



From Conflict to Reconciliation: Conflict Resolution Approaches and State-building in Syria

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Abstract

Contemporary Conflict Studies increasingly recognizes that the termination of violence, while necessary, is insufficient for durable peace. Post-conflict transformation is better understood as a multidimensional process encompassing conflict settlement, conflict resolution, and reconciliation, each entailing distinct analytical and policy implications. Syria offers a critical case in this regard, where deeply entrenched societal cleavages, protracted armed conflict, and persistent institutional fragility have collectively perpetuated recurrent cycles of violence. Although the Syrian civil war has formally ended, the country remains closer to conflict settlement than substantive conflict resolution, with state-building yet to be fully integrated into a broader process of political transformation and reconciliation. This study argues that durable peace in Syria requires the integration of state-building with conflict resolution and reconciliation through a framework that combines realist and psychological needs perspectives. It first conceptualizes the distinctions among conflict settlement, conflict resolution, and reconciliation, and then applies these theoretical perspectives to Syria's post-war trajectory. The analysis demonstrates that moving beyond conflict settlement requires not merely the restoration of order, but the construction of legitimate, inclusive, and capable institutions capable of addressing structural grievances, accommodating competing identities, and reducing the risk of cycles of violence. The study concludes that integrating conflict resolution and reconciliation into state-building is essential to transforming Syria's fragile post-war settlement into durable peace and a more stable regional order.

Keywords: *Conflict Settlement; Conflict Resolution; Reconciliation; Syria; Realism; Psychological Needs-Based Theories; State-Building*

Introduction

In the aftermath of intrastate or regional armed conflicts, simply ending hostilities is no longer regarded as sufficient to achieve sustainable peace. Experience from numerous conflict settings demonstrates that violence often re-emerges shortly after a ceasefire or evolves into new forms through its interaction with political, social, economic, and security-related factors. Consequently, the termination of violence must be followed by timely and sustained efforts to address the underlying causes of conflict and resolve the issues that gave rise to it. Otherwise, unresolved grievances may reignite violence, frequently becoming intertwined with new sources of instability. As conflicts become increasingly complex, protracted, and deeply entrenched, their resolution becomes considerably more difficult. Such dynamics pose serious challenges not only to the domestic political stability of conflict-affected states but also to regional peace and security. Ensuring the termination of armed conflict, addressing its root causes, and building a genuine peace have become central objectives of contemporary peacebuilding efforts. Achieving these objectives, however, requires a clear understanding of the distinct phases of conflict transformation. In this regard, the conceptual and theoretical distinctions among conflict settlement, conflict resolution, and reconciliation are of particular importance. Although these concepts are often used interchangeably they refer to different stages, objectives, and mechanisms within the broader peace process. Distinguishing among them is therefore essential for understanding how peace processes evolve and for identifying the appropriate sequencing of strategies and policy interventions.

One of the most significant contemporary examples of conflict, conflict resolution, and state-building is Syria. Following approximately thirteen years of civil war and armed conflict, the country faces profound political,

economic, and societal challenges that must be addressed to achieve sustainable peace. The enduring legacy of the French Mandate, a political history marked by repeated military coups, and deep sectarian divisions have made post-conflict reconciliation, conflict resolution, and state-building particularly difficult. Having consolidated both its domestic and international legitimacy, the post-Assad administration led by Ahmed al-Sharaa is now confronted with the formidable task of initiating a comprehensive peace process through which the reconstruction of country's political, social, and institutional foundations.

This article argues that the current situation in Syria should not be understood as one of conflict resolution, but rather as a stage of conflict settlement, in which active hostilities have largely ceased without resolving the structural drivers of violence. Building on both the theoretical literature and recent developments in Syria, the study contends that achieving durable peace and long-term security requires not only a transition from conflict settlement to conflict resolution but also the simultaneous reconstruction of effective and legitimate state institutions. The analysis focuses on Syria's post-civil war period and examines this process through the interconnected perspectives of conflict resolution, reconciliation, and state-building. Recognizing the inherent fragility of the conflict settlement phase, the article emphasizes that initiating a genuine conflict resolution process while concurrently advancing state-building efforts is indispensable for establishing lasting peace and fostering societal reconciliation.

Methodologically, the study adopts a conceptual literature review and applies the principal theoretical approaches to conflict resolution, reconciliation, and state-building to the Syrian case. It maintains that Syria has not yet entered a genuine conflict resolution phase but remains in a stage characterized primarily by the cessation and containment of violence. Accordingly, the article seeks to contribute to the existing literature by demonstrating that progress toward conflict resolution depends upon the parallel development of effective state institutions capable of sustaining peace and governance. To this end, the article first examines the theoretical distinction between conflict settlement and conflict resolution, drawing upon the foundational contributions of John Burton and subsequent scholarship. It then reviews how the literature has expanded these concepts by placing increasing emphasis on reconciliation as an integral component of sustainable peace. Finally, the article evaluates the contemporary Syrian context and discusses the institutional and political steps required to facilitate conflict resolution alongside the reconstruction of state institutions.

Conceptual Distinctions in Conflict Studies

The first systematic conceptual distinction in Conflict Studies was introduced by John Burton in his seminal 1969 work, in which he differentiated between conflict settlement and conflict resolution (Burton, 1969, pp. 177–227). Burton argues that the termination or containment of violence constitutes only the initial stage of the peace process and should subsequently be followed by efforts aimed at resolving the underlying conflict. Building upon Burton's framework, leading scholars such as Kelman (2004, pp. 111–124) and Rouhana (2004, pp. 173–187) have conceptualized contemporary peace processes as comprising three interrelated yet analytically distinct stages: conflict settlement, conflict resolution, and reconciliation. Although all three stages constitute essential components of peacebuilding and are closely interconnected, each possesses distinct objectives, mechanisms, and expected outcomes. Accordingly, they should not be regarded as alternative approaches. Indeed, Kelman (2008, p. 18) argues that these stages do not necessarily unfold in a rigid chronological sequence; rather, they frequently overlap and reinforce one another. Nevertheless, there is broad agreement that sustainable peace requires conflict resolution ultimately to evolve into a process of reconciliation (Kelman, 1998, p. 37).

Conflict settlement operates primarily at the level of interests. At this stage, the principal objective is to bring organized violence to an end while initiating political efforts to manage and negotiate the conflict (Kelman, 2004, 2006). This phase is characterized by the predominance of power politics, with third parties and international organizations frequently intervening to facilitate or guarantee a cessation of hostilities. Because the immediate priority is to terminate violence rather than transform relationships, neither significant changes in the relationship between the parties nor shifts in societal attitudes toward the conflict are expected. Consequently, conflict settlement largely reflects the assumptions of realist theory, where negotiations are driven by considerations of power, security, and the maximization of interests. Political agreements at this stage often depend upon the support or mediation of regional powers, major powers, or international organizations. Given the recent experience of violent confrontation, it is unrealistic to expect the parties to develop mutual trust, overcome entrenched hostility, or engage in genuine reconciliation during this initial phase.

By contrast, conflict resolution takes place at the level of relationships and extends beyond the pursuit of immediate political interests and negotiated settlements (Kelman, 2004, 2006). Although concerns associated with power and strategic interests remain relevant, conflict resolution seeks to establish the foundations of a durable

and self-sustaining peace rather than merely maximizing short-term political gains. This requires identifying and addressing the root causes of conflict as well as the underlying needs of the parties involved. Such needs should not be understood exclusively in material terms but should also encompass intangible dimensions, including identity, security, recognition, and justice. While third parties may continue to facilitate negotiations, agreements reached during the conflict resolution process should fundamentally derive from the voluntary consent of the parties themselves rather than being externally imposed or maintained solely through international supervision. Voluntary acceptance of negotiated outcomes is widely regarded as an important indicator of the parties' genuine commitment to peace (Kelman, 2010, p. 2). At the same time, effective conflict resolution requires careful consideration of each party's needs, fears, constraints, and vulnerabilities. Only by acknowledging these mutual concerns can cooperative relationships emerge that accommodate the legitimate interests of all parties and provide a sustainable foundation for lasting peace.

The development of new relationships and cooperative partnerships requires the gradual establishment of trust between the conflicting parties. Such trust need not be based on principled commitments or personal affinity. Rather, a willingness to place pragmatic or functional trust in one another represents a significant progression beyond interactions governed solely by power politics or struggles for political dominance. Accordingly, even a minimal level of functional trust constitutes an essential prerequisite for advancing conflict resolution processes. Nevertheless, scholars disagree regarding the stage at which trust should be cultivated. Kelman (1998, p. 24) considers trust-building an integral component of the conflict resolution process, whereas Worthington and Drinkard (2000, p. 93) argue that genuine trust is more likely to emerge during the reconciliation phase. Regardless of its timing, the development of trust must also receive political, societal, and media support in order to gain legitimacy and acceptance among the broader public. The simultaneous advancement of these political, social, and psychological processes indicates that the relationship between the parties is beginning to undergo substantive transformation. In this regard, both Kelman (1999) and Lederach (1998) conceptualize conflict resolution itself as a process of relationship transformation.

Within the Conflict Studies literature, reconciliation represents the ultimate objective of sustainable peacebuilding. Although reconciliation has received increasing scholarly attention since the early 2000s, successful empirical examples remain relatively rare. While several cases are frequently cited as examples of reconciliation, the process is widely regarded as the most demanding stage of peacebuilding because it entails the highest normative expectations while simultaneously offering the lowest probability of renewed violence. According to Kelman (2010), reconciliation operates at the level of identities and should be understood as the outcome of a successful conflict resolution process. Although reconciliation may be viewed as the product of effective conflict resolution, it should equally be understood as a continuous and evolving process rather than a discrete endpoint. Conflict resolution and reconciliation should therefore not be conceptualized as alternative approaches. Instead, reconciliation builds upon conflict resolution, often overlapping with it through mutually reinforcing practices and objectives.

Moving beyond conflict resolution requires profound transformations in identity, accompanied by the establishment of mutual trust and the normalization of peaceful relationships. One of the principal conditions for such identity transformation is abandoning the negation of the other. This does not imply unconditional acceptance of the opposing group's demands, political positions, or historical narratives. Rather, it involves recognizing the opposing group as a legitimate party to the conflict and, to some extent, acknowledging the legitimacy of its collective identity (Kelman, 1999b). Reconciliation therefore requires not only preserving constructive attitudes developed during conflict resolution but also replacing adversarial perceptions with new norms and patterns of interaction that support peaceful coexistence.

Contrary to common assumptions, reconciliation does not require the weakening or abandonment of the parties' core identities. On the contrary, it seeks to strengthen collective identities in a more inclusive manner by eliminating exclusionary practices and the denial of others' legitimacy. Because identity possesses both an inherent social significance and a considerable potential to generate violence, it remains one of the most complex subjects of analysis within the social sciences. Indeed, one of the principal reasons reconciliation is so difficult to achieve is that it requires transformation at the level of collective identities. Groups that have experienced prolonged hostility and reciprocal violence are expected to reassess and gradually transform their perceptions of themselves and of one another following conflict resolution. Such transformation inevitably requires a number of normative and psychological shifts, particularly with respect to collective identities, which Kelman (2004, 2008) identifies as the most influential dimension of reconciliation.

The reconciliation process therefore requires the mutual recognition of the opposing group's humanity, the acknowledgment of its existence as a distinct community or nation, and a willingness to incorporate it into a shared social and political order. Equally important is the development of common moral foundations that affirm the necessity of peaceful coexistence, together with institutional mechanisms and frameworks that promote sustained cooperation. Reconciliation further requires confronting the legacy of the past and acknowledging responsibilities for previous acts of violence, both symbolically and materially. Importantly, reconciliation does not necessitate agreement on a single, shared historical narrative. Rather, it requires recognizing that different groups may legitimately maintain distinct historical experiences, collective memories, and interpretations of the past. The practical implementation of such transformations in collective identity is exceptionally demanding. Political leaders, educational institutions and curricula, historiography, economic cooperation initiatives, and both traditional and digital media all play indispensable roles in facilitating this transformation. It is precisely because reconciliation requires comprehensive societal change that successful empirical examples remain relatively uncommon.

Cases in which conflict settlement, conflict resolution, and reconciliation have all been successfully implemented in an integrated and sequential manner remain exceedingly rare. Consequently, the recurrence of conflict and the persistence of cycles of violence continue to characterize many post-conflict societies. Although these three processes need not always occur in a rigid chronological sequence, transition from conflict settlement to conflict resolution and, ultimately, to reconciliation is widely regarded as essential for preventing the re-emergence of violence. In practice, these stages may overlap, proceed in different sequences, or involve similar mechanisms. Nevertheless, a critical lesson from both theory and empirical experience is that when conflict resolution and reconciliation are delayed or neglected following the cessation of hostilities, unresolved issues frequently generate renewed legitimacy crises, increase the likelihood of conflict recurrence, and pose significant threats to both national and regional security.

Theoretical Approaches for Conflict Resolution and Reconciliation

There are multiple theoretical approaches to the concepts and processes discussed above. For many years, Realism has remained the dominant theoretical framework for understanding conflict. Likewise, the initial stage of conflict termination has traditionally been approached from a realist perspective. This is because the realist paradigm assumes that parties engage in conflict due to competition over scarce and tangible resources, their inability to share these resources, and the centrality of resource allocation to the maximization of gains. From this perspective, in international conflicts, disputes over natural resources such as minerals, valuable materials, water, and territory constitute the primary causes of conflict. Similarly, within states, the inability of identity groups to share economic, political, or commercial resources, or to reach agreements over sacred sites, emerges as fundamental sources of conflict. Accordingly, if conflicts arise because scarce and tangible resources cannot be shared, then durable solutions can be achieved by developing mechanisms for their equitable allocation. This perspective further assumes that rational actors, when acting on rational grounds, are capable of reaching agreements over resource distribution that they had previously failed to achieve.

While conflict termination has traditionally been dominated by realist theories, the conflict resolution and reconciliation literature since the early 2000s has increasingly emphasized the human needs or psychological needs approach, moving beyond the explanatory limits of realism (Kelman, 2004). According to this perspective, generally associated with Burton's pioneering work, explaining conflicts solely in terms of competing interests and the unequal distribution of tangible resources is insufficient. Rather, the underlying causes of conflict should be sought in threats directed at the parties' fundamental psychological needs (Burton, 1969). Although disputes over the allocation of scarce material resources remain important, conflicts cannot be fully resolved unless the threats to these basic psychological needs—and the emotions and motivations they generate—are effectively addressed.

Within the psychological needs approaches, intangible needs—including religious, ethnic, and national identities; ethical, national, and religious values; security, survival, existence, recognition, justice, dignity, respect, and the acknowledgment of one's identity and existence—are regarded as being at least as significant as tangible and scarce resources. The neglect of such intangible needs is therefore recognized as a potential source of conflict. At the same time, it should be emphasized that assessing the relative importance of these intangible needs is inherently difficult. Furthermore, feelings of humiliation experienced before or during a conflict may persist even after hostilities have ceased if they are not adequately transformed through reconciliation processes. Such unresolved humiliation can evolve into a desire for revenge, thereby deepening and prolonging conflict, obstructing peacebuilding efforts, and creating the conditions for cycles of violence (Frijda, 1994, pp. 263–289).

The psychological needs literature on reconciliation has increasingly converged around two influential theoretical perspectives: the socioemotional approach and the instrumental approach. The socioemotional approach places primary emphasis on the cycle of apology and forgiveness (Nadler & Shnabel, 2008, pp. 37–56). According to this perspective, it is essential for conflicting groups to engage in dialogue regarding past wrongdoings and to acknowledge actions perceived as unjust or harmful (Nadler & Shnabel, 2008, pp. 37–56). Building upon this process, the reciprocal exchange of apologies and forgiveness constitutes the core mechanism of reconciliation. From this viewpoint, achieving conflict resolution and reconciliation in the present requires first confronting the past. Accordingly, both legal and historical mechanisms—such as truth and reconciliation commissions, and historical inquiry commissions—are regarded as essential instruments for uncovering and addressing past injustices. By participating in these processes, the parties are expected to begin apologizing to and forgiving one another, ultimately leading to mutual forgiveness, social integration, and reconciliation over the long term (Nadler & Shnabel, 2008, pp. 37–56). The socioemotional approach maintains that this process provides the most viable foundation for establishing durable peace in societies that continue to coexist after violent conflict. Through the reciprocal recognition of identities and the development of trust-based relationships, former adversaries can rebuild social cohesion and prevent the recurrence of violence (Nadler & Shnabel, 2008, pp. 37–56). Consequently, groups that successfully progress to the reconciliation stage are considered less likely to relapse into cycles of violence and more capable of sustaining peaceful coexistence and long-term social integration (Mitchell, 2014, p. 277).

Psychological needs theory posits that perceived threats to identity, together with persistent distrust toward former adversaries, constitute core emotional impediments to both conflict resolution and reconciliation. Consequently, identity transformation requires the development of repeated interactions and relationships capable of reducing these emotional barriers (Nadler, 2002). Reconciliation has therefore also been conceptualized as a process of trust-building through reciprocal behaviors that foster interpersonal confidence (Worthington & Drinkard, 2000, p. 93). Compared with the instrumental approach, the socioemotional approach places considerably greater emphasis on overcoming these emotional obstacles through the reciprocal cycle of apology and forgiveness (Tavuchis, 1991). This process is also expected to restore victims' sense of justice, agency, and empowerment, which are often severely undermined by violent conflicts (Tavuchis, 1991). At the same time, the apology–forgiveness cycle not only empowers victims but also enables perpetrators to repair identities damaged by ethical transgressions, alleviate feelings of guilt, and facilitate their moral rehabilitation (Gobodo-Madikizela, 2003, p. 117). From this perspective, victims' willingness to forgive perpetrators is likewise regarded as ethically meaningful (Exline & Baumeister, 2000, pp. 133–155). As illustrated by the case of South Africa, this approach considers truth-telling, perpetrators' acknowledgment of responsibility through apology, and victims' willingness to forgive as the fundamental pillars of reconciliation (Tutu, 1999). Ultimately, the overarching objective of the socioemotional approach is the achievement of long-term social integration (Hayner, 2001).

The second perspective on reconciliation is the instrumental approach, which, unlike the socioemotional perspective, advocates focusing on the present rather than revisiting the past. Accordingly, the apology–forgiveness cycle is not regarded as the primary mechanism of reconciliation (Nadler & Shnabel, 2008, pp. 37–56). Instead, this approach prioritizes the promotion of practical cooperation under contemporary conditions by developing collaborative initiatives in areas such as trade, education, tourism, agriculture, environmental protection, media, healthcare, and sports. These cooperative initiatives are expected to be continuous, institutionalized, and repeatedly implemented over time (Nadler & Shnabel, 2008, p. 42). Sustained cooperation, consistent interaction, and long-term communication are believed to facilitate trust-building, transform identities and perceptions, and ultimately contribute to reconciliation (Nadler & Shnabel, 2008, p. 42). The development of practical and mutually beneficial objectives, together with persistent and consistent communication, is therefore regarded as essential. Repeated cooperation and ongoing interaction are expected to gradually transform relationships characterized by distrust, reshape conflicting identities, and foster the development of mutual trust (Kriesberg, 2000, pp. 182–188).

The instrumental approach also closely aligns with the contact hypothesis in social psychology, which posits that cooperative intergroup contact facilitates the development of shared goals and contributes to the reduction of intergroup prejudice (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2005; Sherif et al., 1961). Accordingly, sustained cooperative engagement is regarded as particularly important in educational settings for fostering mutual trust and improving intergroup relations. As parties participate in collaborative initiatives, it is essential that they pursue common and functionally relevant objectives in areas such as environmental protection, agriculture, and public health (Lederach, 1997). To overcome the suspicion and distrust generated by past violence and to cultivate trust-based relationships,

such cooperative activities must be institutionalized, repeated over time, and sustained in the long term (Kriesberg, 2000).

Furthermore, these theoretical approaches should not necessarily be viewed as mutually exclusive; rather, they may represent successive phases within the broader reconciliation process. In this regard, the socioemotional approach is arguably most effective when preceded by the instrumental approach. Establishing trust through cooperative initiatives provides the necessary foundation upon more demanding reconciliation mechanisms such as apology and forgiveness, truth-seeking processes, and ultimately social integration (Nadler & Liviatan, 2004; Nadler, 2002; Lindskold, 1978).

Another critical consideration in post-conflict settings concerns whether former adversaries will continue to coexist within the same state or geographical region. Equally important is the extent to which these groups are expected to maintain interaction in the aftermath of conflict. Where groups are geographically separated or are unlikely to coexist following the cessation of hostilities, instrumental approaches may be sufficient for promoting trust-building and peacebuilding. However, in cases such as Syria or Rwanda, where formerly conflicting communities continue to live alongside one another, the literature suggests that while reconciliation should initially be grounded in instrumental forms of cooperation, durable peace ultimately requires the subsequent implementation of socioemotional approaches aimed at fostering social integration and genuine reconciliation.

Once theoretical approaches developed within Conflict Studies are translated into practice, the conceptual distinctions that characterize the literature become considerably more difficult to maintain. In conflict-affected environments, the various stages of conflict transformation frequently overlap, and different interventions often target similar political and societal domains simultaneously. Consequently, the principal value of conceptual clarification lies not in imposing rigid boundaries between approaches but in facilitating the identification of appropriate sequencing, strategic priorities, and context-specific areas of intervention. Moreover, mechanisms that are theoretically regarded as conducive to reconciliation may, under certain conditions, become sources of contention in practice. For example, the apology–forgiveness cycle may be particularly vulnerable to political manipulation in contexts where mutual distrust remains pervasive (Nadler & Liviatan, 2004, pp. 216–235). Determining which theoretical approach is most appropriate, under what conditions, at what stage of the reconciliation process, and within which social and political context, therefore constitutes a critical prerequisite for the successful implementation of conflict resolution and reconciliation initiatives.

Syria's Post-Conflict Trajectory: State-Building and Approaches to Conflict Resolution

Syria's modern history contains several critical turning points that have profoundly shaped its social and political structure. In 1920, under the French Mandate administration, a military academy was established. Unlike the relatively privileged Sunni Arab majority, which had occupied a dominant position during the Ottoman period, the academy attracted members of relatively marginalized and economically disadvantaged minority communities, particularly Arab Alawites (Nusayris), who increasingly enrolled their children in military education. Over time, Arab Alawites emerged as a highly influential group within the Syrian military establishment (Cleveland, 2009, pp. 217–228). Following the establishment of the military academy and the gradual rise of Arab Alawite influence within the armed forces, a series of military coups beginning in 1949 marked the entry of minority groups into the country's political leadership for the first time. The military academy and subsequent coups represented a profound transformation in Syria's social and political elite structure; for the first time after the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire, political authority in the country shifted away from the Sunni majority and became increasingly concentrated among minority groups, particularly Arab Alawites.

Between 1970 and 2000, Hafez al-Assad consolidated the political dominance of the Arab Alawite community and his family by securing support from other Shi'a minority groups and Christian communities (Cleveland, 2009, pp. 397–407). The subsequent rule of his son, Bashar al-Assad, was characterized by increasing political and economic instability, as well as the expansion of opposition movements beyond the capacity of conventional coercive measures to contain them. Although the Assad regime attempted to preserve its authority through military means, supported by external allies such as Iran and Russia, Bashar al-Assad ultimately left the country in 2024 after seeking asylum in Russia.

Conflict resolution and reconciliation have historically had limited presence in Syria's political trajectory. However, following the conclusion of the thirteen-year civil war, the establishment of a functioning state alongside comprehensive conflict resolution and social reconciliation efforts appears to be the only viable pathway toward achieving durable peace. Given Syria's demographic composition, approximately 74 percent Sunni Muslims, 13 percent Shi'a Muslims (including Arab Alawites, Ismailis, and other Shi'a groups), 3 percent Druze, and 10 percent

Christians (Fleck, 2025), sustainable governance depends not on whether a majority or minority group controls political power, but rather on the establishment of an inclusive state that governs all communities equally and avoids sectarian-based political practices.

Sectarian governance creates structural inequalities when political authorities restrict access to political, economic, and commercial opportunities based on communal identities. From a realist perspective, such exclusion reflects the failure to achieve an equitable distribution of scarce and tangible resources. When these forms of exclusion are institutionalized through sectarian identities, they also constitute a direct threat to fundamental identity needs, as conceptualized within human needs theories. Since ethnic and sectarian identities represent core ascriptive identities acquired by birth, they can rapidly become central drivers of mobilization and conflict escalation.

The opposition Sunni Islamist group Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), led by Ahmed al-Sharaa, which brought an end to the Assad regime, has emerged as the only actor with the potential to obtain political legitimacy and assume governing authority in Syria. Ahmed al-Sharaa has articulated the roadmap for the new Syria around three central principles: "a constitution, pluralism, and territorial integrity." Accordingly, on 13 March 2025, a transitional constitution was promulgated, with a projected duration of five years. The transitional constitutional framework emphasizes a presidential system, the preservation of territorial integrity, and the recognition of Islamic law as a principal source of legislation. It further highlights the protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms in accordance with international conventions and humanitarian norms, judicial independence, and the protection of families, women, and children. In addition, it guarantees freedom of religious belief and worship for different communities and social groups (Gritten, 2025).

However, developments following the regime change demonstrate that Syria's current trajectory represents primarily a process of conflict cessation and de-escalation rather than a comprehensive resolution of underlying conflicts. The tensions with Arab Alawite communities in December 2024 and January 2025, the armed clashes in July between Druze groups supported by Israel and Arab tribal forces, as well as ongoing tensions with the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), reveal the existence of multiple potential conflict fault lines within the country. Nevertheless, the HTS leadership's stated commitment during the constitutional process to maintaining equal distance from all communities and assuming responsibility for the security of all groups constitutes a significant and potentially constructive development.

Yet, while consolidating its own political legitimacy, the new administration must simultaneously undertake the complex tasks of state-building, conflict resolution, and social reconciliation processes that have historically remained absent from Syria's political experience. The challenges facing the new government are extensive, requiring long-term institutional transformation and sustained political commitment. At the same time, significant uncertainty remains regarding the capacity and willingness of the new leadership to address these multidimensional challenges.

Several fundamental questions therefore remain unresolved. In a society where sectarian divisions have been profoundly intensified by both the Assad regime and the civil war, will the new administration be capable of initiating a genuine process of conflict resolution and reconciliation? Can opposition factions and designated terrorist organizations be persuaded to disarm? How will the integration of the Syrian military and various armed groups be achieved? What mechanisms will facilitate the return of refugees and internally displaced populations? How will Syria reconstruct its economic system, employment opportunities, state institutions, natural resource governance, infrastructure, healthcare system, financial sector, education system, and legal order? Will the country possess the institutional capacity to train a professional military, political bureaucracy and rebuild its human capital?

Furthermore, will a constitutional order based on free and inclusive elections be established in a manner that ensures equitable access to political and economic life for all communities? Most importantly, will Syria be able to achieve the ultimate objective of conflict resolution which is sustained interaction among sectarian and formerly antagonistic groups, social reconciliation, and a durable peace? The complexity of these questions demonstrates the profound difficulty of Syria's prospective transition and the magnitude of the challenges confronting the new administration.

Conflict Resolution and State-Building in Syria

From the perspective of the Conflict Studies literature, the trajectory of contemporary Syria is more accurately understood as one of conflict cessation and fragile de-escalation than as a substantive transition toward conflict resolution and reconciliation. This distinction is analytically consequential. The cessation of hostilities does not,

in itself, constitute a resolution of the underlying political, institutional, and societal antagonisms that generated and sustained the conflict. Rather, it may mark the onset of a particularly volatile interregnum in which realist dynamics continue to shape political interactions, competing groups seek to secure and consolidate their respective positions, and the potential for renewed violence remains substantial. Where the termination of overt violence is not followed by meaningful processes of conflict resolution, reconciliation, and institutional transformation, peace remains inherently fragile and susceptible to reversal. The cessation of violence in Syria should therefore be regarded not as an end point, but as a necessary—yet insufficient—precondition for a broader process of peacebuilding. The country must simultaneously move beyond the mere management of violence toward a comprehensive process of conflict resolution, while embedding this process within a broader project of state-building and institutional consolidation. This requires more than the re-establishment of formal state structures; it entails the construction of legitimate, inclusive, and sufficiently capable institutions capable of managing societal cleavages, mediating competing interests, and regulating political contestation through non-violent mechanisms.

Accordingly, policies and practices undertaken in Syria, as well as those supported by regional and international actors, should be situated within an integrated framework of conflict resolution, reconciliation, peacebuilding, and state-building. Such an approach could create the institutional and political foundations for the emergence of a more coherent and consolidated state—one whose institutional configuration and political order cannot simply be restored from the pre-war period but must, to a significant extent, be reconstructed anew. The consolidation of such a state would, in turn, be critical to transforming the cessation of violence into a more durable and sustainable peace, both within Syria and across the wider regional environment. Regional and international engagement is consequently of paramount importance, not merely in sustaining the cessation of hostilities, but in supporting the long-term processes of institutional reconstruction, political accommodation, and societal reconciliation upon which sustainable peace ultimately depends.

In post-conflict settings, the reconstruction of institutional structures damaged or dismantled during hostilities constitutes a fundamental component of the broader peacebuilding agenda. Yet post-conflict institutional reconstruction cannot be reduced to the restoration of a pre-war institutional order. In many cases, the institutions that existed prior to the outbreak of violence were themselves characterized by political exclusion, weak administrative capacity, socioeconomic inequalities, limited state legitimacy, or deficient mechanisms of accountability. Indeed, the structural conditions that facilitate the emergence and persistence of violent conflict are often embedded within precisely these institutional deficiencies. Consequently, the end of armed conflict creates a dual imperative: not only must the material and institutional damage produced by violence be addressed, but the underlying structural conditions that contributed to the conflict must also be transformed. This dual task significantly complicates the transition from conflict termination to meaningful conflict resolution and reconciliation, as it requires simultaneously managing the immediate legacies of war and addressing the deeper institutional and societal grievances that preceded it.

This challenge is particularly salient in contexts where historical legacies exert a powerful influence on the possibilities and limitations of state-building. Institutional reconstruction does not take place within a political or historical vacuum. Rather, state-building processes are embedded within historically constituted patterns of political authority, social organization, economic relations, and institutional practice. These legacies can provide institutional resources and sources of continuity, while simultaneously constraining the range of politically feasible reforms. State-builders must therefore navigate a complex tension between institutional continuity and transformative reconstruction, operating within inherited structural constraints while attempting to establish institutions capable of responding to the demands of a post-conflict political order (Hinnebusch, 2020: 21).

Therefore, the reconstruction and consolidation of state institutions should be regarded not as a peripheral component of post-conflict recovery, but as a central pillar of conflict resolution, reconciliation, and sustainable peacebuilding. Durable peace requires more than the absence of organized violence; it depends upon the emergence of institutional arrangements capable of managing political competition, mediating societal grievances, allocating resources, and regulating conflict through legitimate and non-violent mechanisms. Accordingly, the consolidation of strong, accountable, and sufficiently inclusive state institutions represents a fundamental condition for transforming a fragile cessation of hostilities into a sustainable political order. In the Syrian context, this process should begin with the establishment of a minimum level of security and political order, followed by the progressive development and consolidation of political, economic, administrative, and judicial institutions capable of exercising legitimate authority across the country (Call and Wyeth, 2008; Ammitzboell and Blair, 2011; Center for Strategic and International Studies [CSIS] & Association of the United States Army [AUSA], 2002; Van Gennip, 2005).

Security provision is particularly consequential at the initial stage of this process because the restoration of a credible security environment constitutes the institutional and political foundation upon which subsequent state-building efforts depend. In this regard, HTS appears to have undertaken active measures aimed at containing localized violence and demonstrating its capacity to provide security across different regions and social constituencies. Its deployment of armed units to contain and de-escalate clashes between Druze groups and Arab tribes, for example, can be interpreted as an important attempt to prevent localized communal violence from escalating into broader patterns of instability (Donnison, Lukiv, Walker, 2025). Beyond its immediate security implications, such interventions also have broader implications for the legitimacy and consolidation of the emerging governing authority. The capacity to provide security, enforce order, and prevent the escalation of intercommunal violence is likely to constitute an important source of political legitimacy in a context where state authority remains contested and institutional capacity is still developing.

Nevertheless, the provision of security through coercive or centralized means should not be equated automatically with the establishment of legitimate and sustainable security governance. For state-building to generate durable legitimacy, security must gradually become experienced as a broadly shared public good rather than as a selective benefit provided to particular communities or political constituencies. In other words, the consolidation of state authority ultimately depends not only on its coercive capacity but also on the extent to which diverse segments of society perceive state institutions as credible, impartial, and capable of protecting their physical security and political interests (International Crisis Group, 2025). The development of such perceptions is particularly important in a deeply fragmented post-conflict environment, where historical grievances, communal insecurity, and distrust toward central authorities can easily reproduce cycles of violence.

The security dimension of Syria's post-conflict transformation also extends beyond the immediate containment of armed violence. The return and reintegration of refugees, the future of internally displaced populations, and the status and incorporation of former opposition armed groups constitute equally significant components of the broader security and state-building agenda. These issues are inherently interconnected: unresolved displacement, exclusion from emerging political arrangements, and the persistence of autonomous armed actors can undermine the consolidation of state authority and reproduce the social and political conditions conducive to renewed conflict. Accordingly, ensuring security throughout the country and across its diverse social constituencies must be accompanied by mechanisms for the peaceful reintegration of refugees, internally displaced persons, and former combatants into emerging political, economic, and social institutions. Such processes of reintegration are not merely humanitarian or administrative challenges; they constitute core components of post-conflict peacebuilding and are indispensable to the construction of a legitimate, cohesive, and sustainable state order (Ammitzboell and Blair, 2011: 3–4).

A second, equally consequential dimension concerns political governance, which should be conceptualized not merely as the establishment of formal political institutions, but also as a process of political inclusion and power-sharing. In post-conflict societies, meaningful access to political participation must be extended to all societal constituencies, irrespective of their previous involvement in conflict or their histories of political antagonism and exclusion (Ammitzboell and Blair, 2011: 5). The institutionalization of inclusive political representation is particularly significant because the systematic exclusion of particular groups from political decision-making may reproduce the grievances, insecurities, and asymmetries of power that underpinned the conflict in the first place. From this perspective, political inclusion is not simply a normative commitment to democratic governance; it is also an instrument of conflict management through which competing interests can be articulated, negotiated, and accommodated within institutional rather than coercive channels.

Democracy has consequently come to occupy a privileged position in post-conflict state-building, insofar as it provides institutional mechanisms through which political competition can be regulated without recourse to violence. Nevertheless, building of democratic institutions into post-conflict environments should not be approached as a straightforward or universally applicable institutional formula. Comparative experience suggests that democratic institutions may generate divergent outcomes depending upon the historical trajectories, sociopolitical configurations, and institutional capacities of the societies in which they are embedded. Institutional arrangements that contribute to stability in one context may, under different structural conditions, intensify political polarization or reinforce existing cleavages. Yet despite these limitations, democracy continues to be regarded as the political system most conducive to political accommodation and as one of the institutional arrangements with the greatest potential to transform violent conflict into routinized and non-violent political contestation. The broader diffusion of democratic norms has also strengthened the proposition that democratic governance is not inherently confined to particular geographical or cultural settings, but can be institutionally adapted to diverse

political environments when its implementation is sufficiently attentive to contextual specificities (Grugel, 2002; Ignatieff, 2003).

For Syria, however, the institutionalization of even the most elementary mechanisms of democratic governance presents formidable challenges. In a context marked by institutional fragmentation, diminished administrative capacity, and profound political and societal cleavages, processes that are often taken for granted in established democracies—including electoral registration, the preparation and distribution of ballots, the accreditation and monitoring of electoral observers, the provision of electoral security, and the nomination and regulation of candidates—may require extensive technical, financial, and institutional assistance. The organization of elections should therefore be understood not as an isolated procedural exercise but as part of a broader process of political institutionalization through which political authority acquires legitimacy and competing interests are incorporated into a common institutional framework. The establishment of credible electoral institutions, together with a meaningful separation of powers among the executive, legislature, and judiciary, is consequently essential to constraining the concentration of political authority and reducing the incentives for political actors to pursue their interests through coercive means.

A third, closely interrelated dimension concerns economic governance, which is inseparable from the reconstruction of administrative capacity. Post-conflict economic recovery requires considerably more than the restoration of aggregate production. It entails rebuilding the fiscal, regulatory, and administrative foundations through which the state can mobilize resources, provide public goods, regulate economic activity, and generate sustainable sources of employment and revenue. In Syria, this agenda encompasses the revival of productive activity, the mobilization of new fiscal resources, the attraction and regulation of investment, the transparent governance of natural resources, the creation of new employment sectors, and the development of human capital capable of staffing both the emerging economy and the reconstructed public administration. Equally important are the restoration of municipal service provision and the rehabilitation of essential infrastructure, all of which require substantial financial resources as well as sustained investments in administrative expertise and institutional capacity (Ammitzboell and Blair, 2011: 7–8). Economic reconstruction and administrative state-building are therefore mutually constitutive processes: the fiscal and productive capacity of the economy conditions the state's ability to deliver public goods, while effective administrative institutions provide the organizational infrastructure necessary for economic recovery to become sustainable and socially inclusive.

Judicial governance represents a further, indispensable pillar of this institutional reconstruction. The profound deterioration and fragmentation of Syria's judicial system necessitate more than the restoration of pre-conflict judicial structures; they require the reconstitution of a credible legal order grounded in internationally recognized principles of judicial independence, due process, equality before the law, accountability, and the rule of law. The prosecution of individuals responsible for serious violations committed during the conflict constitutes an important component of this process, but accountability must be pursued within a framework that avoids arbitrary, selective, or politically instrumentalized justice (Ammitzboell and Blair, 2011: 9). Judicial reconstruction must therefore operate simultaneously on two levels: addressing the legacies of conflict through credible mechanisms of accountability while establishing institutions capable of regulating future political and social disputes through predictable and impartial legal procedures. The development of a legal and educational culture centred on the rule of law is consequently of comparable importance, as the durability of judicial reform ultimately depends not only upon formal institutional arrangements but also upon the internalization of norms of legality, accountability, and equal citizenship.

Constitutional reconstruction constitutes a particularly important point of intersection between political and judicial governance. In a deeply fragmented post-conflict society such as Syria, the constitution must function not merely as a formal instrument for distributing powers among state institutions, but as a foundational mechanism for negotiating competing conceptions of political authority, citizenship, representation, and belonging. An inclusive constitutional settlement must therefore accommodate the country's diverse social, ethnic, religious, and political constituencies while establishing meaningful safeguards against the concentration and abuse of state power (Ammitzboell and Blair, 2011: 5, 11). The long-term significance of the interim constitutional framework announced by the HTS-led authorities will consequently depend less on its formal promulgation than on its substantive inclusiveness, compatibility with broadly recognized universal principles, and—most importantly—its effective implementation. A constitution that remains detached from institutional practice and lacks credible mechanisms of enforcement would have limited capacity to generate political predictability, constrain executive authority, or provide the institutional guarantees necessary for sustainable peace.

Finally, the magnitude and multidimensionality of Syria's post-conflict challenges make extensive regional and international engagement indispensable. State reconstruction cannot be conceived as an exclusively domestic undertaking when the country continues to confront severe institutional, economic, humanitarian, and infrastructural deficits. Regional actors, and neighbouring states, have a significant stake in supporting processes of conflict resolution, political accommodation, reconciliation, and institutional reconstruction, not least because Syria's trajectory of stabilization will have direct implications for the broader regional security environment. Regional engagement should therefore be understood not merely as external assistance to a post-conflict state, but as an investment in a regional order in which the consolidation of Syrian state institutions can reduce transnational insecurity and mitigate the prospects of renewed conflict.

International engagement is equally consequential. The lifting of United States sanctions and the willingness of external actors to engage with and support the new governing authorities, insofar as they demonstrate credible commitments to political stabilization and institutional consolidation, could substantially improve the conditions for economic recovery and state reconstruction. Nevertheless, sanctions relief alone is unlikely to generate the material foundations required for sustainable recovery. Syria's immediate needs extend from electricity and water provision to infrastructure rehabilitation, irrigation systems, environmental remediation, disease prevention, and employment generation. Addressing these challenges requires not only the removal of external constraints on economic activity but also the deliberate mobilization of financial, technical, and humanitarian resources toward institutional and infrastructural reconstruction (Lund, 2025). The central challenge for international policy is therefore to move beyond a narrow logic of sanctions removal toward a broader strategy of state-capacity enhancement, whereby external assistance contributes to the reconstruction of the material, administrative, and institutional foundations necessary for durable political order. In this respect, the success of Syria's post-conflict transformation will depend not simply on whether violence remains contained, but on whether domestic and international actors can translate this fragile cessation of conflict into an inclusive political settlement, capable state institutions, and a sustainable social contract.

The range of measures outlined above illustrates both the indispensability and the formidable complexity of preventing the recurrence of violence, consolidating peace, and sustaining a stable political order in Syria and the wider region. It is imperative that the country's new governing authorities embark upon the process of institutional and political transformation without undue delay. The early initiation of these reforms is consequential not only for consolidating the legitimacy of the emerging political order, but also for mitigating the risk of renewed violence and creating the institutional preconditions for the gradual consolidation of sustainable peace. At the same time, these measures should not be conceived as discrete or exclusively technocratic interventions. Their effectiveness will depend to a considerable extent on whether they are embedded within, and mutually reinforcing of, broader processes of conflict resolution and reconciliation. This is particularly important in a context in which communities that have historically been in conflict, continue to harbor profound grievances, and remain divided along political, ethnic, religious, or sectarian lines will nevertheless continue to inhabit the same territorial and institutional space. The restoration of peaceful and constructive patterns of interaction among these communities is therefore indispensable to any credible project of post-conflict transformation.

From the perspective of realist approaches to conflict resolution, one of the most pressing challenges confronting Syria is the institutionalization of tangible mechanisms for the equitable distribution of political power, economic resources, and administrative opportunities across competing societal constituencies (Kelman, 2004, 2006). Ensuring relatively equal access to political authority, economic opportunities, and administrative institutions, while enabling different communities to participate meaningfully in social and commercial life and ensuring the impartial administration of justice, is consequently of fundamental importance. In this respect, state-building constitutes one of the principal institutional arenas through which the material dimensions of conflict resolution can be translated into concrete political arrangements. The reconstruction of state institutions should therefore not be understood merely as an exercise in restoring bureaucratic functionality. Rather, it represents a broader process through which access to authority, resources, public services, and legal protection can be redistributed and institutionalized in ways that reduce the structural incentives for violent competition.

Yet material distribution alone cannot adequately account for the persistence and recurrence of conflict in a society as deeply fragmented as Syria. Psychological needs theories, particularly those associated with the work of Burton, place identity among the fundamental human needs whose persistent frustration may generate protracted and highly resistant forms of conflict (Burton, 1969). From this perspective, sustainable conflict resolution requires more than the redistribution of material resources; it also requires institutional arrangements that enable individuals and collective groups to preserve, express, and reproduce their identities without being subjected to systematic

exclusion, discrimination, or existential insecurity. This consideration assumes particular significance in Syria, where religious, sectarian, ethnic, and communal identities have historically constituted important dimensions of political mobilization and conflict and where identity-based violence has characterized both earlier periods and the country's more recent history. Identity recognition and protection should therefore be situated at the core of the conflict resolution agenda.

The institutionalization of such protections is, once again, inseparable from state-building. Political and judicial governance mechanisms grounded in universal human rights principles, together with constitutional guarantees protecting diverse identities and establishing substantive equality before the law, can provide the institutional foundations for mitigating identity-based insecurity. A constitutional order that recognizes diversity while simultaneously constructing a common framework of citizenship may be particularly important in preventing identity differences from being translated into zero-sum political competition. In this sense, the state can serve not merely as an arbiter between competing identities but as an institutional framework within which those identities can coexist without being converted into sources of political exclusion or organized violence.

Although the transition from the cessation of hostilities to substantive conflict resolution and, subsequently, to reconciliation is inherently difficult, the establishment of durable peace and security ultimately depends upon precisely such a transition. The termination of open violence does not eliminate the underlying antagonisms, grievances, and security dilemmas that have developed among conflicting groups. Moreover, because former adversaries will continue to inhabit the same territorial and political space, the long-term stabilization of Syria cannot be achieved solely through the containment of violence. It requires the development of institutional and societal mechanisms through which previously antagonistic communities can manage their differences and progressively reconstruct relations of coexistence.

The sequencing and substantive design of reconciliation initiatives, however, require particular caution. Approaches grounded primarily in affective or emotion-centred conceptions of reconciliation—which emphasize early processes of apology, forgiveness, or the establishment of historical and truth commissions—may prove especially difficult and potentially destabilizing in the immediate post-conflict environment. Where collective identities remain highly politicized, historical grievances remain salient, and levels of intergroup trust are exceptionally low, attempts to address emotionally charged questions of culpability, victimhood, and historical memory at an early stage may inadvertently reactivate rather than alleviate antagonism. An instrumental conception of reconciliation, by contrast, may provide a more pragmatic point of departure by initially directing attention toward shared interests, practical cooperation, and the development of mutually beneficial forms of interaction.

This logic resonates with both the contact hypothesis (Pettigrew and Tropp, 2005) and the instrumental approach to reconciliation developed by Nadler and Shnabel (2008). Both perspectives underscore, albeit from different theoretical starting points, the importance of creating sustained opportunities for intergroup contact and cooperation. Reconciliation need not therefore begin with highly symbolic or emotionally demanding processes. It may instead emerge incrementally through repeated interactions in which previously antagonistic groups cooperate around concrete objectives and develop shared expectations concerning the benefits of peaceful coexistence. Practical cooperation can thus function as a confidence-building mechanism, reducing mutual uncertainty and suspicion while creating opportunities for the gradual development of interpersonal and intergroup trust.

In the Syrian context, this approach could be operationalized through the reconstruction of state institutions, particularly within the domains of economic and administrative governance. Institutional arrangements that require members of previously antagonistic communities to work together toward shared objectives can create precisely the forms of sustained interaction upon which instrumental reconciliation depends. Joint economic activities, cooperative local governance, shared public-service provision, participation in common educational institutions, and collaborative infrastructure projects could provide relatively low-risk arenas in which individuals from different communities interact repeatedly around practical and mutually beneficial goals. Such forms of institutionalized cooperation may be particularly valuable in a context where direct engagement with the emotional legacies of conflict remains politically sensitive and socially divisive.

Education is of particular significance in this regard. Beyond its conventional function of developing human capital, the education system can constitute a crucial institutional arena for cultivating shared civic experiences and facilitating sustained interaction among members of different communities. The establishment of an inclusive educational system governed by common standards and principles could provide younger generations with opportunities to encounter difference within a structured and relatively secure environment. Similarly,

collaborative practices embedded within economic and administrative institutions can normalize interdependence and gradually transform patterns of interaction that were previously structured by mistrust, segregation, or antagonism. These mechanisms should not, however, be regarded as substitutes for more comprehensive reconciliation processes. Rather, they can provide the social and institutional foundations upon which more substantive forms of reconciliation may become feasible at a later stage.

The broader implication is that state-building and reconciliation should not be conceptualized as distinct policy domains or as strictly sequential stages of post-conflict transformation. Rather, they should be understood as mutually constitutive processes. Political, economic, administrative, and judicial reforms inevitably reshape the distribution of resources, opportunities, authority, and recognition among social groups and therefore have direct consequences for the prospects of reconciliation. Institutional reforms can either reproduce pre-existing patterns of exclusion and inequality or create new opportunities for accommodation, cooperation, and mutual recognition. The design and implementation of state-building policies should consequently incorporate an explicit peacebuilding and reconciliation dimension.

Accordingly, each reform undertaken within the political, economic, administrative, and judicial spheres should be assessed not only in terms of its contribution to institutional efficiency or state capacity, but also in terms of its implications for intergroup relations and social cohesion. The emerging institutional architecture of the Syrian state should be oriented toward inclusive governance, equitable access to political and economic resources, protection of collective and individual identities, impartial justice, and the institutionalization of intergroup cooperation. Such an approach would allow state-building to operate simultaneously as a mechanism of governance, a vehicle for conflict resolution, and an instrument of reconciliation. Ultimately, Syria's ability to transform the termination of violence into a durable and self-sustaining peace will depend not merely on whether its institutions can restore public order, but on whether those institutions can fundamentally reshape the patterns of interaction, resource distribution, political participation, and mutual recognition that have historically reproduced conflict and cycles of violence.

Conclusion

This study has examined the conceptual distinctions among conflict settlement, conflict resolution, and reconciliation, drawing on realist and psychological needs perspectives to assess the conditions under which conflict can be transformed into sustainable peace. Applied to Syria, these approaches indicate that the country remains predominantly in a fragile phase of conflict cessation and de-escalation rather than substantive conflict resolution. This distinction is not merely conceptual. It is essential for diagnosing the sources of persistent instability, determining the appropriate sequencing of interventions, and designing political, economic, administrative, judicial, and societal mechanisms capable of supporting durable peace.

The cessation of large-scale violence is an indispensable precondition for stabilization, but it should not be conflated with conflict resolution. Syria continues to face unresolved political, institutional, and societal antagonisms, while the risk of renewed violence remains substantial. Prolonged stagnation at the cessation stage could weaken the legitimacy of the emerging governing authority and allow existing grievances and security dilemmas to resurface. A transition toward substantive conflict resolution is therefore necessary. Crucially, this transition must proceed alongside state-building. Given the institutional weaknesses that preceded the civil war, reconstruction cannot simply restore the pre-war order; it must simultaneously address conflict-related destruction and pre-existing structural deficiencies. The development of capable, legitimate, inclusive, and accountable institutions is thus central to transforming a fragile cessation of violence into sustainable political stability.

Reconciliation constitutes a complementary dimension of this process. Since formerly antagonistic communities will continue to coexist within the same territorial and political space, durable peace requires more than the management of violence; it requires the gradual transformation of intergroup relations. Although comprehensive reconciliation based on acknowledgement, apology, forgiveness, and engagement with contested historical narratives may represent the long-term ideal, such approaches may be difficult to implement in the short term amid persistent mistrust, politicized identities, and unresolved grievances. A more pragmatic initial strategy may therefore emphasize institutionalized cooperation and shared interests. Economic investment, administrative cooperation, joint public services, and inclusive educational institutions can create sustained opportunities for interaction and mutual dependence, gradually establishing the conditions for greater intergroup trust.

The theoretical perspectives examined here suggest that both material and identity-based dimensions of conflict must be addressed. Realist approaches emphasize the importance of tangible interests, resources, and power-sharing, whereas psychological needs perspectives draw attention to identity, recognition, and security. In

Syria, these dimensions can be addressed through equitable access to political authority, economic opportunities, commercial activity, and administrative institutions, complemented by judicial and constitutional arrangements that protect individual and collective identities and guarantee equal treatment under the law. State-building thus constitutes a principal institutional arena in which both material inequalities and identity-based insecurities can be addressed.

The prevailing political, sociocultural, and economic conditions may constrain the immediate achievement of comprehensive reconciliation. This, however, should not justify postponing conflict resolution indefinitely. Post-conflict policies should instead be assessed according to their capacity to reduce inherited patterns of exclusion and insecurity while creating opportunities for political accommodation and social cooperation. Institutional choices made during reconstruction can either reproduce the conditions of conflict or establish the foundations for a more inclusive political order.

The central policy implication is that conflict cessation should be understood as the beginning, rather than the culmination, of Syria's post-conflict transformation. If conflict resolution, reconciliation, and institutional consolidation remain indefinitely deferred, periods of relative calm may give way to renewed cycles of violence, with consequences extending beyond Syria's borders. Sustained domestic commitment, together with regional and international support, will therefore be essential to institutional reconstruction, political inclusion, economic recovery, and reconciliation.

Ultimately, durable peace in Syria depends on transforming the current absence of large-scale violence into an institutionalized political order in which political inclusion, equitable resource distribution, identity protection, impartial justice, and intergroup cooperation reduce the incentives for cycles of violence. Conflict resolution, reconciliation, and state-building should consequently be understood as mutually reinforcing dimensions of a single process of post-conflict transformation. The success of this process will determine not only the consolidation of a more legitimate and resilient Syrian state but also the prospects for a more stable regional order.

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