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### Let's Get Serious: A Multilateral Approach to Syrian Reconstruction

When the world hears about a conflict, attention is often focused on the violence itself. We focus on the battles, figures, and humanitarian disasters dominating headlines. However, far less attention is given to what happens after the fighting slows. What does life look like for civilians attempting to return home after years of war? How does a country begin rebuilding infrastructure and public trust after the collapse of government? Modern history demonstrates that reconstruction efforts can either stabilize nations or deepen instability depending on how the international community responds. Following World War II, West Germany experienced the “Wirtschaftswunder,” or economic miracle, fueled in part by coordinated international investment and long-term planning. In contrast, reconstruction efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan struggled under prolonged military occupation and inconsistent international cooperation. These examples reveal that successful rebuilding depends not only on ending conflict, but also on creating stable institutions and international legitimacy.

Now consider Syria. The country stands at a similarly critical turning point following the collapse of Bashar al-Assad’s regime in late 2024. After more than a decade of civil war, Syria faces widespread destruction, political instability, and an uncertain future. However, this transitional moment also presents an opportunity for the United States and the international community to support long-term stabilization before another cycle of conflict emerges. Rather than pursuing unilateral military intervention or complete disengagement, the United States should adopt a multilateral, soft-power-based reconstruction strategy in Syria through cooperation with international organizations, regional allies, and humanitarian agencies. By

investing in reconstruction rather than military occupation, the United States can help reduce regional instability, limit extremist resurgence, counter Russian and Iranian influence, and promote long-term security interests for both Syria and the broader international community.

The Syrian conflict began in 2011 during the wave of Arab Spring uprisings spreading throughout the Middle East. Inspired by pro-democracy protests across the region, Syrians organized largely peaceful demonstrations in response to unemployment, corruption, and the lack of political freedoms under Assad's government ("Syria Conflict Explained"). Rather than responding with reform, the Assad regime used violent repression against protesters, escalating tensions into a full-scale civil war. Over time, the conflict fractured into a complicated network of competing groups and foreign interests. Organizations including the Free Syrian Army, Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), Hezbollah, and Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) all became involved in the fighting, often battling both the Syrian government and one another ("Syria Conflict Explained"). Foreign governments also deepened the conflict. Russia and Iran backed Assad's regime militarily and financially, while Turkey, Gulf Arab states, and several Western countries supported various opposition factions. Because of these competing interests, the war developed without clear frontlines or unified leadership, making peace negotiations extremely difficult.

Multiple international attempts to resolve the conflict ultimately failed. Initial peace talks began in 2012 and proposed a political transition period, but disagreements over Assad's role prevented meaningful progress. Later negotiations in 2016 temporarily established de-escalation zones, though fighting quickly resumed. Russia-sponsored peace talks in 2018 were also unsuccessful after opposition groups refused participation without guarantees of Assad's removal ("Syria Conflict Explained"). Although a ceasefire in 2020 reduced the intensity of the war,

tensions reignited in late 2024 following broader instability connected to conflicts in Gaza and Lebanon. In December 2024, Assad's government officially collapsed during a major offensive led by HTS forces, forcing Assad to flee to Russia ("Syria Conflict Explained"). Despite the regime's fall, violence has continued between remaining factions, including clashes between the Syrian government and Kurdish-led SDF forces in early 2026. Syria therefore remains politically fractured with no fully established path toward peace.

The human consequences of the conflict have been devastating. According to UNHCR, more than half of Syria's prewar population has been displaced since the conflict began ("Syria Refugee Crisis Explained"). Millions of refugees remain scattered across neighboring countries including Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, and Egypt. Even after Assad's fall, many Syrians remain hesitant to return because of damaged infrastructure, economic collapse, and ongoing violence. However, recent trends suggest that the post-Assad transition has created cautious optimism among displaced populations. The International Organization for Migration estimated that approximately 1.07 million Syrians returned to the country between December 2024 and December 2025 ("Historic Return of Displaced Syrians"). Most returned to their original communities, signaling a desire among Syrians to rebuild their lives if stability can be maintained. At the same time, millions remain abroad, demonstrating that reconstruction efforts remain fragile and incomplete.

Syria's challenges extend far beyond physical destruction. Environmental damage has also intensified the country's instability. Roba Gaafar explains that the conflict severely damaged water systems, agricultural land, and energy infrastructure while increasing pollution and resource scarcity throughout Syria. These environmental consequences further threaten public health and long-term economic recovery (Gaafar). As a result, rebuilding Syria cannot simply

involve reconstructing buildings. It must also include restoring institutions and public services that protect and promote environmental stability and economic security.

The failures of reconstruction efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan provide important lessons for how the United States should approach Syria. In both conflicts, the United States relied heavily on unilateral military intervention and attempted to stabilize governments through prolonged occupation. While these efforts removed hostile regimes, they often failed to establish lasting political legitimacy or stable institutions, showing that that regime change and victory in war do not necessarily lead to the establishment of stable and prosperous democracies. In Afghanistan especially, the rapid collapse of the U.S.-backed government following American withdrawal demonstrated the dangers of building systems too dependent on outside military power.

By contrast, successful reconstruction efforts typically rely on long-term international cooperation and locally supported governance. Following World War II, West Germany benefited from coordinated economic investment through the Marshall Plan, institutional rebuilding, and multilateral cooperation among Western allies. Rather than relying exclusively on military force, reconstruction focused on economic stability and democratic development (Knowles). Syria presents an opportunity to apply similar lessons in a modern context. Instead of pursuing another large-scale military intervention, the United States should support a multilateral reconstruction strategy centered on diplomacy, humanitarian aid, and economic recovery.

This policy platform would therefore be rooted in multilateralism and indirect intervention through soft power. Multilateralism allows the United States to share responsibility with organizations such as the United Nations, NATO allies, regional governments, and humanitarian organizations already operating within Syria. This approach would avoid the

perception of American occupation while increasing international legitimacy and cooperation. Soft-power intervention would emphasize humanitarian assistance and diplomatic engagement rather than large-scale military deployments.

A successful reconstruction strategy should involve several key components. First, the United States should coordinate with international organizations to expand humanitarian aid and rebuild essential infrastructure such as hospitals, schools, transportation systems, and water networks. According to ODI Global, resilient recovery in Syria requires rebuilding communities in ways that strengthen long-term economic and social stability rather than simply replacing damaged infrastructure (“Beyond Bricks and Mortar”). Second, the United States should support locally-led governance and civil institutions capable of maintaining legitimacy among Syrian communities. This would reduce the likelihood of another authoritarian power vacuum emerging after Assad’s collapse.

Third, the United States should work with European and regional allies, specifically Turkey, Egypt, and Lebanon, to encourage refugee reintegration and economic recovery. Julian Barnes-Dacey argues that Syria’s future will depend heavily on whether the international community supports political stabilization and economic reconstruction during this transitional period (European Council on Foreign Relations). Helping refugees safely return home would reduce humanitarian strain across neighboring countries while strengthening Syria’s labor force and economy. Finally, the United States should maintain limited counterterrorism cooperation aimed at preventing extremist groups from exploiting instability, while avoiding the mistakes of prolonged military occupation.

Supporting Syrian reconstruction would also benefit the United States strategically. A stable Syria would reduce opportunities for extremist organizations to regain influence in the

region. Reconstruction efforts could also limit the influence of Russia and Iran, both of which expanded their regional power during the Syrian civil war. Additionally, promoting stability in Syria would help reduce refugee crises affecting U.S. allies throughout Europe and the Middle East. Compared to direct military intervention, multilateral reconstruction efforts would likely prove less costly while producing more sustainable long-term results. By prioritizing diplomacy and international cooperation, the United States could strengthen its global credibility after the failures of Iraq and Afghanistan.

Ultimately, Syria's future will depend not only on the end of conflict, but also on what comes afterward. History demonstrates that reconstruction efforts shape whether postwar societies achieve lasting peace or return to instability. Following Assad's collapse, Syria now faces a narrow but important opportunity for recovery. If the United States chooses complete disengagement, Syria risks falling deeper into political extremism and humanitarian crisis. However, through a multilateral strategy focused on reconstruction and soft-power engagement, the United States and its allies can help Syria rebuild while promoting broader regional stability. Successful foreign policy should not simply focus on winning wars; it must also focus on building sustainable peace.

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