Strategic Reconstruction: Transforming Syria's Challenges into Opportunities

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21 December 2024

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1 Introduction

Although Syria's economy appeared stable until 2010—with relatively low inflation and a growth rate of around 4.4% between 2000 and 2009, excluding oil—serious underlying issues plagued it. These included the inability to develop basic infrastructure for the national economy, reduce poverty and unemployment, address significant regional disparities within the country, and improve a poor business environment exacerbated by rising corruption levels. Such corruption discouraged both foreign and domestic investments.

Post-2010, the excessive violence of the Assad regime and the armed conflict among various militias claimed the lives of at least 700,000 people, drove 6 million Syrians out of the country, and displaced 7.6 million internally. Those who remained faced increasing hardships in managing their daily lives, ultimately leading to the collapse of the economy.

One of the major reasons behind Syria's massive economic problems, along with those of other similarly developing nations, has been the absence of scientifically and objectively planned strategic frameworks. This critical shortcoming can be carried over to any replacement system, as seen in countries like Iraq, Afghanistan, post-Yugoslavia states, and Lebanon following destructive wars.

Reconstruction experiences in Iraq, Lebanon, and parts of post-Yugoslavia have shown that relying on hasty, reactionary decisions by newly formed governments to address immediate needs—without embedding them in mid- to long-term strategic plans—is a waste of resources and efforts. Such an approach often creates economic difficulties that compound over time.

Given that economic infrastructure is the most critical component of any economic system's performance in terms of efficiency, reliability, and sustainability—and with over 60% of Syria’s economic infrastructure completely or partially destroyed—the formulation of a reliable and adaptable **Roadmap** is the first and most essential step in the reconstruction process.

2 Objective

The purpose of this project is to establish a methodology for strategic future planning based on scientific and objective principles as a standard approach for any government leading the state. This includes initiating emergency and short-term reconstruction policies within a well-studied and goal-oriented roadmap that encompasses medium- and long-term future strategies. Such an approach ensures the continuity of development and progress in a manner that aligns with the challenges of the modern era and the complexities and fluctuations of global, regional, and national markets.

3 Methodology

The methodology broadly involves analyzing different options for reconstructing the country within overlapping future timeframes. For instance, plans can be developed for the following periods: one year, two years, five years, ten years, twenty years, and fifty years after 2025 (see Figure 1). Reconstruction options will be analyzed and quantitatively and qualitatively described, then compared using the **Scenario Approach** methodology. This approach develops internally consistent scenarios as representations of potential future developments.

This requires compiling a wide range of assumptions related to the drivers of the national economy, such as economic growth and development, demographic composition and distribution, lifestyle changes, technological choices, economic policies, security concerns, international and regional market dynamics, investment availability, and political conditions.

Given Syria's situation, with over 10 million displaced people either internally or abroad, the impact of returning displaced individuals to their original or new areas is a critical factor for short- and medium-term planning.

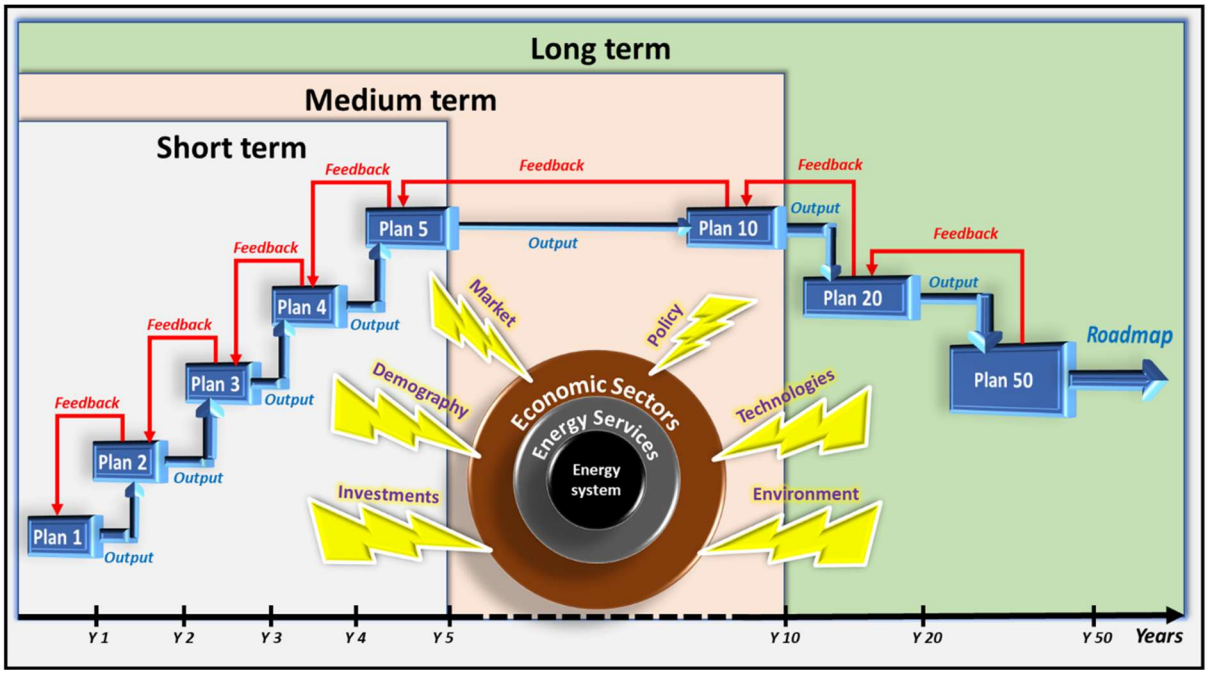

Figure 1, A schematic diagram of the proposed model to be developed for different future timeframes.

4 Importance of the Project

This project will serve as a model or guide for other countries that have suffered significant destruction, such as Libya, Yemen, Lebanon, and others around the world.

Unfortunately, most nations facing similar circumstances have begun reconstruction processes based on short-term policies and urgent plans driven purely by political motives and lacking a long-term strategic vision. This has often led to a massive waste of investments and efforts, as some of these investments were later deemed ineffective in the long run. Consequently, these approaches failed to adequately reestablish a stable and sustainable economy, as witnessed in Iraq, Afghanistan, and post-Yugoslavia.

Thus, having a coherent and consistent roadmap for Syria's reconstruction will ensure greater success and provide safeguards against sliding into similar crises.

The destruction in Syria extends beyond economic and organizational structures—it has deeply fractured Syrian society. The international conflict over Syria, compounded by the Assad regime's divisive tactics, has exploited and amplified divisions among the country's social components. This has also severely damaged what can be termed Syria's "human infrastructure."

Rebuilding Syria's social and human bonds depends on the performance of its economic system. Economic disparities and the widespread poverty at catastrophic levels fuel social crises, which in Syria often manifest in sectarian, ethnic, or political alignments. This was evident after the 2011 Syrian revolution and worsened due to conflicting reconciliations among influential nations during that time. These factors facilitated and deepened societal disintegration, fueled by divisive media campaigns led by various parties involved in the conflict.

Therefore, economic reconstruction—rooted in establishing a strong infrastructure capable of driving and sustaining development—is a prerequisite for reshaping the social and national contract. This, in turn, lays the groundwork for social and human development, which constitutes Syria's true capital and key to future success.

The scale of destruction presents an opportunity: the reconstruction process will essentially start from scratch. This avoids dealing with the legacy of previous economic infrastructure issues in Syria, offering a unique chance to adopt a fresh and strategic vision.

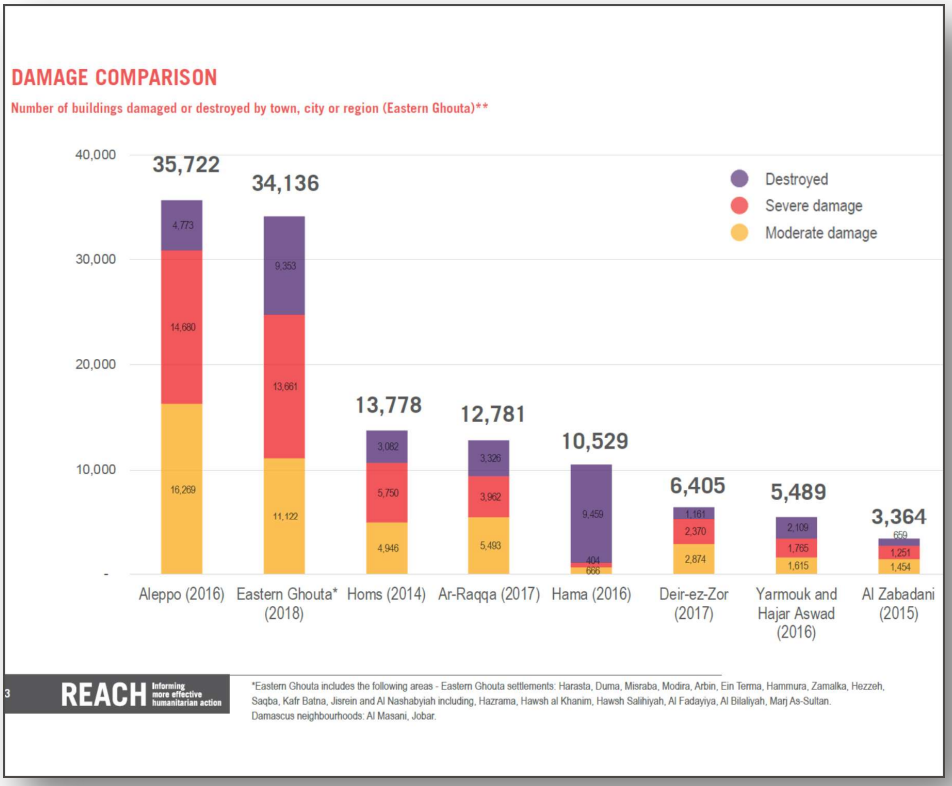

Figure 2, A comparison of destruction levels, showing the number of buildings damaged by region.

5 Work Tracks and Sectors

The project will focus on the most critical infrastructure sectors necessary to build a strong, sustainable, and efficient economy:

1. Housing and Urban Distribution Sector
2. Energy Sector
3. Transportation Sector
4. Water Sector
5. Social Sector

5.1 Housing and Urban Distribution Sector

Over decades, Syrian cities and villages expanded chaotically, leading to imbalanced population distribution relative to resources and services. This created densely populated major cities surrounded by impoverished neighborhoods, similar to many other developing countries.

Despite the pain and hardship caused by population displacement, it has provided an opportunity to rethink urban distribution between provinces, cities, and rural areas in a way that is economically and socially effective. This requires developing a bold roadmap to adjust

population distribution based on social and economic interests, rather than sectarian, ethnic, or tribal considerations.

Such a strategy necessitates opening a balanced and constructive social dialogue to ensure public acceptance of these plans. Gaining public trust is essential, though this approach may face significant challenges due to a current lack of trust. Planning may need to extend over longer timeframes to rebuild this trust within Syrian society.

5.2 Energy Sector

The national energy system consists of four primary sectors:

- Extraction and Supply: Fossil fuels like oil and natural gas, renewable energy, and imports.
- Generation and Transformation: Power generation stations, oil refineries, etc.
- Transmission and Distribution: Networks for electricity, natural gas, and more.
- Consumption: Industrial, residential, service, and transportation sectors.

Studying the energy sector requires analyzing and evaluating all economic components of the national economy, as well as the current socio-economic and demographic realities. Future changes, technological advancements, state policies, and regional and global market trends must also be considered.

The project views other economic infrastructure as part of the demand side and will preliminarily evaluate scenarios for other economic infrastructures. This includes analyzing demographic and social conditions and possible government policies.

Strategically planning Syria's future energy system will serve as the central model for the reconstruction roadmap. This is because the energy system is the backbone of any economic system, interacting dynamically with all other sectors.

5.3 Transportation Sector

Like other sectors, transportation in Syria has suffered from decades of haphazard planning and construction. Global experience shows that Syria requires an extensive transportation network that effectively meets population, economic, and service needs.

Syria needs to begin building a wide railway network that connects provinces, cities, and economic hubs. Experiences from other nations highlight that railway systems are the foundation of effective economic development, despite their high initial construction costs.

Additionally, investing in highways capable of accommodating future growth is a fundamental requirement that should proceed in parallel. Building urban transportation networks in major cities, especially those heavily damaged, is another priority that must be addressed before embarking on large-scale reconstruction projects.

5.4 Water Sector

Before the conflict, Syria's water distribution network suffered from a loss rate of up to 25%, coupled with an imbalance in water resource allocation relative to population concentrations. Water resources have long posed significant challenges for the entire region.

Rebuilding the water distribution network will require extensive and precise planning, leveraging international best practices for efficient resource utilization.

The challenge of ensuring potable water and securing water for productive sectors may also necessitate establishing desalination plants to support agriculture and other economic activities.

5.5 Social Sector

The social infrastructure—schools, hospitals, public housing, and community centers—plays a critical role in human capital development and social well-being. Robust education and healthcare systems contribute to a skilled and healthy workforce, which is essential for economic growth. Social infrastructure also fosters social cohesion, improves quality of life, and attracts businesses and investments.

Ensuring that health and education services are provided to all citizens according to the highest standards and free of charge, alongside establishing public housing infrastructure, represents the most crucial step toward ensuring Syria's reconstruction is sustainable and prosperous. This foundation can significantly reduce poverty, which, in turn, minimizes the socio-economic disparities that could lead to further challenges in the future.

5.6 Ownership and Responsibility for These Sectors

One of the most significant risks and mistakes made by many countries, including Western European nations, lies in chaotic privatization policies, often driven by corruption. For Syria, it is essential that the public or governmental sector maintains a share of no less than 70% in the aforementioned infrastructure sectors, ensuring the delivery of essential services for several reasons:

1. **Balanced Growth**: Privatization of infrastructure sectors in many countries, including Western Europe and the United States, has not resulted in equitable growth for individuals. Instead, it has disproportionately benefited the private sector, widening the

gap between the wealthy minority and the impoverished majority. This has led to ongoing economic, political, and social crises since the late 1990s.

2. **High Investment Costs**: Infrastructure requires massive investments that may not yield significant profits in the short term. However, public-sector control ensures long-term profitability while attracting private sector investments and establishing a resilient economic foundation.
3. **Private Sector Limitations**: These conditions are typically unattractive to private entities, which often seek high returns in both the short and long term. In cases where initial government compensation was provided, the outcomes failed to meet expectations.

6 Work Methodology

The project relies on building semi-independent models for each studied timeframe. This allows for comparisons between solutions tailored to specific time horizons and those integrated across all periods, creating a feedback loop to refine results between different models (see Figure 1).

The methodology also involves dividing Syria into several regions based on geographical, demographic, economic, and developmental distribution. This ensures that the vast differences between Syrian regions are taken into account and provides a more cohesive and realistic vision. This regional division also allows for more accurate cost assessments and improved infrastructure performance in sectors like transportation and the distribution networks for energy and water.

The project will use engineering and mathematical modeling tools accredited by scientific institutions. These tools will help create models that are adaptable and expandable over subsequent years, allowing them to accommodate unforeseen changes. Additionally, these tools offer a vital means of optimizing solutions and scenarios within defined constraints outlined in the models.

7 Project Phases

Figure 3, Diagram of the project phases.

7.1 Phase 1: Defining Objectives, Drivers, and Study Framework

- **Setting Objectives and Timeframes for Each Sector**:
  Define objectives according to national and regional priorities within each economic sector. For instance, prioritizing cost-effective solutions that ensure infrastructure efficiency.
- **Determining Sector and Regional Priorities**:
  Some areas of Syria have suffered greater destruction than others, and some have been neglected by the previous regime for extended periods. Prioritization must consider these disparities.
- **Regional Division**:
  The country will be divided into multiple model regions based on the degree of infrastructure damage (focusing primarily on final energy consumption, housing reconstruction, and service infrastructure development).
- **Defining Constraints and Requirements for Each Sector**:
  Identify and outline the necessary constraints and policies. For example, implement energy, food, and water security strategies to ensure that imports do not exceed 30% of total demand for these resources. Additionally, adhere to international environmental protection commitments over the medium and long term.

7.2 Phase 2: Data Collection

- Collect necessary project data and information from various local and international sources. These will undergo validation, comparison, and categorization before being

consolidated into a single database. The data will include historical records to provide insights into Syria's economic, social, demographic, and environmental developments, as well as current data reflecting the state of the country.

- Assessing and estimating the damage to Syria's infrastructure is challenging and often imprecise due to the current situation. However, this is an essential step for building a reliable database and designing future models and scenarios. Inputs will rely on data and estimates from international institutions and, where possible, direct local sources.
- Data collection will face significant uncertainty. Syria's data was already unreliable and inaccurate before the crisis, and the situation has worsened. Limited data availability and quality must be supplemented with external assumptions, adding another layer of uncertainty. This phase will likely be the most challenging in developing scenarios and deriving results.

7.3 Phase 3: Designing Future Scenarios

- Develop various scenarios for future changes based on economic, technical, and social criteria at national and international levels. Cooperation with regional partners and global market trends will also be considered.
- Key Questions for Scenario Design:
    - How will Syria's population grow and distribute geographically?
    - How will Syria's economy grow or shift?
    - What are the urgent, short-term projects that must be addressed within the first few years, and how can they be incorporated into a strategic plan?
    - What constraints will the Syrian government prioritize? For example, cost-efficiency, environmental protection, rebuilding the most affected areas, etc.
    - What are the funding sources? What are the upper investment limits, particularly in the initial years?
    - How will displaced people be redistributed, and at what rates? Will they return to their homes, and if so, when? Could a plan for improved population redistribution be proposed? This question is critical, given Syria's unique situation where an estimated 40% of the population has been displaced.
    - Parallel to population redistribution, how will industrial and service hubs be distributed?

7.4 Phase 4: Mathematical Modeling

- Use reliable and specialized modeling tools to build mathematical models. These tools will analyze results for different future timeframes and identify optimal pathways by integrating various operational scenarios.

- For instance, a model for the energy system would include levels such as:
    - **Energy Sources**: By type, including trade and primary energy supply.
    - **Conversion**: Power generation, oil refining, and infrastructure for energy transport and distribution.
    - **Final Energy and Demand**: Demand for energy use in sectors such as industry, agriculture, residential, and services.
- Each level will be described based on energy forms (fuel types) and their prices, available technologies (e.g., power plants, refineries, electrical grids, gas pipelines), and their costs, efficiency, and reliability. On the demand side, economic sectors will be classified based on their technologies, efficiency, and costs, along with government subsidies and pricing policies.

7.5 Review, Evaluation, and Verification of Results

The process of review, evaluation, and verification of results is a crucial step to ensure the accuracy of outputs, their alignment with current realities, and their ability to reflect future possibilities reliably. This process aims to account for a wide range of uncertainties associated with the future.

These operations are carried out through digital and mathematical verification tools, in addition to assessments provided by local and international experts, enhancing the credibility and precision of the results.

7.6 Phase 5: Results and Final Reports

Extract results, interpret findings, and compile the final report in both Arabic and English.

8 Estimated Duration and Required Resources

The first year will address Syria's urgent situation and the need for immediate decisions. However, the project must continue for subsequent years to enhance all aspects, including data, information, mathematical modeling, future scenarios, and results.

Such studies require regular, periodic reviews to improve their accuracy and efficiency. These reviews will allow for the integration of newly available data and adaptation to unforeseen developments.

9 National Efforts and International Cooperation

9.1 National Efforts

The physical reconstruction process in Syria must be accompanied by a comprehensive rebuilding of the national social fabric. Before the 2011 revolution, Syrians endured decades of authoritarian rule characterized by systemic corruption. Over the past 13 years, they have suffered even more as Syria became a battleground for external powers. These forces exploited and deepened divisions along sectarian, religious, ethnic, political, and ideological lines.

Rebuilding Syria's society requires the following steps to restore unity and capacity:

1. **Grassroots Reconciliation**:
   Syrians must work to overcome the burdens of the past and the vertical fractures that pose significant risks to future development. This process should be gradual and implemented through national frameworks that include media, education, and constructive social dialogue.

2. **Building Trust**:
   Declining trust between citizens, governments, and institutions is a global issue, but in Syria, this challenge is particularly acute. Grassroots reconciliation must be accompanied by efforts to rebuild trust among Syrian communities and between citizens and their government and institutions.

3. **Harnessing Human Potential**:
   Syrians are now driven by dreams and determination to reclaim their homeland. This represents a substantial human capital that must be systematically and institutionally utilized in the reconstruction process. Millions of displaced Syrians, both internally and abroad, bring diverse and valuable expertise that can contribute significantly to rebuilding efforts.

Achieving these goals requires a foundation of democracy, human rights, and transparency, alongside the establishment of strong institutional frameworks. Additionally, a new vision for public discourse and societal dialogue must be developed to foster unity.

Caution must be exercised to avoid emotional or populist tendencies. Many Syrians emotionally support groups or figures who delivered the final blow to the Assad regime, such as the "Liberation Front" and its leader Ahmad Al-Sharaa. However, these emotions alone are insufficient to build trust or launch grassroots reconciliation. Syria must move beyond traditional, often emotionally charged, approaches toward modern strategies informed by the experiences of other nations, particularly those in the region and the West, which are grappling with the rise of populist extremism.

10 International Cooperation

Post-Assad Syria faces significant challenges in security, politics, and economics. The factors that fueled the 13-year conflict in Syria have not disappeared, and the risk of external interference to shape Syria's future remains high. Similar challenges have plagued countries like Iraq, Lebanon, Sudan, and Yemen.

A coordinated international coalition led by Western powers, in partnership with regional countries, is essential to establish a stable, modern Syria capable of sustainable development.

However, there is a risk of repeating the same mistakes made in Iraq, post-Yugoslavia states, Lebanon, and even Greece. Assistance based solely on narrow geopolitical and material interests has failed in all these cases.

Syria offers Western countries a unique opportunity to demonstrate that peacebuilding and effective assistance for crisis-stricken nations can succeed. This requires abandoning a purely market-driven perspective and avoiding support structures that prioritize private sector profits over meaningful state-building.

While international aid may seem unprofitable initially, a medium- to long-term perspective will yield political and material benefits for nations that reconsider how they manage their foreign interests.

11 Conclusion

This paper aims to present a roadmap that lays the foundation for a unified and self-reliant Syria, where sustainable infrastructure and social cohesion pave the way for future prosperity.

Achieving this vision requires coordinated efforts among Syrians themselves, based on social trust and a scientifically grounded strategic vision. It also depends on meaningful support from the international community, which must align its interests with those of a modern Syrian state. This collaboration is essential for overcoming challenges and building a future free from the mistakes of the past.

Although such efforts should have started years ago to anticipate Syria's transition from chaos and war to stability, it is better late than never. The time to act is now. Together, we can rebuild Syria as a beacon of resilience, hope, and opportunity for all its citizens, while fostering constructive regional and international relations that benefit both Syria and the global community.