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# **The Ramifications of the War in Syria: Where Does the World Stand?**

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## **About the Syrian Law Journal**

The mission of the Syrian Law Journal (SLJ) is to introduce Syrian law to a wide variety of English speakers by serving as a legal resource unit. The idea behind a database of this nature goes back to the summer of 2010 at a time when a promising future looked within reach for Syria, its people and its business community. While events unfolded tragically in the following years, the commitment to this project remained unwavering. The SLJ's goal is to become the central database for all matters pertaining to Syrian law. We aim to keep our readers regularly informed of all the pivotal developments taking place in this field.

The world has become accustomed to associating Syria with the brutal effects of conflict and humanitarian disasters that have devastated all Syrians. Such an impression does no service to a country that has a rich heritage and history behind it and a proud people that has been at the forefront of human civilization. Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Syrians established a secular, civil legal system based on the models of continental Europe and enacted legislation in a range of sectors to reflect international standards. For any individual interested in Syria, these are crucial facts that the SLJ seeks to convey.

The SLJ attended the British Syrian Society's recent workshop in Damascus as an independent observer to report on the views and exchanges between speakers and participants. In that respect, the following report and the opinions expressed within it belong to the speakers and participants and do not necessarily reflect the views of the SLJ.



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## **Executive Summary**

The British Syrian Society's workshop at the University of Damascus focused on the ramifications of the war in Syria with the aim of providing an exchange of views on the underlying reasons for the conflict and the means by which to resolve it. The workshop began with a background to the war before moving on to discuss Syrian foreign relations during the crisis. A panel was then set up to focus on the media narrative since 2011. It was followed by a presentation on the reconciliation process backed up by facts and figures. The effects of sanctions on the lives of ordinary Syrians were also discussed at length. Attention was then directed to the role of civil society during the conflict with much of the focus covering rehabilitation, reconstruction, education and cultural heritage.

The first topic of discussion included the origins of the crisis in Syria and the subsequent response of the Syrian government. During this session, it was made clear that a number of security personnel were martyred very early on as the crisis erupted in Daraa, a fact that is generally overlooked by the West and the media. On the political front, the government responded by lifting the State of Emergency, introducing legislative reforms, initiating a national dialogue, granting nationality to stateless Kurds and issuing general amnesties.

The focus of the discussions was then redirected towards the response of Western countries such as the US, the UK and France, which sought regime change and getting President Bashar Al-Assad to step down. The themes of regime change and legitimacy featured many times throughout the workshop. A lot of attention focused on the media's role in promoting the West's narrative in this respect.

Two significant lessons can be drawn from the media's coverage of the Syrian conflict. The first is that after nearly six years into the crisis, Syria should have created its own media platform to counter the Western narrative. The second is that the Syrian government should have provided better media access to Western journalists in order to get their story across in the press. Otherwise, restrictions give the impression that the government has something to hide.

There was a lot of discussion about the role of armed groups, terrorists and extremists in the Syrian conflict and the way foreign backers used these groups to realize their specific objectives. On the part of regional powers, the focus was set on Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar. The workshop alluded to the fact that Turkey had to literally invade Syria because its proxies were unable to accomplish the mission set out for them.



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As for Europe, there appeared to be a consensus among the participants that European leaders had failed in their dealings on Syria and had instead adopted positions that left their countries vulnerable to terrorism at home. Moreover, the Syrian government expressed its dismay at the fact that major powers such as the UK had cut off counter-terrorism intelligence cooperation when it had in fact proved to be very helpful in the past.

Despite the internal and regional interests engulfing the war in Syria, the workshop discussed how the conflict had quickly turned into a superpower chess game between the US and Russia. From the Syrian government's point of view, the US is merely seeking to safeguard Israel's interests and guarantee its security by attempting to Balkanize the region.

As for Russia, the game is closer to home and it is leading a genuine war against international terrorism, which will not be confined to Syria's borders. The big question was why the US and its coalition refuse to cooperate with Russia if they are serious about fighting the same terrorists? A possible answer was that the US and its allies are using all the armed groups regardless of whether they are ISIS or Jabhat Al-Nusra (recently rebranded itself as Jabhat Fatah Al-Sham) to fulfill their own agendas in Syria.

An entire presentation was dedicated to the story of Aleppo and how fighters entered the city with the goal "to transfer the revolution to Aleppo by force". Evidence of the destruction and looting of factories along with images of extremist fighters holed up in the city were presented to the participants. Emphasis was placed on the role played by Turkey, which was accused of spearheading the campaign by militants to attack Aleppo. Aleppo is considered a regional hub because of its geopolitical strategic location that connects the coastal area to the eastern region. Due to its status, Aleppo represents a prized possession to the armed groups since it can be used as a staging ground to control other areas. The workshop heard how the Syrian government has proposed several ceasefires and offered safe passages to the militants in order to get them out of Aleppo and end the conflict in the city.

The harsh and detrimental effects of international sanctions were also covered extensively in the workshop. It was shown how banking restrictions and a prohibition on US Dollar transactions have dramatically increased the operating costs for Syrian businesses, which in turn have passed on those expenses to ordinary Syrian consumers. Both imports and exports have been severely affected as a result of political decisions taken by the US, the EU and Syria's neighbours. It was explained that while Europe has in theory imposed selective sanctions, they are in practice having detrimental effects on the importation of food and medicinal products. The resulting shortages, inflation and



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currency depreciation have forced many entrepreneurs and ordinary Syrians to emigrate from a country where 80% of the economy used to rely on small and medium-sized enterprises and industries.

Such economic restrictions have become a breeding ground for more corruption as smuggling and war profiteering become the norm. The informal economy has grown significantly and incorporating it back into the formal economy will be a challenge.

A repeated appeal to ease sanctions that indiscriminately affect the population was made throughout the workshop. A number of suggestions were put forward in this respect. For instance, one speaker advocated the establishment of banking and payment corridors into Syria. At the same time, the entry of commodities into the Syrian market should be guaranteed. Another important recommendation was to identify a set of particular commodities whose importation into Syria should not be affected by the sanctions. Rather than restrict transactions, it would be preferable to monitor them. The need to take tangible steps to help small businesses survive in the current economic climate was also emphasized.

The workshop also discussed the importance of having a wider debate within the EU as to whether the sanctions imposed on Syria are actually necessary. It was noted that while Moscow is voicing concerns in international forums about the sanctions imposed on Syria, Russia is itself also subject to sanctions. It was mentioned that India and Pakistan, who maintain friendly relations with Syria, can also air these concerns on behalf of the Syrian people.

The means by which the conflict in Syria can be resolved hinge on appreciating the origins of the crisis and correctly recognizing the factors that will prompt the external players to end the conflict. Once that has been realized, there will be an opportunity to effectively implement a political process and pursue reconciliation efforts on a larger scale.

The workshop looked into how the political track could help end the conflict. The Syrian government continues to reiterate President Al-Assad's 2013 plan that calls for a broad and representative national unity government comprised of members from the current government, opposition figures and independents. The new government would then oversee constitutional reform followed by a referendum and then elections.

In the meantime, the Ministry of National Reconciliation is pursuing local reconciliations in various regions across the country. It is overseeing the resumption of public services to the liberated areas and settling the status of fighters willing to lay down their arms. One



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speaker promoted the role of Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) in working towards post-conflict peace consolidation. He further clarified that without reconstruction and economic prosperity, de-radicalization and hence reconciliation would be difficult to attain.

Although the war has not ended, rehabilitation and reconstruction have started albeit on a small scale. The Higher Relief Committee along with other public bodies, NGOs and UN aid agencies are spearheading rehabilitation efforts through the provision of public services in the liberated areas. Such services, which are in most cases provided directly by the government, form an integral part of the reconciliation process.

The question of how Syria's reconstruction will be financed seems to rest on three possible outcomes of how the conflict may end. Syria will not be able to rely on itself unless its expatriate communities return and invest in their country. The resources could alternatively come from friendly countries that have already started setting up investment funds for this purpose. The last and by far the most favourable option would be for the conflict to end in a manner agreeable to all members of the international community who in turn will finance the costs of reconstruction.

One subject of key interest that arose in the workshop was the future role of the Syrian Army. Participants were intrigued to learn that there is a general consensus among a number of policymakers in the West that the Syrian Army must remain constituted in its current form. The Army is considered to be a strategic pillar of the regional security order and the most important institution in the state. There is also an emerging realization that the Syrian Army must prevail in the conflict in order to lead the reconciliation process because there is no other viable alternative.

One of the most overlooked subjects in the media but given a great deal of attention at the workshop was education. A number of facts and figures were presented to highlight the plight of Syria's children, whose need for an education must be urgently addressed to prevent them from becoming a lost generation. The fear is that the generation driving Syria forward will be mentally scarred by the horrors of this tragic conflict. The harsh fact is that poverty forces children to drop out of schools in order to provide a living for their families. Poverty also results in an upsurge in crime, prostitution and radicalization.

The workshop drew to a close with a presentation on the main challenges facing Syria's archaeological heritage. They include premeditated destruction, nearby clashes, illegal excavations and the smuggling of artifacts. While the Directorate-General of Antiquities and Museums (DGAM) at the Ministry of Culture is carrying out emergency restoration work at present, it is looking to cooperate with international organizations such as



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UNESCO to assist in a complete restoration programme once the conflict ends. Moreover, the DGAM has been in regular contact with INTERPOL throughout the conflict to retrieve stolen artifacts.

The workshop produced a number of important and wide-ranging conclusions. Firstly, the government was urged to create its own media platform, which should facilitate greater media access into the country. Moreover, international cooperation and internal reconciliation through dialogue were regarded as key to pursuing a political track to end the war as long as there is a US-Russian agreement. Trust between the people and the state can be restored to a certain extent by the provision of public services in the liberated areas. While these components are essential, they will only allow the conditions for reconstruction to be successful as long as there is a lifting of international sanctions. Furthermore, a substantial emphasis on restoring the education system will give Syria's children a chance to develop and shape a promising future for their country. All of these objectives will need to be accomplished while encouraging Syrian expatriate communities to return to their country. Finally, Syria's cultural heritage, which has been subjected to a significant level of damage during the conflict, will need to undergo a major restoration process.



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## **Introduction**

Prior to the start of the conflict, the British Syrian Society (BSS) played an instrumental role in promoting Syrian relations with the international community and specifically the UK while at the same time encouraging a reform process in the country. With the escalation in violence in 2011, the BSS suspended its normal activities but nevertheless remained committed to its goals despite the meltdown in British-Syrian relations. More recently, a decision was taken by the BSS Board of Directors to refocus its efforts towards assessing the causes and effects of the conflict in Syria. Through this workshop, the BSS sought to understand the ramifications of the war in Syria and observe where the world stands in this respect.

In war, each side has its own argument and in the fog of war, truth is always the first casualty. In order to decipher the truth, the conflict must be objectively understood. The workshop hosted by the BSS in Damascus on October 30<sup>th</sup> and 31<sup>st</sup>, 2016 brought together Syrian social, political, religious, economic and military figures with academics, policymakers, retired military officials, diplomats and journalists from other countries. The aim was to facilitate a better understanding of a very complicated conflict by listening to differing sides of the argument. The proceedings of the workshop were conducted away from the media spotlight under the Chatham House Rule.

The workshop began in the early morning of Sunday the 30<sup>th</sup> of October with a background to the war in Syria before moving on to discuss Syrian foreign relations during the crisis. Later in the afternoon, a panel was set up to focus on the media narrative since 2011. It was followed by a presentation on the reconciliation process backed up by facts and figures. The following morning, the effects of sanctions on the lives of ordinary Syrians were discussed at length. Attention was then directed to the role of civil society during the conflict with much of the focus covering rehabilitation, reconstruction, education and cultural heritage.

What follows is an account of all the major issues that were discussed at the workshop. However, as provided for under the Chatham House Rule, the identity of the speakers and participants at the workshop is not revealed.

## **Government Response to the Crisis**

The origin of the conflict as we know it began in mid-March 2011 but more precisely starts with the events in Daraa, which included the allegations of child torture and shootings at demonstrations. A number of people dispute the nature of these accusations



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while others strongly believe that they took place. What was brought up during the workshop was a story that had never been reported and which could have ramifications for how the real events in Daraa are interpreted.

In March, 12 policemen were shot dead but this fact was never reported. The first four victims from the security forces were shot on March 23 and March 24, 2011, just over a week after demonstrations first started. The participants also learnt that most of the casualties in the war have hitherto been from the government forces.

The government responded in a variety of ways to the events taking place around the country in early 2011. On March 24, 2011, the Syrian leadership held a meeting and took what they considered to be extremely important decisions. It cancelled the State of Emergency Law and announced plans for other pieces of legislation such as the Political Parties Law, the Electoral Law and the Media Law, all of which were passed during the course of the next few months. Furthermore, a national dialogue forum was convened in July 2011 to bring together a range of members from the Syrian community to discuss an exit strategy out of the crisis. A total of 124,000 Syrian Kurds who did not possess Syrian nationality were granted it. Numerous general amnesties were issued and saw the release of political detainees from all walks of life including those with an extremist background.

## **Western Response to the Crisis**

For many Syrians and international observers, the Western response to the crisis was an attempt by countries such as the US, the UK and France to forge regime change in Damascus and get President Bashar Al-Assad to step down. A main driving force for this stance is the fact that the Syrian government has always been an ally of Russia and Iran and never adhered to the Western agenda in the Middle East. In short, the crisis in Syria was seen internally as a conspiracy aimed at toppling a legitimate government by applying military pressure to reach a political objective.

Comparisons to other Arab Spring countries were being made in the West and there was much talk in the press of invoking the “Yemeni scenario” in Syria whereby the Vice-President would replace President Al-Assad. The response from Russia and China was swift. On October 4, 2011, they both vetoed the first UN Security Council draft resolution that sought to target Syria. Four other vetoes over the course of the conflict followed suit.

The idea of regime change and talk of President Al-Assad’s legitimacy were the basis of a discussion on the subject of state legitimacy. The message taken from the workshop



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was that only Syrians can grant legitimacy to their state and governing authorities. The war today is perceived to be against the Syrian state and society, and the notion of a political regime is being fused with that of the state. The strategy seems to be focused on destroying the state by dividing Syrian society and consequently the country. To that end, the “with” and “against” labels were deployed and a strong emphasis on sects and ethnicities was utilized in an unprecedented matter. The strategy also sought to undermine the Syrian Army and push for demographic changes across Syria.

## **Media Narrative**

The mainstream media was perceived to have blatantly aligned its own narrative on the crisis with Western policy on Syria. The underlying theme of this discussion was that the truth is the first casualty of war and that the dissemination of modern communications has led to a campaign of disinformation targeting Syria. Moreover, the workshop touched on how the power of social media must not be underestimated as it helped to prevent a coup in Turkey for example.

In response to the measures taken by the government to alleviate the crisis in the early days, the Arab media escalated its campaign against the Syrian authorities, particularly the Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya news channels. Soon afterwards, ambassadors were withdrawn from Damascus and the Western discourse had shifted to regime change and calls for President Al-Assad to step down.

It was pointed out during this session that there was a certain irony in French President Francois Hollande’s call for President Al-Assad to resign given that the former only enjoys a nine percent approval rating in his country. There was also frustration over the fact that the West and the media never mention that President Al-Assad has lots of support within Syria for a variety of reasons.

For their part, the Syrian government and armed forces have been trying to explain that militants were part of the demonstrations from the onset and that they fired on the security forces. There was a hijacking of the peaceful movement by extremists while the smuggling of arms into Syria played a major part in this regard. The media was accused of becoming a weapon of war as it ignored all these facts while basing its stories on fake eyewitnesses. From Damascus’ point of view, it appeared that there was an attempt to recreate the events of Benghazi across Syria.

Past events showed how governments in Eastern Europe collapsed following a series of orchestrated media campaigns. Consequently, the same strategy was perceived in relation



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to the events in Daraa especially since no evidence of the alleged torture of children was ever presented.

One of the main problems the Syrian government faced at the time was that it had no channel of communications with the Western media, whose narrative followed a purely accusatory tone. Participants heard that the Western media almost entirely relies on the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) to receive information about the events in Syria. The SOHR is comprised of a single person named Rami Abdel-Rahman who works in a clothes shop in the British city of Coventry and who is a well-known opponent of the Syrian government. The session also noted that the Western media narrative has also been shaped to a significant extent by Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, both of whom have been accused of leading a campaign against the Syrian government.

The corporate media outlets were viewed as megaphones for fabrications while they tow the Western line. They were seen as exploiting the chemical weapons attack in the Eastern Ghouta region outside Damascus to accuse the government for political purposes. They kept peddling this story even after an independent investigation concluded that the government was not responsible. The media was also criticized for ignoring the terrorist attacks being perpetrated in Syria. In fact, countless schools have been destroyed across the country and there has not been a single report or condemnation in this respect. Bearing these factors in mind, it was argued that the media fabrications in the Syrian conflict constituted an international war crime. It was even asserted that through its reporting, the media was indirectly encouraging massacres to take place.

Another attempt by the media to discredit the Syrian government was the claim that the UN aid programme in Syria has been corrupted. What the media does not report and put into context is that the UN works in government-controlled areas where the majority of the Syrian people live. The Western media even attacked President Al-Assad's 2013 political plan to resolve the conflict before he finished his speech.

US Vice-President Joe Biden's speech at Harvard University in 2014 was cited during the workshop as an example of when some light on the truth was finally shed. Vice-President Biden described the conflict in Syria as a Sunni-Shia regional war and made it clear that President Al-Assad's opponents were determined to bring him down in any way they could, especially by funneling money and arms to different armed groups inside the country. Biden subsequently apologized for his remarks, which deviated away from the media narrative.



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One discussion focused on the role of journalists and whether they were adhering to the standards of professional conduct required of them. While many journalists just want a story to tell, questions were asked as to when they stop being professionals and instead become campaigners. The concept of honest, balanced, transparent and accurate reporting appears to have been compromised during the Syrian conflict. The fact is that a lot of journalists do not have any frame of reference on Syria. To this end, more open forums are needed to educate journalists on what is actually happening inside Syria and this workshop was regarded as a step in the right direction.

Criticism was leveled against the Syrian government for failing to create its own media platform after nearly six years into the crisis to counter the one being promoted in the West. In fact, it was observed that one of the biggest detriments to the government's narrative was restrictions on the media during the first two years of the conflict. Media access is very important to convey the whole story. One only has to contrast the narrative between Mosul and Aleppo to understand the significance of media access. The argument was made that the narrative has changed so much in Syria that it would be considered a tragedy not to invite the media into the country.

From a journalist's point of view, the media can be a friend but it will also tell you what you may not like to hear. The crisis in Syria is seen in the West in the same light as the upheavals in Eastern Europe, the so-called David versus Goliath narrative. Pictures of protests are very powerful in the West. The lack of Syrian government access was seen as an impediment whereas the Western media had unfettered access in rebel areas. If the government does not let journalists enter Syria, they will think that the government has something to hide. Moreover, journalists believe that people will consider what they say if there are minders around observing them.

The argument was made that the media will be willing to listen to an alternative narrative if Syria opens up to Western journalists and that nobody will try to block stories in the Western media that go against the mainstream narrative. Donald Trump was cited as a great example of someone who wanted television access and used the media to his benefit. Most importantly, the workshop heard that intelligence services in the West usually receive their information from their embassies but if there are no functioning embassies, the media becomes an alternative resource.

Although the Western media narrative started to change in late 2013 with the rise of ISIS, this did not mean that Syria's side of the story was being told. When Syria initially invited in the Western media to meet extremist fighters who had been captured, the West accused the Syrians of staging the whole event and dismissed the presence of an extremist element within the insurgency.



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Today, the media is looking at the conflict in Syria as a superpower face-off between the US and Russia while maintaining heavy criticism of the latter. It was pointed out that what is hardly ever appreciated by the Western media is the fact that Russia has had a longer relationship with Syria than any other power. Furthermore, it was noted that the media is critical of Russia's intervention despite the fact that it was legally invited into the country by the Syrian government unlike the US-led coalition, which unilaterally began bombing campaigns without seeking sovereign consent.

### **Armed Groups, Terrorism & Extremism**

There was some debate over how to characterize the war in Syria and whether it was a civil war or a proxy war imposed on the country by foreign powers. However, the fact that there are more than 80 nationalities fighting in Syria lends more credence to the argument that what is happening in Syria is not a civil war.

The conflicts taking place in the Middle East were described as attempts to destroy Arab nation states by direct foreign intervention through the arming of extremist proxies and the encouragement of sectarianism. Moreover, the armed groups fighting in Syria are not "moderates" but the West is promoting them as such. It was held that the mere presence of foreign fighters means that they are not moderates. One assessment of the situation is that Syria today is fighting an array of enemies to preserve itself and to reject the notion of partition.

It was explained that an extremist ideology that rejected both religious tolerance and inclusion had started taking hold among the armed opposition groups early on in the crisis. They were accused of committing crimes and pursuing sectarian activities that were unheard of in Syrian society. Syria after all is considered the last true secular state in the region and the idea of blatant extremism and sectarianism were alien to it.

As part of their strategy, armed groups focused on Syria's borders and highways to divide the country and enforce a new status quo. Furthermore, one of the problems in dealing with the strategy of divide and conquer as highlighted by one participant is the fact that after more than five years of war, people in conflict areas will likely back their local armed groups. As a result, it becomes even more challenging for the government to end the conflict.

Participants learnt that the Free Syrian Army (FSA) was stillborn when it first emerged because extremists had already arrived on the scene. FSA leaders even appeared



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alongside ISIS and Jabhat Al-Nusra (recently rebranded itself as Jabhat Fatah Al-Sham). What followed was a campaign of assassinations targeting a number of Syrian officials and figures. The emphasis on willful violence perpetrated by the armed groups and the failure by the international community to recognize the dangers posed by them were both extensively discussed at the workshop.

It was recounted that in September 2011, Western countries and their allies began intensely arming anti-government forces in Syria and that militarization only took months to be realized. Turkey was accused of facilitating the movement of extremist groups into Syria while Israel was alleged to be offering logistical support at its borders. The apparent strong relationship between Israel and the armed groups was interpreted as further evidence that the militants do not constitute a real opposition in a region where such relations are not acceptable and deemed treasonous.

As a result of foreign backing, the only alternative to the Syrian government today is ISIS and Jabhat Al-Nusra since they are the only other real powers on the ground that can pose a significant challenge. The split between ISIS and Jabhat Al-Nusra was described as one over power and not ideology. In fact, their ideologies are very similar if not the same as that adopted by Al-Qaeda.

Furthermore, the workshop heard that the role of the Muslim Brotherhood as a political organization is even more dangerous than ISIS and Jabhat Al-Nusra. To an extent, the conflict in Syria has also become a war of ideology. In this respect, the government's priority in fighting terrorism cannot stop as the alternative would be disastrous.

Ceasefire attempts were explained as a strategy by the government to free civilian hostages. When militants give up an area, they request to go either to Turkey or to the Syrian province of Idlib. The workshop learnt however that Idlib will never be allowed to turn into a long-term shelter for Al-Qaeda fighters but for the time being, the government's priority is to get the terrorists out of city centres.

Remarks were made on the fact that the conflict today does not represent the first time Syria has had to deal with the violent effects of terrorism. While the events of the late 1970s and early 1980s were indeed challenging, the problem today is on a much larger scale. Syria has long campaigned for an effective definition of "terrorism". In 1985, the Syrian government called for an international conference in Greece to define it.

On December 17, 2015, the UN Security Council passed Resolution 2253, which invokes the Chapter 7 provisions against any party that finances, arms and facilitates terrorism. The following day, Resolution 2254, which lays down the groundwork for a political



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solution in Syria, was passed. One participant mentioned that there is no doubt that Resolution 2253 was a prerequisite for Resolution 2254. Given that the core issue is terrorism, it was lamented that the media completely neglected to report on the provisions of Resolution 2253 and instead focused solely on Resolution 2254.

The war against Syria is also seen as a means to distort the image of Islam. The role of Sufism in shaping Syria's moderate Islam was contrasted with the extremist views of Wahhabism, which most of the armed groups are said to follow. Participants learnt that the peaceful and inclusive religious teachings of Sufi Sunnis were the first target of attacks by the Wahhabi fighters, many of whom made their way to Syria from abroad.

Sunni Sufi clergymen in villages located in the province of Aleppo were targeted by extremist fighters and wiped out in 2011 and 2012. The armed groups then turned their attention to the nearby predominately Shiite villages of Nubl and Al-Zahraa, which had peacefully coexisted with their Sunni neighbours for hundreds of years. ISIS also attacked the Sufis in Mayadeen.

The leading Syrian religious cleric Dr. Said Ramadan Al-Butti, who was assassinated in Damascus back in 2013, was a Sufi. Syria's mufti Dr. Ahmad Badr Al-Din Hassoun is also a Sufi. The strength of Sufism in the region also helps to explain why ISIS was unable to penetrate the major capital cities of Damascus and Baghdad.

## **Regional Powers**

The roles of Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar could not be overstated according to many of the participants as each of these countries adopted its own political opposition group along with its corresponding armed faction. Turkey was alleged to have put up tents even before the refugees arrived all the while deliberately encouraging them to flee Syria. Turkey is now literally invading Syria directly with its armed forces due to the failure of its proxies to accomplish the mission set out for them. However, it was asserted that Turkish use of armed proxies has led to instability within Turkey, which in turn has made Turkey more aggressive. It was pointed out that Turkey has its own ambitions of returning back to the glory days of the Ottoman Empire, which includes proposals to amend the Treaty of Lausanne to alter its borders accordingly.

Part of the discussion focused on the position of the Arab countries, which were split over the issue of Syria in general. While Saudi Arabia and Qatar are very hostile towards Syria and actively support the armed groups, others like Egypt and Algeria have been generally supportive of the government. One participant remarked that Egypt today has fully



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recognized that Damascus and Cairo are fighting the same enemy. Oman for its part has maintained open diplomatic channels with the Syrian government.

## **Europe**

Europe was described as having failed in its dealings on Syria with its policies in a state of disarray. Its stance was interpreted as moving away from Mediterranean partnership towards a collapse of the regional order that had hitherto existed in the Middle East. It was remarked that European leaders adopted positions that left their countries vulnerable to terrorism at home. The Syrian government has even advised Europe to exercise vigilance as extremists and foreign fighters are posing as refugees.

Some participants were also dismayed at how Europe criticizes Syria for taking measures to combat the spread of terrorism at home while it was deemed acceptable for the French government to impose emergency legislation after the Paris attacks of November 13, 2015. The workshop was told that it is the national and constitutional duty of the Syrian government to protect the country and its citizens from terrorists.

Syria has in the past cooperated with many European intelligence agencies on counter-terrorism measures including with their British counterparts. There were tangible benefits for both countries stemming from this cooperation before the British side suddenly ceased communications. Syria regards such a relationship as essential particularly since the country has become an arena for global terrorism. Furthermore, the delay of successive British governments in addressing the Saudi Arabian political agenda of financing the construction of numerous mosques in the UK was also mentioned in the workshop.

While Syria would be willing to resume relations with major European countries, it was suggested that there are other factors at the moment that do not encourage such a move. For instance, British politics for the time being will be mainly focused on the consequences of the Brexit referendum. In addition, French policy was described as sidelined and on the fringe of Middle Eastern politics due to the financial influence of Gulf countries.

## **United States**

For the Syrian government, the prism of Syrian-US relations can only be seen in the light of Syrian-Israeli hostility. Israeli security and safety is viewed as the US' top priority.



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The workshop heard that Israel seeks the Balkanization of the region in order to guarantee its security. In this respect, the US will pursue this policy on Israel's behalf. It was remarked that this perception of US-Israeli relations defining American interests in the region is perhaps too narrow and rather requires more substance analytically. However, for many Syrian participants at least, the evidence today indicates otherwise.

Syria has long been suspicious of the West. The 2003 invasion of Iraq, the 2006 Israeli war against Lebanon and the 2007 Israeli strike against an alleged nuclear site inside Syria exacerbated Damascus' concerns. The US was also accused of destroying Syria's infrastructure when it intervened in the Syrian conflict in late 2014.

Participants were nevertheless reminded that Syria had enjoyed excellent foreign relations before the war. Western leaders, particularly the US, were said to have initially looked at President Bashar Al-Assad with hope when he first came to power in 2000. They were however surprised at some of his early statements specifically those made during the visit of Pope John Paul II to Syria in 2001.

After the September 11th attacks, CIA Director George Tenet was keen on working with Syria. The workshop heard that the CIA was very grateful to Syria for its cooperation. Even former US Secretary of State Colin Powell remarked that Syria had helped save American lives. The Baker Hamilton Report was cited as just another example of policymakers seeking engagement with Damascus. However, the Bush Administration resisted such a move.

There was a discussion surrounding a report by the neo-conservative establishment about building a new Middle East following the collapse of the Soviet Union. The report was initially referenced by General Wesley Clarke some years back. It advocated the pursuit of regime change in some countries while seeking conduct change in others. The report prescribed regime change in Iraq while a mere conduct change was recommended in Syria and Egypt.

In this context, the assassination of Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri and the subsequent investigation into his death would be used as a pressure point against the Syrian government. The events that erupted in Syria in 2011 would be another way to pressure the government in Damascus. Participants heard that since 2008, a clearer picture was emerging that major plans were being prepared for Syria. On this assumption, it was argued that only the foreign powers can end the war in Syria.



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## **Russia**

Participants were taken back to 2009 to get a sense of the geopolitical overview of the region when the restart in US-Russian relations was initiated. It was made clear that substantial US intervention in Syria was halted by the return of active Russian diplomacy. The integration of Russia into the US agenda similar to the attempts in the 1990s had not succeeded. It was remarked that US foreign policy in the region is failing while Russia is reestablishing strong relationships with various countries in the region.

In response to a query about Syria becoming a puppet state, it was pointed out that Syria and Russia share strong common interests and that Syria has historically and geopolitically been the key to Russian security interests. For Russia, the game is closer to home and it is leading a genuine war against international terrorism, which will not be confined to Syria's borders. Such a relationship can be readily contrasted with Turkey's treatment of Syria. Ironically, Turkey is geographically closer to Syria but has not appreciated the dangers posed by the growing threat of terrorism on its borders. Both the Syrian and Russian governments recognize that what is happening in Syria is a war against terrorism.

A point emphasized was that only when the Russian Army intervened in Syria in September 2015 did the real fight against international terrorism begin. Russia was credited with directly stopping a number of offensives against government forces. Russia has also been very active in calling for the separation of the comparatively less extremist armed groups in Syria from the Al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat Al-Nusra.

A main theme that came out of the workshop is the importance of opening channels of communication between the superpowers to avoid further destruction in Syria. The West is currently reluctant to engage with Russia regarding Syria. However, the consensus is that the US and Russia can end the war if they agree to do so. After all, people in the West would not accept to see such destruction in their countries.

The US-led coalition was deemed not to be serious in fighting terrorism in the region not least because it cannot rectify the contradictions of its allies or control Saudi Arabian policy in Syria. The question for many is how can the West be an ally of Saudi Arabia while fighting terrorism at the same time? However, the bigger question was why the US and its coalition refuse to cooperate with Russia if they are serious about fighting the same terrorists? The perspective from Damascus is that nobody in the West will fight ISIS and Jabhat Al-Nusra since these groups are needed to further their agendas in Syria. That is why only Russia, Iran and a few other countries are perceived to be the only ones with a real interest in fighting extremist groups in the region.



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## **Aleppo**

An entire presentation was dedicated to the story of Aleppo and how fighters entered the city with the goal “to transfer the revolution to Aleppo by force”. Evidence of the destruction and looting of factories along with images of extremist fighters holed up in the city were presented to the participants.

The crisis in Aleppo began in July 2012 with reports that insurgents forced their way into the city to coerce the inhabitants to join the revolt. It was remarked that the fighters who came into Aleppo embedded themselves among the civilians similar to what happened during the Lebanese Civil War.

Aleppo is a regional hub enjoying a strategic geopolitical location that connects the coastal area to the eastern region. Due to its status, Aleppo represents a prized possession to the armed groups since it can be used as a staging ground to control other areas. The area around Aleppo is also very important due to the presence of oil and gas resources.

The events in Aleppo were described as an invasion prepared by Turkey who is widely believed to have organized fighters in the countryside outside the city. Starting off under the cover of secular fighters, these groups had to later expose their true extremist nature in order to attract fellow extremists and foreigners willing to fight against the Syrian government.

The destruction in Aleppo was assessed from both the industrial and social levels. On the industrial level, factories were looted and sent to Turkey. On the social level, Christians and government supporters were targeted in an attempt to create a split among the communities living in the city.

The workshop heard how the Syrian government has proposed several ceasefires and offered safe passages for the militants in order to get them out of Aleppo and end the conflict in the city. The Syrian government has expressed its willingness to allow all fighters including Jabhat Al-Nusra to freely leave the city. What this amounts to practically is a pardon, something no Western country would ever consider granting to Al-Qaeda fighters.

What it comes down to as one participant put it is that the conflict in Syria is a war to preserve the identity of Syrians and their way of life. In this respect, there will be no negotiations by the Syrian government on these points. There was a perception that Aleppo will reconcile the conflict in Syria and that President Al-Assad’s forces are



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winning the war. One participant predicted that Aleppo should be liberated by Christmas time followed by a push towards Raqqa soon thereafter.

## **International Sanctions**

The session on international sanctions proved very informative for understanding the state of the Syrian economy since the start of the conflict. Participants learned that sanctions started having a limited impact when the US first imposed them in 2004 after the invasion of Iraq. Nevertheless, the liberalization process led by President Bashar Al-Assad allowed the Syrian economy to grow at an impressive rate up until 2011.

The turning point for the economy came in 2011 when both the US and the EU led an unprecedented campaign against Syria imposing economic and personal sanctions. While the US has been leading a very aggressive campaign against Syria, the same description was not applied in absolute terms to the EU. The EU after all was considered to be acting under pressure from the US. It was also noted that the European banks are themselves suffering from the US compliance procedures.

Banking services became severely restricted and US Dollar transactions were prohibited as of August 2011. The fear of being penalized led international banks to impose restrictions on all Syrian nationals. Banks and financial institutions began establishing compliance buffer zones on Syria. International transaction costs for Syrian businesses rose significantly as commissions for banking transfers increased. Moreover, informal payment channels were set up since correspondent banks ceased providing services. It was shown during the workshop how these measures have dramatically increased the operating costs for Syrian businesses, which in turn have passed on those expenses to ordinary Syrian consumers.

The aim of these policies, which were designed to discourage commerce with Syria, succeeded as major companies consequently ceased trading with the country. Most shippers halted direct shipments to Syria and traders had to look towards other countries. Syrian businesses were obliged to turn to third parties for alternative supplies, which came at higher prices.

Although sanctions may be selective, they seem to have an overwhelming general effect. While the EU excluded food and medical supplies from its sanctions regime against Syria, they were not exempted in practical terms. The domestic food and medical industries were also severely affected and resulted in shortages of products across the board. For instance, the government today is finding it difficult to treat cancer. While it is



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seeking alternative sources, it has had to compromise on the quality of the treatment. The economic activity in Syria shifted so much during the conflict that food and medicine constituted 25% of imports in 2015 while Syria was a main exporter of medicines in the region up until 2011.

It was noted that the Syrian government through the Ministry of Health still regulates the prices of medicines to keep them affordable. Furthermore, public employees working in the healthcare sector in rebel-held areas are still receiving their salaries from the Ministry to ensure continued services and compliance with the government's health policies.

It was also pointed out that there was a rise in the number of Syrians migrating overseas and specifically to Germany in late 2015 and early 2016. One underlying factor why they chose Germany was because it offered similar services to what they were accustomed to in Syria such as free healthcare and education. As mentioned, the Syrian government's ability to provide these services, especially healthcare, has been significantly reduced during the conflict.

One of the presentations highlighted the fact that 80% of the Syrian economy relies on small and medium-sized enterprises and industries, which are being affected by the international sanctions. Many of these businesses relocated to neighbouring countries due to the overwhelming inflation rate, the huge depreciation of the Syrian Pound and the ever increasing electricity shortages.

Throughout the conflict, there has been a significant decline in imports due to the sanctions. When procuring their goods, initial partial payments by importers are no longer accepted. Rather, importers now have to pay the full price for their goods upfront. Consequently, this change led to a decrease in liquidity and hence a reduction in working capital.

Syrian exports were also severely hit by the looting of factories, the destruction of power stations and the restrictions imposed on Syrian products. There was also a massive drop in oil exports due to both the EU sanctions and the destruction of the underlying infrastructure needed to extract oil.

The closure of the Jordanian border crossing at Nassib is also affecting exports to the Gulf countries. There was a proposal to establish an alternative trade route to Jordan through Suwaida to replace the Nassib border crossing but the workshop heard that this initiative was blocked by the Jordanian government for political reasons. While exports to Iraq continue, logistical problems caused by the wars in both countries proved detrimental.



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The social impact of these economic pressures has resulted in an ever increasing rate of unemployment, the closure of businesses and higher levels of migration. More than 80% of Syrians are now facing poverty and the country's development has been reversed by decades. Inflation has increased five times while the local currency has depreciated by 10 times. Most salaries and wages have not kept up with these sudden changes. Even NGOs are suffering from the effects of the sanctions. One of the conclusions drawn at the workshop was that the objective behind the sanctions appears to be to pressure the government by subjecting the Syrian people to a prolonged period of agony.

From mid-2012 until the autumn of 2013, the crisis was at its peak in Syria. By the autumn of 2013, the Syrian Army had made advances and established security in a number of regions, which allowed businesses to resume work. The advances led to the stabilization of areas in the provinces of Rural Damascus and Homs. As of mid-2014 to 2015, a number of factories began restarting operations once again.

As a result, the industrial sector is now slowly returning. In fact, 200 factories have been set up in the formerly rebel-held town of Yabroud. Gas and fuel are being imported from friendly countries to satisfy the needs of industry, electricity, heat, consumption and transportation. In 2015, the private sector's contribution to the economy was measured at 73%. Despite some positive signs, the private sector continues to face the adverse consequences of international sanctions.

One key observation made at the workshop was that economic sanctions lead to the creation of a parallel market that relies on the smuggling of low-grade goods. It was argued that this restrictive environment bred further corruption and consequently created a new class of war profiteers and warlords. Such dangerous symptoms must be addressed while seeking a resolution to the conflict. One suggestion was that the informal economy must be integrated back into the formal economy. The lack of an inclusive economy was regarded as a contributing factor leading up to the crisis.

A repeated appeal to ease sanctions that indiscriminately affect the population was made throughout the workshop. A number of suggestions were put forward in this respect. For instance, one speaker advocated the establishment of banking and payment corridors into Syria. At the same time, the entry of commodities into the Syrian market should be guaranteed. Another important recommendation was to identify a set of particular commodities whose importation into Syria should not be affected by the sanctions. The need to take tangible steps to help small businesses survive in the current economic climate was also emphasized.



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The workshop also discussed the importance of having a wider debate within the EU as to whether the sanctions imposed on Syria are actually necessary. It was noted that while Moscow is voicing concerns in international forums about the sanctions imposed on Syria, Russia is itself also subject to sanctions. It was mentioned that India and Pakistan, who maintain friendly relations with Syria, can also air these concerns on behalf of the Syrian people.

### **Political Process & Reconciliation**

The means by which the conflict in Syria can be resolved hinge on appreciating the origins of the crisis and correctly recognizing the factors that will prompt the external players to end the conflict. Once that has been realized, there will be an opportunity to effectively implement a political process and pursue reconciliation efforts on a larger scale.

In retrospect, the situation in Syria was considered desirable before the war. Nevertheless, as one speaker lectured, there were problems evidenced by a great split in society. Prior to the conflict, one could witness substantial developments in and around Syrian city centres. However, rural areas remained underdeveloped in comparison to the cities.

Aleppo itself looked very promising with a great number of factories and educational institutions springing up all around the city along with an emerging touristic industry. Ironically enough, Aleppo's rural areas were one of the poorest regions in Syria and later became a fertile ground for extremists.

Looking forward into the future, the political process and reconciliation efforts will have to incorporate plans for greater openness and more balanced development. Moreover, the general atmosphere of secrecy and lack of information that prevailed before the conflict will also have to be substantially reassessed.

As part of its plan to pursue a political track to help end the conflict, the Syrian government continues to reiterate President Al-Assad's 2013 plan. It calls for a broad and representative national unity government that includes members of the current government, opposition figures and independents. The new government would then oversee constitutional reform followed by a referendum and then elections. In practice, Syria is not obliged to adopt a Western-style democracy but rather one based on its own culture and history. At the international level, Syria is ready to resolve the conflict by sitting down with opposition groups based abroad and their foreign backers.



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One position put forward during the workshop was that without President Al-Assad at the helm, Syria will not be able to overcome the current conflict. While the subject of much debate on both the national and international levels, his presence for the time being at least is regarded by many as essential to safeguard the country's territorial integrity. As part of the aforementioned 2013 plan, the future of the presidency would be decided by the electoral process.

As part of the political track, dialogue in Syria is essential. However, the opposition is split on the issue of national dialogue with large parts of it seeking a change of government as a prerequisite. Since 2013, efforts have been alternatively focused on local reconciliations sponsored by the government as a result of the intentional scuttling of national dialogue initiatives.

Participants were intrigued to learn that local reconciliations are becoming predominant all over Syria. They were even being undertaken in the province of Deir Ez-Zor before ISIS moved into the area. Local reconciliations do not just constitute a military solution but they also include the resumption of public services to the liberated areas.

Interestingly enough, the government is still providing services throughout Syria despite the current circumstances. The government argues that the provision of public services helps to rebuild trust between the people and the state. Even UN Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura acknowledged that the state's approach in pursuing reconciliations is advantageous.

Up to 2 million people have benefitted from local reconciliations but success does not always come without a price. It is a fact that officials involved in local reconciliations have been assassinated. The Minister of State for National Reconciliation has himself been subjected to four attempts on his life.

Furthermore, the government brushed off any allegations that its approach to local reconciliations is coupled with a state policy to pursue demographic adjustments. In any event, the final solution in Syria will be achieved through political means and this point was emphasized throughout the proceedings of the workshop.

As part of the reconciliation process, the question of settling the status of fighters who lay down their arms was also discussed. The government does not regard everyone who carries arms as terrorists. It understands that among other circumstances, some are under duress to do so. Therefore, legal and administrative procedures are being followed as the various government ministries coordinate among themselves to settle the cases of armed



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fighters who lay down their arms. Such settlements are carried out on a case by case basis and every area where fighters are located is treated according to its own circumstances.

The government explained that the rehabilitation and reintegration of armed fighters is important for the individual concerned, his family and society in general. In this respect, a separate mapping of rebels and terrorists was recommended so that they are properly distinguished from each other.

One speaker promoted the role of Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) to work towards post-conflict peace consolidation. In any event, reconciliation will constitute a long process until integration in Syria is restored. It was clarified during the workshop that reconciliations must be induced internally and not externally like the blueprints in Geneva and Vienna. However, the success of the internal reconciliation process and by extension the DDR strategy relies to a significant extent on Syria's foreign relations.

Reconciliation without reconstruction is very difficult to attain because reconciliation and de-radicalization require a strong base from which to build on and thrive. Without an economic plan, there can be no sustainable reconciliation. A "Marshall Plan" so to speak such as the one being considered by Russia would be welcomed in Syria. An estimate by the UN values the costs of reconstruction at \$500 billion (US). If the war stops, Syrians can rebuild but the consensus is that help must come from the countries that willfully fed the destruction in the country.

The reconciliation process can of course not be put into context without an analysis of Syria's rich mosaic of diverse communities who lived together peacefully before the war. Syria's mosaic today is not exactly the same as before the conflict but there is still hope of restoring it to its historic status.

Participants were interested to learn that not as many minorities left Syria as initially thought. Facts and figures showed that only 16,000 out of the 100,000 Syrian-Armenians living in Syria before the war had actually left for Armenia. The overwhelming majority of this group felt more Syrian than Armenian and decided to remain in their country despite the conflict.

Moreover, the predominately Christian residents of Saidnaya chose to stay and defend their town against Jabhat Al-Nusra. The last Jewish family in Aleppo only left less than a year ago while there are currently 70 Jews living in Damascus. While the latter may seem like a nominal figure, given the circumstances today, it is quite significant. The message



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from a participant was that the promotion of religious harmony coupled with reconciliation can still save Syria's rich mosaic.

The main executive authority leading reconciliation efforts in Syria is the Ministry of State for National Reconciliation headed up by Dr. Ali Haidar. It must be pointed out that he is not a member of the ruling Baath Party but rather the once banned Syrian Social National Party (SSNP). Given the prevalence of the Baath Party in Syria's government, the SSNP is considered to be an opposition party.

Despite being a member of the opposition, Dr. Haidar sees it as part of his national duty to participate in the government as a minister at this time of crisis. Given his membership in the government, he is personally subject to international sanctions and travel bans. On this subject, a question was asked that if he is prevented from travelling to the West to tell his side of the story and that of the Syrian government's, what hope is there to resolve the conflict?

## **Rehabilitation & Reconstruction**

Although the war has not ended, rehabilitation and reconstruction have started albeit on a small scale and mainly at the initiative of the public authorities with significant input from civil society organizations. The provision of public services is regarded as an integral part of the reconciliation process. In this respect, the Higher Relief Committee (HRC) was formed by the government back in 2012 for the purpose of providing services to Syrians caught up in the war. Up to 5.24 million people fled their homes in conflict areas and services such as the construction of housing units and shelters are being extended to them.

The HRC does not exclude any citizen from the provision of public services since it seeks to promote reconciliation and build trust between the people and the state. As part of this effort, the HRC also helps internally displaced persons return to their homes. However, extremists and other armed groups pose a major obstacle in this regard. There was an obvious frustration that the international community and the UN do not always recognize all these efforts by the government.

A special committee has been set up to resolve the problems in troubled regions of the country. The UN coordinates with the government and the HRC to enter unstable areas to help residents living there. It was noted that when delays for safety considerations occur in some instances, the media is the first to incorrectly report the reasons for the holdups.



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Other specialized committees that have been formed to alleviate the effects of the conflict include the Reconstruction Committee and the Damage Assessment Committee. Additionally, every government ministry is working towards this objective in its own capacity and according to its mandate and responsibilities.

The means by which some NGOs are funded have always made Syria cautious in how it approaches these organizations. Nevertheless, there are 10 Syrian and two international NGOs currently working in Syria. Their work is decentralized so that they can better serve the local populations.

All the aforementioned public entities and NGOs are involved in the formulation of the government's Response Plan, which is being implemented in coordination with UN aid agencies. Nevertheless, it was clarified during the workshop that most of the services are being provided by the government.

Once the Syrian Army liberates territories, the government immediately rehabilitates the area by providing all the essential services that make it possible for people to return back to their homes. In addition to water, sewage, electricity and other services, the government implements early development initiatives and provides microfinance facilities.

It was also stated that no other government in the world has managed a humanitarian response of this nature while resisting such a destructive war against it. The government's resilience was put down by one speaker to the resolve of the political leadership to provide essential services to all citizens wherever they are located.

One important fact that helped the government in its humanitarian efforts was the experience of hosting millions of Iraqi, Lebanese and Palestinian refugees over the years. Syrians were also supported to a large degree by the efforts of their own civil society, which provided care to underprivileged communities and even made sure that the basic environmental practices such as recycling were upheld during the conflict.

The question of how Syria's reconstruction will be financed seems to rest on three possible outcomes of how the conflict may end. Syria will not be able to rely on itself unless its expatriate communities return and invest in their country. The resources could alternatively come from friendly countries that have already started setting up investment funds for this purpose. The last and by far the most favourable option would be for the conflict to end in a manner agreeable to all members of the international community who in turn will finance the costs of reconstruction.



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There will be many considerations to deal with during the reconstruction process. Many of them relate to the nature of the conflict on the ground such as the alleged tensions between the different communities. To cite as an example, it was reported that certain soldiers did not intentionally defect from the Syrian Army. Rather, they abandoned their positions out of concern for their villages and the need to defend them. All these facts and issues will have to be closely scrutinized in order to create the right conditions for reconstruction.

A brief account of life in Damascus by one speaker provided a gist of what the Syrian people and the government would like to see replicated across the country. Participants were told that life in Damascus continues normally and this was confirmed to them during their stay in the city. Despite inflationary pressures, prices are still much lower than in neighbouring countries such as Lebanon and Jordan. Public services are still being provided and ministries are functioning as usual. Foreign residents are even organizing activities and sports events.

## **Syrian Army**

One subject of key interest that arose in the workshop was the future role of the Syrian Army. Participants were intrigued to learn that there is a general consensus among a number of policymakers in the West that the Syrian Army must remain constituted in its current form, which was not the case five years ago. Western links to the Syrian Army were highlighted by the fact that many Syrian generals and officers were educated in the West and not just in Russia and Iran as is generally presumed.

The significant role of the Syrian Army was evidenced by the fact that it was credited with ending the war in neighbouring Lebanon and was an instrumental part of the US-led coalition in the 1991 Gulf War to liberate Kuwait. The Army is the most important institution in the state and is considered a strategic pillar of the regional security order. There is an emerging realization that it must prevail in the conflict and take back Aleppo to lead the reconciliation process.

The workshop was reminded that a majority of British MPs with a military background voted against airstrikes targeting Syria in the summer of 2013 and that David Davis MP, the current UK Brexit minister, led calls against the airstrikes. While there is a growing diplomatic longing to work with Damascus, there are internal pressures in Western countries that reject this approach. The perception at the workshop was that there is a difference of opinion at all levels in the West on how to deal with the situation in Syria especially between the political and military establishments.



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## **Education**

One of the most overlooked subjects in the media but given a great deal of attention at the workshop was education. Children have borne the brunt of this conflict on many levels but losing access to schooling may have the most detrimental effect in the long term and lead to a lost generation of young Syrians. Participants were informed that it is actually the first time for thousands of years that people are being denied an education in Syria.

Unlike the country's infrastructure, the damage to the education system in Syria cannot recover in the medium term. Therefore, this sector has to be given priority as today's children will be the key players shaping the country's future. The biggest fear is that the children driving Syria's future forward will be mentally scarred by the horrors of this tragic conflict.

The fact is that poverty forces children to drop out of schools in order to provide a living for their families. Poverty also results in an upsurge in crime, prostitution and radicalization. Such a vicious cycle was identified as the gravest outcome of the war, which must be addressed as early as possible to prevent a potential disaster. In this respect, it was recalled that three generations of Iraqis were physically and mentally scarred by the international sanctions imposed on their country.

Before the war, Syria had 20,000 schools, 200 educational institutions and a number of public and private universities. 97% of the schools were open to the public and offered free education. In 2011, enrollment at primary and secondary schools were 95% and 65% respectively. Many schools have now been destroyed or damaged while others are located in conflict areas.

Despite the fact that the province of Idlib falls outside of the state's control, there are 1,000 public schools functioning there and teachers are still receiving their salaries from the government. Nevertheless, there are up to 4,320,000 young people in Syria who are in need of schooling right now. There will have to be a concerted effort on rebuilding and strengthening the educational system if Syria is to fully recover from this crisis.

Prior to the conflict, British universities such as the University of East Anglia were considering opening branches in Syria. Others, including the University of South Wales, were offering support to Syrian students. Moreover, Syrians used to travel abroad to study with the majority of them returning home to work and prosper.

However, Syrians are now facing considerable difficulties when attempting to study abroad. For example, Syrians currently studying in the UK are unable to receive money



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for living expenses through bank transfers because of the sanctions. Moreover, the Syrian government today is no longer able to send any Syrian students to the UK. It was also mentioned that presently the Pakistani International School of Damascus is the only institution in Syria to maintain a British affiliation.

The workshop heard that the international community has failed Syria's children and its youth. Rather than focus on helping Syrians inside Syria, members of the international community are directing their attention to countries that host Syrian refugees. The main reason is their unwillingness to work with the Syrian government despite the fact that most children in Syria live in government-controlled areas.

Additionally, host countries are imposing a number of restrictions on Syrian refugees. In Jordan for example, 92% of Syrians are denied a university education and the situation in Lebanon is not much better. Students in Turkey face language barriers. In Iraq, the government has limited resources with which to support Syrian refugees given the problems it faces.

Nevertheless, Syrians in general are regarded as highly skilled and that explains the open door policy extended by Germany to Syrian migrants. One measure of assurance was the fact that Syria will continue to produce the skills needed to rebuild the country.

On the other hand, Syria continues to suffer from the effects of a brain drain. The sad truth is that only a minority of expatriates went back to Lebanon after the war ended in their country. Therefore, a plan must be put in place to give Syrian expatriates the confidence needed to return to their country and participate in the reconstruction process.

## **Cultural Heritage**

The damage to Syria's cultural heritage needs no introduction as it has been the subject of pillages throughout the conflict. One needs only to look towards Palmyra and the devastation in that ancient city at the hands of ISIS to get a glimpse of the catastrophic acts that have been bestowed on Syria's cultural heritage.

The main challenges facing Syria's cultural heritage were identified. They include the premeditated destruction of the archaeological sites, clashes in the vicinity of the sites, the illegal excavations and the smuggling of artifacts. There are vast regions across the country that are the site of distressed cultural areas with Aleppo being one of the most severely affected. A campaign to raise awareness about the destruction of Syria's cultural



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heritage was launched back in 2012 and the UN Security Council passed Resolution 2199 in 2015 to shed light on this issue.

Participants heard that antiquities and museums must be separated from political agendas. The Directorate-General of Antiquities and Museums (DGAM) at the Ministry of Culture has cooperated with members of local communities to transport artifacts to safer locations whenever possible.

While the DGAM is carrying out restoration work on damaged artifacts, emergency restoration is the priority at the moment. For the purposes of a complete restoration programme once the conflict ends, the DGAM is looking to cooperate with international organizations such as UNESCO. Moreover, the DGAM has been in regular contact with INTERPOL throughout the conflict to retrieve stolen artifacts.

## **Conclusion**

Before the start of this workshop, the British Syrian Society was criticized on two opposing fronts. The first was led by some Western media outlets, which questioned the objectiveness of an event organized in Damascus under the watchful eye of the Syrian government. The second came from members of the British Syrian Society itself who criticized the delay in hosting such an important workshop. In any event, the goal was to have an objective exchange of views among a variety of opinions on the conflict in Syria. To a significant extent, this has materialized on the whole as evidenced by the dozens of news articles that have referred to the event.

Syria has found itself isolated by the West for more than five years and its story has been blocked by the mainstream media narrative. Therefore, the workshop sought to help create a deeper understanding of the nature of the conflict with the support of facts and figures presented by experts. The discussions at the workshop initially assessed the Syrian government's response to the crisis before moving on to examine the Western political position and media narrative.

One noteworthy recommendation that followed was for the government to create its own media platform. As part of its mission, this platform should facilitate greater media access into the country so that Syria's side of the story has a chance to counter or at least influence the Western media narrative.

The workshop gave more than 60 international journalists the opportunity to finally see the real Syria from within as opposed to relying on unverified reporting from outside the



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country. The journalists travelled to Aleppo and witnessed firsthand the true nature of the conflict taking place in that city. They also had the opportunity to meet ministers and even President Bashar Al-Assad and question them as they saw fit.

Other major themes discussed in the workshop included international cooperation and internal reconciliation through dialogue. The two processes were regarded as key to pursuing a political track to end the war as long as there is a US-Russian agreement. Trust between the people and the state can be restored to a certain extent by the provision of public services in the liberated areas since it is an integral part of the reconciliation process. In addition, the Syrian Army is also expected to play a leading role during this stage. While these components are essential, they will only allow the conditions for reconstruction to be successful as long as there is a lifting of international sanctions. Post-conflict peace consolidation cannot be achieved without the promise of a bright economic future.

In addition, the removal of sanctions and a substantial emphasis on restoring the education system will give Syria's children a chance to develop and shape a promising future for their country. All of these objectives will need to be accomplished while encouraging Syrian expatriate communities to return to their country. Finally, Syria's cultural heritage, which has been subjected to a significant level of damage during the conflict, will need to undergo a major restoration process.

While the conflict may be resolved by the politicians, the peace will not be won unless there is a concerted effort by Syrians and those genuinely willing to help them to rebuild their country. In order to do so, it is first necessary to know where the world stands.