposition have conditionally accepted the Geneva Communiqué for a political transition, endorsed by the Syria Action Group of the United Nations on June 30, 2012 (Geneva I). The United States, its European partners, and the joint special envoy of the U.N. and the Arab League are actively engaged in diplomatic efforts to initiate a Geneva II process, bring the parties to the table, and negotiate the terms of a political transition.

After more than 30 months of violence and many diplomatic setbacks, expectations about the likely success of a Geneva process are not high. Nonetheless, the deepening human toll of the conflict, its destabilizing effects on Syria's neighbors, the possibility of state fragmentation or collapse, and the emerging threat from jihadist groups that now govern large areas in Syria's northeastern provinces, ensure that international powers will remain focused on bringing Syria's civil war to an end.

Peace in Syria could take a variety of forms. Some are more plausible than others, and some hold greater promise to foster security and stability, economic recovery, effective governance, and the process of social repair. If there is a "best-possible peace" for Syria, it is one that maximizes the likelihood that positive trends -- political and financial, internal and external -- have sufficient support to get underway and endure. It is a peace that gradually reduces the risk that inevitable episodes of violence and enduring grievances tip the country back into all-out war. A best-possible peace for Syria is one that crosses a point of no return, generating political, security, economic, and social conditions in which no relevant actors perceive it to be in their interest to return to war.

The hope is that in the Syrian war, like other conflicts before it, combatants retreat and society slowly recovers a sense of normalcy. Insecurity and vulnerability to violence are replaced by public order. Refugees and the internally displaced return home or begin new lives in new locations. Schools, businesses, and hospitals reopen. Economic infrastructure is rebuilt. Political and state institutions resume functioning.

As in many post-conflict societies, peace will be fragile. The effects of war typically linger long after conflict ends. For victims of war, truth, justice, and reconciliation are elusive: Few perpetrators of war crimes are ever prosecuted, and Syrians must grapple with this challenge. Social repair and economic reconstruction are generational projects that strain the resources, political will, and patience of local and international actors alike. Peace does not always bring a decisive resolution of the grievances that sparked violent conflict: It results as often from the military victory of one side over its adversaries as it does from negotiations. Nor does peace imply that new political and security institutions will be democratic: War empowers autocrats no less often than it replaces dictators with democrats. Moreover, peace does not always hold. Instead, it can foster

conditions that lead to a recurrence of conflict. Combatants may not yield their weapons, while spoilers exploit opportunities to prevent the consolidation of peace.

Today, Syria's civil war shows few signs that it is nearing a resolution. Violent conflict rages on, exacting a terrible toll on civilians. The Assad regime and its allies appear locked in a stalemate with an increasingly radicalized Syrian opposition and its regional supporters. Syrian actors, and their regional and international counterparts, are sharply divided in their views of how to achieve a negotiated end to the conflict. Peace in Syria is thus increasingly urgent yet stubbornly distant.

Yet imagining what a plausible peace could look like can help us to imagine what we must think about now to make peace more likely and, once it has arrived, more durable.

Peace, whether full or partial, ultimately rests on six pillars: politics, security, humanitarian relief, economics, state institutions, and justice. To achieve a best-possible peace in Syria, relevant actors (those who effectively hold a veto) must prefer peace to alternatives that can only be achieved through violence. Not all actors need to be equally invested in every pillar of a plausible peace arrangement. Rather, these arrangements must meet the minimum non-negotiable requirements of each relevant actor. Moreover, any plausible peace agreement must contain or marginalize potential spoilers.

Political Pillar. The political arrangements necessary to achieve a best-possible peace will need to address the legacies of authoritarianism and provide sufficient incentives and protections to induce warring parties, ethnic and religious minorities, and a long-repressed Sunni majority to participate. They will need to address the minimum requirements of veto players, whether internal or external, and contain or marginalize potential spoilers. For the opposition, a political formula that does not include meaningful changes to the Assad regime's authoritarian "rules of the game" is unlikely to be acceptable. For the regime and its base, credible security guarantees and a political formula that will not leave them marginalized and excluded are elements that need to be part of any negotiated outcome of the conflict. These arrangements should include the following elements:

- A revised constitution based on principles of citizenship, equality, the rule of law and protection of fundamental rights, and the separation of powers;
- A shift in the balance of power from the executive to parliament;
- A reformed electoral law that guarantees adequate representation of all Syria's "components";
- Political decentralization encompassing the election of provincial governors, local mayors, and local government officials; the limited autonomy of designated regions, including Kurdish majority areas in the northeast around Hassaka Governorate, majority Alawi areas in the central coastal zone around Lattakia and Tartous, and Druze majority areas in the southwest in and around Suwayda;
- Parliamentary oversight of the national budget;
- Civilian control over the security apparatus and armed forces.

These arrangements do not guarantee stability, effective governance, or the legitimacy of political institutions and elected leaders. They will be severely tested by Syria's nearly complete absence of democratic experience,

the severe underdevelopment of political parties and civil society, as well as widespread corruption and personalism among political elites. They will be challenged by numerous potential spoilers: Alawite hard-liners seeking the restoration of former privileges; Islamist militants who reject Western-style democracy; local warlords who resist the imposition of state authority; former beneficiaries of the Assad regime in the Baath Party, security services, and the military; Kurdish nationalists advocating complete autonomy; and the possible intervention of regional actors, including Turkey, the Arab Gulf states, Hezbollah, and Iran.

Nonetheless, absent political arrangements that address the core requirements specified above, a best-possible peace has little chance of taking hold.

Security Pillar. Following years of violent conflict, suppressing challenges to security and restoring public order will strain the capacity of nascent political institutions and untested political leaders. Security arrangements will need to contend with the wartime transformation of Syria's armed forces, security apparatus, and loyalist militias into little more than sectarian defenders of the Assad regime. They must be sufficiently robust to provide adequate levels of civilian security, manage terrorism, and respond to challenges from warlords, Islamist militants, criminal networks, and former combatants -- and serve the needs of national security, too. Building a democratic security sector offers all Syrians the strongest protections against a return to the abusive practices of the Assad regime. However, whether fragile political institutions will be capable of reconciling immediate public demands for order, stability, and security with the demands of democratizing the security sector is uncertain. Several key elements will improve the odds of success:

- Immediate measures to secure the regime's weapons inventories and prevent the transfer of advanced weapons outside of Syria;
- A locally led and internationally supported process, potentially under U.N. auspices, for the disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration of combatants -- including processes for integrating fighters into restructured security institutions through individualized vetting of regime and opposition forces on the basis of U.N.-approved best practice;
- Complete and immediate withdrawal or removal of all non-Syrian combatants;
- A locally led and internationally supported program to re-establish security of borders, ports, airports, and other critical security infrastructure;
- Locally led and internationally supported efforts, including military action if needed, to isolate, contain, and suppress potential spoilers, including warlords, loyalist militias, and radical Islamist militias;
- Immediate measures to protect civilians, including Alawis, from revenge killings;
- Immediate redeployment of appropriately trained national police forces to prevent looting and the widespread destruction of public institutions, private property, document repositories, and other critical infrastructure, such as communications centers, banks, and significant cultural heritage sites.

The success of the security pillar is contingent on international support. Whether such support will be forthcoming, at what scale, and for how long is uncertain. To date, leading international actors have resisted appeals to intervene in the Syrian conflict. There is little international enthusiasm to undertake initiatives such as a transitional peacekeeping force tasked with maintaining public order and supporting the restructuring of

Syria's security sector. The mandate of such a force would almost inevitably need to be framed in terms of "operations-other-than-war," i.e. the authority under appropriate U.N. Security Council authorization to undertake military actions if attacked and participate in anti-terrorism activities, disarmament of illegal militias, and the protection of strategically important sites and critically vulnerable populations.

Success is also dependent on the capacity of a newly elected parliament to implement processes of security-sector reform that are fraught with risks, while simultaneously providing an acceptable level of civilian security and responding to complex security threats among a polarized, heavily armed population, ungoverned militias, foreign fighters, and other potential spoilers. Syria's nascent political institutions may not be capable of responding to these challenges without international support. If international actors continue to resist demands for assistance in the security field, the likely consequence will be the persistence of insecurity and violence, and the inability of newly elected leaders to reassert state authority throughout Syrian territory.

Humanitarian Relief Pillar. The end of conflict will ease Syria's humanitarian crisis -- described by U.N. officials as the worst since Rwanda in 1994 -- yet areas of hardship and suffering will persist. Agricultural production will take time to recover and reconstruction in the housing sector is likely to lag demand, as will the repair of Syria's health-care sector. Humanitarian support will be needed in Syria for many years after conflict ends.

The challenges of resettlement will loom especially large. Today, more than one-third of Syria's population, some 9 million people, have become refugees or are internally displaced. Projections suggest that fully half of Syria's population will be displaced by early 2014. Internally displaced people (IDPs) will strain the resources and goodwill of host communities; refugees will come under increasing pressure from host governments to return. Yet prospects for resettlement will be complicated by uncertain security; wartime demographic shifts, including zones of ethnic cleansing; the slow pace of reconstruction in the housing sector; the wholesale theft and appropriation of property, especially in major urban centers such as Homs and Aleppo; and the widespread destruction of municipal property records needed to adjudicate disputes over property. With millions of citizens homeless, unable to work or educate their children, and vulnerable to disease and criminality, a best-possible peace will remain out of reach.

Syrian and international actors will need to accord resettlement resources and attention commensurate with the enormity of the problem -- and the potential consequences of getting it wrong. These should include the following elements:

- A resettlement and housing authority must be established under the direct authority of the prime minister to coordinate the return of refugees and IDPs;
- U.N. agencies responsible for refugee and IDP issues must provide the personnel and resources required to ensure appropriate oversight and management support for locally led resettlement campaigns;
- Large-scale emergency loans from international financial institutions, the European Union, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) governments, and other donors will be required to support reconstruction in the housing sector, assist in the return and resettlement of refugees, and extend support to Syrian communities that continue to host large numbers of IDPs, including in the provision of housing, education, and medical services;
- Government-subsidized loan programs will need to be established to provide citizens with the capital to repair or rebuild their homes;

- The Ministry of Justice, in coordination with provincial and local authorities and with police forces, should establish special courts in each province and major urban area to expedite the adjudication of property rights disputes;
- In areas that have experienced atrocities or forced population displacement, the government must provide sufficient security to permit those survivors who wish to return to do so.

The scale of Syria's resettlement needs will require massive, sustained international support. As in Lebanon, Iraq, and other countries that experienced protracted sectarian violence, resettlement will not restore Syria's pre-war demography. Some areas may never be resettled; some refugees and IDPs will not return to their pre-war homes. Implementation of resettlement programs will be a significant source of tension and possible violence. Confidence in the stability and security of home locations will be a major determinant in the decision of refugees and IDPs to return, and potential spoilers will act to disrupt resettlement programs. If the security implications of resettlement are not carefully managed, the resentments of refugees and IDPs will undermine Syria's progress toward a best-possible peace.

Economic Pillar. A best-possible peace will require restoring conditions that permit the Syrian economy to resume functioning and to return to pre-war levels of economic activity as quickly as possible. War has wreaked havoc on Syria's economy, devastating its industrial, manufacturing, trade, services, and agricultural infrastructure. During three years of civil war, a wartime economy has taken hold across the country, fueling widespread criminality, war profiteering, war-lordism, and illegal trade. Almost three years of violent conflict have destroyed more than 600,000 homes, 3,500 schools, hundreds of hospitals, and vast quantities of critical transport and communications infrastructure. In 2012, Syria's exports declined by some 95 percent compared to 2010.

Estimates of the amounts that will be required for Syria's economic stabilization and reconstruction vary from \$30 billion to \$80 billion, figures that vastly exceed the resources available globally to support Syria's economic recovery. Post-conflict reconstruction will take decades, exhausting the patience of even the most generous donors. Further complicating economic reconstruction, several efforts to plan for post-war economic recovery argue that recovery programs should include the reform of Syria's corrupt, inefficient, heavily regulated, and state-dominated economy to spur investment, job creation, and long-term economic growth -- in an environment of weak state institutions and uncertain security, thus adding to the burden of newly established political institutions. The twin challenges of reconstruction and reform must both be addressed, yet each on its own could overwhelm state capacity.

The following actions will support efforts to build the economic pillars of a best-possible peace:

- Establishment of a standing international donor mechanism to mobilize global support for economic stabilization and reconstruction programs, consistent with accepted transparency and accountability standards;
- A locally led and internationally supported damage assessment effort to inform the design of a triage reconstruction strategy -- including one-year, three-year, and five-year objectives -- that will facilitate the allocation of resources to areas of greatest need, impact, and potential for quick, catalytic results;

- The World Bank, IMF, EU, GCC, and other donors must provide large reconstruction loans at concessionary rates to the Syrian government;
- To address the inevitability of donor fatigue, Syrian officials should immediately put in place incentive programs to spur private domestic and Syrian diaspora investment in reconstruction;
- Rapid lifting of U.S. and international sanctions (other than on senior regime figures who were complicit in illegal activities and war crimes);
- The enactment by regional and international actors of policies designed to facilitate Syria's economic recovery by encouraging trade and investment;
- Immediate repair of Syria's oil production and refining facilities, with revenues earmarked to support critical reconstruction priorities;
- The reform of key economic institutions, including relevant ministries to reduce corruption and improve efficiency, transparency, and accountability, which should involve increased parliamentary oversight of state budgeting and expenditure.

State Institutions Pillar. The achievement of a best-possible peace depends heavily on the presence of functioning state institutions. This is especially true in the Syrian context, where the pre-war economy was heavily statist, even after decades of selective economic reforms, and state agencies dominated the provision of basic services, including education, policing, sewage and sanitation, power, communications, water, and medical care. The Iraqi experience of dismantling the armed forces and Baath Party loom large among Syrians as a disastrous mistake, not to be repeated.

Throughout the war, the Assad regime has continued to pay the salaries of most state employees, including those residing in opposition-held areas. Even if a post-war government introduces significant economic reforms and expands the role of the private sector, state institutions will be centrally involved during the post-war period in creating the conditions associated with a best-possible peace. Their capacity to do so will be strengthened if the following conditions prevail:

- The Syrian government, with international support, establishes the executive authorities, agencies, and mechanisms required to achieve the fastest-possible restoration of all public services, giving priority to water, electricity, sanitation and sewage, medical care, and education;
- Leading international donors, including the World Bank and IMF, must provide the resources to ensure an adequate level of basic service provision in these areas;
- In keeping with the commitment to political decentralization, provincial and local officials should be vested with the authority to manage the local reconstruction of basic services, in coordination with national and international authorities;
- To ensure that basic service provision does not play into and reinforce perceptions among the Alawi or other minority communities of sectarian discrimination, authorities overseeing the reconstruction of basic services must be inclusive, transparent, and accountable, through the introduction of appropriate procurement, financial reporting, and auditing practices;

- The Syrian government must prevent retribution against state employees and public officials who are not complicit in war crimes and are capable of playing a productive role in the restoration of basic services through individualized vetting mechanisms housed within an appropriate independent authority.
- Maintenance of public order is essential to the restoration of basic services. Authorities at all levels must ensure that properly trained security forces are available to protect essential infrastructure, including communications networks, power-generating facilities, electricity-distribution networks, medical infrastructure, and water-supply infrastructure.

State institutions will be a leading target for spoilers, from warlords and criminal gangs, to groups opposed to the new political order and terrorists. The failure to provide a minimal level of basic services will also spark grievances among the population at large, threatening public order, undermining the credibility and legitimacy of public officials, and increasing the risks of a recurrence of conflict. Managing the challenges of service provision will strain the capacity of an already overburdened Syrian government. International support, if not direct participation in the reconstruction and oversight of basic services, is likely to be required for an extended period.

Justice Pillar. Peace will open a flood of demands to hold accountable those responsible for war crimes and crimes against humanity. At war's end, millions of Syrians will have legitimate claims to be victims of such crimes, including the families of the hundreds of thousands who were murdered and disappeared, as well as those who were raped, ethnically cleansed, tortured, gassed, illegally detained, and injured in attacks targeting protected populations. Without accountability, public anger could quickly spill over into violence as victims or their families take revenge against alleged perpetrators.

Justice will be among the most challenging aspects of a best-possible peace. Under any number of scenarios, justice demands will quickly fall victim to political expediency: Negotiations to end the conflict could extend amnesty to key regime officials, including Assad; a transitional governing body will include regime representatives who resist justice and accountability processes; international and local concerns about the stability of a post-war power-sharing arrangement, even if temporary, may trump popular demands for justice and accountability, straining state-society relations.

These considerations notwithstanding, powerful incentives will keep justice and accountability on the agenda, including the intensity of popular demands for justice, potential threats to stability from a surge of vigilante violence, and the legitimacy gains, both domestic and international, that will accrue to a government seen as responsive to demands for accountability.

Recognizing these sensitivities, a best-possible peace that provides for transitional justice will be more stable and more durable than one that does not. Elements of such a process could include:

- Establish a locally led, internationally supported special tribunal to prosecute individuals deemed principally responsible for war crimes, atrocities, and crimes against humanity, including both regime and opposition figures;
- Establish and fund a national transitional justice authority to provide victims and their families with compensation, whether through direct payments or means such as public apologies, memorials, national scholarship funds for the children of victims, and so on;

- Establish vetting procedures for combatants and public officials to determine cases to be referred for prosecution and cases to be addressed through other, non-judicial strategies of transitional justice;
- Develop provincial and local-level transitional justice programs to facilitate reconciliation and social repair.

Should a post-war Syrian government embrace transitional justice, it would be a significant departure from the experience of other post-conflict cases in the Middle East. Morocco's truth and reconciliation process was limited in scope and imposed from the top: It is not a useful precedent for the more encompassing and inclusive justice process that will be needed in Syria. However, with that partial exception, no post-conflict Arab government, including Algeria, Lebanon, Iraq, Yemen, and others, has implemented a systematic transitional justice process. History suggests that Syria is unlikely to be an exception. Yet as in Lebanon and Iraq, where memories of war weigh heavily on contemporary politics, Syria's prospects for the consolidation of an inclusive peace, as well as its capacity to avoid a recurrence of conflict, will improve if transitional justice becomes one component of a best-possible peace.

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How to get there from here? There are two principal pathways to peace in Syria: negotiations or the military defeat of one side by the other. Neither will lead inevitably to a best-possible peace; neither excludes the possibility of achieving it -- though negotiations certainly seem a more promising pathway than does an outcome determined on the battlefield. However war ends, moving to a best-possible peace will require compromise, the deft management by Syrian leaders of a volatile and high-risk environment, with few tools and only weak state institutions at their disposal. It will require the commitment of regional and international actors, including, potentially, the deployment of peacekeeping forces, as well as the resources of regional and international donors.

The prospects of reaching a best-possible peace will improve if achieving it becomes an explicit goal of international actors. In that case, investments in peace are far more likely to yield favorable, long-term returns than if it is not. Under any circumstances, however, achieving a best-possible peace for Syria will test the resources and patience of Syrian and international actors alike. There will be many setbacks along the way and no guarantee of success.

A best-possible peace for Syria can be achieved. Whether it will be or not depends in no small measure on how the relevant actors -- veto players and spoilers both internal or external, donors, neighboring governments, regional powers, Western governments, the U.N., international financial institutions, and many others -- manage the challenges that will arise in Syria at the war's end.

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Neighborhood Watch

Why regional players will be indispensable to achieving peace in Syria.

By Rachel Brandenburg

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After nearly 30 months of conflict in Syria, millions of refugees have fled across the country's borders, and violent spillover has touched Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, and Israel. What has been characterized as a civil war has already morphed into a regional power struggle between Saudi Arabia and Iran and heightened sectarian polarization that is eroding stability in Iraq, Lebanon, and Jordan. Regional powers are using Syria as grounds for proxy wars, supporting factions -- both regime and opposition -- within the country to avenge their own grievances and wrest power from the other. Extremist militias in Syria predominantly consisting of foreign fighters have gained the advantage over more moderate rebel forces; when these fighters return from the battlefield, they bring volatility back home. And the war now threatens to spark greater regional confrontations, in particular in Lebanon and Jordan, where the conflict's effects have already strained economies and led to resentment among local populations.

Amid ever-changing dynamics, Syria's conflict is likely to continue to unfold in myriad ways, each of which will pose new challenges and threats of differing magnitude not only to the Syrian people and opposition forces, but also to regional actors and the international community. Any approach to mitigating violence or negotiating a political settlement must involve regional powers and address conflict and grievances not only within Syria, but also among its neighbors.

There are at least three critical regional challenges on the road to peace in Syria.

Refugees. The U.N. estimates that more than 2.1 million registered Syrian refugees have fled Syria, with more than 775,000 registered in Lebanon, nearly 530,000 in Jordan, over 600,000 in Turkey, nearly 200,000 in Iraq, and over 125,000 in Egypt. Additionally, there are an estimated 4.25 million people displaced within Syria's borders. The humanitarian crisis is enormous.

Each refugee population places significant strain on the respective host country. Jordan hosts three official refugee camps; its largest, Zaatari, has over 120,000 people, making it equivalent to Jordan's fourth-largest city. However, many Syrians also live within urban centers, in particular in northern Jordan. Consequently, Jordanian schools exceed capacity, hospitals are over-burdened, and jobs are increasingly given to Syrians willing to accept lower wages than Jordanians. Jordan's already scarce water resources are even more taxed, and its suffering economy has been made worse. Jordanians are increasingly resentful of the Syrians who have sought refuge. The Jordanian monarchy remains highly concerned that the Syrian conflict will rattle Jordan's already fragile state to a breaking point.

Lebanon hosts no formal refugee camps but faces similar challenges from the Syrian refugee influx. Refugees live sprinkled across major cities, in ad hoc camps, or with local families. Not only do they present new competition for jobs and create strain on municipal services, but rising food, fuel, and housing prices have caused extra societal tension.