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## After Assad: Syria's Post-Conflict Reconstruction

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## After Assad: Syria's Post-Conflict Reconstruction

### Abstract

Simon Adams and Condoleezza Rice warn us that with the portended fall of Syria's Bashar al-Assad, the country could witness even more heinous crimes and, potentially, regional political fallout. These worries are not unfounded. However, what seems to be truly missing in their discussions is any mention of post-conflict reconstruction planning. This is unfortunate, as much handwringing is still occurring over "what to do" in Syria, and it will continue until there is a clear vision of what to do after this civil war. Syria's post-conflict reconstruction plan is—or should be—inherently tied to its current operational agenda.

### Keywords

Human rights, Syria, Bashar al-Assad, Post-conflict reconstruction, Humanitarian law, Religious conflict, Political conflict, Infrastructure, Displaced peoples

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## After Assad: Syria's Post-Conflict Reconstruction

by H.M. Roff

Simon Adams and Condoleezza Rice warn us that with the portended fall of Syria's Bashar al-Assad, the country could witness even more heinous crimes and, potentially, regional political fallout. These worries are not unfounded. However, what seems to be truly missing in their discussions is any mention of post-conflict reconstruction planning. This is unfortunate, as much handwringing is still occurring over "what to do" in Syria, and it will continue until there is a clear vision of what to do *after* this civil war. Syria's post-conflict reconstruction plan is—or should be—inherently tied to its current operational agenda.

Adams is right to draw attention to the fact that genocide *could* erupt within Syria's borders against Christian, Shiite, Alawite, and Druse communities. The regime has certainly painted itself into this corner by marginalizing the Sunni majority and then by directly targeting, torturing, and killing Sunni populations, thereby exacerbating sectarian animosity. Moreover, the Sunni rebels continue to prove that they are unafraid of spilling blood. However, I am skeptical of Adams' observation that the rebels executing Syrian soldiers and Alawite government collaborators is a sign that the war will turn genocidal. To be sure, there are a growing number of foreign Sunni rebel fighters joining the ranks, but this is not evidence that they will hijack the war in an attempt to "religiously cleanse" Syria. Thus, Adams' observation that Homs was "once home to 80,000 Christians" and is now reportedly home to "fewer than 400" is misleading as evidence for genocidal intent. Fighting in Homs has been fierce, and there is no way to determine conclusively that the fleeing of residents is due to their religious viewpoints and not because of the sheer devastation of the entire city.

More worrisome, though, is that Adams' brief piece on the looming genocide in Syria does not appear to provide any clues as to how the international community might "impress upon" the Syrian opposition the need to uphold international humanitarian law rather than violate it. Aid once distributed is gone. Sure, we might say that aid will stop if the opposition targets minorities for reprisals, but that is a rather shortsighted carrot-and-stick operation. Once the war comes to an end, there must be longer-term incentives to coopt the differing sects in Syrian society, and the opposition should be made to see that it is in their best interests not only to not harm the minorities during the fighting, but to make them contributing members in the rebuilding of Syria. This outcome would make calls for reliance on ICC prosecutions moot. (Not to mention, how could we even begin to hold war criminals responsible in a state that is not a party to the Court, given that there is a lack of political will in the Security Council to do so?)

We see the same problems again in Condoleezza Rice's piece on the centrality of Syria's strategic position in the Middle East. She is remiss to define the conflict as a humanitarian one, seeking instead to underscore the potentiality of a regional breakdown should the regime fall and the country factionalize. Her worry is that Iran will gain ground and the US and its allies "will lose." What exactly they are going to lose, however, is left to the imagination. Slightly appalling is that former Secretary Rice's piece seems to beg the question over how exactly the US and its allies are going to "vet and arm" the Syrian opposition on the "condition that it pursues an inclusive post-Assad framework." If "civil wars tend to strengthen the worst forces" then there should be

considerable post-reconstruction foresight, especially if weapons are part of the equation. For how would the US and its allies enforce this condition once the arms are in the opposition's hands? It is one thing to say, "arm the rebels." It is another thing to say, "and make them promise to play nice afterwards." In 1516, St. Thomas More warned us about the evils of "idle retainers" (or armed former fighters) roaming the countryside, and since that time disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) plans have come to be seen as integral to achieving peace after conflict. Rice's concern is therefore not about the Syrian people or the possibility of a stable and just regime post-Assad, but with a regime favorable to US interests. We might hope to say that US interests are for a stable and just regime, but this is of course a naïve position to take.

I cannot begin to offer definitive advice on a post-Assad Syria here. It is an extremely difficult and politically mired discussion. However, that does not mean that we should brush it to the side. Instead, it should be at the front of every discussion about Syria. All of the "conditions" for aid and reconstruction must have explicit enforcement mechanisms in place. More important still, there must be elaborate plans for socio-economic development, plans to restore basic services and physical and human infrastructure (as most has been devastated by cluster bombing), and plans for former combatants (of the opposition and the regime) under a DDR rubric. Not to be forgotten are also all of the internally displaced persons inside Syria, and the estimated 700,000 refugees that might start returning home to aid in reconstruction. This is a much larger proposal, and it must by its very nature be longer-term. Thus we should not focus on the Iranian boogeyman or the ineffectual workings of the ICC, but instead on the Syrian people, the Syrian economy, and Syrian development. We must hope for Syria to become a phoenix, reborn from the ashes that Assad imposed.

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*After earning her Ph.D. in political science at the University of Colorado - Boulder, H.M. Roff pursued her research interests on international ethics and the ethics of the Responsibility to Protect doctrine. Dr. Roff's approach to international ethics is particularly Kantian, and she is also a recognized Kant scholar. Her research stays and affiliations include being a research fellow at the Lehrstuhl für Strafrecht, Strafprozessrecht und Rechtsphilosophie, Friedrich-Alexander-Universität, Erlangen-Nürnberg in Germany, and she continues to affiliate as a research fellow at the Eisenhower Center for Space and Defense Studies at the United States Air Force Academy. She is currently a Visiting Associate Professor at the Josef Korbel School of International Studies at the University of Denver. Dr. Roff's publications include, *Global Justice, Kant and the Responsibility to Protect* (Routledge, forthcoming); "A Provisional Duty of Humanitarian Intervention" (*Global Responsibility to Protect*, 2011), "Kantian Provisional Duties" (*Jahrbuch für Recht und Ethik/Annual Review for Law and Ethics*, 2010), and "A Response to Pattison: Whose Responsibility to Protect?," (*Journal of Military Ethics*, 2009).*