Towards More Principled International Support:
Doing No Harm and Contributing to Syria's Rehabilitation and Recovery

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Recommendations

- International aid to Syria has supported Syrians on multiple levels for the past decade. Nevertheless, it has contributed to creating dangerous patterns on the ground. **It is time to rethink international aid to Syria, move away from crisis mitigation mode and towards rehabilitation and recovery**, and reflect on how to **empower the Syrian population to take over the process of shaping their future.**

- There is a tendency to think of recovery on a central level, and through a framework of resilience, when discussing the future of Syria. In line with this, the concept of 'early recovery' has been largely politicised and co-opted by problematic and compromised actors, including the Syrian government, to promote a narrative and a reality of normalisation, especially in the wake of the earthquake. **A shift is needed towards genuine rehabilitation, recovery, and resilience building** that transcend conflict foundations and enhance opportunities for peace. This requires deliberately adapting the mechanisms of international assistance to create conditions that would facilitate and protect a civic space that can catalyse genuine development processes, ones that can be defined as truly sustainable from a Syrian perspective and that address existing gaps and faults.

- **International donors' interventions need to be guided by a human rights-based and sustainable peace conditionality.** Syrians can and must play a central role in supporting the international community to achieve more integrated and consistent policies of international assistance in line with this conditionality. This is to avoid empowering warlords and de facto authorities, contributing to more human rights violations, consolidating the war economy, entrenching the divisions between different regions in Syria, planting seeds for new conflicts, or supporting certain segments of the Syrian population at the expense of others.

- Efforts towards achieving recovery and rehabilitation processes can only be fruitful if done in accordance with the parameters of a human rights-based and sustainable peace conditionality. **If such a conditionality is infeasible, efforts must be directed towards making it feasible**, through human-rights based impact assessments that consult affected communities and grievance mechanisms that can remediate any harm. Otherwise, more damage can be expected, including by contributing to human rights violations, entrenching existing divisions, and legitimising calls for normalisation by the Syrian government and other de facto powers.

- Supporting recovery and integrated local development processes in Syria requires overcoming the vague concept of localisation and embracing the specific goal of working on a local level in a principled, structural, and sustainable way. This implies **acknowledging local civil actors as a societal force** that can structurally shape the design, delivery, and monitoring of international assistance. Syrian civic actors can do much more than simply act as implementing agencies, or help with procurement. Working on the local level in a principled way further implies operating across sectors and across regions and localities. This is crucial to ensure that local development processes do not contribute to entrenching geopolitical divisions in Syria or compromising local, sub-national or national interests of the country today or in the future.

- Supporting recovery and integrated local development processes in Syria necessitates **working with Syrian intermediaries that are trusted not only by donors for their technical capabilities, but also by local communities and civic actors for their accountability.** Intermediaries are not simply sub-granting bodies. Rather, they play a fundamental role in securing a dynamic and efficient interface between donors and the local level, and in preserving national, sub-national and cross-regional interests.

- Supporting recovery and integrated local development processes in Syria also entails **working with uncompromised Syrian channels in the civic space and businesses in every part of the international assistance process.** Uncompromised channels are accountable to the communities they serve and have the capacity to navigate technical and security challenges posed by compromised actors.

- There is a need to **create an environment that would protect and nourish uncompromised channels** to build a civic space that is less vulnerable to interference and manipulation by de facto powers, more immune to aid diversion, and less likely to entrench divisions, conflict economies, or conflict traps.

- **There is not a one-size-fits-all, ready-made or fast solution to working at the local level in a principled way. Rather, it is a process.** The goal should be to create an enabling environment for the uncompromised civic space to exist, grow, and eventually own the process.

- Effectuating recovery and integrated local development processes in Syria can allow for an **authentic national ownership by the Syrian people of the country's future peace and development** as opposed to a national ownership dictated by the regime (or other de facto powers). This must also follow a **victim-centered approach to recovery**, where affected communities and victims of violations are consulted in any projects that may impact their rights, and which guarantees remedy channels and procedures if projects result in any infringement to victims' enjoyment of their rights in the short or long term.

- There is an **urgent need for a conducive financial environment in Syria** that would allow legitimate financial transfers, create payment channels to protect aid, and facilitate a productive role for the principled private sector in the transition from an aid-based economy to sustainable local economies.

- **The role of the principled private sector is essential in facilitating integrated local development processes.** There is a need to empower trusted local private sector actors and create local civil society-private sector dynamics and partnerships that could facilitate the establishment of sustainable local economies and protect them from the hegemony of compromised private sector actors.

- **Monitoring of international aid needs to be reconceived as a framework of accountability both to Syrian communities and to the taxpayers of international donor states.** This implies activating meaningful upstream and downstream monitoring mechanisms to hold donors accountable, along with their channels for aid delivery in the design and implementation of aid programmes, in accordance with human rights and Syria's prospects for sustainable peace and development.

- This vision for **more principled international assistance to Syria requires the political will and collective action of donors to embrace new approaches,** and an aid architecture that shifts the response from one supporting the Syrian population's adaptation to the conflict to one addressing root causes of the conflict and the seeds of potential conflict traps. Donors are urged to turn their attention to developing together, and in coordination, such new approaches as are suggested here and to **respond collectively through a recovery mechanism designed for the Syrian population**. This will entail bridging the silos of different types of aid and rethinking the linkages between humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding aid in a structural way, through a pooled international aid mechanism that allows the Syrian civic space to build efficient governance structures, sustainable local economies, and hence recovery and integrated local development.

The Convening Coalition

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