
RESEARCH

Forging Peace in Damascus: On International Aid, Localized Elite Bargaining, and Insider Mediators

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Scholarship identified the present and future of war as increasingly characterized by urbanization and political-economic actors that Western international assistance defines as ‘illicit’, ‘illiberal’ or ‘criminal’. This article asks how Western international assistance could and should shape war-to-peace transitions for contributing to the emergence of lasting non-violent ‘peaces’. It combines scholarly insights from ‘pragmatic peacebuilding’ scholarship and practice with interviews and grey literature on masterplanning projects in two neighborhoods in Damascus, Syria, that are prepared for ‘reconstruction’ or ‘redevelopment’, namely Qaboun and Basateen al-Razi. Thereby, it, on the one hand, challenges current approaches that, as in the case of Syria, presume that macropolitical pressure, diplomacy, and sanctions would forge an enduring outcome. It argues that ‘peace’ must be recognized as an order that is particular to a given time, space, and their inherent relations of political-economic actors (political settlements) and is, thus, changeable and expandable to including more people’s interests and subject matters. On the other hand, it promotes an elongation and bridging of the emerging consensus across the reviewed literatures that supporting local actors who are recognized and respected as mediators by all relevant conflict parties provide for a fruitful avenue to expanding the inclusivity of peaces and their underlying political settlements. This adds to the repertoire of newly emerging sustainable peacebuilding methods and signposts towards further studies of ‘localized elite bargaining’.

Keywords: post-war; urban; peace; elite bargain; insider mediation; Syria

Introduction

The almost one-decade-long crisis in Syria is an unfortunately telling case for many trends scholarship identified with regards to the present and future of war¹: it is urbanized² and characterized by actors that Western international assistance predominantly refers to as ‘illicit’, ‘illiberal’ or ‘criminal’ instead of legitimate peacebuilding³ actors.⁴ After more than one decade of uprisings-turned-war, more than 30% of Syria’s built environment is destroyed, more than 60% of its population relying on humanitarian aid, and more than half of the country’s pre-war population (12.2 mil people) displaced and living in cities (The World Bank 2017: 22; UNHCR, 2019). At the time of writing, the central government has retaken almost all formerly opposition-held territories and is preparing for the so-called ‘reconstruction’ or rather ‘urban redevelopment’⁵ of the

¹ In this paper, ‘war’ is understood as armed conflict between state and/or non-state groups.

² See, e.g., Kaldor 2013; Koneav & Spencer 2018; and Koneav 2019.

³ In this paper, ‘peacebuilding’ is understood broadly as ‘the use of dialogue, trust-building and consensus-seeking processes to resolve, transform or manage conflict through nonviolent means’ (Wennmann, 2019b: 25).

⁴ See, e.g., Lewis, Heathershaw & Megoran 2018: 489; Smith 2020: 42; Smith et al. 2020; Mac Ginty, 2010; and Richmond, 2015.

⁵ ‘Urban Redevelopment’, also known as ‘urban renewal’, means the destruction of a building or neighborhood in order to create a completely new and supposedly socio-economically better project there (Harvey, 2003: 26). Its formal counterpart is the ‘urban upgrading’ approach, which seeks to improve a building or neighborhood by renovating its existing built environment while keeping its overall housing and infrastructure grid (Satterthwaite 2012: 206). While these normally have nothing to do with post-war rebuilding (‘reconstruction’), I use both ‘urban redevelopment’ and ‘reconstruction’ to refer to the same masterplanning projects for they evolved from pre-war urban redevelopment plans to post-war reconstruction plans, and are often, by the Syrian central government, still referred to by both terms. The third section of this paper discusses this in more detail.

country. To this aim, they are, among others, preparing more than 185 new city masterplans⁶ and a dozen of real estate projects that envision turning selected areas that were formerly inhabited by predominantly opposition-supportive citizens into high-class residential neighborhoods.⁷ Combined, those are primarily catering towards upper- and upper-middle-class investors and dwellers who are part of or associated with the central government or the ruling presidential family (hereinafter referred to as ‘the regime’).⁸ Simultaneously, they issued some 60 new laws that vastly changed related ownership, investment, and compensation rights,⁹ and give socioeconomically disadvantaged and opposition-affiliated Syrians a raw deal.¹⁰ Because of this, ‘peace’, herein used synonymously with ‘post-war order’, in Syrian cities and the country at large is predicted to solidify inequality.¹¹

To prevent this, the USA and the European Union (EU) are currently using a macropolitical approach that combines diplomatic and economic measures with large-scale ‘regime change’ ambitions. Since 2011, they tried to raise pressure for behavioral and policy change of ‘the regime’ by imposing sanctions against high-level politicians as well as businessmen close to it (EU 2011; US Department of State 2020). From Winter 2019 onwards, this extended into a zero-tolerance strategy sanctioning all kinds of persons and business activities related to above depicted ‘reconstruction’ efforts (European Council 2019; US Department of Treasury 2020). Additionally, both withhold their funds for Syria’s reconstruction until a ‘comprehensive, genuine and *inclusive* political transition, negotiated by the Syrian parties in the conflict on the basis of UN Security Council Resolution 2254 (2015) and the 2012 Geneva Communiqué [i.e. the basis for a “*good*” peace], is firmly under way’ (EU 2018; my italics). This is assumed to raise pressure for policy change on the side of the already financially struggling Syrian central government, whose allies Russia, Iran, and China are presumed to be unable to bear the lion’s share of the estimated costs (250–400 billion USD; Daher 2019). To date, however, this macropolitical strategy has not been able to change the course of reconstruction in Syrian cities and their impact for Syria’s ‘peace’.

This article makes four contributions to the debates. First, it notes that the response of the USA and the EU rests on a binary understanding of ‘peace’ (simplified as non-inclusive = bad, inclusive = good). It argues that their response should instead recognize ‘peace’ as a fluid and expandable order that is particular to a given time, space, and their inherent relations among licit and illicit¹² political-economic actors. Or, in other words, their underlying political settlements and localized elite bargains. This would allow to, second, elongate and bridge an emerging consensus among ‘pragmatic peacebuilding’, that is, political settlement theory, critical peace and conflict, urban peacebuilding, and illiberal peacebuilding scholarship. That is to say that, supporting measures for local actors provides for an effective counterpart to macropolitical measures of international assistance actors. Hereby, particularly so-called ‘insider mediators’, that is, persons who are from a conflicting environment and recognized and respected as interlocutors and shapers of social norms by all relevant conflict parties, arise as most worthwhile.

Third, it shows that such ‘insider mediators’, without having been referred to as such, already play(ed) a significant role in the negotiations surrounding the exemplary studied masterplanning cases for the ‘reconstruction’ or ‘urban redevelopment’ of the neighborhoods Basateen al-Razi and Qaboun in Damascus. Because those were and are, however, well connected to ‘the regime’, the article highlights the need to explore potential means of collaboration with politically undesirable actors. Fourth, it concludes by emphasizing the study of localized elite bargains as a crucial avenue for future scholarship on (urban) post-war orders (‘peace’).

Throughout, the article combines insights from presently disconnected academic and grey literatures, media sources, and primary material on the two masterplanning case studies, Basateen al-Razi (Marota City) and Qaboun in Damascus. The latter consists of 24 semi-structured interviews with practitioners and Syrian

⁶ Interview with UN-Habitat employee, 26.06.2019.

⁷ Preparations for real estate projects are currently taking shape in, for example, Damascus (Marota City, Basilia City, Qaboun), Aleppo (Haydariah and Jabal Pedro, based on Law 15/2008) and Homs (Baba Amr and Sultaniye based on Decree 5/1982) (Syrbanism 2020).

⁸ See, e.g., Chakrani 2013; Al-Jablawi 2017; Batrawi 2018; Daher 2018; Heydemann 2018: 11; and Al-Lababidi 2019.

⁹ Those laws are all located in the field of Housing, Land, and Property (HLP). As ‘a collective bundle of human rights laws, standards and principles’ (IOM, Global Protection Cluster & Solutions Alliance, 2018: 1), HLP rights are, amongst others, concerned with the formal and informal ability of an individual to own and/or use land, natural resources, and property. Because this also contains the ability to have and return to ‘a home, free from the fear of eviction and a place that offers shelter, safety and the ability to secure a livelihood’ (Leckie & Huggins, 2011: 2), HLP rights constitute an issue in every situation of conflict, destruction, displacement, conflict-resolution, reconstruction, and refugee return.

¹⁰ See, e.g., Clerc 2014; Jamal & Kieke 2016; Salem 2017; and Heydemann, 2018a: 11.

¹¹ See, e.g., Heydemann 2018b; Daher 2019; and Abou Zainedin & Fakhani 2020.

¹² I understand both terms in a legal positivistic manner – ‘licit’ means ‘legal by law’ and ‘illicit’ means ‘illegal by law’.

civil servants from the executive and ministerial level that were involved in the related urban planning and political processes surrounding both neighborhoods as well as international development aid professionals that worked on concurrent and/or related urban development projects in Syria.¹³ The interviews were conducted in June, July, August, and October 2019, either in person in London, Berlin, and Beirut or via Skype and WhatsApp call. Due to the high political sensitivity of those matters in Syria, specific interviews are hereinafter referred to without reference to specific names, interview locations, and means of execution. Prior to the conduction of interviews, the author obtained both ethical approval from King's College London's Research Ethics Office¹⁴ and verbally from all interviewees.

On Peace and Localized (Urban) Elite Bargains

The current approach of Western states to shaping Syria's peace assumes that an *inclusive* political transition, that is, a formal peace agreement, a change of government, and/or a state constitution that integrates as many ethnic, confessional, demographic, and gender groups' rights and perspectives as possible, would result in a long-lasting non-violent post-war order. This section contends that this response fundamentally misconceives insights that have already been vastly acknowledged by 'pragmatic peacebuilding' scholarship and practice over the course of the last decade. With 'pragmatic peace' I mean 'recent trends in peacebuilding approaches that contrast with the prevailing policy focus of the 2000s [so-called "liberal peacebuilding"]¹⁵ on building central state institutions and promoting universal values and practices of liberal democracy and rule of law' (Stepputat, 2018: 405). This encompasses, for example, 'local', 'hybrid', 'urban', and 'illiberal' peace-/building measures. Drawing from their combined insights, this section argues that instead of emphasizing absolute 'inclusivity' the response should focus on shaping 'localized elite bargains' that are 'inclusive enough', increasingly urban, and blurring lines between licit and illicit actors.

Surely, great correlations between the degrees of inclusivity of peace agreements with regards to societal notions like, for example, women and gender (see, e.g., UN Women 2018) and the 'quality' of a peace exist. Yet, with regards to the 'duration' and 'evolution' of a post-war order, empirical evidence suggests that 'inclusivity' of formalized political agreements is not necessarily a pivotal factor. Rather, the sustainability of a peace depends on the extent to which formal political agreements are representative of and compatible with underlying 'political settlements' (Cheng, Goodhand & Meehan, 2018: 10; cf. *ibid.*: 1; Olonisakin, Ababu & Muteru 2016: 14). That is, the basic 'distribution of power ... result[ing] from [formal and informal] conflict and negotiation between contending elites' (Cheng, Goodhand & Meehan 2018: 10). To illustrate: In Bosnia (Cheng, Goodhand & Meehan 2018: 68), Lebanon (Leenders 2012), Iraq (Dodge 2017), and Myanmar (Mccarthy & Farrelly 2020), among others, fighting did not (at least temporarily) stop because a new national political order was formalized between former warring parties or presumably all ethnic-/confessional groups. Instead, a 'peace' emerged because their respective political, economic, and security elites, like notables, businessmen, gang leaders, militia members, and so on, in parallel to the agreement, received and distributed 'spoils' in the form of offices, lucrative public service contracts, or property ownership among themselves (cf. Cheng & Zaum 2013).

¹³ The interview accounts of central government and opposition leaning interlocutors were verified via triangulation with hundreds of emails of and with Syrian state institutions from August 2006 through March 2012, leaked by WikiLeaks (see WikiLeaks, 'Syria Files', accessed at: <https://wikileaks.org/Syria-Files.html>), Arabic and English media sources; grey and academic literature; open source maps; and the accounts of four researchers and analysts interviewed on Syria's economic, warfare, and/or urban development trends. In cases in which verification of interview accounts was not possible because of respective data's sensitive political nature and/or because the Syrian administration, in general, did not document its internal decisions beyond legislations and directive communication (Interviews with Abdallah Dardari, head of the Syrian Planning Commission 2003-06 and Syrian Deputy-Prime Minister for Economic Affairs 2005-11, 10.07.2019; Syrian urban planner, 14.07.2019; and Syrian UN-Habitat employee, 03.08.2019), interview accounts were verified following Randall and Phoenix's (2009: 133; cf. Masip et al. 2016) approach to 'lie detection' in qualitative interviews. That is, interview accounts were compared to those of other interviewees involved in a given project or phase (between-person in-/consistencies) and, in the absence of those, interviewee account's credibility was tested in multi-staged interviews via the repetition of questions over the course of several months and the comparison of their answers (within-person inconsistencies).

¹⁴ Reference number: MRS-18/19-12998.

¹⁵ In the fashion of the founding fathers of social contract theory, 'liberal peacebuilding' stipulated since Boutros Boutros-Ghali's Agenda for Peace (1992) three things: (a) formal political agreements would render armed conflict absent (cf. Hobbes 1999), (b) would guarantee equal rights for all citizens (cf. Locke 1982), (c) decrease the war-proneness of a country if its order is liberal-democratic (cf. Kant 2008), that is, inclusive and 'well governed', and increase it if not (Berdal & Zaum 2012: 123; Cheng & Zaum 2013; Olonisakin, Ababu & Muteru 2016). Pragmatic peace-/building scholarship heavily criticized this (see, e.g., Berdal & Zaum 2012: 56; Boege 2013; Mac Ginty & Richmond 2013: 763; and Herbert 2019: 13).

Within ‘pragmatic peace-/building’ scholarship, this empirical phenomenon is also referred to as ‘illiberal peacebuilding’, namely anything but ‘liberal peacebuilding’. It represents the *de facto* most common form of how ‘a peace’ forms (Lewis, Heathershaw & Megoran 2018: 489; Smith 2020: 42; Smith et al. 2020) and is shaped by a practice known as ‘elite bargaining’ (cf. Pospisil & Kühn 2016). ‘Elite bargaining’ means ‘discrete agreement[s], or series of agreements, that explicitly set out to re-negotiate the distribution of power and allocation of resources between elites’ (Cheng, Goodhand & Meehan 2018: 11).¹⁶ They are influenced by historical, social, and developmental patterns, like hierarchies among elites and between elites and the local population, and renegotiated over time (Cheng, Goodhand & Meehan 2018: 10, 17–18). Issue wise, they cover a range of discursive, spatial, and other kinds of politically-economic subject matters (Heathershaw & Owen 2019; Lewis, Heathershaw & Megoran 2018). The outcomes of elite bargains, ‘political settlements’, effect citizens’ relationship to those goods and related public services and, hence, the ‘quality’ of a peace (cf. Cheng, Goodhand & Meehan 2018). Meaning, ‘elite bargains’ translate degrees of in-/equalities, socio-economic (parallel) systems, and/or the integration, segregation, and marginalization of societal groups (Björkdahl 2013; Björkdahl & Buckley-Zistel 2016; Gusic 2020: 41–42).

If formal political (‘peace’) agreements misalign with an underlying ‘political settlement’, they risk creating a ‘destabilizing disjuncture’ and a return to violence (Cheng, Goodhand & Meehan 2018: 84; cf. Mac Ginty 2011; Berdal & Zaum 2012; Cheng & Zaum 2013: 9, 13; Autesserre 2017: 115; Hameiri & Scarpello 2018: 163). Hence, to withstand a relapse into violence, an ‘inclusive political transition’ would need to synergize with a simultaneous transformation of the overall political settlement (Cheng, Goodhand & Meehan 2018: 84). To this aim, as Christine Cheng, Jonathan Goodhand, and Patrick Meehan (2018) suggest in their seminal work on ‘Securing and Sustaining Elite Bargains that Reduce Violent Conflict’, peacebuilding serves best by ‘instigating a series of bargains that begin to shift the parameters of negotiation and work towards establishing the “doorstep conditions” that may make more equitable and inclusive development possible’ (ibid.: 43). Each and every bargain must not be ‘inclusive’ but ‘inclusive-enough’ in the sense of incorporating political-economically relevant elites. Those need to *successively* elongate ‘the issues up for negotiation, the scope for what can be demanded, and expand[the list of] those whose interests are taken into consideration, while at the same time ensuring that the failure of negotiations does not entail the risk of renewed violence’ (ibid.). Thereby, I do not mean to say that no large aims should be set for a ‘peace’ that forms after a war, but that they should not be absolute and not externally imposed (Stepputat 2018: 411). Instead, the post-war order should be recognized as ‘provisional’ and successively developed by relevant power holders. Meanwhile, external actors focus on the facilitation of means that reduce and erase physical and structural violence and, step-by-step, including more topics and negotiation groups (cf. Bargues 2020; Stepputat 2018: 411).

To achieve this, the positionality of elites and their bargains’ issues need to be understood. On the one hand, in post-war settings as diverse as Afghanistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Nepal, among others, local politicians created both formal and informal partnerships with businessmen and security actors like militias that secured their access to wealth (Goodhand 2008; Jarvis 2020; Lewis, Heathershaw & Megoran 2018). This created corrupt networks and/or patrimonial linkages to the wider population (cf. Cheng, Goodhand & Meehan 2018: 35; Lindberg & Orjuela 2014: 728). Thus, elite bargains are situated at a blurry line between ‘licit’ and ‘illicit’, that is, ‘il-/licit’, political-economic activities. On the other hand, in context of the growing urbanization of human lives, economic opportunities, rising demands for basic services, infrastructure, and reconstruction projects after war in cities (Sampaio 2016), also those diverse il-/licit alliances and networks are moving to cities and ‘urbanizing’. This means that they involve place-specific, or ‘localized’, sets and alliances of local or local and national elites (Cheng, Goodhand & Meehan, 2018: 22; Diprose & Azca 2020; Mccarthy & Farrelly 2020).

Consequently, in Syria and elsewhere, strategies for war-to-peace transitions should move to an understanding of ‘peaces’ that acknowledges those spatial, temporal, and relational particularities (cf. Björkdahl 2013: 213) alongside their changeability and expandability (cf. Cheng, Goodhand & Meehan 2018; Stepputat 2018: 405). Furthermore, actors who international peacebuilders sideline or exclude from peace negotiations in Syria and elsewhere, like members and associates of ‘the regime’, need to be recognized as vital for the durability of a peace (Cheng, Goodhand & Meehan 2018: 3; WBG & BMZ 2020: 68). In Syria and elsewhere, international assistance currently tries to circumvent engaging with such presumably ‘illegitimate’, ‘illicit’, or ‘criminal’ actors by working with civil society organizations (CSOs) and community-based organizations

¹⁶ In ‘illiberal peacebuilding literature’, this is also referred to as ‘authoritarian conflict management’ (Lewis, Heathershaw & Megoran 2018; Heathershaw & Owen 2019).

(CBOs). Like in Habermasian thought, those are believed to act as non-governmental advocates for and multipliers of citizen interests vis-à-vis state institutions. Yet, since those need to be approved by the central government (Berdal & Zaum 2012: 55; Human Rights Watch 2019; Leenders & Mansour 2018; Zaum 2012: 123, 128), they are, in Syria and elsewhere, somewhat linked to and/or supportive of respective political-economic elites. Hence, more productive ways of engaging with 'localized elite bargains' need to be found.

The Hybridity of International Aid and the Rise of Insider Mediators

From 21 nations that experienced '(liberal) peacekeeping missions', some 57 percent relapsed into conflict within only five to ten years, or remained reliant on international aid (Autesserre 2017: 116; del Castillo 2010: 75, 2018; del Castillo & de Soto 2017: 213). Against this background, not only 'liberal peacebuilding' but all somewhat related international assistances gained a challenging reputation. Thus, it must be asked whether and if so how international actors, in general, and the current response of the USA and EU to the crisis in Syria, in particular, *should* be engaging with il-/licit political-economic actors (cf. WBG & BMZ 2020: 80). This section promotes that they should learn from the emerging consensus among 'pragmatic peacebuilding' scholarship of following a so-called 'hybrid approach'. That is, a combination of macropolitical means of pressure and support for micro-level domestic actors, particularly those recognized and respected as mediators by all relevant conflict parties.

To begin, it needs to be established that relevant changes in 'localized elite bargains' and related political settlements frequently emerge without the engagement of external forces. In Medellín, Colombia, for example, from 1991 to 2006 a series of mayors successively built a comprehensive locally owned strategy consisting of both a range of concrete policy measures, like community policing, improvements of basic services, spatial changes, job creation (Wennmann 2018: 5), and buy-in from relevant local elites (Gutiérrez et al. 2013). This reduced violence in the city by 90% (Wennmann 2018: 5). On the other hand, civilian challenges to a settlement do also frequently arise. Roger MacGinty (2014), for example, observed that people in Northern Ireland adopted seemingly ordinary or mundane practices like avoidance, ritualized politeness, or blame deferring as means of 'everyday diplomacy', which lead to a 'tolerance' or 'coping' with the conflict dynamic, an acceptance of the 'peace' that emerged.

In contrast to this, Johanna Selimovic (2019) noted that Palestinians in the divided city of Jerusalem used wall-climbing, Skype, and Facebook posts to defy the mobility, employment, and security restrictions imposed upon them by Israeli authorities. They effectively created a momentous 'peace' that worked for them. Meanwhile, Oliver Richmond and Sandra Pogodda (2016) found community-based organizations (CBOs) in Westbank to assume 'everyday' roles that normally only formal state entities would. Successively, the CBOs created an 'everyday statehood' that defied both the Israeli occupation as well as an intra-Palestinian elite struggle between the parties Fatah and Hamas. Thereby, the logic of those 'everyday peaces', arguably, is of the same kind as Cheng, Goodhand, and Meehan's proclamations surrounding 'series of elite bargains' (Cheng, Goodhand & Meehan 2018: 19). They do not bring immediate large-scale changes but are self-sustainable (cf. Björkdahl 2013: 212) and may, over time, scale up to macro-level conflict transformation (Mac Ginty & Richmond 2013).

Increasingly, the diverse range of 'pragmatic peacebuilding' scholarship and practice converge on the fact that so-called 'good-enough' approaches to international peacebuilding assistance are most effective (Stepputat 2018). Thereby, particularly the adoption of hybrid approaches that combine macro-political pressure with support measures for domestic players stand out (Autesserre 2017: 117; Brown 2018; Lewis, Heathershaw & Megoran 2018: 488; MacGinty 2015; cf. Stepputat 2018). Claire Smith (2020), for example, argued that a combination of Indonesia's external pressure and timely support for identified 'domestic moderates' shifted internal power balances among elites in Timor Leste. Even more so, this combination created a 'more liberal' macro-level peace than in neighboring Papua, although both states experienced illiberal war-to-peace transitions (ibid.). Similarly, for creating a more inclusive city-level economy in largely Uzbek inhibited Osh, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan's pressure motivated the national government to exchange the head of the local police, allow for the establishment of an independent and internationally-funded Reconstruction and Development Fund, and to oust the local mayor who was controlling up to 90% of the city's economy at the expense of the Uzbek minority (Lewis, Heathershaw & Megoran, 2018: 86–87).

Correspondingly, 'urban peacebuilding' scholarship advocates for the collaboration with so-called 'insider mediators' to transform conflicts in cities when the licit support of state actors is lacking (see, e.g., Wennmann & Jütersonke 2019; Wennmann, 2019). With 'insider mediators' I mean (former) members of conflicting parties or societies, like gangs or criminal networks, leaders of CBOs, trade unions, or business councils, who because of their position, personality, and knowledge of local and conflict dynamics are respected by

all conflict parties and are, thus, able to change social norms (UNDP 2020: 7; Wennmann 2019: 184–85). Thereby, their inherent advantage is that they inhibit an intimate understanding of the in-/formal dynamics of a conflict and a society, which typically includes all cultural, religious, and political aspects (UNDP 2020: 28) that are relevant to a local 'political settlement'. In combination with their respected status by all conflict parties and stakeholders, this provides them with an ability to influence related elite bargains.

In 2012 El Salvador, for example, the security ministry covertly negotiated a truce with the country's two largest street gangs, MS-13 and Barrio 18, through a military chaplain and a former congressman (Dudley 2014: 3). Thereby, the government had to concede to transferring 30 imprisoned gang members to other prisons around the country and, reportedly, conceded further favorable conditions to respective gang leaders that were not disclosed to the public (Dudley 2014). Yet, the working through these respected figures lead to a decrease of El Salvador's homicide rate by 60 percent in only four years (Wennmann 2018: 4). Meanwhile, in the regions of Taiz and Abayan in Yemen, 120 women helped to resolve community conflicts around basic access to water, sanitation, education, and health facilities as well as other kinds of common infrastructures (UNDP 2020: 35). They were identified by the UN and the EU with the help of local CBOs and local authorities and conducted dialogue processes and participatory 'conflict scans' to restore trust between the community and authorities (ibid.). In short, 'insider mediators' arise among the most promising actors to support as part of pragmatic 'hybrid approaches'.

Two Tales of Different Entry Points in Damascus

A closer look at the living cases of the masterplanning processes for the 'urban redevelopment' or 'reconstruction' of the neighborhoods Basateen al-Razi and Qaboun in Damascus, Syria, arguably advances this emerging consensus both practically and academically. The masterplans for both neighborhoods were originally prepared from 2010–12¹⁷ as part of Syria's nationwide pre-war 'urban redevelopment' programme. Yet, they took very different turns with regards to the degrees of 'inclusivity' of their underlying political settlements. Qaboun's masterplan envisions turning an industrial zone with agricultural space and informal houses into a high-class residential area mixed with limited commercial space (UrbAN Syria, 2020: 36). It received relatively little international but intensive domestic resistance and is at the time of writing up for renegotiation.¹⁸ In contrast to this, the masterplan for Basateen al-Razi (also known as part of the 'Marota City' project)¹⁹ mixes high-class residencies with new governorate service facilities and few commercial space (Al-Lababidi 2019: 7). It gathered intense inter-/national attention, but is unlikely to be renegotiated.²⁰

The empirical analysis provided hereinafter suggests that this divergence is the result of both 'the timing' of international political-economic pressure, the degree of organization of community-level resistance, and the usage/skills of the respective insider mediators employed. Combined, those provided for two different entry points towards shaping their local elite bargaining. Since both masterplans, simultaneously, constitute some of the most progressed cases of 'urban redevelopment' and 'reconstruction' across the country and the Damascus Metropolitan Area,²¹ and therefore – for better or worse – bear a likelihood for replication, they pinpoint that more consolidated elite bargains and political settlements require high-reputation or less impartial insider mediators. This contradicts prevalent and often normatively-driven accounts of Syria-specialist literature (e.g. Heydemann 2018, 11; Clerc 2014; Jamal and Kieke 2016; Salem 2017) and illuminates a localized approach towards influencing political settlements as a fruitful avenue for 'pragmatic peacebuilding' research and responses, particularly in urban spaces.

Basateen al-Razi ('Marota City')

The first masterplan for Basateen al-Razi was prepared at the onset of the uprisings-turned-war from 2010 to 2012²² and largely stayed below the radar of both domestic and international resistance until 2015/16. It was part of the so-called 'Sustainable Urban Development Reforms' (2005–12), which alongside many other sectoral reform processes like economy and education, aimed at modernizing Syria and advancing President

¹⁷ Interview with former Syrian contractor, 05.08.2019.

¹⁸ For images and impressions, see Emmar Syria 2020.

¹⁹ The respective plans also encompass 2.15 km² and also span parts of the adjacent neighborhoods Mazzeh and Kafr Sousseh, Yet, this article's analysis focuses on the neighborhood Basateen al-Razi.

²⁰ For images and impressions, see Marota City 2019.

²¹ In the DMA alone 11 neighborhoods are scheduled for new masterplanning processes for the next three years: 2019 – Barzeh, Qaboun and Jobar; 2020 – Al-Tadamon, Al-Zahira, and Aisha River area; 2021 – Mount Qasioun; 2022 – Dwel'a and At-Tabbaleh; 2023 – Al-Mazzeh 86 and Dmmar (Syrbanism 2020).

²² Interview with former Syrian contractor, 03.07.2019.

Bashar al-Assad's vision of it becoming a regional power, the 'hub between the five seas'.²³ While Western states targeted national-political and economic elites from Spring 2011 with increasing sanctions (EU 2011; US Department of State 2020), the 2005–2018 Governor of Damascus, Bishr al-Sabban, pushed his master-planning project ideas for Basateen al-Razi and some adjacent areas through (by-then called 'Behind al-Razi' or *Khalfa al-Razi*). Although an expert committee (*Lajnet al-Mutaba'a*) had already approved the plans in February 2012, according to one interviewee, he asked the institutional architects of the Governorate of Damascus (GoD) to upgrade and enlarge them over Spring 2012 to provide for more areas of investment.²⁴ Allegedly, Sabban also bribed some committee members in an attempt to receive their approval.²⁵ Subsequently, Sabban lobbied for the same at the Ministry of Local Governance and the Ministry of Presidential Affairs.²⁶ In September 2012, the necessary legal change in the field of HLP (Decree 66/2012)²⁷ was tailor-made to legalize his redevelopment endeavor.²⁸

Although rumors about the upcoming but by-then unpublished masterplan were spreading in Basateen al-Razi since 2009, its dwellers associated the motivation for the project with their protest activities throughout the early phase of the uprisings (Goldsmith, 2018; Jamal & Kieke, 2016; Salem, 2017). While some vocalized their concerns in opposition blogs and outlets, their community leaders, who were traditionally used as 'insider mediators' to negotiate conflicts with the central government,²⁹ requested a meeting with President Assad (Abou Zainedin & Fakhani 2020). Other local communities negotiated at least 35 ceasefires between 2011 and 2014 (Wennmann 2018: 6). Basateen al-Razi's insider mediators, however, were never granted a meeting (Abou Zainedin & Fakhani 2020). From 2013–16, the GoD evicted hundreds of dwellers and destroyed their, mostly 'informally' built, houses, provided only little compensation (98–158 USD), if at all, and no alternative housing, even though Decree 66/2012 had promised so (Jamal & Kieke 2016; Salem 2017).³⁰

Interestingly enough, the central government supported Sabban's plans through the whole of the preparation phase (2012–16) for the implementation of the project. Afterwards, it rebranded the 'urban redevelopment' *Khalfa al-Razi* in 2017 into the Marota City project (meaning 'sovereignty' and 'homeland' in Syriac) and proclaimed it as a model project for Syria's post-war 'reconstruction' (Damascus Cham Holding 2017; The Syria Report 2018a). The best explanation for this is that the related political settlement offered strong private and public political-economic advantages for both relevant local and national level elites. To illustrate, Syria's since 2006 incumbent Foreign Minister, Walid al-Mu'allim, shall have bought property in Basateen al-Razi³¹ and the nephew of President Assad and long-time director of the Military Housing Establishment, Riyadh al-Shalish, was interested in undertaking Marota City's joint works infrastructure construction (Al-Lababidi 2019: 8). Moreover, some well-known businessman close to 'the regime', like Assad's maternal cousin Rami Makhlouf, promised investments in value of around USD 57.5 million (ibid.: 9). This resonates with both the observation of international development practitioners who were working on parallel urban development projects and programmes in pre-war Syria that a general tendency among politicians to distribute prosperous urban zones amongst themselves existed and with the theories of authoritarian conflict management.³²

On the other hand, the project's rebranding can be considered to have forged a testimony of stability for the public administration. It happened at a time when Syria had lost 80% of its pre-war Gross Domestic Product, some 226 billion USD, due to the war and the West's sanctions (The World Bank 2017: 83). From its announcement in July 2017 until the issuance of Law 10/2018 in March 2018, which expanded the stipulations of Decree 66/2012 to potentially the whole of Syria, Marota City secured USD 474 million in investment

²³ (Interview with a former Syrian contractor, 01.07.2019 and 03.07.2019; Abdallah Dardari, 10.07.2019; cf. Goulden 2011: 200; Clerc 2012). They aimed at both the structural reform of some HLP matters in Syria and encompassed localized regional and urban planning processes and coherent lawmaking that set out to re-regulate HLP ownership, living, and investment rights all across the country and particularly with regards to so-called 'informal settlements' (Interviews with Samir Aita, 01.07.2019; former Syrian contractor 01.07.2019; former UNDP employee 09.07.2019; Abdallah Dardari 10.07.2019).

²⁴ Interview with former Syrian contractor, 01.07.2019.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Interview with former Syrian contractor, 05.08.2019.

²⁷ Decree 66/2012 legalized the redevelopment of two zones in the Southwest of Damascus, zone 1 spans 2.2 km² and encompassed Basateen al-Razi, zone 2 is located south of it, spans 8.8 km² and is known as 'Basilia City'.

²⁸ Interview with Syrian public servant 1, 18.07.2019; Interview with former Syrian contractor 05.08.2019.

²⁹ See FES & COAR. (COAR, 2019b; Khaddour & Mazur, 2019)

³⁰ For explanations of the problematic, see NRC 2017.

³¹ I.w. Syrian contractor, 03.07.2019.

³² Interview with a former development aid program manager, 10.07.2019.

promises (The Syria Report 2018a). While only some USD 185–222 million were needed (Al-Lababidi 2019: 8), this created an image of a prosperous Syrian reconstruction. Furthermore, since around 90 percent of those investment promises stem from previously largely unknown businessmen,³³ many analysts assume that those act as an il-/licit ‘cover’ for closer ‘regime’ members, such as the private funds of President Assad himself (Al-Lababidi 2019: 12; The Syria Report 2018a). This also concurs with investigations surrounding the Panama Papers (Obermaier & Obermayer n.d.) and confessions Rami Makhoulouf made in Summer 2020, namely that he used other companies to evade the sanctions for ‘the regime’ (OCCRP 2020).

In sum, Marota City can be best understood as an unfortunately good example of ‘authoritarian conflict management’ with a strong il-/licit political settlement under it. Even when international pressure and attention for Syria’s unequal reconstruction increased from 2018 onwards and gathered vast amounts of media attention and diplomatic criticism (see, e.g., Chulov 2018; ECRE 2018), ‘the regime’ only dismissed Sabban on corruption allegations and amended Law 10/2018’s timeframe (SANA 2018a; The Syria Report 2018b). When, from Winter 2019 onwards, Western sanctions extended to all kinds of economic transactions and key personnel associated with ‘reconstruction’ (al-Khateb 2020; Loveluck 2019; McDowall 2018), investment flights and delays considering the construction start occurred (The Syria Report 2020). However, until to date, there is no renegotiation of the masterplan for that Basateen al-Razi’s dwellers cope with the trajectory via self-help groups on Facebook (Abou Zainedin & Fakhani 2020; also see The Syria Report 2020a).

Qaboun

In contrast to this, the masterplanning case of Qaboun is a tale of a relatively unstable political settlement and a strongly organized resistance group. From 2010 to 2012, the neighborhood’s first masterplan was prepared in parallel to the one for Basateen al-Razi. Yet, due to the fact that its first draft’s urban design and architecture were reportedly ‘not modern enough’ for the aims of Damascus’s urban development scheme, they were retendered in Autumn 2011.³⁴ They could not get finalized until Summer 2012,³⁵ when the GoD prepared the legalization of *Khalifa al-Razi*. Afterwards, from 2012 to 2017 with the exception of a ceasefire in 2014, Qaboun was under opposition-control and its built environment heavily destroyed (UrbAN Syria 2020: 26). Therefore, the masterplanning processes could only get picked up in 2018 following the ‘reconciliation’ of the area (Damas Times 2018; SANA 2018a). When Qaboun’s first masterplan draft emerged in Summer 2018 and foresaw turning the area into a residential zone with limited commercial activities, its underlying political settlement was arguably not as strong as Basateen al-Razi’s yet.

Moreover, Qabounis profited from the aforementioned and by-then omnipresent pressure created by Western state actors and the Syrian diaspora in response to Law 10/2018. Simultaneously, and arguably more importantly, local industrialists from the area instantly organized and synergized their resistance. They realized that the newly announced masterplan of the GoD would force them to move to another nearby area (Adra al-Omaliya) and strip them off their property rights (COAR 2019b). In response, the local industrialists formed a Facebook group and tried to seek dialogue with the Governorate of Damascus (ibid.). Thereby, they first promoted the fact that their facilities would be located in an ‘organized’, not an ‘informal’ area (e.g., Basateen al-Razi) (UrbAN Syria, 2020: 40). Second, as the GoD claimed that some 80–85 percent of Qaboun would have been destroyed by the conflict and would, thus, require redevelopment in any case, they pledged to undertake the necessary restoration processes if the GoD accepted their stay (COAR 2019b; Enab Baladi 2018; UrbAN Syria 2020: 40). When the Governorate responded that the plan would be ‘unchangeable’ (UrbAN Syria 2020: 41), the industrialists, third, commissioned an independent damage assessment by the Syndicate of Engineers and the Syrian Ministry of Justice (ibid.). This assessment found 90 percent of the industrial facilities in question being undamaged or having only suffered minor structural or superficial damages that would be easy to rehabilitate (ibid.).

Subsequently, through Fall and Winter 2018/9, the industrialists used this independent damage assessment to rally for the support of the Syrian Chamber of Industry (Sol) (ibid.). The Sol assumed the role of their ‘insider mediator’ and advocated on behalf of the industrialists directly with the Syrian Prime Minister Imad

³³ A prominent example of this is Samer Foz. Until 2015, he Foz largely unknown before it became known that his Aman Holding Group imported foodstuff and petroleum for the regime during the war, and invested in or acquired ‘car factories, iron smelters, a sugar factory, flour mills, pharmaceutical factories, and airline company, and hotel services’ (Al-Lababidi, 2019: 12), including the Four Seasons hotel in which the UN staff works in Syria. Following his 18.9 million USD investment in Marota City, Foz also purchased shares in two of Syria’s largest private banks, Al Baraka Bank Syria and Syria International Islamic Bank (ibid., 13). The former of the two, together with Damascus Cham Holding, had earlier ‘looked to launch the first joint stock real estate finance company “to help citizens in financing the construction of their real estate”’ (ibid.).

³⁴ I.w. former Syrian contractor, 05.08.2019.

³⁵ Ibid.

Khamis. Thereby, its arguments reportedly appealed to the ‘post-war reconstruction and nation-building rhetoric espoused by the government’ (ibid.). Additionally, as an important representative of large chunks of the Syrian economy, the SoI declared its readiness to assist the industrialists in resuming their economic activities in the area (ibid.). Khamis’ office, in turn, promised to support their endeavor and requested a list of all businesses in the area, clustered into businesses immediately able to resume work, those requiring some repairs and maintenance, and those lost to destruction (ibid.). What is more, Khamis himself met with the industrialists through Winter 2018/9 and, at least officially, attempted to solve their concerns (SANA 2018b). In July 2019, the GoD passed the masterplan regardless (UrbAN Syria 2020: 42). This was met with some 740 formal objections during the subsequent ‘objection phase’ (COAR 2019a) and continuous resistance of the industrialists until the time of writing.

Arguably, in this context, changing legal justifications used by the GoD and the response of the central government illuminate some interesting insights into the underlying political settlement. That is to say that, the 2019 masterplan publication evoked Law 10/2018, which alongside the approval of the Ministry of Local Administration, required the signature of President Assad (COAR 2019b). One year later, in June 2020, however, the plan was republished under Law 23/2015 (Enab Baladi 2020), which authorizes the Ministry of Public Works and Housing to prepare all land identified in ‘Detailed Organizational Plans’ (Masterplans) of ‘the owner’s division’ or ‘the regulatory planning of the administrative authority’ (here: the GoD) for construction (ibid.; The Syria Report 2015). In this light, one can assume that Assad did not grant his needed signature to the first draft. This arises as particularly interesting because Qaboun, like Basateen al-Razi, was (and still is) subject to the political-economic interests of many highly influential elites, including the President’s brother Maher al-Assad and his brother-in-law Mohammed Hamsho (UrbAN Syria, 2020: 27).

Which factors and actors could have outprioritized such elite interests? In this context, one must surely consider the status of the Qabouni industrialists as formalized HLP right holders and economists that contributed to the Syrian pre-war economy for many years.³⁶ Arguably, they were even part of Syria’s pre-war political settlement³⁷ and remained loyal to the central government throughout the war (The Syria Report 2020b). Yet, given that, contrary to the case of Basateen al-Razi, various neighborhoods and societal groups that have and had troubling relations to the central-government, such as for having been an opposition stronghold, were able to promote their interests in other highly politicized issues like the ‘reconciliation’ and return (COAR 2019b; UrbAN Syria 2020: 26), the industrialists status cannot have been a pivotal factor. In light of the protest and resistance history of Basateen al-Razi and Qaboun one could actually even argue that, overall, the neighborhood of Qaboun must have a more difficult relation to the central government than Basateen al-Razi. Rather, it occurs that the involvement of the SoI and its status and strategy in combination with their organized pressure and the formalized objections influenced the national interests with regards to Qaboun’s political settlement.

Thereby, the SoI is a good example of two risks that are associated with insider mediator support, namely reputational and contextual ones. The first stems from the fact that the SoI’s ‘respect’ by the Syrian central government is also reflected in the fact that some heads of its provincial chambers, such as the one for Aleppo and Homs, are so closely collaborating with ‘the regime’ that they are on the sanctions list of the EU (EU 2011). While this, arguably, allows the whole entity to communicate with and potentially persuade all stakeholders to the issue (UNDP 2020: 28), the SoI, like insider mediators in other countries, is not a neutral mediator (ibid.). Any kind of in-/direct engagement with them bears political risks for external actors like Western international assistance. Yet, in alliance with political settlement theory, as outlined above, supporting their endeavors may be useful if one recognizes their local bargain outcomes as provisional (Stepputat 2018: 411). Additionally, the insider mediators must continue including new and diverse societal groups into a conversation (cf. UNDP 2020: 28) and/or extend the subject matters up for negotiation.

During the aforementioned ‘reconciliation’ and ‘return’ negotiations throughout formerly opposition-held areas in Syria, innumerable ‘insider mediators’ (in this context referred to as ‘local intermediaries’) were either appointed by the central government, communities themselves, or by external players like Russia (COAR 2019b; Sosnowski 2019). Consequently, it is to suspect that more of such seemingly organic ‘insider mediators’ will continue to take on influential roles with regards to localized (elite) bargains even without any Western assistance. Surely, a direct support of their endeavors risks having those local ‘insider mediators’ in the eyes of either Syrian communities or the Syrian central government ‘affiliated’ to Western politics and interests (UNDP 2020: 48). This could risk their ‘respected’ status among all relevant stakeholders (ibid.).

³⁶ I thank one of this paper’s anonymous reviewers for pointing this out.

³⁷ Ibid.

Yet, it is to echo the finding of the 2020 Guidance Note of the United Nations Development Programme 'Engaging with insider mediators: sustaining peace in an age of turbulence' that 'insider mediator's' work is frequently constrained by being disconnected from and disregarded by formalized political processes' (UNDP 2020: 29). The facilitation of exchange mechanisms for things such as peer-learning among 'insider mediators' and an open invitation to include them in the formal mediation processes facilitated by the international community (ibid.: 28) should be explored and integrated with the top-down political pressure mechanisms the US and EU enact.

Conclusion and Outlook

In Syria and elsewhere, the present and future of 'peace' after war is and will be characterized by localized elite bargains among il-/licit alliances of political-economic elites over matters that are 'urban'. Yet, as the contemporary response to the emerging transition towards a post-war order in Syria shows, international assistance is lacking both an effective understanding of how 'peaces' form (and reform) as well as productive means to shaping the 'localized elite bargains' that are pivotal to it: If a 'regime' like the one of 'the Assads' remains incumbent, a 'peace' is not automatically 'bad'. Neither is a 'peace' automatically 'good' in the sense of 'long-lasting' if its formal political transition includes as many ethnic, confessional, social, and gender groups as possible. Instead, the durability and quality of a 'peace' depends on the relationship of the formalized political agreement to a society's underlying informal and *de facto* political settlement. A 'peace' is an order that is particular to a given time, space, and their inherent relations, meanwhile, changeable and extendable to other matters and societal groups. It is sufficient if the initial post-war order is 'inclusive enough' and locally working – instead of instigating a full-blown 'regime change'. Over the course of further rounds of negotiations, it can still gradually evolve.

Recognizing this and the pivotal role of 'localized elite bargains' that make or break a political settlement is a necessary first step international assistance needs to take with regards to shaping 'peace' in (urban) post-war settings. Simultaneously, this forces international assistance to engage with various sets of alliances of licit and illicit political, economic, and security actors that are increasingly localized. In this regard, the article suggested to learn from the emerging consensus among 'pragmatic peacebuilding' scholarship and practitioners. It is to adopt a so-called 'hybrid' approach that marries macro-level political-economic means with localized micro-level support measures. Thereby, particularly collaboration and in-/direct support for 'insider mediators' stand out.

The cases of the masterplanning processes for the 'urban redevelopment' or 'reconstruction' of the neighborhoods Basateen al-Razi and Qaboun in Damascus, Syria discussed herein echoed this emerging consensus.³⁸ The comparison of both planning trajectories highlighted the importance of 'balance' between resistance to a bargain that is exogenous and endogenous to a society and of 'timing' with regards to the solidification of a related political settlement. Additionally, programmatic and reputational risks that engagements with 'insider mediators' in politicized contexts like Syria's bear, since some 'insider mediators' may be somewhat associated to 'the regime', need to be considered. In this context, the 'pragmatic peacebuilding' approach proved helpful in refraining from expecting immediate large-scale transformational changes and, instead, opting for a 'series of bargains' that successively expand from one space and societal group to another and eventually to other subject matters. Here, the article identified the facilitation of exchange mechanisms for peer-learning among 'insider mediators' and an open invitation to include 'locally' emerging ones in formal mediation processes were as auspicious.

On a conceptual level, the findings contributed to a more nuanced yet shared understanding of 'peace' and the role that external actors play with regards to their potential positive and negative influences on underlying localized elite bargains. If anything, the article emphasized that some of the so-presumed 'sub-studies' of peacebuilding that fall under the umbrella of 'pragmatic peacebuilding' like 'urban peacebuilding', 'illiberal peacebuilding', and political settlement theory can and must extensively contribute to macropolitical approaches. Simultaneously, they should exchange horizontally with related sets of literatures. For advancing both the relevant concept of 'peace' and the practices that should be related to its 'building' in urban post-war settings, further theoretical and empirical inquiries into 'localized elite bargaining' and their relation to actors and factors that are endogenous and exogenous to a conflict would prove particularly worthwhile. In sum, this provides not only a 'pragmatic' but a genuinely sustainable entry point for locally owned peacebuilding in urban post-war settings, and perhaps beyond.

³⁸ For a discussion of the meaning of the conflict in Syria for peacebuilding as a whole, see Wennmann 2019a.

Acknowledgements

This article is indebted to many people. I thank Reinoud Leenders and Jalal Mesady, for their guidance and support on earlier versions of this paper; Derek Plumbly, Nimat and Omar Bizri, Meinolf Spiekermann, and one person I shall not name for their help throughout the fieldwork; the journal editors and the two anonymous reviewers for their helpful feedback on my writing; and all of the foregoing for their encouragement in preparing my work for publication.

Funding Information

The author received funding from the German National Academic Scholarship Foundation (Studienstiftung des deutschen Volkes) and the Gilchrist Educational Trust.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

Author Information

The research was done for the author's dissertation of the MA War Studies at King's College London. Post-graduation the author got employed by GIZ.

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How to cite this article: Kania, M. 2021. Forging Peace in Damascus: On International Aid, Localized Elite Bargaining, and Insider Mediators. *Journal of Illicit Economies and Development*, 2(2), pp.188–203. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31389/jied.65>

Submitted: 14 May 2020

Accepted: 21 October 2020

Published: 23 February 2021

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Journal of Illicit Economies and Development is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by LSE Press.

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