The conflict in Syria has entered its fifth year, with no end in sight. There is no shortage of visions, however, for what Syria should look like after the fighting is over.

Within two years of the 2011 uprising, large international institutions and smaller think tanks, university seminars and working groups had produced at least five major documents laying out prescriptions for post-conflict Syria. Representatives of the opposition to the Syrian regime were officially involved in at least two of these efforts, some of which were sponsored by the Friends of Syria—a group of 11 nations, including the United States, formed in response to the Russian and Chinese veto of a UN Security Council resolution condemning the Syrian regime for its violent suppression of the initial peaceful uprising and its crimes in the ensuing civil war.

The participation of the Syrian opposition in these conferences poses something of a paradox. It is a truism that a main
reason for the persistence of the conflict is that the opposition has failed “to provide an alternative” to the continued rule of President Bashar al-Asad and his regime that could convince the bulk of Syrians to switch their loyalties. How can it be that an opposition so invested in post-conflict and transitional visions has supplied no alternative to Asad? Exploring this paradox may shed light on aspects of the Syrian conflict that are not properly understood.

Descent Into Darkness

If few anticipated a popular uprising in Syria, fewer still predicted that the country would subsequently descend into a humanitarian nightmare. By early 2015 an estimated 210,000 people had been killed in the fighting, and upwards of 840,000 wounded, meaning that 6 percent of the population is either dead or maimed as a result of the conflict. The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs puts the number of internally displaced persons in Syria at about 7.6 million, and the number of officially registered refugees outside the country’s borders at 3.9 million. Roughly half of the pre-war population, therefore, has been uprooted from their homes. Inside Syria, according to the Syrian Center for Policy Research report, the Syrian people are living in a “terrible state of exception, estrangement and alienation with a massive social, political chasm dividing them from those involved in violence and the institutions of violence.”

Since 2012, the category of “those involved in violence” has encompassed not just the regime’s regular armed forces, but paramilitary organizations of all ideological stripes and political allegiances. In addition to government-sponsored militias such as the National Defense Forces, the war has seen the rise of armed Kurdish groups; extremist Sunni Muslim organizations, starting with Jabhat al-Nusra, the al-Qaeda affiliate, and ending with the Islamic State or ISIS; the Syriac Military Council fighting on behalf of Assyrian Christians and Jaysh al-Muwahhidin of the Druze; among others. Syria has also been infiltrated by brigades of Shi’i irregulars from Iraq, such as ‘Asa’ib Ahl al-Haqq and Liwa’ al-Abbas, as well as Hizballah units from Lebanon.

In retrospect, the year 2012 was decisive in creating the present catastrophe. There were foreign elements emboldened in Syria before that date, fighting for and against the regime, but until early 2012 the dynamics of the Syrian conflict were largely internal. The regime had beaten down the peaceful movement that started around March 2011 and spread to many parts of the country. Partly in anger at the repression, partly in appropriation of weapons pumped in from the outside and partly in anticipation of still greater military assistance, namely from the West, the opposition decided to take up arms.

This decision—militarization—had three main effects. First, it dramatically increased the rate of death and destruction throughout the country. The death toll in the first five months of the uprising, from March-July 2011, was already high at 1,715. Over the next five months from August to December, as more and more street protesters became armed rebels, the number of killed rose to 3,150, and to 7,517 over the subsequent five-month period, according to the Violations Documentation Center in Syria. By mid-2012, the monthly casualties were almost in excess of the total in the entire first year of the uprising. Militarization gave the Syrian regime a free hand to unleash its full arsenal of indiscriminate weaponry. Second, the opposition’s shift to a war footing prevented large sectors of Syrian society from participating in the struggle to unseat Asad and his entourage. Contrary to common belief, the initial uprising was not exclusive to provincial towns and the countryside. The capital city of Damascus, in fact, was also the site of early demonstrations, which continued, off and on, for almost a year. The regime’s overwhelming strength in the city, coupled with the alienation of many Damascenes from the trajectory of the uprising, was a big reason why these protests did not develop further. There is no way to be sure, but it is possible that had the uprising stayed peaceful more and more people would have been emboldened to take to the streets. Third, and perhaps most fateful, the advent of armed rebellion placed much of the opposition’s chances in the hands of those who would fund and arm the fighters. Militarization was the main conduit by which Turkey and the Arab Gulf states—under cover of the exiled Syrian opposition—hijacked the movement inside Syria. When the nucleus of the Free Syrian Army was crushed in Homs at the end of February 2012, the regime was on the verge of extinguishing the uprising. It was then that the jihadi groups were unleashed.

Close observers could see the writing on the wall. An International Crisis Group report released that March warned that the emerging dynamics could set in motion a destructive cycle of violence that would be too complex for any one side to stop.

Even if the regime can survive for some time, it has become virtually impossible to see how it can ultimately prevail or restore normality. It might not fall, but it would become a shadow of itself, an assortment of militias fighting a civil war…. Gulf Arab countries have said they are prepared to [arm the opposition] and may have begun; it is probably unrealistic to stop them. But this, too, could plunge the nation even
deeper into a bloody civil war without prospects for a resolution in the foreseeable future, and almost certainly trigger counter-steps by regime allies, thus intensifying the budding proxy war.\(^4\)

Further away from the ground, the warning signs were missed or purposely ignored. In US and European policy circles, the talk was not of how to arrest the descent into darkness but of how to manage the “transition to a post-Asad Syria.” This transition was treated as a \textit{fait accompli} almost as soon as President Barack Obama said the words “Asad must go” in August 2011.

**Post-Conflict Recovery**

Over the last 25 years, an industry of peacebuilding and post-conflict economic recovery planning has burgeoned with buy-in from governments, aid agencies and non-governmental organizations. The impetus for associating peace with economic recovery came from frustrations with the existing apparatus for helping countries back on their feet after war or regime change. First, it became evident that exclusive attention to “transitional justice”—truth, reparations, criminal prosecutions and institutional reform—was inadequate in places that had suffered massive loss of life, destruction of property, displacement and polarization along lines of ethnic or religious identity. Second, it dawned on international experts that the “political” and “economic” realms are not easily separated. The famous illustration of this idea came in a 1994 \textit{Foreign Policy} article by Alvaro de Soto (senior political adviser to the UN secretary-general) and Graciana del Castillo (a senior UN officer and professor of economics at Columbia University). In this piece, the co-authors stressed that “political, economic, social, environmental and security/military problems should be addressed jointly and coherently.” To indicate the folly of doing otherwise, de Soto and del Castillo used the metaphor of a patient lying on the operating table, a curtain running down the middle, as unrelated surgery is performed on the left and right sides of the body.\(^5\) Third, practitioners in the peacebuilding field came to realize that the problem was not just a lack of coordination between the political peacekeepers and the stewards of economic recovery, such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, but also the very substance of those institutions’ policy advice. What was considered sound economic policy in Washington circles in the early 1990s—austerity, balanced budgets, deregulated private sectors—was in fact damaging to the prospect of keeping the peace as well as to the project of building a new state. The legitimacy of the state, according to the critics, did

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\(^4\) A civilian group of rescuers, the White Helmets, enters a destroyed building to bring out wounded people after a barrel bomb attack. JACOB SIMKIN

\(^5\) A civilian group of rescuers, the White Helmets, enters a destroyed building to bring out wounded people after a barrel bomb attack. JACOB SIMKIN
not come simply from democratic elections but also from delivery of social services and programs that the population needed and demanded. Assuming that outside aid dries up over time, the state must learn to make do with domestic revenue, such as taxes, but the capacity of the state to collect taxes depends on citizen perceptions of the state’s ability to provide services and generate economic development. In what is termed the post-Washington consensus literature on post-conflict situations, there is tremendous focus on building credible institutions or, as some put it, getting the rules of the game right.

The study of post-conflict economic aid is another growth industry. Post-conflict assistance has grown to be as much as 15 percent of official development aid worldwide, with over $100 billion pledged in the 1990–2005 period. Every major multinational organization, including the UN, the World Bank, the IMF, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, and the International Labor Organization, has its own corpus of research and writing about what happens when peace accords trigger substantial flows of aid. It was no surprise, then, that Syria gained immediate attention on this front, with institutions from near and far releasing studies of various length.

Some of the most significant documents are those produced by the Clingendael Institute (Netherlands); the Legatum Institute; the Day After project co-sponsored by the US Institute of Peace and the German Institute for International and Security Affairs; the Syrian Economic Task Force, a subgroup of the Friends of Syria; and the UN ESCWA’s National Agenda for the Future of Syria. Though sometimes formulaic, the substance of the recommendations reveals the extent of the learning attained over the years. Many of the post-conflict visions are benign or in fact quite useful. They stress local economic development, for example, and the need to preserve the public sector rather than embark on across-the-board downsizing and purging a la de-Baathification in Iraq.

The Clingendael document, Stability and Economic Recovery After Assad: Key Steps for Syrian’s Post-Conflict Transition (2012), is a self-described “power” study focusing on the nature of political competition or armed conflict, its material bases, and the possibilities of defusing conflict and paving the way for peace. It takes note that the black markets and criminal networks that arise in wartime are a threat to post-conflict stability. The Legatum Institute study is co-authored by Ashraf Ghani, the former World Bank official who is now president of Afghanistan, and Clare Lockhart. It purports to distill lessons from previous conflicts in order to address four different post-Asad scenarios. The Clingendael and Legatum documents are meant to supply general policy advice rather than blueprints or road maps. The Day After, the Syrian Economic Task Force and ESCWA, on the other hand, aim to make concrete policy recommendations. Unlike Legatum and Clingendael, these projects also claim to be providing a forum for Syrians and giving Syrians ownership of the outcomes. The Day After, in particular, lists intellectuals and activists prominent in the Syrian opposition in its executive committee and working groups.

Many of the documents—like others published by multinational institutions—are marked by the obsession with “good governance” that has replaced the Washington consensus fixation upon liberalization, privatization and deregulation. As Jonathan Goodhand has noted, “good governance” is not about “getting the prices” right but “getting the institutions” right by promoting pluralism, civil society and other types of institutional reform. The problem is that such idealized “rules of the game” eschew engagement with messy local politics.

These documents are not inherently flawed, but they are investments in a future that is becoming more distant by the day. One reason is the intransigence of the Syrian regime, of course; another is the constantly compounded humanitarian emergency. But there is a third reason that is less commonly acknowledged—and that is the role of the Syrian opposition.

With Friends Like These

The Syrian opposition has played the vision game of its own accord and without the help of Western hosts. The main would-be visionary was the Syrian National Council (SNC) formed in Istanbul in the fall of 2011. In April 2012 the Friends of Syria recognized the SNC as representative of the Syrian people, and the following March the body was granted Syria’s seat in the Arab League. On March 27, 2012, the SNC published a National Covenant for a New Syria, calling for a democratic, pluralistic, civil state; human rights and freedom of belief; full rights for women; national rights for Kurds and Assyrians; and restoration of the Golan Heights to Syrian sovereignty.

That liberal-sounding platform, at least, was what the “international community” saw. Even as it professed these goals, however, the SNC was actively helping to make their realization impossible on the ground, chiefly by pushing the militarization of the uprising. More and more Syrians came to see the SNC and its Turkish and Gulf backers publicly embracing pluralism, while in fact facilitating the rise of fanatical forces, and minimizing or dismissing their crimes. Some of the newly prominent jihadi militias on the opposition side went so far as to claim the right of takfir, or the prerogative to excommunicate other Muslims and make it religiously permissible to kill them. The takfiris were forthright in their sectarian hatred of ‘Alawis, Shi’a, Christians and other religious minorities in Syria.

Liberal-minded opposition intellectuals were put to the test at this critical juncture. Some, such as ‘Abd al-‘Aziz al-Khayyir, spoke out against the prevailing trends. Al-Khayyir was a member of the National Coordination Council, an opposition body that had remained independent of Turkey, the Gulf states and the West and therefore was demonized as much by the SNC as by the Syrian regime. People like al-Khayyir and Haytham Manna’, the former head of the Arab Human
Rights Council, were vociferous in warning of the corrosive impact of militarization, including the rising danger posed by takfiri groups. Others, however, including most of the liberal members of the SNC, wavered. Fearing complete military defeat at the hands of the regime, they stood by silently as the takfiri groups emerged. Many took rhetorical refuge in a Syrian exceptionalism—“Syria is not Iraq; Syria is not Lebanon”—insisting that Syrian society is not and cannot become sectarian. This notion was a healthy counter to the essentialist reading whereby the uprising and all subsequent events were wholly sectarian in cause, but it ignored the course of events and downplayed the openly expressed animus of groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra. It was also a misreading of history: Sectarianism in Lebanon and Iraq is not an essential feature of those societies, either. As in Syria, it was produced.

The opposition’s duplicity regarding the rise of extremists was disastrous. Aside from its contribution to the death toll, it sent a message to many Syrians that the opposition simply wanted to take power, regardless of the consequences, and that the promises of a pluralistic, democratic state based on citizenship were empty. By refusing to acknowledge sectarian crimes, claiming that all evidence thereof was fabricated by the regime to scare minorities, the opposition lost credibility among many Syrians and, eventually, in world capitals. The divisions in the country were reinforced, as a large segment of the population was thrown back into the arms of the regime.

No one can say for sure if the Syrian uprising could have turned out differently—and, if so, how. Any movement forward, however, must acknowledge that the ferocity of the fighting has split the Syrian population so badly that no one side can claim to represent the entire country. It is also essential that the entire truth of what took place, the atrocities of both the regime and the opposition, be known. Careful documentation of the calamity could be the cornerstone of an anti-sectarian, pluralistic state project based on citizenship. Absent such a thorough airing, what will instead emerge in Syria is what psychologist Johanna Vollhardt terms “exclusive victim consciousness”—each social group will believe that their suffering was the worst, to the extent of denying the anguish of others. The process starts, however, not by envisioning the future “rules of the game” but by addressing the game itself.

Endnotes
2 Ibid.
5 Alvaro de Soto and Graciana del Castillo, “Obstacles to Peacebuilding,” Foreign Policy (Spring 1994).
7 I owe Samer Abboud a special debt of gratitude for bringing some of these projects to my attention as part of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace Beirut Center’s Syria Economic Reconstruction Roundtable meetings, which took place in Beirut in 2013 and 2014. During 2014, I was a consultant with UN ESCWA’s National Agenda for the Future of Syria Program.