



The British Syrian Society

The British Syrian Society's Recommendations Arising from Conferences:

The War in Syria; the Challenges and Opportunities

May 2017

**The National Administrative Reform Programme:
Success Requirements in Post War Syria?**

January 2018

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In May of 2017, the British Syrian Society hosted a conference at Damascus University to discuss day-to-day issues that reflect the suffering of the Syrian people as a result of the war. The first day of this conference explored many topics relating to the various ramifications and challenges faced in Syria including the topics of corruption and of battered public services. The second day of the conference examined the future prospects and opportunities which the country can harness once the war subsides.

The Society also held another conference in January of 2018 to discuss the government's new National Administrative Reform Programme (NARP). The objective of this new Programme is to instigate fundamental reforms on the overall administrative work environment of governmental institutions in Syria. These reforms will be based on thorough methodical evaluation of current governmental performance to come up with a comprehensive roadmap outlining the required execution and evaluation techniques of the Programme.

H.E. the Prime Minister along with various government ministers and other public officials, parliamentarians, economists, academics and members of the British Syrian Society participated in the two conferences. The resulting deliberations have included detailed presentations and extensive Q&A sessions on various topics. A set of issues and concerns have featured repeatedly throughout these discussions. What follows is a summary of these issues and the corresponding recommendations:



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1. There is a substantial weakness in disseminating information to the public regarding various governmental activities, plans and performance¹. Therefore, it would be useful if all governmental institutions publish details about their respective strategies, mechanisms, organisational structures, projects, budgets, performance indicators and all other relevant information through modern easy to use websites. Moreover, it is important for all the above entities to establish a dedicated public relations office to facilitate this objective.
2. There are significant shortcomings in the application of e-government solutions and these seem to be a result of attempts to implement such solutions on a grand scale and through a programme involving all public institutions². Therefore, it would be useful if the government encourages individual initiatives and pilot projects by each institution to provide these ever-evolving solutions according to their own requirements. A good example of such an initiative is the electronic services provided by Damascus Governorate's Citizen Service Centres.
3. Public sector recruitment and career advancement mechanisms seldom adhere to proven criteria of selection that take into account qualifications, experience and personal traits. Consequently, large numbers of low-paid employees with overlapping responsibilities overwhelm the public sector, and this in turn impedes the implementation of effective incentive/penalty policies³. Therefore, it would be useful to evaluate the idea of establishing a specialised public sector recruitment body tasked with the responsibility of analysing and recruiting the human resources needs for each public institution. Such a body would also be responsible for designing remuneration structures as well as overseeing career development and progression.
4. The government could make better use of the exceptional academic expertise that is available in Syrian universities, civil societies and expatriate communities. All efforts to this end have been limited to humble initiatives that do not rise to the importance of how such expertise can strengthen governmental performance through the provision of specialised consultation and

¹ First session of "The War in Syria; the Challenges and Opportunities" conference. First session of "The National Administrative Reform Programme: Success Requirements in Post War Syria?" conference.

² First and third sessions of "The National Administrative Reform Programme: Success Requirements in Post War Syria?" conference.

³ First and second sessions of "The National Administrative Reform Programme: Success Requirements in Post War Syria?" conference.



training⁴. Therefore, it would be useful for every governmental institution to formulate plans and programmes aimed at utilising such expertise. If implemented, these programmes should be regularly and independently assessed.

5. The Regional Planning Commission plays a vital role in strengthening the unity of Syria through its mandate of formulating and monitoring the execution of balanced developmental strategies across the country. However, the changes in the way the Commission works has greatly reduced its effectiveness and rendered it unable to carry out its work properly⁵. Therefore, it would be useful to restore the status and independence of this institution and provide it with adequate expertise to perform its duties. Moreover, certain organisational changes should be implemented to allow for a broader ministerial representation as well as the inclusion of academics, consultants and members of the civil society in the Higher Council for Regional Development.
6. The blatant disregard for environmental and sustainable development issues during this very critical stage should lead to calls for utmost care in dealing with such matters and their impact on the future of Syria⁶. Therefore, it would be useful to impose environmental considerations onto all aspects of governmental work and specifically that of the Regional Planning Commission. Moreover, the government should restore the standalone status of the Ministry of Environment and grant it the necessary executive powers to allow it to:
 - a. Incubate and structure the work of the various local environmental NGOs.
 - b. Act as the focal point for correspondence with international donors and centres for environmental studies.
 - c. Have the authority to coordinate with other ministries and governmental institutions to assess the environmental impact of all their work.
 - d. Propose environmental legislations and executive frameworks.
 - e. Monitor the proper enforcement of all applicable laws and regulations.

⁴ First and second sessions of “The National Administrative Reform Programme: Success Requirements in Post War Syria?” conference.

⁵ Fourth and fifth sessions of “The War in Syria; the Challenges and Opportunities” conference. First, second and third sessions of “The National Administrative Reform Programme: Success Requirements in Post War Syria?” conference.

⁶ Fifth session of “The War in Syria; the Challenges and Opportunities” conference. Third session of “The National Administrative Reform Programme: Success Requirements in Post War Syria?” conference.



7. Urban planning and urban development of Syrian cities play a major role in strengthening links between the various regional centres in Syria. The prevailing crisis has created a unique opportunity to reconsider the current urban policies and the role that they may play in consolidating inter-regional links and crystallising the concept of citizenship among all Syrians⁷. Therefore, it would be useful to establish a Higher Council for Planning and Reconstruction that would bring together all the provincial governors, concerned ministers, the Regional Planning Commission, academics and representatives of the civil society. The new proposed council would have the mandate to approve all urban plans and development policies within cities and ensure a unity of vision and a balanced development within and among those cities.
8. The transportation sector plays a crucial role both in urban and regional planning as well as the economic development of the country at large. It seems, however, that there is quite a lot of overlapping in responsibilities and a lack of coordination when it comes to formulating an overall vision and integrated local solutions for this strategic sector in Syria⁸. Therefore, it would be useful to establish a practical mechanism for coordination between the Ministry of Transport, the various Governorates and the Regional Planning Commission (in addition to the Higher Council for Planning and Reconstruction if established) to formulate a general and detailed vision for the transportation networks both inside and outside the cities.
9. The importance of balanced rural development in combating poverty, illiteracy and radicalism cannot be over stated. Moreover, this balanced approach is also very instrumental in preserving the rural character of Syrian villages and preventing them from becoming urban concrete blocks⁹. Therefore, it would be useful to reactivate the work of the Syrian Fund for Rural Development and expand its mandate to include the provision of development action plans in conjunction with the Regional Planning Commission to cover all social, educational, health, agricultural and urban aspects of development.

⁷ Fifth session of “The War in Syria; the Challenges and Opportunities” conference. Second and third sessions of “The National Administrative Reform Programme: Success Requirements in Post War Syria?” conference.

⁸ First, fourth and fifth sessions of “The War in Syria; the Challenges and Opportunities” conference. Third session of “The National Administrative Reform Programme: Success Requirements in Post War Syria?” conference.

⁹ Fifth session of “The War in Syria; the Challenges and Opportunities” conference. Second and third sessions of “The National Administrative Reform Programme: Success Requirements in Post War Syria?” conference.



10. The authority to develop and update educational curricula is restricted to the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Higher Education. The resulting limitation deprives the educational sector from many opportunities that would otherwise allow it to open up and develop¹⁰. Therefore, it would be useful to involve as many ministries and civil society organisations as possible in the design, update and delivery methods of school, university and technical education curricula. Moreover, the complimentary role of the family and the media in education should be utilised and supported to cater for the consequences of the crisis, the developments in teaching techniques and the requirements of the job market.
11. The war has revealed numerous weaknesses in the existing strategy of delivering public healthcare services. The weaknesses were highlighted when enemy forces were able to target and put major hospitals out of service and thus causing substantial financial losses in the process¹¹. Therefore, it would be useful to reconsider the strategy of building large hospitals in regional centres, and evaluate instead the idea of establishing a large network of small but highly equipped clinics and medical centres. These countrywide smaller medical centres would be equipped and connected together by a sophisticated information technology system that would allow them to be monitored centrally through an independent body affiliated to the Ministry of Health.
12. The daily overload of bureaucratic work is constraining the outlook and initiative of ministers and other heads of public institutions and preventing them from paying enough attention to overall strategy formulation¹². Therefore, it would be useful to encourage ministers and heads of public institutions to consult with experts, academics and reputable businessmen through special advisory councils. The advisory councils would serve to help in formulating strategies to tackle issues faced by the government such as those highlighted during the two conferences:

¹⁰ Sixth session of “The War in Syria; the Challenges and Opportunities” conference. First, second and third sessions of “The National Administrative Reform Programme: Success Requirements in Post War Syria?” conference.

¹¹ Third session of “The War in Syria; the Challenges and Opportunities” conference.

¹² Third, fourth and sixth sessions of “The War in Syria; the Challenges and Opportunities” conference. First, second and third sessions of “The National Administrative Reform Programme: Success Requirements in Post War Syria?” conference.



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- a. The shadow economy, made up mainly of illicit transactions, administrative corruption and tax evasion, constitutes a large proportion of the gross domestic product in Syria. If the government is serious about tackling this problem, then this is only achievable by the introduction of e-government services which will decrease bureaucracy and limit human interference in governmental work.
 - b. The high rate of population growth in Syria has been and will remain the biggest economic challenge in the absence of a serious governmental programme that can manage this growth. The effects of unmanaged population growth and youth unemployment have been clearly demonstrated in the ongoing Syrian crisis.
 - c. The burdens of providing public healthcare can be drastically reduced if the government concentrates on preventing the causes rather than treating the symptoms. It seems though that the Ministry for Health does not have any such policy. A simple example would be controlling the number of diesel vehicles inside city centres, as the case is in neighbouring countries, and strictly monitoring the exhaust of other vehicles. Such a measure alone would save the Ministry huge sums in treatment costs related to respiratory diseases and millions of Dollars' worth of imported medicines.
 - d. Historical records have shown that agriculture originated in Syria. However today, large swathes of this ancient fertile land is plagued with either arbitrary real estate projects or illegal settlements. Moreover, the once famous organic agricultural produce is rapidly giving way to mass fertilizer and pesticide enhanced agriculture.
 - e. Damascus, the oldest city in the world and the capital of the Umayyads whose green orchards and unique cultural heritage is second to none, has become in recent years a forest of concrete and one huge car park. Moreover, the Syrian government seems oblivious to the ongoing violations against the architectural heritage of old Damascene neighbourhoods both inside and outside the Old City wall. Such gross negligence is detrimental to the image of the capital whose beauty should reflect that of other cities across the country. The government should be more appreciative of the fact that the pride of the capital goes a long way in strengthening the sense of citizenship.
13. The reputation of the Syrian judiciary system is tarnished. The civil courts are swamped with hundreds of thousands of both legitimate and malicious lawsuits, many of which cannot be



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provided with any credible judicial remedies¹³. Therefore, it would be useful to take certain measures to alleviate some of these shortcomings:

- a. All lawsuits in which the value of the dispute exceeds fifty million Syrian Pounds should be referred to a special court convened for this purpose. The referral can be made upon the request of the litigants parties or upon a decision of the court itself. To fund this scheme a nominal fee not exceeding one percent of the dispute value can be deducted after the court has pronounced its judgment.
 - b. Well-known law faculty professors and reputable lawyers should be appointed on special committees tasked with the objective of reviewing all Court of Cassation rulings, particularly those cases where the dispute value is high. The move would serve to appraise the credibility and integrity of judges on one hand, and provide training material for law students on the other.
 - c. The effectiveness of the judicial immunity enjoyed by judges and its influence on the spread of corruption in the judiciary should be re-assessed. Moreover, every judge and high-ranking employee within the judiciary should submit an annual declaration of assets and interests.
 - d. The processes and effectiveness of the existing Judicial Inspectorate should be re-examined, and its powers should be expanded to cover lawyers as well as judges.
 - e. The fact that the judicial system in Syria is often misused to blackmail prominent local and foreign parties should be taken into account, particularly since many civil lawsuits require the presence of defendants.
14. The sheer numbers of Syrian youth leaving their country to avoid compulsory military service represent a national catastrophe¹⁴. It would therefore be useful if the General Command of the Armed Forces undertakes a comprehensive appraisal of all the various proposals put forward to tackle this phenomenon such as the introduction of an exemption fee or a civil service position. It is very important that a decisive decision on this matter be taken swiftly as it is the ambiguity surrounding this issue that is exacerbating the scale of the problem.

¹³ Second session of “The War in Syria; the Challenges and Opportunities” conference. First session of “The National Administrative Reform Programme: Success Requirements in Post War Syria?” conference.

¹⁴ Second and sixth sessions of “The War in Syria; the Challenges and Opportunities” conference.



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15. Robust democratic institutions are built on constructive dialogue between rational interlocutors who are not at complete odds with respect to their educational and cultural backgrounds. A setup of this nature does not prevail in any of the supposedly democratic institutions in Syria such as the Parliament and Local Councils because there are simply no such qualification criteria when it comes to filling those positions¹⁵. Therefore, it would be important to set suitable educational and professional benchmarks for all nominees running for Parliament and Local Councils. Moreover, it will be very useful to have an appointed council with members selected according to their merits such as the House of Lords in the United Kingdom.

¹⁵ Sixth session of “The War in Syria; the Challenges and Opportunities” conference. Third session of “The National Administrative Reform Programme: Success Requirements in Post War Syria?” conference.