

الإسكوا فى الإعلام/ESCWA in the News

- **The Gulf Today: Michael Jansen: Looking for a dignified solution (On the ESCWA National Agenda for the Future of Syria Programme)**

Michael Jansen: Looking for a dignified solution

Exclusive to The Gulf Today

Although fighting rages on several fronts and negotiators are far from reaching a deal to end the war, both UN agencies and Syrian civil society groups have begun planning for the post-war period. The UN's Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) has drawn up a detailed plan for the reconstruction of Syria as well as national reconciliation, and the adoption of democracy. The project, entitled the "National Agenda for the Future of Syria" has gathered teams of experts – economists, architects, engineers, conservationists, and environmentalists – to deal with the physical devastation of five years of war and provide options for governance.

Provisions must also be made to deal with the dire situation of the populace and the fracturing of the society as well as the blasted and burnt fabric of villages, towns, cities and countryside. Syrians must themselves tackle the existential problems of countrymen and women and the society as a whole if they are to be resolved. But they will need help, advice and funding from the UN and other international agencies.

Priority must be given to youth and men who have fought one another. Rights activist Sawsan Zakzak stated in conversation with The Gulf Today, "We are especially in danger from youth radicalised through mosques and we must find employment of armed men in national defence forces." Indeed, radicalisation and arms are two causes of the conflict.

Education is a priority for it is main force fighting alienation and radicalisation. UNICEF's communications director Kieran Dwyer, an Australian who has served in Afghanistan and other war-torn countries, told The Gulf Today, "We need to give services not just supplies" to those living in besieged and difficult-to-reach areas which have, under the ceasefire, begun to open up.

"Students want access to the curriculum. They cannot carry on [with their lives] except as students." Syria has a "huge youth population. There are eight million children, 2.8 million displaced, and two million kids are out of school. We have to provide people who cannot go to school with home learning materials. Education cannot wait. Young children are left out; older children don't know what to do. We must get volunteers in besieged areas to teach and provide 'school in a box' [classroom materials].

"The longer the cessation of hostilities holds, the more durable the peace process will become and people will get better services. UNICEF insists there should be "no lost generation." Today's gunmen were earlier "lost generations" whose schooling was cut short or of poor quality, producing alienated young men who could be easily radicalised by internal actors and external forces and turned against the society and the state.

While radicalisation is an imminent danger, fragmentation of the society poses a long-term threat to Syria's national unity, sovereignty and territorial integrity. Lawyer and activist Anas Jaudeh, who heads the Syrian Nation Building Movement, told The Gulf Today, "Until 2011 [when the troubles began] we did not think of the problems within the society and with state institutions. After five years [of war], we have discovered we do not have a common identity. We are not one society, we do not have a fundamental basis for citizenship among inhabitants of cities and countryside, bourgeois and workers. They disagree on everything from the name of the republic to the shape of the state. The Baath party takes the view Syrians are Arabs and the name of the country is the Syrian Arab Republic; while others argue the name should be the Republic of Syria."

The Muslim Brotherhood has a different idea, he argued. The Saudi-based opposition, which has ultraorthodox Salafi components, "cannot say al-Qaeda's Jabhat al-Nusra is extremist."

His organisation has held seminars and workshops in Damascus, Sweida and Tartous with the aim of identifying problems. The organisation seeks to build civil society until it can assume a central role in the community and country.

In his view Syria's future will be shaped by the ongoing intra-Syrian talks taking place in Geneva. The documents the sides present, he said, will serve as a precedent to be built on later. Of course, the outcome depends on who is dominant – Russia or the US.

He argued Syria must avoid the Lebanese model and must "issue a constitutional declaration now, defining freedoms, identity and values and listing the main things to be amended in the current constitution." He held that Syria should stick with a presidential system but the president's powers should be stated clearly and there should be a "balance between the president, parliament and the judiciary. People have to believe in the constitution.

"The shape of the state is the most important thing. It must be made sustainable by a political agreement that can stand.... The regime cannot hand over to the [divided and disparate] Riyadh opposition [comprising exiles and armed factions] because this would produce fragmentation. We need a gradual transition. We can't bring untested people...

We must wait to hold elections...

"We need a clear dignified solution or we will have a generation who will hate everyone in Syria... [Youth] need to feel they can be part [of the political process] for several years."

The author, a well-respected observer of Middle East affairs, has three books on the Arab-Israeli conflict