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**The Weaponization of Syria's Reconstruction: A
Preliminary Sketch**

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Omar Imady

Introduction

It is indeed instructive that discussions of reconstruction often fail to provide a definition, or at the very least a general explanation, of what exactly they mean by the term. The assumption appears to be that the term is so readily understood to not require an explanation. Another common characteristic of such discussions is a preoccupation with how international, regional and national players are attempting to advance, or undermine, reconstruction. The focus on how various parties are interacting with a process, however, should not be confused, as often is the case, with a focus on the actual process. While the former is consumed with context, the latter attempts to shed light on agency. To focus on agency is to invariably focus on yet another conspicuously neglected subject, the actual communities that have been the victim of partial or wholesale destruction. Not only do discussions of Syria's reconstruction generally remain loyal to these shortcomings, they additionally reflect a very determined attempt to weaponize the idea of reconstruction in various ways and towards various ends.

The weaponization of Syria's reconstruction started as early as 2012, and by 2016, with the end of the battle for Aleppo, it had accelerated rapidly, reaching full culmination with the passing of the 'Strengthening America's Security in the Middle East Act' (February 5, 2019). The focus here is on how this weaponization was achieved conceptually, rather than

operationally (i.e. social media dissemination). This form of weaponization may be termed ‘conceptual weaponization’ as it provides the ideas, facts and statements that are subsequently used by social media activists to reinforce their messages. The aim is to shed light not only on how distant the idea of reconstruction ultimately is from the realities it was meant to be preoccupied with, but also on the extent to which reconstruction became a front for the political and economic empowerment of various factions and players.

Conceptual Weaponization

The weaponization of political discourse, though now associated with the internet and social media, is an ancient craft, and examples of how it was articulated can be identified long before the internet arrived. Granted, the subject is very broad and complex, but a preliminary sketch of a very specific branch of weaponization is attempted here. Conceptual weaponization involves the creation of an understanding of a political term, an understanding that is closed (i.e. it does not allow for multiple interpretations), entrapping (i.e. it is integrated with inbuilt incentives), and exclusionary (i.e. it is predicated on the creation of an enemy).¹ The language used by ‘The Covenant of the League of Nations’ to describe the idea of the ‘Mandate’, including that of France over Syria, illustrates all three characteristics:

[Article 22:](#)

“To those colonies ... which are inhabited by peoples not yet able to stand by themselves under the strenuous conditions of the modern world, there should be applied the principle that the well-being and development of such peoples form a sacred trust of civilisation and that securities for the performance of this trust should be embodied in this Covenant.”

The idea of the mandate is conceptually closed in the sense that its nature and purpose are treated as though they were irrefutable facts. It is entrapping because it is promising unconditional authority to the countries administering the mandate (i.e. Britain and France), and civilizational advancement to the populations they are being authorized

to administer. And it is, finally, exclusionary in the sense that it implies that those who don't subscribe to this understanding are *a priori* hostile to the development and best interests of the populations it oversees and working against what the international community has decreed.

Reconstruction as utopia

The first major usage of the term reconstruction is found in the narrative of the American Civil War (1861-1865).² Even then, the term carried just as many myths (deliberately crafted, and at times possibly well-intentioned) as it does today. The myth, in mid-nineteenth century America, was that a post-war union can be reconstructed or, that the north was genuinely interested in its reconstruction. The actual way within which the term was understood by the victors was that the South (not the union) had to be radically reconstructed. The 1867-1868 Reconstruction Acts organized the South into occupied military districts and conditioned the restoration of the ex-Confederate states to the Union on the condition of ratifying the Fourteenth Amendment (which gave ex-slaves full citizenship). The myth, however, was not only that the victors were uninterested in the reconstruction of what *was*, but on a far more important level, the myth was that the victors could in fact succeed, irrespective of their victory, in reconstructing the South on their terms. Even one century later, the Civil Rights movement encountered a South that was culturally very hostile to the type of reconstruction the North had earlier envisioned. So, in this sense, the term reconstruction carries a double illusion; not only is the proclaimed objective not the real objective of those who are using it, but even the real objective is ultimately very difficult, if not impossible, to achieve.

From its earliest usage, the term 'reconstruction' implied restoration, or a return to a previous, often idealized, reality. At its most basic level, it implied the rebuilding of structures that were destroyed during war, and at a higher level of sophistication, it implied a rebuilding of not only physical structures, but of political, economic and social frameworks, which, in their totality, constituted a specific moment in time that 'reconstruction' would restore.³ Because reconstruction is an activity, a method, and not an objective in itself, it cannot possibly be the

destination. Hence, the focus shifts almost naturally from the process to the new reality it is seeking to actualize. When describing this new reality, the tendency is to speak in terms of a utopia that not only never existed, but which seems difficult to actualize under the best conditions and even in countries that have not undergone violence and destruction. Conceptual weaponization is achieved when features of these utopias become the standards upon which any planned reconstruction effort is judged. If it does not conform, it is labelled (politely) as an instrument of [recreating the conditions that led to conflict](#), or (less diplomatically) as [complicit in war crimes against the Syrian people](#).

The National Agenda for the Future of Syria (NAFS) provides one of the most elaborate explanations of this post-reconstruction utopia. NAFS was launched by UN ESCWA in 2012 with the aim of engaging “ ... [Syrian experts and stakeholders in developing policy alternatives for Syria in preparation for a post-agreement phase](#).” The [Principles for a vision of ‘Syria 2030’](#) were reached through an extensive exercise led by Syrians from across the political spectrum. In their totality, these principles encapsulate the utopia that the reconstruction of Syria will give birth to. They may be synthesized and paraphrased as follows:

1. A political agreement that guarantees “a comprehensive transition” towards a Syria where “a culture of democracy is built and practiced, mutual political trust is re-established among the main political players, and the rule of law, equality and citizenship is established.”
2. The right of the displaced and the refugees to “a safe, dignified and voluntary return to their homes (or to any other location inside the country they voluntarily choose to return to).”
3. A national reconciliation unto which all “Syrians are invited and encouraged to contribute”.
4. A just and balanced development that directly contributes to stability, peace building and reconciliation at the local and the national levels that is tangibly manifested in the availability “of rehabilitated social and physical infrastructure” and; that “empowers people, especially the most vulnerable and poor, to attain their basic needs.

5. A governance framework that allows “the national administrative structure to be comprehensive, participatory, transparent, accountable, result-based, and achieve gender equality.”

On the surface, these principles provide a vision of an inclusive, democratic Syria that one would at least hope the vast majority of Syrians would concur with. On a more subtle level, however, these principles not only create false expectations in terms of what reconstruction can result in, but they also validate the assumption that ‘reconstruction’ is an actual legitimate process that has a credible record, and that the only concern is whether or not it will be guided by an appropriate vision. The catastrophic failures of reconstruction in countries like Iraq and Afghanistan, for example, are clearly here irrelevant or at the very least are regarded as examples of what will *not* happen in Syria.

The Syrian regime has its own vision of reconstruction, which is deliberately vague, but equally utopian. In various speeches and interviews, the Syrian president made scattered references to reconstruction.

“... the more arduous challenge lies in rebuilding, socially and psychologically, those who have been affected by the crisis. It will not be easy to eliminate the social effects of the crisis, especially extremist ideologies. Real reconstruction is about developing minds, ideologies and values. Infrastructure is valuable, but not as valuable as human beings; reconstruction is about perpetuating both.” ([Interview with the German Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung newspaper 17/June/2013](#))

And again:

“The rebuilding of minds and the reform of people is the major challenge rather than the rebuilding of the infrastructure. When they started this war against us, they knew they would destroy the infrastructure, and they knew that we would rebuild it, but what is much harder is how to interact with the intellectual structures and we must not fail in confronting this challenge.” ([Asad’s speech, 18 February, 2019 – my translation](#))

Asad's emphasis on the rebuilding of human capital under-scores the regime's concern with the fact that even if Syria is physically rebuilt, this will have no impact on the extent to which millions of Syrians will remain fierce enemies of everything the regime stands for. Hence the emphasis on rebuilding the intellectual foundations of Syrian society implies a type of reconstruction akin, in sensibility (though clearly not in nature), to what the North had in mind after the American civil war. The South had to be culturally restructured, and in Asad's mind, Syria, Syrians opposed to the regime in particular, require intellectual restructuring.

A far more elaborate utopia was [identified by the participants in Sochi](#) (January 2018). Here reconstruction is seen as the grand summation of what all Syrians (represented at Sochi) aspire to. Twelve major principles that sound more like the manifesto of a political party are articulated:

1. Sovereignty, independence, territorial integrity, and unity of the Syrian Arab Republic.
2. Syria's national sovereign equality and rights regarding non-intervention.
3. Syrian people shall determine the future of their country by the ballot box.
4. Syrian Arab Republic shall be a democratic and non-sectarian state.
5. Syria to be committed to national unity, social peace.
6. Continuity and improved performance of state and public institutions.
7. A strong national army that carries out its duties in accordance with the constitution.
8. Commitment to combat terrorism, fanaticism, extremism and sectarianism.
9. Respect and protection of human rights and public freedoms.
10. Value placed on Syria's society and national identity, and its history of diversity.
11. Fighting poverty and providing support for the elderly and other vulnerable groups.

12. Preservation and protection of national heritage and the natural environment.

We even have negative utopias, that is utopias that identify what reconstruction should not involve but are ironically just as utopian in what they assume can be achieved in lieu of the model they are concerned with negating. In *Beyond fragility: Syria and the challenges of reconstruction in fierce states*, Steven Heydemann writes:

“Thus, the aim of post-conflict reconstruction is not to return war-torn societies and states to their pre-war condition, but to make use of the space that violent conflict is presumed to create to put in place institutions, norms, and practices that address the causes of violence and provide a basis for effective governance and sustainable peace.”

What all these utopias have in common is the closed nature of their logic. It is closed because there is a circular link between their assumptions and conclusions. They do not, for example, question whether or not their vision can be achieved, how it will be achieved, or if it has been achieved elsewhere. Their premise is that it is *required*, for various reasons, and hence it should be pursued. More importantly, they all come with direct and indirect warnings that caution us from the dangers of not adhering to their prescriptions, from the recreation of the climate conducive to conflict, to the strengthening of the regime and its allies.

Reconstruction as an Opportunity

As early as February 2012, the idea of ‘preparing’ for the reconstruction of Syria starts to gain currency. The only challenge was how to make this idea more attractive. The message purports to be an invitation for the international community to be prepared to assist Syria once the war is over. In actuality, the message involves articulating an opportunity, a multi-layered opportunity that has something in it for everyone. It is first an opportunity for Syrians opposed to the regime to cast themselves as trusted experts who are in a better position to provide such expertise than their international counterparts. In August 2012, a group of Syrian intellectuals created a think tank, *The Day After; Supporting a*

Democratic Transition in Syria or TDA. TDA aimed at providing “a detailed framework of principles, goals and recommendations ... for addressing challenges in six key fields: rule of law; transitional justice; security sector reform; constitutional design; electoral system design; and post-conflict social and economic *reconstruction* [emphasis mine].” With time, the dimensions of the opportunity become clearer to the organized opposition, and by November 2012, the term begins to be invoked with more assertiveness: “The incoming or transitional government in Damascus will confront not just the physical and social destruction of the war effort, as well as its collateral effects on regional stability, but also the deep legacies of a 40-year dictatorship. Its urgent domestic tasks will include ... reconstructing infrastructure and the state apparatus ...” The ‘opportunity’ here is for the opposition to prove itself credible and worthy of becoming the new leadership of Syria. The myth, no doubt, is the idea that members of the opposition have any experience in building, or rebuilding, anything akin to what they aspire to undertake. Once again, the ‘double illusions’ apply both the professed message and the actual message are equally detached from reality.

Reconstruction is foremost, however, an opportunity for the Syrian regime to signal the end of the conflict and for the initiation of its international rehabilitation. Yet, without a price tag placed on it, the opportunity remains not adequately attractive, nor weaponized. The price tag required is a financial one. Other types, like the [survey](#) conducted by UNRWA in mid-2013 which estimated that it would take around 30 years for Syria’s economy to recover, are not helpful and will be duly ignored by players across the board. In June 2013, we are informed that a [six member UN team](#) lead by Abdallah Dardari, Syria’s ex-Deputy Prime Minister for Economic Affairs, has arrived at the first estimate of what it would cost to reconstruct Syria: \$60 billion. The figure is first repeated, then is systematically increased “... the country would need at least **\$80 billion** to put the economy back to what it was prior to the uprising ...”; “Syria’s interim minister: **\$100 billion** needed for reconstruction”; “Rebuilding damaged physical infrastructure will be a monumental task, with reconstruction cost estimates in the range of **\$100 to \$200 billion**”; and the final number is left to be identified by the president himself:

“Syrian President Bashar Assad estimated Thursday that it may take up to [\\$400 billion](#) to reconstruct Syria after the conflict ...”

On the surface, these numbers are attempts to capture damage and, in turn, the costs of rebuilding. The sources responsible for their initial computation (e.g. ESCWA, the National Agenda for Syria, etc.) are generally technical bodies, well intended and as objective as it is possible when it comes to a subject as in-flamed as Syria. The point here isn't to cast doubt on why such numbers were calculated, but rather on how these numbers are subsequently weaponized to achieve very different objectives. As those who have actually gone through the economic exercise of calculating them would assert, these numbers tell us nothing about how they will be, or can be, used to finance the rebuilding of anything. At best they measure the value of what was destroyed. The logical fallacy of the idea of reconstruction is that you can in fact rebuild if only you had the resources required. This assumption was dramatically disproven in [Afghanistan](#) and [Iraq](#), and, according to at least [some economists](#), it didn't even apply during the implementation of the Marshall Plan. Reconstruction efforts in post-WWII Europe were [never fully dependent](#) on US assistance, and more often than not, were primarily based on local resources. The primary success stories took place where there was something already on the ground, a thirsty potential already attempting on its own to reconstruct, and then, subsequently, benefitting from a financial contribution that it was ready to do without. The US spent around [\\$13 billion dollars](#) to reconstruct Europe, (now equivalent to approximately \$100 billion); already less than what the US has so far spent on the [reconstruction of Afghanistan](#). [Indeed](#), corruption depleted the vast majority of these resources, and much of the same applies on the reconstruction of Iraq. In fact, it would not be difficult to show how the higher the number allocated for reconstruction, the more likely it will be misused. The point here, however, is that all of this is well understood and purposely employed by the various political camps fighting over Syria. The premise appears to be is that the higher the price tag, the more attractive the invitation is (i.e. a country that requires \$400 billion to reconstruct is far more attractive than a country that requires \$100 billion). Indeed, some of the headings almost read like an investment opportunity: “[A Los Angeles banker, the](#)

head of a Middle Eastern investment bank and retired General Wesley Clark plan to announce Monday the formation of an investment fund to help re-build Syria.” Not only is it an investment opportunity, it is one which many are deemed ‘unworthy’ of: “Talking about the reconstruction of Syria’s war-torn regions, President Assad said companies from different countries have already offered their services in rebuilding Syria. While French and Swiss firms are among those ready to participate, the Syrian government will do its best to give Russian companies the best contracts ...” After all, the price of being part of such a lucrative opportunity is to have supported the Syrian regime, or, at the very least, to be willing to suspend all the rhetoric and activities that question its legitimacy.

Reconstruction as punishment

In more practical terms, reconstruction can also be weaponized to exclude, or include, legitimise or demonize.⁴ The Syrian regime understood this well and proceeded to enact laws to re-define demographically and economically post-war Syria into what Asad described as “a healthier and more homogeneous society.” Though as noted above, these top down approaches to social realities consistently fail, the suffering and dispossession they can result in is very real. Take for example the town of Darayya, located 8 km south-west of the centre of Damascus, and belonging administratively, to the Rural Damascus governorate. In August 2016, the town fell to regime forces, and the remaining population were resettled in Idlib (7700), and Herjaleh (600). It is unclear what happened to the original 78,000 (at the very least) inhabitants of Darayya. It seems likely that long before August 2016, thousands left the town to either other parts of Syria, or left Syria altogether. What concerns us is that Darayya today is largely vacant of its original indigenous inhabitants and, hence, to speak of a reconstruction program in Darayya would be to normalize a demographic distortion. Yet, in early 2017, a committee for the reconstruction of Darayya was formed under the Prime Minister’s Office. Much of the same would apply on numerous other towns in Syria, stretching from Ifrin, in the north-west, to Daraa, in the southeast.

Reconstruction that is based on demographic distortions is similar to reconstruction that is based on physical distortions. While the former targets people who moved into an area after its original inhabitants have been displaced, the latter redefines an area entirely. Southwest of Damascus, and not too far from Darrayya, is an area known as [Basateen el-Razi](#). Prior to 2011, the area was home to thousands of people who were too poor to afford regular houses, and who therefore built their shacks and ramshackle houses in the fields behind the houses of the Mezzeh highway. Today, a [‘reconstruction’ program](#) has been initiated that aims at replacing these houses with skyscrapers and shopping centres. It would be entirely different if the indigenous inhabitants of Basateen el-Razi were the actual beneficiaries of such a program. As it stands, the program recreates a new physical reality and ignores the future prospects of returnees which, as studies have confirmed, in the vast majority of cases return to their own homes ([even if such homes were partially damaged](#)).

In the same vein, several decrees, from Law number 66 (2012) to Law number 10 (2018), have created a situation where the indigenous inhabitants of an area will [find it even harder to return to their towns and villages](#) and repossess their homes, and land. The idea that a refugee or a displaced person must somehow provide proof of ownership of a house that is most probably damaged or destroyed, and which was most probably built without legal documentation, amounts to (at the very least) a strong disinclination to return. Since Syrian refugees and the displaced already face numerous other obstacles that make their return difficult, these decrees make the hard even harder, and legitimize their inability to return.

On the other side of the spectrum, reconstruction as an instrument of punishment was also employed by the West, the US in particular. The Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act was first initiated in July 2016, and on the 15th of November 2016, it unanimously passed the House as The Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act (HR 5732). After dying in previous congresses, another version, H.R. 1677 (115th), passed the House on May 17, 2017. It was considered by the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations on September 26, 2018, and on the 3rd of October 2018, an updated text of the bill was published. On the 19th of January 2019, it passed the House, yet again, as the ‘Strengthening America's Security in the Middle East Act of 2019’. Finally, [on the 5th of February 2019, it was passed by the Senate. The language of the Act](#) that pertains to Syria is consistent with the objectives of punishment and exclusion:

- Requires the President to impose sanctions on foreign individuals if the President determines that the foreign individual knowingly engages in any of the following activities (Title III, Subtitle A, Sec. 312):
- Knowingly provides significant financial, material, or technological support to, or knowingly engages in a significant transaction with the Government of Syria;
- Knowingly sells or provides significant goods, services, technology, information, or other support that significantly facilitates the maintenance or expansion of the Government of Syria’s domestic production of natural gas, petroleum, or petroleum products;
- Knowingly, directly or indirectly, provides significant construction or engineering services to the Government of Syria.

The Strengthening America's Security in the Middle East Act is very clear on what should not take place, but it is not concerned with what should

take place. Clarity on what should not happen and ambiguity on what should, has been a common feature of American foreign policy in Syria, and it is reminiscent of how the US interacted with the use of chemical weapons. The Syrian regime should not use chemical weapons, US officials strongly proclaimed, but its use of other forms of killing (e.g. barrel bombs) is ignored. In the same vain, countries should not support the reconstruction of Syria, but how the suffering of the refugees and the displaced will be alleviated is not an American security interest nor is it relevant to an Act that, by its very name, is concerned with strengthening American policies.

Conclusion

When the history of the Syrian Uprising is finally written, one of the important aspects of this history will be the way in which certain ideas were weaponized by various actors. Such a history may begin with the regime's *mu'amirah* or [conspiracy theory](#) that portrayed the protestors as agents of a foreign plot who practiced *jihad alnikah* or [sexual jihad](#), move on to the opposition's use of *sa'it al sifr* or [zero hour](#) to dramatize the immanent end of the regime, and would include how the West used an incremental (verbal) delegitimization of the regime ('from [Asad should step down](#)' to '[Asad must go](#)') creating in the process the illusion that such delegitimization techniques are capable of impacting the regime's survival. The latest, though unlikely to be the last, is the idea of reconstruction, an idea that carries with it the illusory promise of a phase beyond war where Syria's rebirth would take place. What is perhaps distinct about reconstruction is the extent to which it was about the regime's legitimacy, as opposed to its continuity. Past examples of weaponization were significantly instruments of actual war, when at stake was the very survival of the regime. Reconstruction, on the other hand, belongs to a battle over the regime's international rehabilitation.

The significance of *The Strengthening America's Security in the Middle East Act* lies in the blow it delivered to the regime's attempt to restore its legitimacy through reconstruction. As noted above, the Act was first contemplated in mid-2016, and it took until February 2019 for it to be passed by the Senate. In only three months, (February-May 2019), the

reconstruction of Syria has already started losing the coverage and momentum it enjoyed until early 2019. The Syrian regime's success in the weaponization of ideas during the war phase of Syria's uprising may explain some of the [peculiar aspects of the president's latest speech, delivered](#) only days after the passing of *The Strengthening America's Security in the Middle East Act*. Rather than emphasize victory and moving beyond the war, as he had done in earlier speeches, Asad actually proclaimed that Syria was still at war, in fact it was now fighting four distinct wars. Perhaps the regime is sensing that it was far easier to weaponize the war than it is to weaponize the peace.

Endnotes

1. On the weaponization of language, see: Singer, P. W., & Brooking, E. T. (2018). *Likewar: The weaponization of social media*; Jeremiah Clabough, Mark Percy, (2018) "'Wild words' – analyzing angry rhetoric in American politics", *Social Studies Research and Practice*, Vol. 13 Issue: 3, pp.369-382; Herrman, John. "If everything can be 'weaponized,' what should we fear?" *The New York Times Magazine*. March 14, 2017. <https://www.ny-times.com/2017/03/14/magazine/if-everything-can-be-weaponized-what-should-we-fear.html>; and Apter, Emily. "Weaponized Thought: Ethical Militance and the Group Subject." *Grey Room 14* (Winter 2004); Allenby, Brad and Joel Garreau, "Weaponized Narrative Is the New Battlespace," *Defense One* [3 January 2017]. <http://www.defenseone.com/ideas/2017/01/weaponized-narrative-newbattlespace/134284/>; Katerji, O. (2018, September 13). *The Kremlin has weaponised doubt in Syria – and Labour is helping*. Available at: <https://www.newstatesman.com/world/middle-east/2018/09/kremlin-has-weaponised-doubt-syria-and-labour-helping>
2. On reconstruction in the context of the American Civil War, see, Kirsch, S & Flint, Colin. (2011). "Introduction: Reconstruction and the worlds that war makes." in *Reconstructing Conflict: Integrating War and Post-War Geographies*, Farnham, UK and Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, pp. 3-28. On the theory and applications of reconstruction, see, Abu Ismail, K., Imady, O., Kuncic, A., and Nujum, U., 2016. *Syria At War: Five Years Later*. ESCWA & St Andrews. Available at: [afghanistan/](#); Jabareen, Yosef. (2013). *Conceptualizing "Post-Conflict Re-construction" and "Ongoing Conflict Reconstruction" of Failed States*. [online] *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society*. 26(2) pp. 107-125. Available at: <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10767-012-9118>
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4. See for example, Wintermute, Bobby A.; Ulbrich, David J.: Race and Gender in Modern Western Warfare. Berlin: De Gruyter Oldenbourg 2019.