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UN PEACEKEEPER: Interview regarding the financing of war within the geopolitical region of Syria

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The process of financing war begins with militarization and armament, proceeds into armed conflict scenarios, and continues beyond into post-conflict resolution. Exchanges are between actors, such as: the military, civilian and economic actors, humanitarians or international organizations. The Syrian Civil War began in 2011 and is on-going¹, with modest hopes for de-escalation in the near future.² Regional and international proxies have inarguably increased the length of the war through their financing of various conflict actors.³ Though many aspects of the geopolitical dynamic may be understood through research, first-hand knowledge from people living within the war zone is essential in the analytical process of differentiating theory, praxis, propaganda, bias, and need as various humanitarian, political, and social responses are engaged now and in the future. Specifically, Maher Melhem, a UN peacekeeper from Lebanon, who has worked directly within Syrian and Lebanon before and during the war as a humanitarian, academic, and journalist, has shared his experiences regarding the economy of conflict within Syria and the surrounding region, as the war has progressed. To analyze, questions were formulated for the interview regarding the economic situation before the war, during the war, and what will be needed during de-escalation. Throughout the chronology of conflict, combat, shadow and coping economies are all addressed. Additionally, the influence of terrorism and the challenges of bringing the state back into authority are topics that are both engaged. Finally, the interview presented on-going

¹ Associated Press. 2018. *A Timeline of the Syrian Conflict as it Enters its Eighth Year*. The Associated Press, [online] 6 Jan 2019. Available at: <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-03-15/timeline-of-the-syrian-conflict-as-it-enters-8th-year>

² Press TV. 2018. *Syria open to any initiative making way for resolution of country's crisis: Ja'fari*. Press TV, [online] 6 Jan 2019. Available at: <https://www.presstv.com/Detail/2018/12/20/583506/Syria-UN-Security-Council-De-Mistura>

³ Shapiro, Jeremy and Iria R. Estrin. 2014. *The Proxy War Problem in Syria*. Brookings Institute, [online] 6 Jan 2019. Available at: <https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/the-proxy-war-problem-in-syria/>

thoughts and concerns regarding propaganda, ethics, and implicit biases that must be vigilantly addressed throughout all work.

Wartime economies may be categorized into three types: combat, shadow, and coping.⁴ Combat economy is defined by both regional and international geopolitical processes. Shadow economies are entrepreneurial opportunities that arise from conflict scenarios, and coping economies are the subsistent opportunities that present themselves to the general population. Political corruption and favoritism existed in Syrian for decades before the current conflict.⁵ According to Melhem, the economic transition from state socialism to a social market economy that occurred under Bashar al-Assad between 2000 and 2011, helped to cement his presidency. But, privatization of projects, favoritism, and corruption increased under his leadership.⁶ The expanding equity divide between those who have power, those who have access to those who have power, urban people and the more rural regions of the country laid the foundation for revolution, and have also extended the length of the crisis. Melhem states that the combat economy started years before the initial conflict through the importation of weapons by the corrupt, new-rich who had been privileged by Bashar al-Assad. (Q1)

Melhem expands upon the international and regional combat economy by expelling that even through the US and EU implemented vacations against the importation of basic goods, the Syrian government somehow been able to supply and subsidize such products as flour, gas and fuel. (Q3) Additionally, even though the country has been war torn, the Syrian pound has stayed at a specific value level.⁷ Melhem explains that due to expensive living conditions in Lebanon, many of the Syrian refugees are incentivized to return to Syria. He states that “a resident has to pay an average of \$1 a day for pita break, meanwhile in Syria the bread cost will be \$0.1.” (Q3) Education and transportation is also expensive, making those who are living with a minimum income want to return to their origin. Even though the US has stated that it intends

⁴ Goodall, Jonathan. 2004. “From War Economy to Peace Economy? Reconstruction and State Building in Afghanistan.” *Journal of International Affairs*, [online] 6 Jan 2019. Available at: http://faculty.nps.edu/relooney/Afghanistan_2.pdf

⁵ Al-Sheikh, Abdulkraher, Abdullah Hamadah. *Corruption in Syria: Causes, Effects, and Anti-Corruption*. Syrian Economic Forum, [online] 6 Jan 2019. Available at: https://www.syrianef.org/assets/estimate_position/english/Corruption-in-Syria.pdf

⁶ Simpson, Paul. 2018. *No end in sight for corruption in Syria*. Supply Management, [online] 6 Jan 2019. Available at: <https://www.cips.org/en/supply-management/analysis/2018/august/no-end-in-sight-for-corruption-in-syria/>

⁷ Currencies.Zone. 2019. *Chart Syrian Pound*. Currencies.Zone, [online] 6 Jan 2019. Available at: <https://currencies.zone/chart/syrian-pound/us-dollar>

to withdraw physically from the region,⁸ it must also stop selling weapons to actors if it intends to assist with de-escalation.⁹ This is an excellent example of how a country may symbolically disengage, but still be playing a central role within the combat economy.

Conflict traders, or entrepreneurs who have created business opportunities from war, are found throughout Syria.¹⁰ A specific example that Melham provides are the refugee smugglers.¹¹ The Lebanese government recognizes refugees as Displaced Persons so that they are not responsible for social integration and push for a return to Syria. To achieve this goal, Lebanon set up check points, rules, and regulations for all Syrian refugees entering the state. Conflict traders smuggle people, fuel, products, and weapons across borders. Syrians cross into Lebanon, and either stay there, or travel to Turkey, Greece, or onwards to Europe in boats. Melham adds that in his experience assisting refugees, multiple acts of Gender Based Violence along the borders perpetrated by traders and rebel groups have been reported. (Q2) Coping economic survival still provides frequent opportunities for violent actions within refugee camps and the region. (Q3) While these actions are secondary to violence of conflict, they reflect the absence of law and order, and the stabilizing effects of the state. The equity gap between privileged elite, those who live in the city, those who have benefited from the shadow economy and the masses is continuing to increase. Frequently, those who take advantage of lawlessness are rewarded by profit, while those who subsist on the least are rewarded with more suffering.

Currently, it appears that Syria will be more-or-less united under the continued leadership of President Bashar al-Assad.¹² One of al-Assad's chief challenges will be how to bring the state back into authority. Both al-Assad and ISIS committed horrible acts against

⁸ Landler, Helen Cooper, and Eric Schmitt. 2018. "Trump withdraws U.S. forces from Syria declaring 'We have won against ISIS.'" NYTimes, [online] 6 Jan 2019. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/19/us/politics/trump-syria-turkey-troop-withdrawal.html>

⁹ SIPRI. 2019. *SIPRI Arms Transfers*. Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, [online] 6 Jan 2019. Available at: <https://www.sipri.org/databases/armstransfers>

¹⁰ Samaha, Nour. 2016. "The black market kings of Damascus." The Atlantic, [online] 6 Jan 2016. Available at: <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2016/10/syria-war-economy-damascus-assad/502304/>

¹¹ Kingsley, Patrick, 2017. "Syrians in Turkey: The human smuggler and the young refugee." NYTimes, [online] 6 Jan 2019. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/24/world/europe/turkey-human-trafficking-refugee-crisis.html>

¹² Phillips, Christopher. 2018. "The world abetted Assad's victory in Syria." The Atlantic, [online] 6 Jan 2019. Available at: <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/08/assad-victory-syria/566522/>

human rights.¹³ However, Melham explains that even though ISIS has been shown to have the ability to administer a community,¹⁴ it was never considered during the stabilization deal in Syria. Regardless, of its ambitions to establish a caliphate, it could not shift its position as a terrorist group to negotiator. However, while al-Assad lost standing within his country and the region, he maintained international standing by attending regular UN meetings, having support from Russia and China (permanent UNSC members), as well as India, Brazil and South Africa. In short, the ethical argument fails when powerful countries have economic ambitions that are in alignment with your own. (Q5) Internally, al-Assad's Law 10, enacted in April 2018, "stipulates that a property owner [or family representative] has one year to provide proof of ownership after receiving notification that their property is in an area slated for 'reconstruction.'"¹⁵ Some argue that this law is being used to counterfeit documents and reattribute property to new demographics within Syria, while others respond that this is al-Assad combating lawlessness and implementing natural order. Melham clarifies that while both of these positions should be considered, the UNHCR does not anticipate Law 10 creating any problems for refugees who wish to return and claim their property. (Q6)

Melham asserts that the reconstruction process of Syria is a responsibility held, not just by Syria, but by all the regional and international proxies that contributed to its destruction. (Q9) The OCHA report details that 64%, or 2.14 billion dollars, of humanitarian requirements were met—which, when compared to other countries is remarkable. Even though they opposed the Syrian regime, US contributed 600 million dollars to humanitarian aid in 2018, along with EU members and Japan.¹⁶ As of November 2018, 100k IDP voluntarily returned home to regions that had two years prior been out of government control.¹⁷ While the Syrian government has, and will continue, to have access to all humanitarian aid money entering the

¹³ Human Rights Watch, 2017. *Syria: Events of 2017*. Human Rights Watch, [online] 6 Jan 2019. Available at: <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2018/country-chapters/syria>

¹⁴ Robinson, Eric, Daniel Egel, Patrick B. Johnston, Sean Mann, Alexander D. Rothenberg, David Stebbins. 2017. *When the Islamic State Comes to Town*. Rand Corporation, [online] 2 Jan 2019. Available at: www.rand.org/t/RR1970

¹⁵ Ahmad, Ibrahim Abu. 2018. *Assad's Law 10: Reshaping Syria's Demographics*. The Washington Institute, [online] 2 Jan 2019. <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/assads-law-10-reshaping-syrias-demographics>

¹⁶ Relief Web, 2019. *2018 Syrian HRP Funding Overview*. Relief Web, [online] 6 Jan 2019. Available at: https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/hrp_weekly_funding_status_180102.pdf

¹⁷ Relief Web. 2018. *Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Spontaneous Returns*. Relief Web, [online] Available at: https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/idpspontreturns_201811_final.pdf

country, the international community may use this same aid to enforce specific requirements and commitments from the government. (Q7) Transparency, international commitment to human rights, decreased proxy participation in war economy, opportunities to engage issues of equity, and national reconciliation that includes all actors by UN peacekeepers are just a few of ways that the international community may support Syria transition from being war-torn into being state-held. The Syrian state has given priority to Lebanon, Russia, Jordan and Iran to legalize imports (Q2), while Iran has publicly been stated as having special privilege for being granted reconstruction bids. (Q9) These state decisions will directly impact combat and shadow economies, with the hope, but not security, of improved opportunities for those coping.

Through the process of researching developing questions, and engaging with the first-hand experiences of an actor, what has also become clear is that researchers, analysts, journalists, and individuals all hold a level of responsibility within the conflict. In developing the questions, I was held accountable to my own implicit biases¹⁸ and the quality of my previous research. It quickly became clear how my exposure to western research and news sources have influenced my perception of actors. Remaining vigilante to the influence propaganda and analyzing one's own bias should continually be addressed, scanned, and made accountable to and for, as the consequences are not academic—they are human. Melham concludes that the Syrian identity is resilient—with long reaching roots. (Q10) When I developed the questions for this interview, I was concerned about the Syrian people's ability to survive such a horrendous conflict. Not to minimize what they have suffered, but after the interview, I am left with increasing concern for the ability of economics to smoothen ethics, the persistence of cultural biases across borders, and the reality that the resilience of identity demonstrated by the majority of Syrian people is not universal.

¹⁸ Payne, Keith, Laura Niemi and John M. Doris. 2018. "How to think about 'Implicit Bias.'" *Scientific American*, [online] 6 Jan 2019. Available at: <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/how-to-think-about-implicit-bias/>

Transcribed Interview w/ Questions:

Maher Melhem interviewed by Cerena Ceaser (January 5, 2019 via email)

About the Actor: Maher Melhem

Maher Melhem is a Lebanese citizen originally from the Northern region of Lebanon, near the Syrian border. He directly worked with the Syrian Crisis between 2012 and 2017. His experience includes being the information manager for ACTED where he served in a livelihood project for Syrian Refugees living in Camps on Lebanese Syrian Bekaa borders. Melhem was a Protection Reporting Officer for the IRC for 3 years. Working for the UNHCR, he was an Information Management Focal Point in Northern Lebanon.

Additionally, Melhem served as a Journalist between 2011 and 2014, whose main focus was the impact of the Syrian crisis on Lebanon, along with being a Freelance Researcher on the Syrian Crisis. In 2014, he covered the situation in Arsal following the battle as an Independent Journalist. He has worked on 4 documentaries in Syria (Aleppo, Idib, Kobane, and Damascus) as a Freelance Producer and Assistant Director. Currently, he is part of the MINUSMA UN peacekeeping mission in Mali and working on his MA in Conflictology with UNITAR/ UOC.

Melhem presented himself during the first course of this program as being open, willing, and interested in sharing the experiences that have led him to study Conflictology. The interview assignment provided an opportunity to engage him regarding his personal and professional experiences, that has been supported my own learning goals—as well as providing a needed, and much valued perspective.

- 1. At the beginning of his Presidency, Bashar al-Assad's transitioned the Syrian economy from state socialism (father) to a social market economy that broke up state monopolies.¹⁹ Did this change support or harm his position as Syria's leader? Do you think that the change in economic structure was part of what led to the initial revolution?**

A: As a Lebanese citizen, living not far from the Syrian borders and with Syrian troops still in Lebanon (following their intervention during the civil war) and them staying in Lebanon until 2015 and being able to witness all the changes that occurred in Syria over the years since the arrival of Bashar Al Assad as a president until today, I can tell you that the change he made actually strengthened his position as Syria's leader, which people might find surprising. But the changes he implemented, whether on the Economic structure or even the "somehow" political reform, allowed him to gain a strong base among the population (This might sound absurd, I know), but, in fact, Bashar Al Assad gained a huge reputation as he supported huge projects and investments to allow Syria to start exporting its own products in the Levant. I can tell you that in Lebanon, imports from Syria increased and the number of companies opened in Syria and mainly in Damascus and Aleppo are very good examples to reflect that.

¹⁹ Lund, Arron. 2018. *The Factory: A Glimpse as Syria's War Time Economy*. *The Century Foundation*, [online] 2 Jan 2019. Available at: <https://tcf.org/content/report/factory-glimpse-syrias-war-economy/?agreed=1>

Now, talking about the Economic structure, it did play a role in the revolution; talking about my personal experience with several persons I met through P2P meetings to discuss why they came as refugees to Lebanon and through the meetings I held with personnel in Syria to understand why they stayed there.

Bashar Al Assad, unlike his father, allowed somehow the privatization of several projects in Syria—allowing many persons to gain fortunes in a very short period of time. These persons themselves always refer to themselves as “close to the President” because, simply, they can bribe members of state authorities. These people with money use the money and relationships with people close to the president, who is the leader of the state, to gain more and achieve bigger fortunes through illegal activities. This created sort of "antipathy" from the poorer population in Syria as well as those living in smaller regions of the country and less urban states.

It is important to mention that the majority of demonstrations started in the suburbs of the cities but never in the main cities. The only city directly affected by demonstrations inside it was Homs. In Syria, there are old cities that are known for their urban status and diversity of its population. Damascus, Aleppo, Lattikiah, Tartous, Homs have people from all religions and different backgrounds. The newer cities are known for having the leaders of local tribes and fractions living in it and in the past except for Idlib, these cities were marginalized during the reign of Hafez Al Assad.

Now, to summarize the answer, the economical change created a corrupted layer that did not exist before Bashar Al Assad and that played and continues to play a huge role in the crisis. Believe it or not, many of these stakeholders and business owners were the first to import weapons into Syria through Lebanon.

- 2. A new industry of conflict traders, or businessmen who negotiate terms between rivals, emerged within the war. Negotiating transportation, kidnapping, use of territory, and other tactical maneuvers to improve leverage are their reason for being.²⁰ What is your experience with conflict traders? Is there an honor code? Do you think they will have an on-going economic role within the region?**

A: I just spoke about these, my main knowledge of these conflict traders was related to those involved in smuggling refugees through borders following the decision of the Lebanese Government to setup rules on the entry of Syrian refugees to Lebanon through regular checkpoints; as you know, Lebanon and to date continues to recognize the refugees in Lebanon as Displaced persons in order to avoid any potential responsibility of Social Integration of the refugees in Lebanon in case the other options did not work for the UN, as the UNHCR and through its mandate looks for three sustainable solutions: Voluntary Repatriation (Return to Syria); and Social Integration. With the Resettlement option being more and more subject to rules and regulations coming from hosting countries such as Germany and Canada and Voluntary Repatriation being an option to consider in case of a political agreement between all stakeholders especially for ex-combatants the social integration remains the only option and Lebanon is against it.

Therefore, Lebanon has set rules for the entry of Syrian refugees to Lebanon which were implemented in early 2015. People in Syria seeking to enter Lebanon either to

²⁰ Samaha, Nour. 2016. “The black market kings of Damascus.” The Atlantic, [online] 6 Jan 2016. Available at: <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2016/10/syria-war-economy-damascus-assad/502304/>

stay there, or in a later stage, travel to Turkey/Greece in boats towards Europe had to rely on conflict traders. These conflict traders included military and border control officers from both Lebanon and Syria; it included professional smugglers who used to work before the crisis in smuggling fuel and products from Syria to sell them in Lebanon as well as weapon traders who found in smuggling people an opportunity for additional income not to mention the non-state armed groups active on both sides of the borders mainly in Akkar north Lebanon and Northern Bekaa. These traders had somehow an honor code, refugees were paying a fixed price to transport them through Syria to the Lebanese Borders and then finally to the location they want to arrive to in Lebanon. Meanwhile, some of the information remains confidential it is no secret that several acts of Gender Based Violence reported against some of these traders and mainly speaking the non-state armed groups (Rebels) in Syria and borders.

Now, talking about their future in the post-conflict or the stabilization period; their impact started to decrease with nationwide decisions being made to legalize all sort of activities. The Syrian Government has adopted a specific strategy for the post conflict; it can be noticed in every visit to Syria (I honestly like to visit Damascus, it is a beautiful city). I originate from North Lebanon also where we have common borders with Syria and I have known Syrian citizens working in Lebanon since my early childhood. The disposition adopted by the Syrian government in accordance with international key players will diminish the role of these traders in the very near future for two reasons:

1. Their backbone in Syria where the presence of rebels was supporting their illegal activities has somehow disappeared as rebels controls less ground every day.
 2. The agreements by the Syrian government with Lebanon, Russia, Jordan and Iran to legalize import of personnel and equipment and giving the Syrian government and Iran the lead in rebuilding the country will not give the conflict traders any significant role. In fact, it cannot be said at this moment but it is a reality, Bashar Al Assad is now trying to re-establish his father's economic regime that he build over 30 years with specific reforms by adopting the Turkish strategy used by Erdogan.
- 3. Crippling international sanctions imposed by the US and EU in 2011 prevented the legal importation of basic goods and led to the creation of a new class of wealthy black market entrepreneurs.²¹ Consequences of the black market is that the equity divide between wealth and poverty is increasing. From your experience, how does the war economy in Syria support the continuation of violence? Has economic survival been linked to perpetuating violent conflict?**

A: In fact, the sanctions imposed by the US and EU on importation of basic goods and in politics refers to an attempt of having a certain control over the power the regime in Syria had before the crisis. The gap is definitely increasing and in every typical war the poor will get poorer and rich will be wealthier. However, if we have a quick look on the situation in Syria, we continue to see that the regime still somehow has control over basic products in the country despite the inflation that affected the currency. Which means, if you go now to Syria and aim to buy products that used to be provided to the population for low prices (as they were supported by the government) you will still see that these products continues to be supported by the government such as flour, gas

²¹ BBC News, 2012. Q&A: Syria Sanctions. BBC News, [online] 6 Jan 2019. Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-15753975>

and fuel. It is true that the crisis has resulted in limited purchasing capacity among the majority of the population, but the ability of the national bank of Syria to maintain the Syrian Pound on a certain level, if you check the following link you will see the ability of the bank to maintain the Syrian Pound on a specific level.

In addition, many Syrian refugees who were living in Lebanon always criticized the expensive living conditions in Lebanon and despite the expensive conditions in Syria they always said that once they have a safe space to return to they will definitely do. A simple comparison in Lebanon: a resident has to pay an average of 1\$ a day for pita bread, meanwhile in Syria the bread cost will be at 0.1\$ (<https://currencies.zone/chart/syrian-pound/us-dollar>) for simple people as refugees and those living with the minimum income, each cent is worth every investment not to mention that education in Lebanon is expensive, transportation is expensive. Now to answer the questions quickly:

- **How does the war economy in Syria support the continuation of violence?**
The continuation of violence now is more related to who is going to get the biggest share as every stakeholder is attempting to have a piece of the cake that is being cut. including the big countries such as the US, France and Arab Countries. violence will continue as long as someone still has interest to be partner on the table.
- **Has economic survival been linked to perpetuating violent conflict?**
I can answer this question from my experience working with displaced persons inside Syria for a period of time; economic survival still initiates acts of violence and these acts continue to be reported daily in Camps, in cities but these acts of violence are way far from reaching a significant level that could affect the conflict as whole, but rather have a very small impact inside a specific area; and this is mainly due to the lack of stability and absence of competent local state authorities and response to their needs.

4. From your professional experience and knowledge of the region²², will the US's withdrawal from the region de-escalate military spending by other international and regional countries? Or, will the US's withdrawal lead to further violations of human rights, specifically against the Kurds?

A: The US intervention in Syria is more related to export of weapons sold mainly to counterparts opposing the Syrian Regime; therefore, the impact of the US withdrawal from Syria would indirectly impact the military spending by the international and regional countries only if the US decides not to sell weapons to be used by counterparts. but this seems to be case; US is withdrawing, Saudi Arabia the main importer accepted to pay the US contribution in rebuilding Syria; agreement between US and Turkey not to attack Kurds; somehow, European agreement to stop these kind of hostilities.

Violations of Human rights have been reported since day one in the Syrian crisis and they will continue to occur; but with the current atmosphere among international key-players in the crisis it appears that the decision is now heading towards de-escalation instead of escalation. Although the decision of the US to withdraw remains clumsy

²² Landler, Helen Cooper, and Eric Schmitt. 2018. "Trump withdraws U.S. forces from Syria declaring 'We have won against ISIS.'" NYTimes, [online] 6 Jan 2019. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/19/us/politics/trump-syria-turkey-troop-withdrawal.html>

awaiting actions, I believe that Turkey is not in a position that would allow it to launch an offensive against Syria nor Kurds at this moment. Turkey has lost some of its influence recently following the disruption of relationships with the US. But still plays a crucial role in a sustainable solution in Syria.

5. Now and in the future, could there ever be a place at the negotiation table for ISIS? Who could best lead this process?²³ Or, are human rights violations and acts of terrorism unforgivable? These ethical lines seem less strong as Assad re-enters the international community.

A: ISIS was never considered as part of the stabilization deal in Syria. Not to mention the migration of its combatants from the country towards new jihadism lands; talking mainly Libya, Mali, Niger and Tunisia in Africa and some of them shifting into a de-escalation in their activities awaiting new opportunities for them to fight. In Syria, ISIS as a terrorist group was never considered as a negotiator; in opposition, you can see that all offensives in Syria that aimed to liberate the cities from terrorist armed groups never considered allowing ISIS into such negotiations, unlike the Nusra Front, which had local leaders. Therefore, ISIS has lost its battle in Syria and any offensive it might launch in the country will be perceived as final attempt of survival for a wounded lion.

As for the Assad regime and the relations with international community; this falls under the politics of benefits and achievements. The Syrian Regime and despite all the sanctions and accusations maintained its presence in the international community unlike the regional one (Arab League). The Syrian regime continued to participate in the UN regular meetings; the Syrian regime continued to supervise the response to the conflict in its country and the Syrian regime continues to have a strong political support from Russia and China permanent members in the UNSC not to mention India, Brazil and South Africa (BRICS). Therefore, all these accusations and the ethical lines would fall if any of the countries got what they aim for from the economical perspective.

6. Assad's Law 10, enacted in April 2018, "stipulates that a property owner [or family representative] has one year to provide proof of ownership after receiving notification that their property is in an area slated for 'reconstruction.'"²⁴ If proof is not provided, no compensation will be provided and ownership will be transferred to the government. This will be infeasible to achieve for IDPs and refugees. Additionally, most documentation has been lost, or destroyed. Assad's government is arguing that this is part of the normal reconstruction process. However, first hand accounts are demonstrating high concerns for human rights and the ability for IDPs and refugees to return home. What is your understanding, perspective and/or experience with the implementation of Law 10? Will it aid in reconstruction, or further divide those who have from those who don't? Additionally, if refugees lose property rights, how will this impact their return? The economy?

²³ Robinson, Eric, Daniel Egel, Patrick B. Johnston, Sean Mann, Alexander D. Rothenberg, David Stebbins. 2017. *When the Islamic State Comes to Town*. Rand Corporation, [online] 2 Jan 2019. Available at: www.rand.org/t/RR1970

²⁴ Ahmad, Ibrahim Abu. 2018. *Assad's Law 10: Reshaping Syria's Demographics*. The Washington Institute, [online] 2 Jan 2019. <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/assads-law-10-reshaping-syrias-demographics>

A: I had some discussions with colleagues working in Syria and Lebanon these days for UNHCR and involved in the voluntary repatriation process especially for refugees originating from areas where the cities are completely destroyed. According to colleagues, arguments used by the Assad Regime are part of the on-going negotiations in order to achieve a final compromise. Despite that two main opinions emerges now:

- The Assad regime is using this argument as an excuse to provide counterfeit documents to specific people announcing their ownership of these properties; which, according to some this is the strategy used by Assad regime, are being used to achieve the demographic change in Syria.
- The Assad regime is just attempting to be selective in that process by allowing property to be distributed to whom he believes will not cause trouble in the future, or reignite tension ,and somehow reestablish the conflict.

Both opinions are subject for discussion; but the legal officers at UNHCR actually underestimate this issue, because all properties, excluding from lands, are somehow under the control of the government. Therefore, all that an owner of a house or apartment needs is a title deed or documents that are already available in the local municipalities belonging to the government. Hence, this should not be a problem, if a refugee, IDP wants to return to his hometown.

It is worth also mentioning that in rural areas, most of the houses did not have title deeds and the owners of these houses used to build their houses inside the premises based on an agreement with an influential person or someone belonging to the authorities. Therefore, the Assad regime or the government is attempting to bring whom they call as “outlaws” back under their control.

7. As Assad regains power, humanitarian agencies and many international countries with resources to provide humanitarian aid are hesitant to assist a government defined by corruption and crimes against humanity. However, humanitarian aid is desperately needed throughout the country. Additionally, northeastern Syria is rich in oil, water, and agriculture.²⁵ From your knowledge of the situation, do you believe that resources and humanitarian aid will be used as leverage by international and regional states to control al-Assad? Is this possible?

A: The Syrian response is by far the biggest response as it involves a response in 4 countries including the country where the crisis is taking place. The OCHA report on funding shows somehow the contributions received in Syria to fund the needs to respond the crisis. https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/hrp_weekly_funding_status_180102.pdf

A quick look will show: That 64% of the requirements were met ! Which is somehow impossible compared to other countries (2.14 billion dollars). 50% of these funds were provided by local NGOs which is an important fact to see where these NGOs are receiving their funds.

²⁵ Rieger, Alon and Eran Yashiv. 2017. *The Syrian Economy: Current State and Future Scenarios*. INSS: Strategic Assessment, [online] 2 Jan 2019. Available at: http://www.inss.org.il/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/SA20.1_Rieger-Yashiv.pdf

The US itself provided more than 600m Dollars in 2018. If we look at the main contributors; they are all the same political enemies of the Regime, they are all from the EU, except for Japan.

Now another infographic about the IDPs voluntary return in Syria in November 2018 https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/idpspontreturns_201811_final.pdf 100k IDP returned to their hometown which 2 years ago were out of control of the government. Are these IDPs all sympathizing with the regime? Definitely not; they have the will to live and survive. Throughout 4 years of working in the crisis and being involved in budgeting, it was always obvious that the Syrian Regime still has a say in all the money that comes to Syria, which could be observed by the locations of the hubs. Have a quick look at the logistics cluster for Syria. The Syrian regime also have the ability to identify the priorities of the response and where does the money goes. The international community will definitely use their aid to try to enforce specific requirements which will be the case for UNHCR that will not grant easy voluntary repatriation for refugees and facilitate the restoration works if they do not receive commitments from the government.

Over the years, the budget for the Syrian response decreased; yet, the intensity of the crisis has also decreased and other crisis erupted forcing the UN to reallocate the budgeting to cover all the needs. Meanwhile, between 2011 and 2015, the UNHCR had only the crisis inland starting that year the crisis went all the way to the Mediterranean causing huge problems in terms of funding; which, was reflected by the UNCHR as well as the ICRC and MSF.

8. From your perspective, how can the international community—states and UN—best support Syria as the formal war (supposedly) comes to a close?²⁶

A: That's a difficult question; if I want to answer it without diplomacy; I would say, let the people live the way they want. but answering this question diplomatically, I would say the following:

- Neighboring states should ensure the sovereignty of the Syrian territories and the ownership of these lands and full control and not interfere in any activities that could hinder peace such as smuggling weapons or helping increase tensions;
- International community as main stakeholder, to ensure that this economy of war by exporting weapons to regional countries is stopped in order to ensure that no new weapons would be getting into the region to reignite a war;
- International community also should guarantee that Israel does not launch offensives in Syria or promote supporting a group of rebels on border to ensure that the truce remains in place;
- Iran to commit not using Syria as a starting point for any offensive against Israel or to support Hezbollah and Hamas with new technologies and weapons;

²⁶ UNSC. 2018. "International Community Cannot give up on Syria, SG tells SC, stressing implementation of resolution 2401 still possible." UN, [online] 6 Jan 2019. Available at: <https://www.un.org/press/en/2018/sgsm18932.doc.htm>

- Russia to commit to the international community that the new weapons given to the Syrian Regime will not be used in an offensive against Israel;
- UN Agencies to ensure that the aids coming to Syria are provided with equal opportunity to the most vulnerable and commit to a transparency project that would identify where does the money goes;
- A national reconciliation starts among the Syrians without the international community intervention to put it in place. The UN does not establish a mission in Syria overlooking the reconciliation efforts, but instead has a special convoy who communicates with counterparts.

9. What economic responsibility do regional and international proxies hold in the reconstruction process of Syria?²⁷

A: The regional and international proxies takes full responsibility of reconstructing Syria; each country including Lebanon contributed somehow in the destruction. It is true that Syrians take the blame, but everyone who was involved in a single attempt in Syria is now accountable for rebuilding at least one destroyed house in Syria—and this includes Syria and Iran. Knowing that the Syrian Regime has admitted that Iran will have the priority in reconstruction contracts, which would create a new competition between Arabs from the Gulf states, who are considering investing billions in rebuilding Syria.

10. From outside the conflict, there appears to be many divisions within Syria—political, religious, ethnic, socio-economic, etc.—which of these divisions are deep and which are superficial? Is there a united Syrian identity to move forward under? Is this different for refugees, IDPs, and combatants?²⁸

A: Syrians have shown resilience, whether in Syria as IDPs or non-affected by the crisis or as refugees. The Syrian identity is not a recently formed one without roots in opposite it existed for thousands of years and this is so clear in terms of how the Syrians gathered together to fight the Ottoman occupation as well as the French Colonial.

However, with the recent religious division caused by the presence of extremist thoughts and ideologies among all counterparts, it is clear that this has affected the Syrian unity and identity, yet, they can overcome it—as the main cause of this division is political and not religious.

This was the case for Lebanon during the civil war when everyone called it a religious civil war. Meanwhile, it was based on political opinions that created extremism for all counterparts. What happened after? I invite you to Lebanon and maybe Syria to see yourself. But trust me, the Syrian identity is way stronger in its roots then we can see and all the examples I witnessed through my work with refugees, IDPs as well as combatants proves that.

²⁷ Abboud, Samer. 2017. *The economics of war and peace in Syria*. The Century Foundation, [online] 6 Jan 2019. Available at: <https://tcf.org/content/report/economics-war-peace-syria/>

²⁸ Hindy, Lily and Sima Ghaddar. “A ‘Nation in Pieces’: Views from Syrians in Exile.” The Century Foundation, [online] 6 Jan 2019. Available at: <https://tcf.org/content/report/nation-pieces-views-syrians-exile/>

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