

# : Conference Report

Berlin Summer Dialogue 2019

sef:

## Post-Conflict Reconstruction: A Window of Opportunity? The role of external actors in the MENA region

Larissa Neubauer

**Numerous countries in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) have been convulsed by multiple wars and conflicts in recent decades, and in many cases, there appears to be no end to the violence. The damage and economic cost of the civil wars in Syria, Libya and Yemen alone are estimated at more than USD 300 billion, and this does not take into account the human suffering or the long-term impacts on the societies concerned. Against this background, the Berlin Summer Dialogue, which took place on 18-19 June 2019, brought together international experts to discuss how reconstruction measures in the MENA region can have a sustained peacebuilding effect.**

At the start of the conference, Dr Joost Hiltermann, Programme Director for the Middle East and North Africa at the International Crisis Group, shed light on

the many diverse lines of conflict within the region, which external actors should consider. He described how many of today's conflicts can be traced back to the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the artificial borders drawn within the region after the First World War; these, he said, had heightened existing ethnic tensions. The founding of the State of Israel after the Second World War created the impression among Arab countries that the aim was to drive a wedge between them. The revolution in Iran and the radicalisation of Islam since the 1970s also play an important role in the current conflicts. All these conflict drivers are mutually reinforcing.

But it is not only the entrenched lines of conflict that pose major challenges for external actors; so do the impacts of the conflicts themselves. Rasha Jarhum, co-founder of the Peace Track Initiative in Yemen, added that it is often the case that within individual countries, different regions pass through different stages of conflict at different times: in Yemen, for example, some regions have already reached the post-conflict phase, some have not yet been drawn into the fighting, and some are still a focus of hostilities. This creates an additional obstacle for external actors and their intervention planning.

### Do no harm: but is this enough?

The “do no harm” principle originates in the humanitarian sphere but over the past 20 years, it has been extended and applied to other fields of development cooperation as well. Professor Sultan



Sultan Barakat and Samah Halwany

Barakat, Founding Director of the Center for Conflict and Humanitarian Studies at the Doha Institute for Graduate Studies, pointed out, however, that “do no harm” is, in essence, a minimalist approach. The “do no harm” dictum was developed, he said, in order to minimise damage in a humanitarian aid context and to raise external actors’ awareness of their own local impact. But in his view, this approach is no longer enough: “We should focus on doing good, not just on avoiding harm.”

Professor Barakat was particularly critical of many countries’ double standards, with some states exporting arms yet aspiring to do as much good as possible at the same time. The problem is amply demonstrated by Yemen, where Saudi Arabia has been given free rein in the hostilities and has been supported with arms sales.

Saša Hesir, Deputy Director of the Institute for State Effectiveness in Washington, D.C., pointed out that the “do no harm” principle is relevant not only at national but also at local and regional level. Fair and inclusive processes are also important in building trust within the local populace. This must include not awakening unrealistic expectations.

The Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) applies the “do no harm” principle mainly by ensuring that the projects that it delivers are, as far as possible, responsive to citizens and meet their basic needs, according to Professor Claudia Warning, Director-General for the Middle

the resources invested in-country do not end up in the wrong hands. Ekkehard Brose, Special Envoy for Crisis Prevention and Stabilisation at the German Federal Foreign Office, emphasised that viewed from Berlin, the “do no harm” principle seems quite straightforward, but faced with the reality on the ground, putting it into practice is not always an easy task.

---

## Prevention is better than reconstruction

Professor Warning described reconstruction in the MENA region as a mammoth task that will take decades, as the statistics for Syria alone show: here, the war has erased 25 years of social and economic progress. According to Professor Barakat, a war-ravaged country never manages to return to its pre-war economic level in anything less than 20 years. Preventing wars must therefore be a much stronger focus of attention.

Dr Ellen Hamilton, a reconstruction expert at the World Bank in Washington, D.C., cautioned against merely “reconstructing” whatever was there before. “If all we do is to rebuild the MENA region in a physical, economic and social sense, we will do nothing to ensure that the region is more peaceful in the long term,” she said. Her experience over recent decades has shown that it is more important, even in longer-lasting conflicts, to create opportunities for social and economic participation for everyone. It is not about waiting for the right moment to rebuild; it is about starting early and taking small steps.

---

## A practical example: Beirut – taking local people into account

The importance of involving local people in reconstruction efforts was vividly demonstrated at the Berlin Summer Dialogue with reference to Beirut. After the civil war, the then Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri set up SOLIDERE, a joint-stock company whose remit was to rebuild Beirut. However, the company had no interest in ensuring that reconstruction was economically and socially inclusive. Instead, as explained by Aseel Sawalha, Associate Professor of Anthropology at Fordham University, some downtown districts that were undamaged by the war were demolished and land was appropriated in order to make space for a new and modern city centre. The aim was to attract wealthy clients from other Arab countries. However, the visitors stayed away and the new shops and restaurants were unaffordable for locals. As a consequence, much of the real estate was left standing empty. Small organisations are now attempting to move back into the downtown space, repairing buildings and setting up community centres for cultural exchange.



Ute Lange discusses Beirut’s reconstruction with Aseel Sawalha

East, Asia, Latin America, and Southeast and Eastern Europe at the BMZ. Examples are the Ministry’s projects in the education, health and water sectors, which are accompanied by measures that aim to build hope, mutual trust, social awareness, etc. It is not always possible to address these issues through cooperation with the government concerned. Syria is a case in point: it demonstrates the importance of always weighing up which actors it is possible to work with at the local level in order to ensure that

---

## Creating economic prospects between a war and a peace economy

Not all the resources for reconstruction can come from outside the region: the Federal Foreign Office and the BMZ are in agreement on this point. Ekkehard Brose drew attention to the region's own assets, such as oil in Iraq, arguing that the revenues from the sale of these resources should be used to fund reconstruction. Professor Warning also emphasised the importance of local people's economic ownership. With that in mind, it is essential to create jobs so that people have independent livelihoods. For the international community, the challenge is to ensure that people are not simply placed on international payrolls, as this creates long-term dependency on humanitarian aid and development cooperation. Instead, they should be enabled to earn their own living so that they help to fund reconstruction over the long term. In some circumstances, the diaspora can also make an important contribution to economic development, and donor countries should therefore make efforts to involve it. At the very least, the diaspora is generally more politically independent than local stakeholders, as Dr Reinoud Leenders, Reader in International Relations and Middle East Studies, War Studies Department, King's College, London, pointed out.

---

## External actors – not always neutral?

Dr Leenders criticised the tendency for many external actors to become conflict parties themselves, thereby forfeiting the public's trust. In Syria, for example, the regime has succeeded in manipulating the locally engaged UN organisations. The "do no harm" principle does not seem to have been applied here. For example, the companies contracted by the UN organisations to distribute goods are owned by or have direct links with the Syrian regime. So after it devastated neighbourhoods in bombing raids and caused a humanitarian crisis, the regime has in effect been rewarded with the award of contracts to its own companies. It is important to keep this in mind when addressing the issue of reconstruction.

Rasha Jarhum also drew attention to the influence of other countries over the war economy in the MENA region: "I think we have to stop the arms sales altogether. The US is the largest arms exporter to the region – and the region really does not need any more weapons. We must work with serious intent on disarmament and on supporting the transition from a war to a peace economy."

---

## Overcoming the social impacts of war

Alongside efforts to create new economic prospects in conflict countries, social and systemic challenges play

an important role. The BMZ is therefore involved in the No Lost Generation initiative, which aims to provide children and young people from the conflicts in Syria and Iraq with access to certified quality education, giving them future livelihood prospects. Dr Ulrike Hopp-Nishanka, Senior Policy Advisor



Reinoud Leenders and Ellen Hamilton (l.t.r.)

on Peacebuilding and Reconstruction in the MENA Region at the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), stressed how important it is not only to consider the displaced but also to provide support for host communities. This makes a significant contribution to social cohesion and mutual understanding, she said, because many host communities were already struggling with their own social and economic problems before they took in refugees. At the same time, locally engaged external actors are providing psychological support to enable people to work through the trauma caused by their experiences of war. Alongside economic opportunities, this is an important step in empowering individuals to take back control over their lives.

Azzam Moustafa, a peace and conflict consultant from Cologne, who has worked on projects in Lebanon and elsewhere, underlined the need to rebuild social cohesion. This must be mainstreamed as an overarching goal in all projects. However, in his experience, this is often a secondary issue for many displaced persons, who need basic services first and foremost – food, medicines, education. Samah Halwany, an independent consultant on social development for peacebuilding in conflict and post-crisis contexts in Beirut, observed: "So often, I see that children are target groups for external actors, who see this as a way to put them on track towards a future life in peace. But it should not only be about the children; we need intergenerational efforts." And she added that there is lack of awareness within her generation of how to be a good citizen and contribute

to the society while encountering existing traditional political practices and biased legal tracks. Long before the civil war, political leaders have not been allowing any genuine participation outside of their cliental in the political sphere and are not able to put in place any inclusive social, economic and political solutions for living together in peace.



Rawan Khalfallah „Together we build it“

From her experience of working in Yemen, Rasha Jarhum has found that it is mainly women who attempt to hold communities together: “It is the local women who are the real heroines.” As they often make a key contribution to local peacebuilding, it is essential to involve them in official negotiations and reconstruction planning.

### From social cohesion to new social contracts

When laying the foundations for sustaining peace as part of the reconstruction process, the development of future social contracts for the region plays an important role. Thomas Claes, Project Director “For Socially Just Development in the MENA Region” at the Friedrich Ebert Foundation in Tunis, described the current social contracts in many countries as “minimal social security combined with maximum repression”. He therefore preferred the term “social justice”, a key goal and one of the protesters’ demands during the Arab Spring. According to Profes-

sor Bernhard Trautner, whose research at the German Development Institute (DIE) in Bonn focuses on the reshaping of the social contracts in the MENA region, these social contracts currently fall into three categories: in countries such as Syria and Egypt, the old social contracts have remained in place in the wake of the Arab Spring, with no changes and no citizen involvement. In other countries, such as Iraq, the previous social contracts have collapsed. Tunisia, by contrast, is attempting to reform its social contract. Only time will tell whether it will be successful in the long term. As a general principle, however, there should be more emphasis on the functional and less on the liberal/normative significance of social contracts: this was Professor Trautner’s recommendation. It is easier to convey to those in power the importance of elements such as a minimum level of participation and public service provision.

Rejna Alaaldin, founder of advisory firm KLS and Iraqi Legal Advocate for MADRE, an international human rights organisation, recounted some of her experiences in Iraq. The government had attempted to renew the social contract but ultimately, it had merely reinforced the existing one. The peace achieved within society was paid for by the oil industry. However, the government miscalculated. Once the state was no longer able to provide jobs, the desperate populace took to the streets in protest. “The government must prioritise economic diversification and reduce the population’s dependency on the public sector”. Rejna Alaaldin emphasised that she regards a social contract as essential because it enables the mutual expectations between state and society to be clear and to be regulated.

Rawan Khalfallah, a peacebuilder from Together We Build It in Tripoli, emphasised at the end of the conference that it is not about ousting all the current leaders from their positions of power. “But we do want a more inclusive approach. Ultimately, that is what a social contract is about – a process, not an end in itself. We want to create a living document that does justice to the needs of society and does not benefit a small number of individuals while excluding everyone else.”

#### In cooperation with the

Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ)



Federal Ministry  
for Economic Cooperation  
and Development

#### Imprint

The Development and Peace Foundation (sef) was founded in 1986 on the initiative of Willy Brandt. As a cross-party and non-profit-making organisation, the sef: provides an international high-level forum for shared thinking on urgent peace and development issues.

The reports to the conferences and events of the Development and Peace Foundation (sef:) provide information about the discussions and results in a compact form.

**Published by**  
Development and Peace Foundation (sef:)/  
Stiftung Entwicklung und Frieden (sef:)  
Dechenstr. 2 : 53115 Bonn : Germany  
Phone +49 (0)228 959 25-0 : Fax -99  
sef@sef-bonn.org : @sefbonn  
www.sef-bonn.org

**Editor**  
Larissa Neubauer

**Translation**  
Hillary Crowe

**Design Basic Concept**  
Pitch Black Graphic Design  
Berlin/Rotterdam

**Layout**  
Larissa Neubauer

Contents do not necessarily reflect the views of the publisher.

© sef: 2019