

Brussels Conference on Supporting Syria: Complex Issues Surrounding "Early Recovery"

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Brief Analysis

Alignment between recovery efforts and the international coalition requires a comprehensive approach that prioritizes security, economic stabilization, and social cohesion.

It has become customary at the Brussels conferences supporting Syria to hold a ministerial meeting immediately following the "dialogue session." However, in its eighth iteration held at the end of last month, the ministerial meeting—which aimed at mobilizing vital financial support to mitigate the humanitarian crisis for Syrians around the world—was postponed to May 27th. This delay raised numerous concerns among Syrians, who worry that wars in Ukraine and Gaza are overshadowing the dire need for aid to Syrian refugees.

Realistically, Syria is no longer a priority for the international community. The Syrian issue has been sidelined due to the seemingly intractable nature of the crisis. Years-long negotiation efforts, notably the "Geneva" rounds which began in 2012, have failed to put an end to the overall economic, security, and social crises or combat the dominance of foreign intervention in Syrian affairs. Collectively, these factors have led to a strategic shift from "reconstruction" to "early recovery" over the past three years.

The initial agreement among donor countries to increase "early recovery" aid began at the sixth Brussels conference in 2022. This approach aims to transition from reliance on humanitarian relief to self-reliance through revitalizing local economies and developing public services to alleviate the crisis that Syrians are enduring, with as much as 90 percent of the Syrian population living below the poverty line. This approach was further emphasized at the seventh Brussels conference, especially after the 2023 earthquake, with continued stress the need to find a sustainable solution to the crisis. The latest eighth conference focused significantly on the "early recovery approach."

Concrete data on the mechanisms for aid distribution and the areas in which aid is delivered is lacking.

Nevertheless, international and local organizations have worked within the "early recovery" framework by

supporting some small projects or providing financial grants to expand others. However, it is extremely difficult to assess the outcomes of this approach or even to make comparisons with the “reconstruction” process. Instead, it can be said that both approaches have yielded the desired outcomes. There are dilemmas facing the "early recovery" approach, as it depends on uplifting preexisting businesses and local economies in areas that lack even the most basic services. However, this term lacks a precise and unified definition. Despite attempts to depoliticize it and use it as a practical solution, many wonder whether “early recovery” is a feasible and effective approach to the challenges facing Syria.

The Funding and Centralization of "Early Recovery"

The United Nations aims to create an early recovery fund to allow unconventional supporters, such as Gulf countries, to provide support for Syria. In practice, most of the current aid distribution has been conducted through international organizations, which in turn, provide grants to local organizations in various Syrian regions. The Early Recovery Fund can operate in a different manner through granting direct funds to targeted local organizations, while still considering the significant role of influential international organizations in Syrian affairs.

However, the location of this "fund" has not yet been clarified. Concurrently, Russia is striving to establish its own investment project in Damascus to align with its intervention plan in Syria, by propping up the Assad regime and exploiting this “legitimacy” to advance the normalization between the regime, Arab countries, and the international community. Perhaps the regime will heavily leverage this point, especially with the United Nations insisting on operating through Damascus. If Moscow succeeds in its intentions, the rest of the Syrian regions will be deprived of receiving aid, following the Syrian regime's policy of monopolizing and siphoning aid for its loyalists, and using it as a political pressure tool in favor of its agenda.

Therefore, exploring other options remains a priority, and arguably, establishing the fund's headquarters outside Syria, with a guarantee of depoliticizing the aid process in a neighboring country, remains the best option. Yet, this choice also requires careful consideration of the most suitable country, as actors in neighboring countries have their own agenda and would not distribute aid in a fair manner. For example, if the fund is established in Lebanon, where Hezbollah controls the overall Lebanese scene, aid would still be diverted to the regime and its allies. Similarly, areas in northern and eastern Syria would be deprived of aid if the fund were established in Turkey given the hostile relationship between Ankara and the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). In reality, Jordan may be the only “neutral” country capable of distributing aid in an even-handed way. By ensuring the depoliticization of the aid distribution process, the United Nations could explore decentralized solutions, with the main fund headquarters in Jordan and subsidiary centers throughout Syria, whether under the control of the regime, the opposition, or the SDF.

Although establishing a depoliticized, decentralized aid network in Jordan may alleviate many of concerns around distribution, this approach does little to address the threat of terrorism and armed groups on the ground in Syria. Civilians—and any aid workers working in the area—are caught in a cycle of violence and extremism. Remnants of ISIS and Iran-backed militias continue to fight in eastern Syria, and the war in Gaza has escalated violence further as Iran-backed militias began attacking U.S. forces in Syria. The unending chaos has created new opening for ISIS, which has ramped up its activity in recent months. In order to make a meaningful difference with humanitarian aid, it is essential that "early recovery" efforts align with the international coalition's efforts to combat ISIS to ensure the successful delivery of aid to regions affected by the organization's attacks, first and foremost, and to achieve the fund's goals secondarily.

In reality, both international and local organizations have been working in recent years to implement projects within the framework of "early recovery" in areas where extremist organizations still pose a threat to the community, especially in northern and eastern Syria, where ISIS controlled most of Raqqqa and Deir ez-Zor provinces. These organizations have been implementing projects in the context of "rehabilitation and integration" for former fighters

or their families by reintegrating them into local communities and helping them establish small businesses. Aid groups have also supported community projects aimed at strengthening the local economy. However, all these projects represent only a small portion of what needs to be provided to these areas. In fact, "recovery" and stabilization efforts entail close coordination between local forces and the international coalition, provided that military and political parties refrain from interfering in humanitarian and relief work.

For example, in areas where there is still activity by remnants of ISIS, it is not enough to simply arrest them and place them in detention centers. More needs to be done in these areas to raise public awareness and help local communities achieve self-sufficiency.

Therefore, the alignment between recovery efforts and the international coalition requires a comprehensive approach that prioritizes security, economic stabilization, and social cohesion. These goals can be achieved by strengthening the local economy, rehabilitating targeted communities, providing consultations regarding governance and civil administration issues, and avoiding political marginalization. Such initiatives can help prevent extremist groups from exploiting any economic or political vulnerabilities, in addition to ensuring stability, so as to prevent the resurgence of terrorism.

Generally, "early recovery" goals have long focused significantly on supporting local services and moving towards activating the internal economy and public sector in particular. These goals are nearly impossible to achieve unless stability, even partial, is ensured across all Syrian regions. Russia's brutal bombardment of northwest and Turkey's continuous strikes in the northeast are immediate hindrances to any recovery efforts in those regions. Therefore, it is imperative that the "early recovery" process includes international political efforts to pressure all parties to ensure de-escalation and the necessity of sparing civilians and infrastructure from targeting. ❖

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