

# **Reconstruction in Syria: Between Theorization and Difficulty of Implementation**

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## **Introduction**

War, when it touches any land, turns it into rubble and devastates everything in its path, leaving no stone unturned. After it ends, whether with the victory of one party or without a clear victor, much of a country's potential is destroyed, and its resources are depleted, as everyone has exhausted their energies in the conflict. This is where the role of decision-makers comes into play, often using the term "reconstruction," as is happening today in Syria. Paradoxically, those who may lead the reconstruction efforts are often the same actors who played a leading role in the destruction, all within the global capitalist system, which in one way or another contributes to the destruction process by fueling

various arms markets and increasing the profits of arms companies. Then, after the conflicting parties have exhausted themselves, the more powerful and influential actors in these crises begin to claim privileges in exchange for donor loans. They link the principles of reconstruction to their interests and visions of the final solution, thus igniting a new conflict over who will lead the reconstruction.

Reconstruction processes following wars are among the greatest and most complex challenges, and they are not purely economic issues; they are primarily political matters dominated by the interests of states. These crises do not manufacture themselves to leave reconstruction in the hands of others; they must have a significant share in this process.

Hardly a decade goes by in the Middle East without it being marred by bloodshed and devastation, either through civil wars or international conflicts. These wars become the instruments that destroy everything, from cities to villages, roads to buildings, factories to schools. These wars do not happen by chance; they are driven by greed, power struggles, and domination.

What Syria has been experiencing for the past ten years is part of this conflict. The crisis began peacefully but quickly turned into a bloody armed conflict, leading to the intervention of regional and international powers in the region. If you were to travel by land from anywhere in Syria, you would encounter the scale of destruction caused by this war. Many cities appear to be nothing more than piles of rubble, with their steel skeletons exposed. This war has left severe damage to the social, cultural, and urban fabric of the country and has affected all aspects of life.

### **The Problem Statement**

The problem addressed in this study arises from the challenges facing post-war reconstruction in Syria. These challenges include the complexity of external interventions, the diversity of internal agendas on the Syrian stage, and the difficulty of

reaching consensus among all these parties. Therefore, the problem of the study can be formulated in the following question:

- How will reconstruction take place in the midst of all these regional and international interventions?

This is what we seek to shed light on in this study.

**Study Objective:**

The process of reconstruction in Syria is one of the most contentious issues among the stakeholders in the Syrian crisis. It directly intersects with their interests and is closely linked to the final solution, with each party advocating its perspective. Therefore, our objective in this study is to understand the international and regional circumstances surrounding Syria, elucidate the international and regional roles in the Syrian crisis, and in the reconstruction process. Additionally, we aim to highlight the most significant challenges facing this process.

## **Introduction**

Losses and refugee numbers continue to multiply as the Syrian crisis enters its tenth year. Perhaps the most pressing question for Syrians now is how Syria will be rebuilt after the war ends, and what are the ways and means to achieve the reconstruction of the country? In this research paper, we attempted to study the issue of Syria's reconstruction, defining the term and addressing the challenges it faces, such as corruption, selectivity, financing, and financial grants. The involved parties themselves pose a challenge, as each party tries to implement its own agendas. We also tried to shed light on some models of reconstruction and the interests of the parties participating in this process, with the aim of reaching results that clarify the available options for the Syrian regime.

Therefore, the longer the duration or delay of this process, the losses become like a rolling snowball, continuously increasing in size. Hence, it is imperative to reach political agreements on this issue as soon as possible, as the country can no longer bear further destruction.

### **First: Definition of Reconstruction**

The process of reconstruction is a complex and intricate one due to the involvement of various parties with differing interests. It doesn't merely involve rebuilding what has been physically destroyed, but it encompasses rejuvenating all aspects of economic, political, and societal life. However, all of this cannot be achieved without first resorting to the resolution of the conflicts generated by the war. Some argue that there is no clear distinction between conflict resolution and reconstruction because they are interrelated phases aimed at achieving peace and security.

The United Nations literature provides a definition of reconstruction as follows: "A comprehensive effort to identify and support structures that will solidify peace, build confidence and well-being among people, through peace agreements. This process may include the disarmament of former warring parties, the restoration of order, refugee

repatriation, advisory services, support in the training of security personnel, election monitoring, efforts to promote human rights protection, the reform and strengthening of governmental institutions, and enhancing participation in the political process by both official and non-official actors within the state.<sup>1</sup>

Therefore, the process of reconstruction not only represents the economic aspect but is an integrated process encompassing all aspects of post-war societal life, i.e., a peace-building process. Any deficiency in the reconstruction process, whether social or political, or the absence of comprehensive plans and strategies, may lead to even more severe conflicts than before.

## **Second - War Losses and Reconstruction Requirements in Syria**

A decade has passed since the war in Syria, a decade of destruction, devastation, and displacement, resulting in catastrophic consequences for the societal structure. According to the Carnegie Center in early 2019, estimates for the cost of reconstruction in Syria ranged between 250 and 400 billion dollars<sup>2</sup>. This amount seems surreal and exceedingly high for the Syrian budget, especially in light of the declining GDP.

Here, we will attempt to categorize the losses in terms of population, education, and infrastructure.

**Population:** The most affected category in terms of losses and destruction is the population. According to the World Bank, the population of Syria decreased from 21.8 million in 2010 to 18.5 million in 2015. The unemployment rate soared to 66% in 2015, "before declining to 42.3% in 2019," according to a report by the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA)<sup>3</sup>. The report also stated that 82% of the damage resulting from the conflict accumulated in seven of the most densely populated sectors, such as housing, mining, transportation, security,

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manufacturing, electricity, and health. Three million people lost their jobs,<sup>4</sup> and the conditions of human development continuously deteriorated, with the Human Development Index in Syria dropping sharply from 0.64 in 2010 to 0.549 in 2018.<sup>5</sup>

**Education:** The education sector suffered significantly. Many schools were transformed into military barracks, with UNICEF reporting that approximately 40% of school infrastructure in Syria was damaged or destroyed during the war.<sup>6</sup>

**Buildings:** Since the war began and up to the present day, many cities and infrastructure, such as transportation networks, roads, bridges, schools, and factories, have been destroyed. The United Nations estimated in 2015 that approximately 2.1 million homes, half of the country's hospitals, and more than 7,000 schools had been destroyed.<sup>7</sup>

### **Third: Models of Reconstruction**

Reconstruction policies intersect with international and regional strategies. Those who provide grants bring their own strategies and try to impose their policies and visions to continue ending the conflict and achieving reconstruction. Here, we can mention some previous models of reconstruction operations that have taken place in different regions of the world after the end of their wars as an entry point to understand the nature and mechanisms of this issue and its practical applications.

**1- The Marshall Plan for the Reconstruction of Europe:** It began after the end of World War II and officially ran from 1949 to 1951. This plan, which was passed through Congress under the name "European Recovery Program," involved the United States providing financial aid to European countries, estimated at \$13 billion, to recover from the effects of the war that had devastated major European countries such as Germany, France, Britain, Belgium, and others. The infrastructure in these countries had suffered

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near-total destruction, especially bridges, ports, railways, roads, merchant and warship fleets. This plan was crucial in rebuilding Western Europe, especially Germany and Britain. Under this plan, aid was granted to many countries based on criteria related to the size of the state's industrial strength, on the premise that the recovery of these strong economies would stimulate growth and recovery throughout Europe as a whole. What stood out in the implementation of this plan were two fundamental aspects: firstly, the provision of financial aid by the United States to European countries paved the way for major trade channels between them and the United States, which had not suffered the war's losses. Secondly, the countries that received a large share of the aid exceeded pre-war levels of economic growth by the end of the project's duration. Historically, this plan is often cited as one of the successful models in modern history.

**2- Iraq:** During the reconstruction phase, Iraq received relatively high levels of funding. However, these funds were not optimally utilized to enhance the capabilities and capacities of Iraqi institutions or to improve their functioning. Initial planning in Iraq was largely based on activating regional and international capitalist interests.<sup>8</sup> The devastating effects of the large sums of financial resources used for "demand-driven" projects without minimal consultations with the recipient country served as a serious warning.<sup>9</sup> The United States built strategies according to its own vision, far from the Iraqi reality, which led to the exclusion of Iraqi social forces from participating in the reconstruction process. This was due to the absence of Iraqi political forces, civil society organizations, or independent private companies from discussions related to the reconstruction process.

Corruption also played a major role in the failure of the process. A report by Transparency International stated that "the report of the U.S. Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction, Stuart Bowen, and similar cases of financial corruption and embezzlement showed that around 800 million dollars were being transferred illegally out of Iraq weekly."<sup>10</sup>

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**3- Kosovo:** After the Kosovo War and Serbia's intervention, international powers intervened to manage the post-war crisis. The United Nations Security Council Resolution 1244 authorized a massive military presence led by NATO and a civilian presence led by the United Nations to oversee post-war reconstruction<sup>11</sup>. However, the results did not unfold as planned. Inefficiency in achieving objectives and conflicts in roles arose due to conflicting interests among international organizations and institutions. Kosovo's most significant problem in reconstruction was that its governance in various areas fell under the supervision of international institutions, such as the European Union, NATO, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, and the United Nations. Each institution managed its relevant affairs,<sup>12</sup> leading to significant disparities in services provided in rural and urban areas. Moreover, violence persisted despite international intervention.

**4- Afghanistan:** Afghanistan serves as another example of the ineffectiveness of reconstruction in the absence of a coherent strategy. In Afghanistan, there was a dichotomy between two conflicting strategies: "achieving peace through security" and "achieving peace through reconstruction." In the Afghan case, the prevailing strategy was centered on prioritizing security, as reflected in the significant expenditure on security, but without tangible results. <sup>13</sup>The presence of American forces and the prioritization of security over reconstruction efforts ultimately led to an increase in violence.

#### **Fourth- Major Challenges Facing the Reconstruction Process**

The reconstruction process is not as straightforward as its name suggests; rather, it is a complex process, as we have elucidated, fraught with numerous obstacles and challenges arising from conflicting interests and priorities of the influential powers, especially those on the ground. Some of these challenges include:

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a) Reconstruction efforts can potentially lead to the perpetuation of violence unless there is a mechanism for achieving transitional justice (judicial proceedings, reparations, institutional reform, truth commissions, etc.). Ignoring the actions of influential powers on the ground creates many problems and fuels further conflicts. The situations in Iraq and Somalia are clear examples of this.

b) Reconstruction requires funding, especially in the aftermath of widespread destruction. However, achieving stability in the region is a prerequisite for securing funding, which cannot be accomplished without a peaceful transfer of power. Moreover, funding can sustain conflicts if there is no clear work plan aligned with the country being supported. Funding may also end up in the hands of destructive elements due to the absence of local financing opportunities, as most institutions are severely damaged by war.

c) Another evident challenge is the interests of donor countries and the privileges they intend to gain. Grants are not provided without a vested interest for those countries, and they often impose specific agendas when offering grants.

### **Challenges in Syria**

There are numerous challenges facing the reconstruction process in Syria. Syria is effectively divided among three different spheres of influence, in addition to the interventions of regional and international powers. Raymond Hinnebusch, a professor of international relations and Middle East politics at the University of St Andrews, points out, "Reconstruction is linked to the internal struggle for power and is also tied to the geopolitical struggle over Syria, which was previously manifested in the military phase and has now evolved into an international geopolitical battle over reconstruction."<sup>14</sup>

The issue of refugees poses a major challenge. There are millions of refugees who have been displaced from their homes, as well as millions of internally displaced persons who have been forcibly uprooted. These individuals require peace and security to ensure their

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safe return, in addition to the imperative need to repair and rebuild the cities and villages that have been ravaged by war.

Another challenge is the widespread corruption within state institutions, on one hand, and, on the other, the more dangerous form of corruption, which is ingrained as a personal trait within individuals. If individuals are corrupt, the state becomes corrupt, and society becomes corrupted. This phenomenon is one of the most significant outcomes of this regime, making corruption the primary obstacle to reconstruction.

### **Fifth: Key Players in the Syrian Arena and Their Roles in the Reconstruction Process**

The reconstruction process demands enormous amounts of funding. According to a joint report by the economic consulting firm "Frontier Economics" and the charity "World Vision," titled "A Staggering Cost: The Price of the War on Syria's Children," the economic cost of the Syrian conflict, ten years in, is estimated at over 1.2 trillion US dollars. Even if the war were to end today, its cost would continue to accumulate, reaching an additional 1.7 trillion dollars by 2035.<sup>15</sup>

The Syrian Center for Policy Research prepared a study in May of the previous year stating that the economic losses of the Syrian economy from 2011 until early 2020 amounted to 530 billion dollars. This is equivalent to 9.7 times the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) for 2010 at constant prices.

Amidst all this destruction, numerous forces have entered the Syrian arena, each with different perspectives.

**1- Locally:** The Damascus government is striving through various means to ensure that reconstruction benefits its regional and international allies (Iran and Russia) primarily.

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Assad stated in a speech at the opening of the Damascus International Fair, "We must turn towards the East politically, economically, and culturally."<sup>16</sup>

In addition to supporters from within society, who will have the largest share in reconstruction projects. This could potentially create another crisis that may impede a resolution and generate further conflicts due to various laws enacted by the regime, such as Law No. 66 and Law No. 10, which allow for the seizure of civilians' properties, especially those associated with the "opposition." Inequality among citizens could exacerbate internal disputes and ignite future conflicts among various segments of Syrian society.

On the other hand, Damascus is attempting to benefit from aid provided by organizations by imposing security laws that hinder their work and force them to cooperate with local entities under its influence or control, or at the very least, aligned with it. A report by Human Rights Watch stated, "Regular government restrictions on humanitarian access to needy or opposition-held communities and selective approval of humanitarian projects that require engagement with vetted local actors are a longstanding problem."<sup>17</sup> This is especially challenging given the severely limited local resources in the midst of sanctions. The 2019 budget allocated only 29% for capital expenditure, approximately 1,100 billion Syrian pounds, with no more than 50 billion Syrian pounds (equivalent to 115 million US dollars) allocated for "reconstruction."<sup>18</sup> The country's needs for reconstruction are estimated at 400 billion US dollars. The 2021 budget, totaling 8.5 trillion Syrian pounds, did not specify any clear allocation for reconstruction. The government's current focus is solely on securing minimum living standards for its citizens, which is no easy task given the economic crisis suffocating the country. Medium and large-scale reconstruction projects will be frozen, and if a political settlement is not reached and sanctions are not lifted to enable the reconstruction process, the situation will remain bleak.<sup>19</sup>

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## **2- European Position**

The European Union (EU) continues to maintain its position of not contributing to the reconstruction process as long as there is no change in the governance system, and as long as Russia and Iran control the levers of power. A French diplomat participating in international meetings on Syria emphasized, "The Union is not a financial fund to finance projects carried out by countries that do not coordinate with us."<sup>20</sup>

This stance is evident in the statements of German Defense Minister Ursula von der Leyen during a security conference in Bahrain, where she stated, "Investments in Syria will not happen without a political process in which all parties participate."<sup>21</sup> In this context, British Prime Minister Boris Johnson stated, "We believe the only way forward is through a political process and making it clear to Iran, Russia, and the Assad regime that we, as a group with a shared approach, will not support the reconstruction of Syria until there is a political process, which means, in accordance with Resolution 2254, a transition process away from Assad."<sup>22</sup> The positions of France, Germany, and the UK are clear in this regard, meaning that any reconstruction must be linked to a political transition and Resolution 2254.

## **3- American Position**

The United States is not currently attempting reconstruction efforts in Syria. In fact, it has recently imposed sanctions (the Caesar Act) that have had a negative impact on the Syrian economy. The U.S. conditions reconstruction in Syria on a peaceful transition and the implementation of Resolution 2254. Former U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo declared that the United States would not contribute additional aid to Syria's reconstruction as long as Iran-backed forces remain in the country. He added, "If Syria

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doesn't ensure the full withdrawal of Iranian-backed forces, it won't receive a single dollar from the United States for reconstruction."<sup>23</sup>

#### **4- Russian Position**

Russian intervention in the Syrian crisis has made it a key player among regional powers. Its involvement required it to reassess its strategic role with Israel, Iran, and Turkey. Russia entered the global arena through Syria. Russia's role expanded with its 45-year lease of the Tartus port and its establishment of the Hmeimim airbase.

After Russia achieved "victories" for the Syrian regime, it attempts to secure the regime's reconstruction. It seeks closer ties with Europe and Gulf states. Additionally, Russia is trying to manipulate the reconstruction issue to change the discourse about the regime's actions thus far. It seeks to exploit the refugee issue to gain financial support and secure reconstruction contracts for its companies, which would boost its economy, especially in the energy sector. A senior EU diplomat stated to Foreign Policy magazine, "Russia wants our money to rebuild Syria so Russian companies can get the contracts."<sup>24</sup>

Russia has not yet succeeded in attracting donors. Therefore, it can maintain the status quo in Syria to safeguard its gains. In other words, Russia can freeze the situation in Syria as long as it doesn't lose the gains it's trying to acquire through an easy-win policy. It either needs to participate in the political transition, similar to the objectives of the United States and European countries, or continue to wait. Russia lacks the means to propose alternative projects in the context of reconstruction that it can implement independently.

#### **5- Iranian Position**

Iran is attempting to consolidate its military and political presence in Syria to achieve its goals. So far, Iran has spent at least \$30 billion in Syria. Iranian companies secured

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several contracts in 2017 and 2018 for infrastructure rehabilitation and reconstruction.<sup>25</sup> Additionally, Iran signed six agreements with the Syrian government in various sectors such as telecommunications, oil, agriculture, and industry, as part of a larger economic deal with a focus on reconstruction.<sup>26</sup> The opening of an Iranian trade center in Damascus signifies Iran's attempt to become involved in Syrian commercial life and establish communication channels with major Syrian commercial cities. The story of Iranians buying land, real estate, and restoring shrines indicates their long-term plans in the region. Hussein Balarak, the head of the Directorate for the Reconstruction of Holy Shrines, stated, "We will reconsider the urban plan for the area around Sayyida Zainab. We are currently working on a new model and buying properties around the shrine... The Syrian and Iranian governments have signed a contract allowing Iranian companies to obtain around 11,000 hectares of land in the coastal region for agricultural projects and the establishment of oil storage warehouses."<sup>27</sup>

Iran seeks to maintain its presence in Syria, as evidenced by the Basra-Latakia railway project. However, the United States has worked to prevent this project, which would connect Iran to Syria and then Lebanon by land. Perhaps the statement by Iran's Minister of Industry sheds light on Iran's strategy in Syria through its Shia Crescent project, where he claims that "we consider the reconstruction of countries like Syria and Iraq" as a religious duty.<sup>28</sup> Nevertheless, the sanctions imposed on Iran, its dire economic situation, and its domestic and foreign problems become obstacles to its effective participation in the reconstruction process, as the principle "the dead cannot save the dead" applies. Russia's stance, which poses an obstacle to Iran, further compounds the issue. Interests play a role even among allies; Iran represents a significant competitor to Russia in Syria regarding reconstruction. Consequently, due to this confrontation with Russia, Iran's role has been limited to mosques and places of worship. However, both countries cannot carry out comprehensive reconstruction due to their economic crisis resulting from sanctions. For instance, Syria failed to secure funding for some projects that Iran and Moscow

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contracted for, aiming to construct or repair power plants. Consequently, Tehran and Moscow withdrew from these projects.<sup>29</sup> They are only trying to protect their strategic interests by seizing ports and building military bases in Syria, with Russia strengthening security circles and Iran empowering militias.

## **6- Turkish Position**

Turkey has significant interests in the reconstruction of Syria, particularly because it occupies large parts of the country. It seeks to revive its economy and businesses and looks forward to this role. Turkey also aims to maintain its presence in these areas due to the benefits it derives. However, it's evident that Turkey will not leave the Syrian scene without securing its interests, especially in Homs. The primary reason for this is Turkey's reliance on the Muslim Brotherhood, who currently have no future in Syria, both presently and in the future.

## **7-Chinese Position**

China has several interests tied to Syria. Syria's inclusion in the Belt and Road Initiative is one aspect, and on the other hand, China supports the Syrian regime in the fight against terrorism, especially due to the presence of Uighurs among the extremist groups. China also sees Syria as a potential market for its investments. In 2017, China pledged significant support to Syria. China uses soft power to acquire projects in Syria. As part of this effort, it provided a \$14 million grant under an economic and technical cooperation agreement signed by the "State Planning and International Cooperation Commission" affiliated with the Council of Ministers on March 4, 2018.<sup>30</sup> However, China remains cautious due to the instability and economic sanctions on Syria.

## **8- Arab Gulf States Position**

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These Gulf states aim to participate in the reconstruction of Syria with the clear goal of countering Iranian influence. King Salman informed Russian President Vladimir Putin that Riyadh could not spend billions of dollars to serve Iran, and any discussion of reconstruction should come after a political solution in which Syrians have the decision-making power, without external interference. Saudi Arabia announced a contribution of \$100 million for "livelihood and basic service recovery projects" executed by the U.S.-led international coalition.<sup>31</sup> The Gulf states' position is aligned with the Western proposal.

### **Results and Recommendations**

Reconstruction is an integral part of the expected solutions at the end of any war. In the case of Syria, which is entangled in numerous contradictions involving regional and international powers, their interests often intersect and conflict simultaneously in various places and times. Therefore, any discussion regarding reconstruction is tied to the type of solution that a state is trying to promote internally or at the global level. Consequently, before the reconstruction process begins, the regime that fundamentally caused this war must work to address the root causes of this war and destruction.

Here are the key general results of the study:

- The reconstruction process is not only connected to economic aspects but extends to political aspects as well.
- The influential powers in the Syrian crisis, whether international or regional, view the reconstruction process from the perspective of their interests and future strategies, both in Syria and the region.
- Syria, as a state, lacks the necessary economic and political resources to initiate the reconstruction process, especially after surrendering its decision to its main allies, Russia and Iran.

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- The United States will not allow any reconstruction process in Syria as long as it fails to achieve its goals of reducing Iran's role in the country and the Syrian regime's non-compliance with UN Resolution 2254, which calls for a peaceful transition of power and the safe return of refugees to their homes and cities.
- The Syrian model differs from many models of reconstruction in countries that have been devastated by past wars due to the presence of international and regional powers whose political interests and strategies in Syria do not align.
- This process faces significant challenges both internally and externally, primarily related to corruption and selectivity practiced by the state domestically and financial issues and foreign financial aid, which are primarily tied to pursuing their interests.

Therefore, through the previous analysis of the political aspects of the reconstruction process and considering the viewpoints of the active parties in the Syrian situation, we see that the regime likely has two options to begin attracting influential actors, which are:

### **First Option - Democratic Transition**

The regime's stubbornness in pursuing a military solution and its failure to acknowledge the internal factors that have led to the devastating situation in the country have exacerbated the crisis. Syria has become a battleground for numerous regional and international interventions. Nevertheless, there is still time for the regime to overcome this situation by relying on its internal capabilities. To maximize the potential benefits of the available resources and to contribute to the reconstruction process, it is necessary to:

1. Address all the root causes of the war and the destruction that has afflicted the country. This includes resolving all outstanding issues related to democracy, justice, and a peaceful transition of power.
2. Resolve national issues within the country, such as those concerning the Kurds and other marginalized groups.

3. Transition to a decentralized system and accept the concept of self-administration as a general model for the state to enable the utilization of the resources available in these regions.

4. Draft a new constitution in accordance with UN Resolution 2254, which allows for a smooth political transition following international standards and human rights agreements.

5. Put an end to all external interventions that have exploited the war as a pretext to advance their agendas.

### **Second Option - Continued Obstinance and Escalating the Crisis**

If the regime persists in its current obstinate policies, Damascus faces another option:

1- Reinforcing the state of division that the state is experiencing, and carrying out the reconstruction process for each region separately, based on the influence and interests of the dominant foreign states, effectively establishing a de facto situation.

2- The continued imposition of sanctions on the government, leading to significant weakening of the state's infrastructure and widespread extreme poverty among the population.

3- The continued state of isolation, both internally and externally.

In our view, this second option is likely to perpetuate chaos and instability, leading to more violence and increased external interventions.