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STIMSON

## Lessons Learned for Stabilization in Syria

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by Mona Yacoubian



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INSTITUTE OF PEACE



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Cover: *Children walking in Azez, Aleppo.* IHH Humanitarian Relief Foundation.

Page 4: *Syrian refugee students attend a class in an accelerated learning programme at public school in Kamed Al Louz in the Bekaa Valley, Lebanon.* UNHCR/Shawn Baldwin.

Page 6: *Yarmouk Camp emergency.* United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA).

Page 10: *Child walking with a bowl amongst refugee tents.* UNHCR.

Page 12: *Mahmoud, a Syrian refugee, stands in the underground shelter where he lives with his family in El Akbiya, Lebanon.* UNHCR/Shawn Baldwin.

Page 14: *Syrian refugee child playing in flood waters in Lebanon.* Patrick Abi Salloum (PatrickAS on Flickr).

Page 24: *Group of children at the Babunnur Syrian refugee camp in Aleppo.* IHH Humanitarian Relief Foundation.

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## Preface

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Dear Reader,

The Syrian conflict poses enormous challenges for US policy and for US efforts to engage with affected Syrians, including through stabilization projects. Ongoing violence in which civilians are actively targeted shows no sign of abating. As US efforts at stabilization and transition in Syria move forward in 2014, Syria's complex conflict will continue to pose a significant set of challenges for the United States. A deeper examination of "lessons learned" from previous US experiences with conflict stabilization could provide valuable insights for Syria. Gaining deeper understanding into both successes and failures in cases including Afghanistan, Iraq and the Balkans holds particular merit. Ideally, these lessons learned should help to improve the effectiveness of stabilization and transition efforts in Syria and avoid the pitfalls of past stabilization experiences.

The newly established Center for Applied Research on Conflict (ARC) at the U.S. Institute of Peace (USIP) invited the Stimson Center to organize and lead the Lessons Learned for Stabilization in Syria project. Stimson established a working group comprised of experts with a broad range of expertise and skills to advise Stimson's Syria expert Mona Yacoubian, who authored the report. Working group members encompassed a wide range of institutional and country experience, and some have worked directly on Syria-related projects funded by the US government.

The *Lessons Learned for Stabilization in Syria* report is not intended to review current programming for affected populations in Syria, nor to provide operational guidance or develop ideas for specific stabilization programs. It is also not intended to assess current US policy, or to devise a new "grand strategy" for Syria. Rather, the project focuses on developing critical insights from past stabilization efforts for policy makers as they contend with the daunting challenges of engaging affected populations in war-torn Syria.

We are deeply grateful to Mona Yacoubian for her leadership of the project, and for working group members Rachel Brandenburg, William Durch, Alison Giffen, Steven Heydemann, David Kilkullen, Clare Lockhart, Sharon Morris, Russell Rumbaugh, James Shear, Daniel Serwer, William Taylor and Ann Vaughan. We wish to thank the US Institute of Peace for initiating the project, providing funding to carry out the research activities, and including USIP experts in the working group. Stimson takes responsibility for the findings and judgments of this report.

Sincerely,

Ellen Laipson  
President and CEO  
Stimson Center





## Executive Summary

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The protracted Syrian crisis and its catastrophic humanitarian consequences have created profound dilemmas for outside actors seeking to provide relief to Syrians at risk, both inside and outside the country, and to enable efforts to stabilize conditions for Syrian society and institutions. Stabilization work — to the extent that it is possible — faces daunting challenges; can previous US experience with conflict stabilization provide useful insights for Syria?

The newly established Center for Applied Research on Conflict at the US Institute of Peace funded an effort led by the Stimson Center to convene a small group of experts to distill lessons from Afghanistan, Iraq and the Balkans. This report is not intended to provide detailed operational guidance, or to offer advice on overall Syria policy, but may serve as a useful menu of insights and ideas to support effective engagement with Syrian civilians in distress.

- Stabilization work will need to focus on areas of the country beyond the regime's control, and in refugee locales.
- Because understanding of the deep, underlying conflict dynamics is essential, expanded use of creative mapping exercises would help assess political actors and the impact of assistance on local economies.
- Integration of peace-building, security and development work is key to lasting success. In the field, this concept is embraced and implemented, but a Washington-based senior level authority on Syria is also essential. Empowering the Special Envoy for Syria with the authority to oversee and integrate Syria policies and programming and to de-conflict contradictory or redundant efforts could make a big difference to the overall effectiveness of stabilization programming.
- Mutual dependencies, even among hostile communities, create an entry point for facilitated negotiations at the local level. This proved true in Iraq and Kosovo and may provide an opening in Syria.
- Local negotiation and mediation efforts must be led by local actors, not external players, and Syrians should be trained to lead dispute resolution and negotiation.
- A bottom-up approach focusing on local governance structures can yield important progress on stabilization.



## THE SEARING SYRIAN REALITY

Syria's conflict, now in its fourth year, defies description. The war in Syria is distinguished from other conflicts in numerous ways: its complexity, its brutality, the breadth of its humanitarian crisis, and the reverberations of its spillover, with regional and possibly global implications. Syria's grim statistics<sup>1</sup> underscore the scale of human suffering (see Appendix). Children in particular have paid a significant price, with mounting fears of a "lost generation" of Syrian youth (see infographic).

Beyond the devastating humanitarian impacts, three years of conflict have also resulted in significant damage to the country's infrastructure and economy. It is estimated that in three years of conflict, Syria has lost more than 35 years of development gains.<sup>2</sup> It has plummeted from a solidly middle-income country (listed between South Africa and Tajikistan in the 2010 Human Development Index) to one whose development indicators could rival those of Somalia (see Appendix).

The current crisis began as peaceful, nonviolent protests in the broader context of the 2011 Arab Awakening. Met with brutal government repression, the protests morphed into an armed uprising. Over time, the conflict has become a sectarian war with both local and regional dimensions. Fighting in Syria now encompasses several layers: a civil war among Syrians, a proxy battle between key regional powers including Iran and Saudi Arabia, and a global competition between Russia and the West. Moreover, there are battles within battles: armed opposition groups, with vastly different visions for a future Syria, fight each other for territory and influence.

Protracted stalemate stands as the most likely scenario for the Syrian conflict in the short-to-medium term. Foreign fighters are increasingly flowing into Syria, which now surpasses Iraq and Afghanistan as a magnet for jihadists.

High levels of violence likely will persist, deepening the humanitarian crisis and exacerbating regional spillover effects. Unfortunately, Syrian civilians will continue to bear the brunt of the violence. The Syrian conflict is notable for its significant brutality. Throughout, Syrian civilians have been deliberately targeted in increasingly egregious acts that have been deemed war crimes and, in some instances, crimes against humanity.

A fractious panoply of armed groups with differing agendas and external patrons further exacerbates Syria's chaos. Radical groups such as the Islamic State of Iraq and Sham (ISIS) have gained influence in certain parts of the country. As such, a second conflict has erupted, pitting more moderate Islamist groups against jihadist extremists, further entrenching the conflict.

As the conflict deepens, a war economy has developed in Syria. Numerous actors have emerged to exploit profitable opportunities created by the conflict. Private-sector middlemen have stepped into the void created by sanctions on the Syrian government, importing goods through neighboring countries, reselling to the government and earning a commission.<sup>3</sup> Regime cronies in particular are reportedly making substantial profits in the commodities trade via front companies. Smugglers profit from trade in scarce commodities in besieged rebel-held areas. Criminal gangs flourish in the lawlessness, operating smuggling, extortion and racketeering rings. These war profiteers have a vested interest in the perpetuation of the conflict, which is yet another impediment to stabilization. The collapse of the formal economy has contributed to the growth of this informal economy, further encouraging rent-seeking and criminal activities.<sup>4</sup>

Not surprisingly, Syria has become a virtual "no-go" zone for Westerners. While conflict zones are dangerous by nature, the Syrian war poses particularly potent threats to foreign journalists, aid workers and others. The rise of al-Qaida and other extremist groups over the past several months has significantly increased the risks. Deteriorating security inside Syria has led foreign aid organizations to dramatically reduce their foreign staff.<sup>5</sup>



# The Conflict's Impact on Children: A LOST GENERATION

**10,000**

children have been killed

More than 5 million  
children are in need of

Including 1 million  
who are cut off from

**ASSISTANCE**

Due to fighting or blockades

**3 MILLION**

children are internally displaced

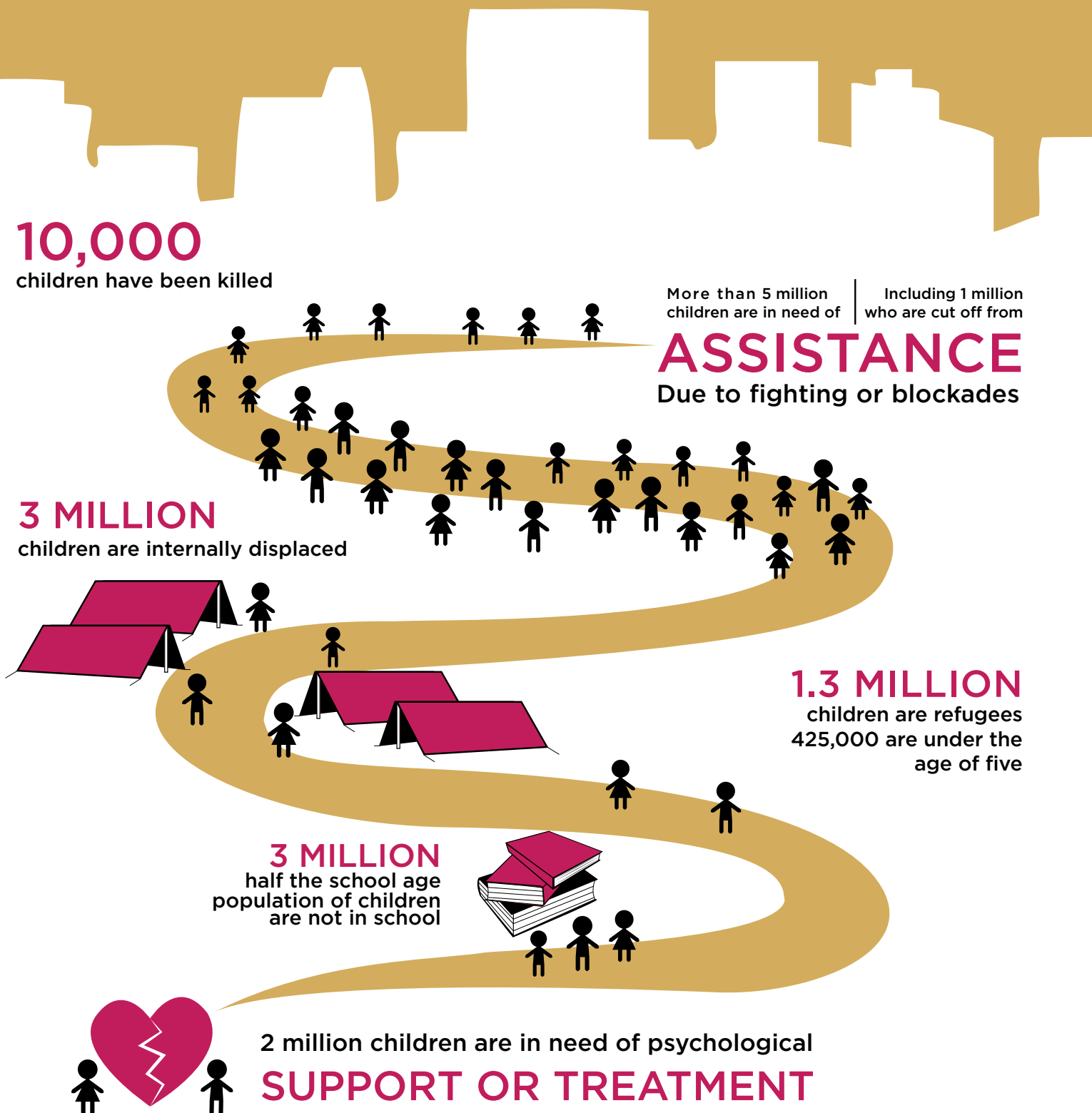
**1.3 MILLION**

children are refugees  
425,000 are under the  
age of five

**3 MILLION**  
half the school age  
population of children  
are not in school

2 million children are in need of psychological

**SUPPORT OR TREATMENT**







## Current Syria Programming

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Current US assistance for stabilization and transition in Syria largely falls into two categories: humanitarian aid and nonlethal transition assistance to the Syrian opposition. Of these efforts, the vast majority of aid is devoted to humanitarian assistance. Since 2012, the United States has contributed more than \$2 billion in humanitarian assistance, making it the largest single donor country. Approximately half of this assistance is provided to organizations working inside Syria, while the remainder is devoted to Syrian refugee communities and aid to host countries.

Nonlethal transition assistance is currently estimated at more than \$260 million and is directed to the moderate Syrian opposition. Programming and support are focused on local opposition councils and civil society organizations (CSOs) inside Syria, while a lesser amount is directed to the externally based Syrian Opposition Coalition. The funds are designated for the provision of basic goods and services to Syrian communities in areas beyond the regime's control, as well as to extend the rule of law and enhance stability in these areas. Support is also provided to activists in regime-held areas to maintain connections to their counterparts in liberated areas and in the diaspora. Assistance includes the provision of equipment such as generators, ambulances and garbage trucks. In addition, programming includes training and equipment to build the capacity of 4,000 grassroots activists from more than 300 local councils and CSOs. Support is also provided to independent media, including assistance to community radio and television stations and the training of citizen journalists, bloggers and cyberactivists.

Some portion of the \$260 million is also used to provide moderate factions of the armed opposition with nonlethal assistance including medical kits, vehicles and meals ready to eat (MREs).





## Understanding the Context

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**For Syria.** Numerous differences distinguish the situation in Syria from previous US experiences with stabilization. Most significantly, unlike Afghanistan, Iraq and the Balkans, Syria does not have a US presence inside the country. This underscores the key challenge of attempting to understand the conflict's complex dynamics, let alone design and implement an effective stabilization strategy remotely.

Second, the Syrian regime remains in power. Indeed, as it consolidates its control over critical areas of the country, genuine transition in Syria may be years away. Instead, stabilization and transition efforts will likely focus on areas of the country beyond the regime's control. However, this strategy poses a crucial dilemma of how to implement effective stabilization programming at the local level when the central government is hostile to those efforts and targets such actions with a military response.

Critical differences in context cannot be ignored, but important insights can nonetheless be distilled from past experiences, particularly the failures and successes of earlier work on stabilization in active conflict zones. Important parallels exist in certain “baskets” of activities, including humanitarian assistance, governance, conflict mediation and economic development, across a broad range of country experiences. Ideally, understanding the successes and failures associated with these various activities can help to inform an effective stabilization strategy for Syria.

**For Stabilization.** Stabilization is a loose concept that encompasses a wide range of activities along a spectrum, from early relief/humanitarian aid to governance and economic development assistance. Activities can vary significantly within different contexts. Moreover, the distinctions marking each category of work are often blurred. Humanitarian relief, security, governance, and development are porous areas that often meld into one another. Yet, despite this potential blurring, humanitarian assistance must remain impartial in order to allow humanitarian actors broad access to civilians in need across conflict zones.

For stabilization to be effective, activities in these various categories often must occur simultaneously rather than sequentially. Security helps local governance councils to work more effectively. Basic needs must be met as part of broader efforts to revive local economies. The lines between security, policing and judicial functions can be fuzzy; all are essential for the establishment of the rule of law. The relief-to-development trajectory is essentially a Venn diagram of overlapping circles rather than a straight line between two points.

By the same token, a variety of actors undertake these various stabilization activities in both the civilian and military realms. While the US military played a significant role in Afghanistan, Iraq and the Balkans, this is not the case for Syria. Indeed, unlike those cases, no external stabilization force is present in Syria. Instead, civilian actors from the State Department, the Agency for International

Development (AID) and numerous nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) will play a leading role in stabilization efforts, although from outside Syria.

Finally, the theory of change underlying stabilization operations remains somewhat uncertain. The relationship between the provision of economic assistance and the promotion of stability, for example, is subject to debate. While some may underscore that economic assistance is critical to achieving stability, others question whether development-assistance-driven stabilization efforts are effective. Those who favor a development-assistance approach note a positive correlation between development and security. However, others point to the potentially corrupting impact of aid and the role that assistance plays in creating winners and losers, thereby fueling competition and instability.



## THE CHALLENGE OF PROTECTING CIVILIANS FROM DELIBERATE VIOLENCE AGAINST CIVILIANS

Both the Syrian regime and rebels have used egregious forms of deliberate violence against civilians. Targeted violence includes acts that intentionally cause physical harm to and/or displacement of civilians, prevent civilians from being able to access essential life-saving services or move voluntarily, or cut off access to humanitarians trying to reach civilians in need.

Armed actors may employ deliberate violence against civilians to achieve a political or ideological objective, to sustain their ability to fight, or as an end in itself as in the case of genocide or ethnic cleansing. These motivations can impede interveners seeking to deter or compel armed actors from targeting civilians. External actors must understand armed actors' means and motivations and tailor strategies that reduce the threat to and the vulnerability of civilians. At the same time, the interveners must seek to anticipate and prevent or mitigate unintended negative consequences that any protection intervention may pose to civilians—or risk the intervention's credibility and legitimacy.

Effective protection efforts require a deep understanding of the conflict's context, difficult to achieve without an on the ground presence. These efforts must also be multifaceted, with political, economic and military components. If the interveners fail to protect, cycles of violence will continue, undermining any progress toward stability.

Stopping threats of violence in the short- and medium-term is not the only challenge. A painful lesson learned in Afghanistan and Iraq is that stabilization does not equate to the protection of civilians in the near-term. Stabilization efforts undermine the status quo of conflict, potentially endangering civilians. Establishing governance requires a recapturing of political power, a monopoly on the use of force, and economic control, all of which counter the interests of armed actors, war economies and shadow governance structures that contributed to or emerged during the conflict. Previous cases demonstrate that those with ingrained interests in the status quo will not give up power quietly.<sup>6</sup>

Assessments and planning should identify whether and how stabilization efforts—e.g., elections, decentralization, infrastructure development, institution-building—might catalyze conflicts and takes steps to prevent and mitigate them.<sup>7</sup>



## Insights from Stabilization Experiences in Afghanistan, Iraq and the Balkans

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The following lessons learned are distilled from working group discussions and separate interviews.

### Lesson 1

**Understanding the underlying conflict dynamics is essential.** Significant conflict and competition characterize transition environments. Conflict mitigation and post-conflict stabilization programming must be anchored in an understanding of these complex dynamics. Local politics cannot be ignored, and the political dimensions of assistance must be explicitly acknowledged. Otherwise, attempts to transform communities at the local level could end up doing more harm than good. Winners and losers are often created by the implementation of humanitarian and development assistance programs. How does the injection of aid affect the existing conflict dynamics? What impact will programming have on local actors?

The Syrian case raises a number of acute and unparalleled challenges with respect to conflict dynamics. These include the Syrian regime's deliberate and targeted violence against civilians, and the growing presence of foreign fighters in areas beyond the regime's control. The targeting of civilians is both a tactic and an objective of many actors in the conflict.

As the conflict in Syria deepens, the violence itself becomes a driving factor. Self-perpetuating elements of conflict, such as cycles of revenge between various communities as well as the embedding of a "war economy" and its attendant vested interests, further complicate stabilization efforts.

The difficulty in understanding the Syrian conflict's complex dynamics is compounded by the dangerous security environment and highly restricted access. Assistance going into Syria is largely cross-border, and the US government's understanding of local politics, key actors and power dynamics is partly mediated by the few local actors who can or will deal with the United States.

**Recommendation: Creative efforts at "mapping" the Syrian conflict could play a key role in better understanding the conflict's dynamics as well as the political economy and effectiveness of US assistance.** Given the absence of a significant US presence inside Syria, technology (including big data and crowdsourcing) should be leveraged to gain greater insights into dynamics on the ground.

A number of Syrian conflict "mapping" exercises are ongoing with varying degrees of sophistication. One initiative, [Mapping Conflict in Aleppo](#), merits mention. Undertaken by Caerus Associates, the study brings together time-series data and local research teams to map the conflict in Aleppo during a four-month period. The report relies on a variety of data sources, including monthly surveys of local residents, to provide important insights into the evolution of conflict in Aleppo and its impact on a variety of measures.<sup>8</sup>



**For Syria, the Caerus effort and other creative mapping exercises should be expanded to other parts of the country.** As it develops, the mapping effort should be continually updated and refined to insure the inclusion of critical details on how the conflict is evolving, as well as the effectiveness of aid. In particular, conflict mapping should be employed to continually monitor shifting local and micro-level power dynamics, providing a more sophisticated understanding of local politics. Mapping efforts should also focus on local economies and how assistance is impacting prices, supply and other indicators of economic activity.

These mapping efforts should feed directly into Syria assistance strategy and program design. In particular, as assistance and planning for Syria progresses, conflict mapping should be employed to help identify whether and how stabilization efforts might be working or whether they may be having the opposite effect — catalyzing conflict rather than mitigating it. Program design and implementation should be an iterative process, with informed feedback loops in place to insure that objectives are being met on the ground and that the realities of the situation on the ground inform strategy.

## Lesson 2

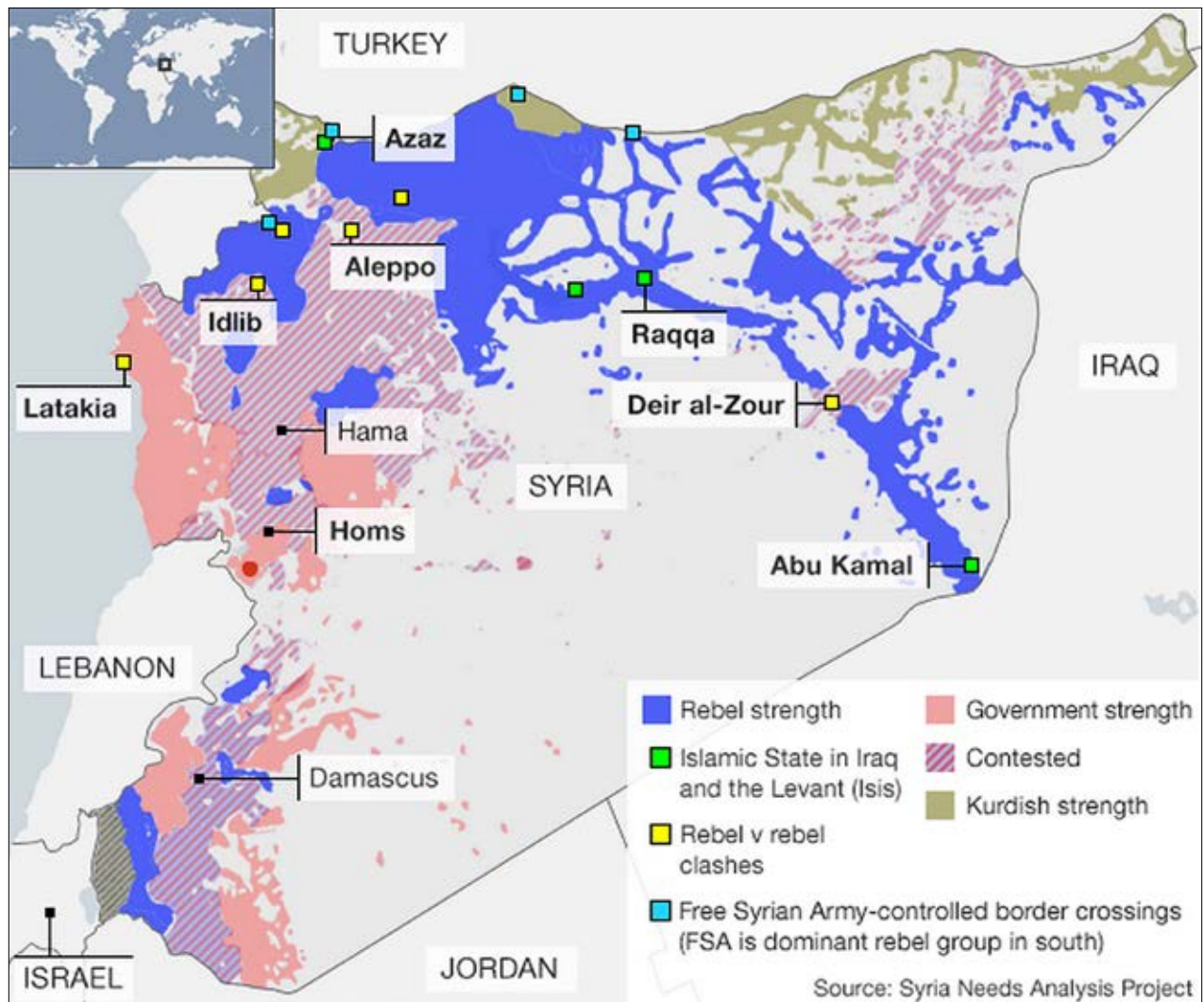
**Stabilization and transition efforts should encompass peace-building, security and development in an integrated model.** Distinctions between various phases of conflict and post-conflict transition are often blurred at best. Indeed, the assumption that a conflict moves from one discrete phase to the next does not reflect the reality that cycles of violence will continue during stabilization efforts and are sometimes catalyzed by them. It is important to design programming that addresses these dimensions *simultaneously*, combining conflict prevention and mitigation, recovery efforts, peace-building and security together with development.

This approach explicitly acknowledges that these elements are mutually reinforcing and must be implemented together in conflict zones, rather than being undertaken sequentially. For example, livelihood assistance and other types of economic development aid are important, but should be accompanied by peace-building activities such as conflict mediation training, as well as measures to instill security. On its own, economic assistance can exacerbate tensions within communities and have a destabilizing impact.

Although the lines are blurred, humanitarian assistance differs from other recovery and development efforts. Stabilization actors should be aware of and sensitive to the mandates, principles and objectives of humanitarian actors. Humanitarian principles dictate that humanitarian actors act independently from any government or party to a conflict and impartially provide assistance based on need. Humanitarian actors adhere to these principles along a spectrum, and many also provide recovery or development aid. It is particularly important to distinguish stabilization efforts from humanitarian assistance, so that humanitarian actors can negotiate access to areas in need regardless of who has control, and can reach those areas safely and provide assistance based on need rather than peace-building or other political and economic objectives.

**Recommendation:** Integrated models are difficult to implement as a result of bureaucratic stovepipes and competition (see Lesson 8). **For Syria, a concerted effort should be made to bring together key elements of the stabilization effort under a single authority.** The State Department's Syria Transition Response Team (START) based in Gaziantep, Turkey, is an important first step. The team is comprised of 25 people

## Syria's Evolving Conflict



Map source: Syria Needs Analysis Project

who oversee and coordinate six different sources of assistance for Syria from State and AID. While START begins to address the difficulties in assistance coordination and implementation, similar efforts to coordinate Washington-based strategy, policy and programming for Syria stabilization should also be undertaken.

**Enhancing the authority of the Special Envoy for Syria to coordinate all US government efforts related to Syria could help insure successful integration and de-confliction across the bureaucracy.** Any complex stabilization effort demands a senior-level policy official with overarching authority who can adjudicate conflicts that will arise among disparate elements of the bureaucracy. This Special Envoy for Syria position would also have an oversight role to insure that stated goals and objectives are met by the numerous agencies engaged in Syria stabilization and transition efforts. Ideally, this senior official would help to build a strategy and approach on the ground that leverages mutually reinforcing stabilization elements and insures against elements that catalyze conflict.

## FACILITATING DIALOGUE IN CONFLICT ZONES

Successful facilitation of dialogue between hostile communities in conflict zones illustrates the potential for peace-building at the local level as part of a broader stabilization effort. Two examples in particular — Mahmoudiya, Iraq (2007), and Kosovo (2000) — merit mention. In both instances, the US Institute of Peace (USIP) helped facilitate dialogue between communities locked in conflict. Both cases underscore the peace-building potential of engaging communities involved in subconflicts. As noted in a USIP study on the topic, “Even though higher-level political and military conflicts are ongoing, it is possible to engage local communities on sub-conflicts that would otherwise complicate the larger peace-building process.”<sup>9</sup>

In Mahmoudiya, on the southern edge of Baghdad, Sunnis and Shiites participated in a facilitated dialogue managed by USIP’s Iraq team, with Iraqi facilitators. Known as the “triangle of death,” Mahmoudiya suffered from acute intercommunal violence. While addressing a series of issues, the facilitators were able to leverage areas of mutual dependence between the two communities into small-scale successes. In this region, the Sunnis controlled the outlying rural area while the Shiites controlled the town and its markets. Sunni farmers were not able to transport their agricultural products to markets as they did not have access. Meanwhile, the markets were empty, deprived of produce from the countryside. In the facilitated dialogue, the two communities were able to get past their intense animosities and negotiate basic issues such as market access, commercial exchanges and security guarantees. The Sunni farmers were then able to transport their goods to the markets with their safety guaranteed, while the Shiite town residents once again could obtain fresh produce.

In Kosovo, the US Army brought in USIP to develop a dialogue between local Serbs and Albanians, who were locked in extreme tensions and hostility at the end of the war. Facilitators identified a number of mutual dependencies between the local Serb and Albanian populations. For example, local farmers had depended on a cooperative for use of large agricultural machinery (such as combines and harvesters). The cooperative had broken up during the conflict, with farm machinery expropriated over a wide area among both Serbs and Albanians. To restart agricultural production, the farmers needed access to the machinery. Underlying their intense hostility, a series of mutual dependencies helped to bring the two communities together. Ultimately, they were able to expand cooperation to several areas, even forming a joint nongovernment organization, the Council for Professionals, which recognized mutual interests among professionals, such as doctors and teachers.<sup>10</sup>



### Lesson 3

Even in situations of intense conflict and intercommunal hostility, mutual dependencies exist that can serve as an entry point for facilitated negotiations at the local level. No matter how deep some animosities reside, it is often possible to find areas of shared interest at the local level, often regarding very basic issues. Dialogue and negotiation training can assist in bringing divided communities together around shared interests. This type of facilitated negotiation cannot resolve the larger, core conflict, but can create a pragmatic space for resolving local, small-scale disputes.

Instances of facilitated intercommunal dialogue in Kosovo and Iraq illustrate this potential. In both examples, mutual dependencies created an opportunity for bounded problem-solving between two communities enmeshed in intense hostility. By drilling down to find where deeper mutual dependencies exist, engaging in negotiations can bring about small-scale successes that could build toward a larger peace. Moreover, if local and sublocal conflicts are ignored, they may bubble up and negatively impact the larger core conflict.

As a corollary, subconflict domains may be a more fruitful area for engaging in stabilization and transition activities. These types of conflicts may be more tractable and therefore lend themselves to more modest interventions that could serve as important entry points for more sustained and broader stabilization. However, agreements that emerge from subconflict negotiations may be more difficult to codify or institutionalize. They may also be more difficult to sustain in the absence of formal enforcement mechanisms.

**Recommendation:** For Syria, this lesson and its corollary suggest numerous potential opportunities for peace-building and stabilization efforts by focusing on local disputes at the subconflict level, rather than the larger conflict. Syria's diverse, patchwork composition marked by a heterogeneous population where villages of different sects live side by side has likely propelled the conflict. As such, the Syrian conflict is in reality comprised of multiple local and micro-level conflicts that are continually shifting and evolving. While this array of subconflicts underscores Syria's complexity, it also could provide a number of entry points for stabilization at the local level by focusing on mediating local disputes.

Mutual dependencies, often relating to resources and basic needs, have been noted in various communal spheres. For example, in Idlib province rebels control many of the wheat fields but not the mills to grind the flour. The government controls the flour mills but does not have access to wheat. In a deal worked out between the two sides, wheat is milled into flour that is distributed to both sides.<sup>11</sup>

Mutual dependencies, particularly if identified among civilian as well as armed actors, could provide an important pathway toward building more lasting civil peace. Using conflict mapping techniques and in close consultation with local actors and international NGOs on the ground, US stabilization efforts should identify mutual dependencies between local adversaries. Areas of mutual dependence, likely over resources and basic needs, could then serve as entry points for local-level stabilization efforts.

In a similar vein, increasing emphasis has been placed on brokering local cease-fires. The record of these local truces is decidedly mixed. In many instances, the Syrian government has exploited the desperation of rebel-held areas resulting from government tactics of withholding food and humanitarian assistance. Dubbed a "starvation and submission" strategy, such cease-fires are part of a broader government campaign to reassert control

over rebel areas, and sometimes are followed by a resumption of military tactics. In other instances, however, more genuine moves toward peace are embodied in local truces. A March 2014 study, “Enabling Homegrown Peace in Syria,” by Madani, a Syria-focused NGO, noted that positive results have emerged from some locally negotiated cease-fires.<sup>12</sup>

**A detailed study of local cease-fires could offer further insights into the effectiveness and sustainability of these local efforts.** In particular, this study should seek to understand the dynamics propelling local cease-fires, and whether they are contributing to more sustained stabilization efforts. Moreover, in instances where local cease-fires are proving effective, the study could explore whether these efforts are replicable more broadly.

#### Lesson 4

**To be successful, local negotiation and mediation efforts must be led by local actors, not external players.** Identifying, recruiting and training appropriate people, who represent a broad spectrum in local communities is extremely difficult but essential. In the Iraq example of facilitated negotiation in Mahmoudiya in 2007, Iraqis took the lead in the actual negotiations between Shiite and Sunni elements.<sup>13</sup> Outside actors played a facilitating role behind the scenes, but not in the forefront. Increasingly, regional actors are playing important roles in helping to facilitate dialogue. For example, Mercy Corps has trained Iraqis to help facilitate dialogue between Syrian refugee and Jordanian host populations in northern Jordan.

**Recommendation: Efforts should focus on training Syrians to facilitate local-level dispute resolution and negotiation.** Local buy-in and engagement in negotiation and dispute mediation is critical, but also requires appropriate training. The Madani report underscores the importance of training local mediators who would benefit from independent outside support given the danger of such work. As the report notes, “For local negotiation and mediation efforts to be successful and sustainable, they must be initiated and led by local actors, but these actors need support and advice from independent experienced mediators.”

Focusing on subconflict domains (see Lesson 3) and training Syrians to serve as local mediators could serve as an important foundation for a successful stabilization effort. However, these activities are inherently political and sensitive in terms of external involvement. A deep understanding of subconflict dynamics is critical to their successful implementation. In particular, the political dimensions of identifying subconflicts and training local actors as mediators must be explicitly acknowledged and understood. Ideally, this will help to ensure that these types of interventions mitigate conflict rather than potentially deepen it.

#### Lesson 5

**A bottom-up approach focusing on local governance structures — particularly if projects are small-scale and have local buy-in — can yield important progress on stabilization.** In fragile and conflicted societies, grooming legitimacy from the bottom up is essential. As such, it is worth exploring the potential role that local governance structures can play as an anchor for stabilization. Over the long term, vertical integration into larger regional and ultimately national government structures will be necessary for stabilization efforts to be sustainable. As such, support for activists and civil society organizations in regime-controlled areas is also important to avoid deeper atomization of the country and ultimately provide a foundation for broader integration of these efforts across the country.

During the uprising, an impressive array of spontaneously formed local governance structures emerged in Syria. In many areas beyond the regime's control, these local councils developed as part of the broader emergence of local organizations supporting the uprising. These municipal-level organizations provided basic services, such as garbage collection, electricity and health services, in the absence of a government presence. However, as the violence intensified and armed groups gained power, many of the civilian-led local councils were overtaken by armed groups who rule by force of arms and a greater command of resources. Elsewhere, civilian councils have managed to survive despite enormous obstacles. Nevertheless, they are often threatened by both regime and extremist forces.

**Recommendation:** Given the Syrian government's staunch opposition to transition efforts, a bottom-up approach focusing primarily on local governance structures is perhaps the only option in the short term. Identifying civilian councils to support will require a deep and evolving understanding of the conflict's dynamics and actors. Moreover, policymakers will need to be wary of the pitfalls of "picking winners," and the potentially corrupting impact of assistance on local actors. Yet focusing on Syrian grassroots efforts to establish local civilian governance structures still offers the greatest hope for a bottom-up stabilization strategy. Ideally, knitting these efforts together across Syria and fostering ties among grassroots activists in both opposition and regime controlled areas should stand as a key follow-on priority. Beyond this horizontal integration, eventually, vertical integration into national level governance structures will be critical to any successful transition.

## Lesson 6

**Stabilization programming should be nimble and demand driven, encompassing needs identified by local actors on the ground.** Local ownership should serve as a guiding principle for stabilization efforts. Local actors should be vested in programming that responds directly to their identified needs. Dialogue with and among a wide spectrum of local actors should play an important role in identifying stabilization needs and priorities.

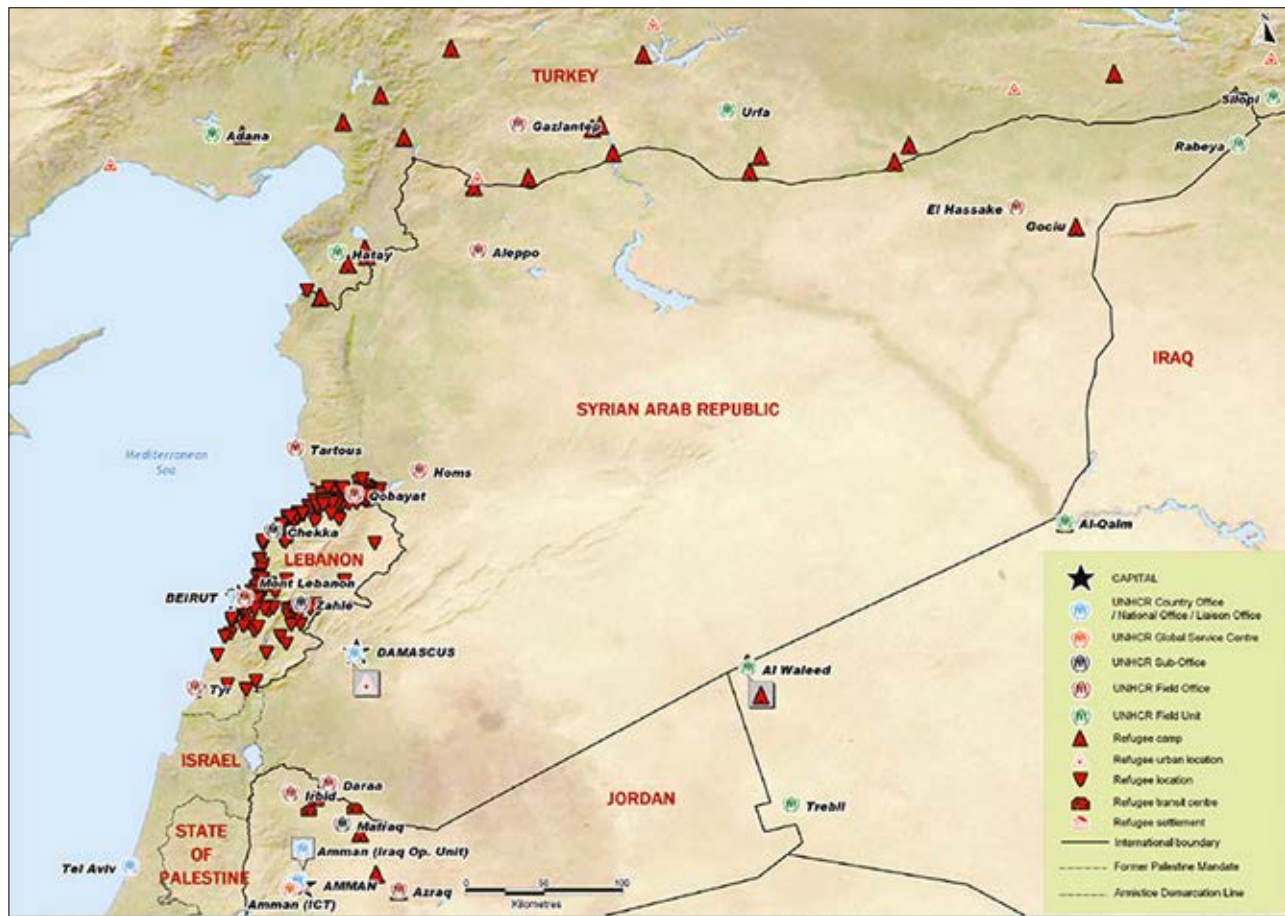
**Recommendation:** US stabilization and transition programming for Syria should reflect needs and priorities as expressed by local Syrian actors on the ground. This demand-driven programming should emerge from dialogue with a wide range of Syrian counterparts that form a web of local networks. Ultimately, these networks can play a key role in the recruitment and vetting of local stabilization actors. The design and implementation of Syria stabilization programming should reflect the distinct needs of this broad, Syria-based network of stabilization actors, rather than the "off-the-shelf" generic projects often implemented by contractors who lack Syria-specific experience. In addition, while US government-mandated vetting must occur, it is still incumbent for US stabilization efforts to reach beyond the "usual suspects" and engage with a wide range of actors, including those with whom the US government may not share the same perspective. In the same vein, it will be important to bring vetted armed actors into the process, vesting them with a stake in successful stabilization efforts.

## Lesson 7

**A fundamentally different approach encompassing both the immediate and longer post-conflict phase is needed for the provision of assistance to high-risk and transition states. This approach should engage nontraditional actors, including refugee communities and youth.** The Syrian conflict in particular is notable for its large refugee flows and



## UN Syrian Refugee Operations in 2014



Source: United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)

its devastating impact on Syrian youth, with mounting concerns about a “lost generation” of Syrian children. Yet both communities can make valuable contributions to peace-building and stabilization, and ignoring them may further protract conflict.

In the case of refugees, hostilities between them and host communities can expand conflict, adding another complicating layer to resolution. Young people in refugee camps can also act as future spoilers, particularly if they are drawn to militancy.

Furthermore, many refugees will not return to Syria. Diaspora communities have proven to have an effect on home nations as drivers of conflict, inciters of deliberate violence against civilians, and spoilers in peace negotiations. South Sudan is but the latest example for which diaspora communities, in Canada and elsewhere, use hate speech to help drive ethnic and political violence. The diaspora has also played a spoiler role during many attempts to stabilize Somalia.

**Recommendation: Peace-building and conflict mitigation programming should be directed at the Syrian refugee population, with appropriate changes in bureaucratic authorities to allow for this non-traditional work.** Bearing in mind concerns about politicizing refugee populations, the Syrian refugee population can play an important role given its size and significant cross-border flow in both directions. Providing mediation

and dispute-resolution training to refugees can mitigate conflict with host populations, and this type of training is also a transferable skill for post-conflict Syria. Moreover, as many Syrian refugees may not return to Syria for years, or ever, some aspect of peace-building programming should be directed at this segment of the refugee population to insure the least disruptive long-term integration into host countries. Currently, bureaucratic mandates inhibit the implementation of this type of work among refugee populations. Greater flexibility on mandates should be accorded to relevant offices at State and AID to allow for this type of programming with refugee populations.

## Lesson 8

**Washington-based obstacles must also be addressed.** Numerous failings in stabilization trace their origins to the Washington-based bureaucracy. In particular, a number of US government-focused obstacles undermine stabilization/transition efforts. These include:

- **Institutional barriers and “silos” among various US government agencies, as well as bureaucratic competition, preclude interagency cooperation** and at times lead to redundancies. Creating an interagency office for Syria stabilization can foster synergistic cooperation, help to eliminate redundancy and diminish bureaucratic competition.
- **Quantitative measures of program effectiveness often do not adequately capture the success or failure** of a program. More creative metrics that capture non-quantifiable benefits and more nuanced measures of success must be developed.
- **Bureaucratic incentives can be poorly structured**, with an emphasis on “burn rates” without proper consideration of absorptive capacity. Much greater consideration must be taken with respect to the capacities to absorb stabilization assistance. A determined effort must be made to avoid allowing bureaucratic imperatives to overshadow realities on the ground.
- **Large-scale projects in fragile states can be a recipe for failure.** In both Iraq and Afghanistan, big-budget projects have been linked to problems with accountability, waste and corruption. Moreover, large infusions of capital in volatile environments can negatively alter power dynamics, prolonging rather than mitigating conflict. Often, these regions also lack the capacity to effectively implement large-scale projects. Instead, smaller, even microscale projects are recommended. Micro-grants, while more difficult to administer, can serve as effective, more flexible instruments for implementing small-scale projects.
- **An overreliance on contractors**, who have a built-in incentive to remain needed, can result in project design and implementation that often undermines the goal of capacity-building. Reviewing the role of contractors and specifically assessing their presence’s impact on capacity-building should be integrated into stabilization planning and integration. Program developers might consider limiting the role and duration of contractor involvement and their speedier replacement with qualified local actors.
- **A significant disconnect exists between high-level decision-makers and on-the-ground engagement**, hindering effectiveness. A continual feedback loop needs to be established among the strategic, programmatic and activity levels of programming. Learning needs to occur in all directions, with grassroots activities informing programmatic decisions and strategy, and vice versa.







## Conclusion

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Stabilization in Syria will pose a critical challenge to US policy makers for many years to come. The conflict continues to grind on, with little indication that it will end soon. In many ways, the Syrian crisis is emblematic of 21st century conflicts. It is highly atomized and diffuse, marked by a proliferation of actors and rapidly shifting dynamics. Changes on the ground occur at a breathtaking pace, often forcing US analysts and policy makers to play catch-up. Information is controlled at the micro level, often propelled by the vigorous use of social media.

At the same time, the Syrian conflict is almost primal in many respects. Its savage brutality, wanton disregard for international legal norms and senseless violence — including the deliberate targeting of innocent civilians — seem medieval. The extent of human suffering and desperation, including families forced to subsist on grass and leaves, conjures wars of long ago. Moreover, its levels of danger have rendered the conflict increasingly remote to outside media and humanitarian organizations.

Lessons learned from previous stabilization experiences, while differing somewhat in context, can provide useful insights to US policymakers as they contend with the challenges of stabilization in Syria. In particular, successes and failures in stabilization efforts undertaken in Afghanistan, Iraq and the Balkans offer valuable lessons that can help inform a more successful strategy for stabilization in Syria. These lessons, gleaned from experiences on the ground and in Washington, could form the core of a new stabilization strategy not only for Syria, but also for other emerging 21st century conflicts.

## Endnotes

1. Compiled from the United Nations and various nongovernmental organization reports.
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3. Fielding, Abigail. "Profiteers Become Another Obstacle to Peace in Syria." *Financial Times*. December 1, 2013.
4. United Nations Relief and Works Agency. "Syria: War on Development: Socioeconomic Monitoring Report of Syria." Syrian Center for Policy Research. October 2013. [http://scpr-syria.org/att/1382759391\\_c6yBX.pdf](http://scpr-syria.org/att/1382759391_c6yBX.pdf).
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6. World Bank, *World Development Report 2011*, Chapter 3, "From violence to resilience: Restoring confidence and transforming institutions," available at [http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTWDRS/Resources/WDR2011\\_Chapter3.pdf](http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTWDRS/Resources/WDR2011_Chapter3.pdf).
7. Contributed by Alison Giffen, Senior Associate, Future of Peace Operations, Stimson.
8. The full report is available at [https://s3.amazonaws.com/fmg\\_static/aleppo/Caerus\\_AleppoMappingProject\\_FinalReport\\_02-13-14.pdf](https://s3.amazonaws.com/fmg_static/aleppo/Caerus_AleppoMappingProject_FinalReport_02-13-14.pdf).
9. Smock and Serwer, *Facilitating Dialogue*, 169.
10. This box was informed by a February 6, 2014, presentation by Daniel Serwer to the joint Stimson-USIP Working Group on Lessons Learned for Syrian Stabilization, and by: Smock, David R., and Daniel Serwer, eds. *Facilitating Dialogue: USIP's Work in Conflict Zones*. Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2012. (Notably, Chapter 1, "Iraq: Peace Initiative in the Triangle of Death," by Rusty Barber, 9-29, and Chapter 3, "Kosovo: Promoting Ethnic Coexistence," by Daniel Serwer and George Ward, 45-66.)
11. Oliver Holmes and Alexander Dziadosz. "Syria's Warring Sides Trade Wheat for Flour." *Reuters*. June 20, 2013.
12. Madani. "Enabling Homegrown Peace in Syria." Madani. March 11, 2014. <http://madan-isyrria.com/?q=node/24>.
13. In addition to a presentation by working group member Daniel Serwer, this experience is chronicled by Rusty Barber in "Iraq: Peace Initiative in the Triangle of Death." *Facilitating Dialogue: USIP's Work in Conflict Zones*. Edited by David R. Smock and Daniel Serwer. Washington DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2012.

## Appendix

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### Syria Conflict Statistics (as of March 2014)

#### 1. Overall Conflict Statistics

- More than 150,000 killed
- More than 9 million Syrians displaced (40 percent of the population), including 6.5 million internally displaced
- 2.5 million of those displaced are refugees, expected to reach 4 million by year's end
- 9.3 million Syrians are in need of humanitarian assistance
- 200,000 Syrians live in besieged areas without access to aid
- 3.5 million Syrians live in difficult-to-reach areas

#### 2. The Conflict's Impact on Children

- At least 10,000 children killed
- 1.3 million children are refugees, with 425,000 under age 5
- 3 million children are internally displaced
- More than 5 million children are in need of assistance, including 1 million who are cut off from assistance as a result of fighting or blockades
- 3 million children, half the school-age population, are not in school
- 2 million children are in need of psychological support or treatment

#### 3. Development and Infrastructure Costs

- 1.5 million homes, a quarter of the housing stock, destroyed
- 60 percent of hospitals destroyed or damaged
- More than 4,000 schools destroyed
- 40 percent of the Syrian economy's productive assets destroyed
- The economy has lost 45 percent of GDP—comparable to post World War II Germany



## Map of Syria



Source: United Nations



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