

# Syria: donor conditionality, sanctions, and the question of justice

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*De-valued currency. Photo credit: Maher al-Mounes.*

The question of donor conditionality and how it could be used to influence behavior and promote respect for human rights and political inclusion has increasingly gained importance in debates on Syria as the conflict shifts to another stage. In this transition, many have raised hopes that conditionality can succeed where other means have failed.

In the context of conflict studies, conditionality is often referred to as peace conditionality. Professor James Boyce and others coined this term to refer to the use of formal performance criteria and informal policy dialogue to encourage the implementation of peace accords and the consolidation of peace. Scholars of peace and conflict studies have contrasted the potential positive impact of peace conditionality with the dubious legacy of economic conditionality imposed by multinational institutions and other donors since the 1980s era of structural adjustment. Peace conditionality should encourage policies that promote peace, justice and reconciliation processes even if these contradict traditional economic policy prescriptions.

The most obvious problem with this in the Syrian case is that the above notion of peace conditionality assumes it is used for *peacebuilding*, not *peacemaking*. Peace conditionality is supposed to follow from negotiated peace accords between relative equals, not a near total victory by one side. Peace accords are statements of declared intent by the different parties to reduce or end the conflict, advance processes of reconciliation, transform governance structures, and commence measures for justice and accountability, as well as economic reconstruction. Even at their best, peace accords are aspirational. They may or not be translated into actual policy, and it is hoped that conditionality would provide sufficient incentives to do so. What happens however when even those lofty and aspirational statements do not exist? If the victor has not even declared the commitment to make peace or initiate processes of justice and reconciliation, what is there to incentivise? Quite simply, what was not achieved through the conflict will not be achieved through conditionality.

On the other hand, the changing regional political landscape and shifting alliances are further dragging the geopolitical scene in Syria away from where it was in the 2011 to 2016 period. Internally, the conflict has empowered the warlords and the well connected, amidst staggering levels of death, destruction and displacement. Regardless of who claims victory, Syrian society as a whole has lost. Can this reconfiguration provide an opening for an engagement of a different kind, peacebuilding without a formal peace?

Perhaps, but only if it is accompanied by broader political initiatives, during which there is a desire to rethink previous modes of engagement and binaries that prevailed during the war and consider the needs and voices of Syrian society – all Syrian society, whether inside or outside the country. Here broad-based economic sanctions must also be reconsidered. At this point they seem to only serve a punitive purpose, but against the wrong people. Broad-based economic sanctions have significantly damaged the Syrian economy, negatively impacting ordinary people and exacerbating the war economy. As far back as June 2012 the United States Department of Agriculture identified how sanctions negatively impact food security in Syria in its *Commodity Intelligence Report*:

The net result of international actions has been to trigger a major depreciation in the Syrian currency (50%), dramatically increase domestic inflation, significantly deplete government financial reserves, and seriously restrict trade. Though current sanctions do not officially target food or agricultural commodities, restrictions imposed on Syrian banks and trading firms have somewhat impeded the country's ability to finance needed imports<sup>1</sup>.

Similar negative effects have been found by others including the *United Nations Human Rights Council Special Rapporteur's September 2018 Report*<sup>2</sup>. Sanctions have not caused the humanitarian crisis in Syria, but they worsen rather than improve the situation of Syrians. Sanctions empower the well-connected while others suffer.

Peace conditionality can continue by considering the needs of the millions of refugees languishing in Syria's neighboring countries. It needs to continue to consider processes and initiatives, even at the local scale, that can enable and further justice, accountability, equality, voice and representation for all Syrians, regardless of political perspective or declared loyalty. What medium to long-term processes will allow Syrian society to revive itself, and empower itself to achieve agency over its own future?

In March 2019 it was eight years since Syrians took to the street to ask for a just and equitable society. Though they are exhausted by war, the question of justice remains more relevant than ever. Eight years ago, demonstrating Syrians raised the slogan "the Syrian people know their path". For the devastating price they have paid for this demand, they should have a chance to voice their agency over their own future and once again know their path.

*Note: The CRP blogs gives the views of the author, not the position of the Conflict Research Programme, the London School of Economics and Political Science, or the UK Government.*

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[1] <https://ipad.fas.usda.gov/highlights/2012/06/Syria/>

[2] [A/HRC/39/54/Add.2](https://www.unhcr.org/refugees/39/54/Add.2)