



Lessons for the Sustainable Rehabilitation of Gaza

Liel Maghen

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 **The joint Peace
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1. Introduction: Postwar Rehabilitation

The war between Israel and Iran, the collapse of the Assad regime, efforts to rebuild Lebanon, and the cumulative consequences of the Gaza war present the Middle East with a decisive choice - between the continued cycles of violence and destruction and the beginning of a long process of regional rehabilitation, social healing, and the building of a shared future. Such a transition will not happen overnight - it requires continuous investment over decades, based on mutual responsibility, renewed trust between peoples and governments, and the development of infrastructure for a life of civil, economic, and environmental partnership between rival or disconnected communities.

Rehabilitation is a multi-disciplinary process with profound implications that transcend immediate aid and rescue imperatives, also touching on questions of governance, justice, economy, security, and society. The purpose of this document is to direct a spotlight on postwar reconstruction processes in other conflict zones in order to derive from them relevant insights for the reconstruction of the Gaza Strip and the region. While these models cannot be copied due to the unique context of each case, they can provide guiding principles based on accumulated experience to formulate a stable, comprehensive and sustainable rehabilitation process.

The postwar reconstruction and rehabilitation of the Gaza Strip will likely become a major geopolitical issue in the coming years. In addition to the urgent humanitarian needs, it is also a political, economic, and security challenge with broad regional and international implications. The question of how to rebuild Gaza is not only technical; it touches on the very heart of stability in the Middle East and the face of the region for decades to come.

The document seeks to delve deeper into the question of sustainability - how to ensure that Gaza's renewal is not limited to physical reconstruction, but will lead to long-term social, political, and economic stability. To this end, the document sets out case studies from five regions: Bosnia, Kosovo,

Kuwait, Sri Lanka, and post-Marshall Plan Europe. Each case is analyzed with a focus on specific lessons and insights that can be applied in the Gaza context. This is not a formal comparative study. Rather, it is an attempt to extract key lessons from the reconstruction processes that followed widespread destruction in order to lay the foundation for a high-quality, effective, and deeper reconstruction process after the regional wars of 2023-2025.

The main challenge ultimately lies not only in immediate rehabilitation, but in paving a path to long-term economic, political, and social stability. Experience shows that postwar reconstruction is not limited to the reconstruction of infrastructure - roads, public buildings, water and electricity systems - but also requires the rebuilding of institutions, society and communities, the strengthening of the rule of law, and the establishment of economic mechanisms enabling sustainable development. Rehabilitation limited to infrastructural aspects that fails to provide a deep response to the torn social fabric and the infrastructure of government and justice systems creates a vacuum that feeds feelings of mistrust, hopelessness, and deepening gaps. These, in turn, form conditions for renewed violence and undermine prospects of stability. On the other hand, comprehensive and deep rehabilitation - which includes addressing social, economic, and institutional issues - generates in citizens a sense of belonging, return to a productive life, and belief in the future. In doing so, it lays the groundwork not only for recovery, but also for preventing future rounds of violence and building a lasting peace.

In Israel's case, this calls for in-depth examination of its desired role in the process: in what areas it wants to be actively involved, where it would prefer to exert its influence indirectly, and what interests it wishes to ensure along the way. Establishing a clear position will enable Israel to contribute to responsibly shaping the future, while being aware of the challenges but also the opportunities inherent in the reconstruction process.

The case studies reviewed in the paper provide critical insights for Gaza's reconstruction, taking into account issues such as the involvement of

the international community, the creation of fair legal mechanisms, investment in economic development, and comprehensive environmental rehabilitation. Applying these principles will provide an opportunity to build a more stable, just, and sustainable society in Gaza, and prevent a return to the fragile reality prior to the war. However, it should be noted the three essential conditions for the successful rehabilitation in all the case studies examined, which must be applied to our region: (1) A political settlement and an end to the war. Any arrangement must be based on Israeli willingness to change its approach to the Gaza Strip and the Palestinian arena as a whole, and to promote long-term sustainable reconstruction within the framework of a stable arrangement; (2) meaningful and effective international and regional engagement, based on measurable goals; (3) and the establishment of local government as an essential component of reconstruction. Absent these three principles, even the most successful models will not prove viable.

The experience of reconstruction in other conflict-affected areas provides essential insights for shaping an effective reconstruction process in Gaza. Bosnia's case illustrates the importance of establishing an international mechanism to ensure the return of displaced persons, under close supervision and with legal and economic support. Kosovo's example provides lessons for the role of an interim international government as a bridge to independent governance. However, it also highlights the danger of extending the transition period and thereby undermining the legitimacy of local institutions and creating external dependence. The experience of Kuwait, which has established a Dedicated Environmental Rehabilitation Fund (KERP), teaches us the importance of a stable economic framework, which combines external capital with local control and management. This model could be particularly relevant to environmental rehabilitation in Gaza, although Kuwait enjoyed unique advantages that Gaza does not. On the other hand, Sri Lanka's case illustrates the critical contribution of community-led reconstruction, a process in which civil society engagement and incentives for local involvement have contributed to postwar stability, continued growth and social resilience. Finally, lessons learned from the

post-World War II Marshall Plan emphasize the opportunity inherent in reconstruction to leverage regional agreements, connectivity, and economic and social integration. Each of these examples holds a clear lesson: Successful reconstruction requires multidimensional planning, fundamental institutional and economic responses, and broad involvement of local and international actors. Above all, reconstruction requires long-term political stability, whether under international or domestic auspices, to ensure sustainable implementation of its goals.

The document is divided into four main chapters: the first offers a conceptual framework of rehabilitation - not only as the physical rebuilding of infrastructure, but also as a broad process that includes institutional, social, economic, and communal rebuilding. The second chapter presents specific lessons from five case studies - Bosnia, Kosovo, Kuwait, Sri Lanka, and the Marshall Plan, emphasizing their relevance to Gaza. While too limited in scope to provide comprehensive comparative lessons, the document focuses on one lesson from each case study in order to expand the discussion regarding Gaza's reconstruction following the 2023-2025 war. The third chapter analyzes the implications of these lessons for Gaza's reconstruction, including such issues as the return of displaced persons, the building of government institutions, environmental rehabilitation, and the integration of civil society. The concluding chapter proposes guiding principles for a sustainable reconstruction policy to serve as the basis for practical recommendations on tools for the political, international, and civilian actors involved.

Gaza in Ashes: Anatomy of a Man-Made Disaster

The war that ensued after the Hamas massacre in southern Israel on October 7, 2023, has resulted in unprecedented loss of life, mass displacement, and widespread destruction of social, physical, and production infrastructure. On Israel's side of the border, 1,200 people were massacred, 250 were taken hostage and entire communities were forced to leave their homes for a lengthy period following the destruction of their homes and communities. The war turned large swathes of Gaza

into rubble and spawned a comprehensive and deep humanitarian crisis.

As of July 2025, at least 58,000 people have been killed in the war. According to estimates by the Gaza Ministry of Health, 55,202 people have been killed in the Gaza Strip alone since the beginning of the war, including no fewer than 17,000 children, with at least 125,000 more wounded. Less conservative estimates, which include excess mortality, suggest that 84,000 Palestinians had died by January 2025, and by summer 2025, the death toll is projected to approach more than 100,000.²

In addition, nearly 2 million people-almost the entire population of Gaza-have been displaced from their homes and are facing severe shortages of All essential needs for survival. The war has triggered a deep humanitarian crisis affecting all segments of the population. Alongside the near-total destruction of physical infrastructure, the social support systems have also collapsed. The crisis is manifested in acute hunger and malnutrition, widespread environmental contamination, safety hazards from landmines and unexploded ordnance, and outbreaks of disease. The extreme shortage of essential resources is eroding livelihoods and undermining prospects for both short- and long-term humanitarian and economic recovery. This is a humanitarian catastrophe of immense proportions-driven largely by the manner in which the Israeli government has shaped its military strategy since the October 7th massacre.

An Initial Damage and Needs Assessment (IRDNA) issued in early 2025 by the European Union (EU), the World Bank and the United Nations, put the cost of comprehensive rehabilitation at US\$53.2 billion. That included rebuilding physical infrastructure such as housing and water and energy systems; rehabilitating various sectors of the economy; restoring essential services such as education and health; and restarting the private sector.

In a document published in the spring of 2025, the Palestinian Authority (PA) put the required investment at \$20 billion over the next three years for the basic rehabilitation of civilian life, including \$3.5 billion for an

² Rachel Fieldhouse, "[First independent survey of deaths in Gaza reports more than 80,000 fatalities](#)," *Nature*, 27 June 2025.

immediate response over the next six months.³ The most urgent areas the PA identified for the next three years were social protection, health, and education (\$10.4 billion); and housing (\$3.7 billion), including temporary and subsequently permanent housing. The authors noted that without rehabilitation of vital infrastructure, such as water and electricity, life in Gaza would not be possible.⁴

As of January 2025, the scope of physical damage caused by the war was estimated at \$49 billion, with physical infrastructure damage and economic and social losses estimated at around US\$29.9 billion and US\$19.1 billion, respectively. The housing sector was hardest hit, with damage amounting to about \$15.8 billion - about 53% of the physical damages sustained. Losses in the economic sector were estimated at about \$6.8 billion, and \$4.9 billion in the infrastructure sector. Water, sanitation and environmental (WASH) infrastructure alone accounts for about \$1.53 billion of the damage. The estimated physical damage alone is 80% higher than the combined annual gross domestic product (GDP) of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, which stood at about US\$17.4 billion in 2023.

Broken down, the economic and social losses of \$19.1 billion are comprised of \$6.3 billion in the health system, \$3.2 billion in education, \$2.2 billion in commerce and industry, \$1.4 billion in social services, and \$1.3 billion in agriculture and food systems (\$1.3 billion). The reconstruction itself also entails a lengthy and expensive process (\$1.9 billion) of handling polluting construction waste, its recycling and disposal.⁵ In all, the total cost of reconstruction is nearly three times that of the combined pre-war GDP of the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

While humanitarian organizations are focused on alleviating immediate suffering, the question of Gaza's long-term reconstruction remains an

3 Government of Palestine, "[Early Recovery, Reconstruction, and Development of Gaza](#)," 3 March 2025.

4 Alexandre Stutzmann, Stefan Emblad and Muhannad Hadi, "[Gaza and West Bank Interim Rapid Damage and Needs Assessment \(RDNA\)](#)," *World Bank*, February 2025.

5 Alexandre Stutzmann, Stefan Emblad and Muhannad Hadi, "[Gaza and West Bank Interim Rapid Damage and Needs Assessment \(RDNA\)](#)," *World Bank*, February 2025.

overriding issue. In February 2025, US President Donald Trump presented a controversial reconstruction comprised of the US taking control of Gaza after the war, turning it into the "Riviera of the Middle East" while transferring some two million Palestinian residents to neighboring Arab countries. Despite its questionable viability, Trump's plan was received with great sympathy in Israel. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu even noted that this was "the day after" plan that his critics at home and abroad had been urging him to formulate for Gaza's postwar administration.⁶

As expected, the Arab League rejected the plan out of hand, sharply criticizing the proposed population transfer. In March 2025, the League adopted a \$53-billion plan proposed by Egypt⁷ for Gaza's reconstruction under the management of the Palestinian Authority, with an emphasis on infrastructure development, the establishment of trade zones, and ports.⁸ The plans adopted by the PA, Egypt and the Arab League reflect the urgency of formulating a comprehensive reconstruction blueprint. They offer regional involvement alongside PA leadership. They are resonating on the international stage and being adopted by key EU member states.⁹

Israel cannot undertake this massive task on its own, and its direct involvement is likely to be spurned. On the other hand, it is being handed a strategic opportunity to enlist broad international engagement in rebuilding the Gaza Strip while advancing its security and political goals.

The scale of destruction in Gaza is staggering - entire neighborhoods leveled, infrastructure obliterated, and all basic necessities for life reduced to scarcity or absence. Hospitals, schools, water systems, and homes have

6 Itamar Eichner and Ran Boker, "Netanyahu on the 'Day After': We Will Ensure Security in Gaza and Allow the Trump Plan," Ynet, July 7, 2024.

7 Embassy of Egypt, "[Gaza Recovery, Reconstruction, and Development Plan](#)", March 2025

8 Ghadir Hamadi, [Marguerita Sejaan](#), [Muntasser Abdallah](#), [Nicholas Frakes](#) and Sarah Abdallah, "[Arab Summit Adopts Egyptian Gaza Reconstruction Plan](#)", *Reuters*, 4 March 2025.

9 [Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office](#) and [The Rt Hon David Lammy MP](#), "[Foreign Ministers' Statement: Arab Plan for Reconstruction of Gaza](#)", *UK Government*, 8 March 2025.

been systematically dismantled, leaving a civilian population in a state of profound humanitarian crisis.

But beyond the rubble lies a deeper question: what future is being built in the aftermath? The devastation has already marked Gaza as the greatest trauma in the long and bloody history of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict - not just a place of suffering, but its most concentrated symbol.

The challenge ahead is no longer to prevent that trauma, but to decide what comes next. Will reconstruction become a foundation for stability and peace - meeting the urgent needs of Gaza's people and offering hope for the region - or will it merely rebuild the ruins of despair, perpetuating a cycle that has already gone too far?

The decision is in our hands. What we choose to rebuild will shape not only Gaza's future, but the moral trajectory of the entire region.

2. Between Rehabilitation and Regeneration: Back to the Past or On to a New Future?

Humanitarian aid, in contexts of protracted conflict, often shifts from a temporary lifeline to a permanent external presence. Instead of serving as a bridge to recovery and self-governance, it can entrench dependency and displace the responsibilities of local authorities - sustaining crisis management rather than enabling long-term solutions. This phenomenon calls for re-examining how aid can serve as a tool for sustainable rehabilitation infrastructure, avoiding long-term external dependence. Adopting principles such as "Do No Harm" and "Conflict Sensitivity" are therefore essential to ensure that external intervention does not exacerbate existing tensions, but rather contributes to building stability, trust and sustainable institutions, and promotes community independence. These principles are all the more important in situations of large-scale displacement and high dependence on external factors. When humanitarian aid planning fails to take a long-term view towards the economic and institutional independence of local communities it risks deepening social gaps and strengthening external dependence. It also ignores the potential to create a sustainable reconstruction process that establishes a new and stable political and economic platform. Therefore, planning emergency assistance must be informed by awareness of its implications for reconstruction and development, and ensure local partnership, mutual trust, and intimate familiarity with the community's cultural, political, and social ties.¹⁰

An effective aid planning process in war zones can serve as a significant lever for reducing tensions, building political bridges, and restoring relations between opposing parties.¹¹ Humanitarian assistance in conflict zones must

¹⁰ Eckhard Deutcher, *"Do No Harm: International Support for Statebuilding, Paris: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development,"* OECD, 2010.

¹¹ Mary B. Anderson and Lara Olson, *Confronting War: Critical Lessons for Peace Practitioners*, London: Collaborative for Development Action & International Alert, 2004.

look beyond a response to urgent needs and provide a broad strategic tool aimed not only at saving lives, but also at laying the foundations for a life of dignity, based on institutional and social rehabilitation. This assistance must therefore be based on the principles of human rights, protection of vulnerable populations, cultural and contextual adaptation, diversity and inclusion, and conflict-sensitive planning. It must also reinforce local infrastructure, build independent capacities, and ensure accessibility and equality while avoiding deepening external dependence or weakening local sovereignty. Ultimately, the right humanitarian aid also shapes an exit strategy for itself while establishing a sustainable and improved reality.

As such, assistance should be viewed as part of a staged process comprised of relief, reconstruction and development, requiring coordination and follow-up planning. The relief phase responds to urgent needs, but must also prepare for the reconstruction phase, including the construction of basic infrastructure and services, and consideration of the conditions required to develop stable institutions, economic growth, and social empowerment. The reconstruction process should optimally follow a timeline along three main stages: short-term humanitarian relief, medium-term infrastructure reconstruction, and clear long-term development goals (Egypt's plan for Gaza's reconstruction includes various stages and uses the concepts of Recovery, Reconstruction & Development).

In practice, the transition between the stages of rehabilitation is not always clear and sometimes even overlaps, presenting a significant planning challenge and requiring clear indicators. As emphasized in the Mitvim Institute's 2024 policy document "Humanitarian Strategy in the Israel-Hamas War", institutional, functional, and social criteria must be developed to help assess when the emergency stage has sufficiently matured for a transition from immediate relief to recovery and development.¹² The transition between stages will not occur uniformly in all fields - some will achieve functional independence relatively fast, while prolonged external assistance will still be required in others.

¹² Levy, Einav, [Humanitarian Strategy in the Israel-Hamas War](#), Mitvim Institute and SID, 2024.

The planning stage must therefore strive for synchronization between the various components of the aid and rehabilitation processes to determine which should be started earlier, and which should be continued with assistance. The mutual influence between the fields must be addressed so that progress in one area will support and strengthen the transition in other areas, as well. Such planning helps prevent chronic dependence on aid, reduces gaps, and strengthens local capacity to cope with future challenges. Humanitarian aid delivered not only as a response to crisis, but also as a tool for building peace and stability is the key to effective and resilient long-term reconstruction. Such perspective, which relates not only to immediate needs but also to a vision of the future, will help reduce tensions stemming from limited resources and strengthen social cohesion. On the other hand, rehabilitation that is not underpinned by a long-term strategy is liable to deepen gaps, perpetuate instability, and strengthen dependence on external assistance.¹³

Effective planning must therefore address the importance of immediate formation of a resilient and independent (off-grid) infrastructure, such as mobile water and wastewater treatment facilities, solar panels, and waterless toilets, especially in the absence of access to central infrastructure. Such solutions enable rapid response to population mobility and limited access. Ultimately, flexible and independent infrastructure empowers local communities, strengthens a sense of independence and connects them to a sustainable environmental rehabilitation concepts promoting values other than the relief itself.

International relief and rehabilitation concepts have been shaped in recent years by two main approaches: **Build Back Better (BBB)** and **Build Forward Better (BFB)**. The BBB approach focuses on restoring the status quo ante while making specific improvements - strengthening infrastructure, upgrading essential services, and improving the resilience of state institutions to future crises. This approach, promoted by bodies such as the United Nations and the World Bank, emphasizes risk reduction,

¹³ Mehdi Shiva, "[Building Forward Instead of Rebuilding Back Better](#)," UNESCO, 22 Dec 2022

environmental sustainability, and streamlined public services.¹⁴ The BFB, approach, on the other hand, takes this further, viewing rehabilitation as an opportunity for deep change, not just an opportunity to fix what is broken. It foresees the reshaping of economic, social, and political systems for the benefit of the local population. It strives to create a functioning economy, integrate advanced technologies, promote social justice, and build new and stable institutions. This approach is aimed not only at rehabilitation, rather, the goal is to lead the affected area onto a path of renewal rooted in sustainability, independence, and long-term resilience.

However, each reconstruction approach faces significant challenges. The "Build Back Better" (BBB) model risks preserving outdated and fragile structures, potentially missing the opportunity for meaningful transformation. The "Build Forward Better" (BFB) model, on the other hand, requires deep reforms that may clash with immediate needs, existing social patterns, or even local identity and cultural values. Therefore, any redesign must be carried out with respect for the past, a connection to tradition, and deep partnership with local communities. This approach helps prevent resistance and ensures that the changes are legitimate, lasting, and deeply rooted.

Successful restoration of viable infrastructure mandates immediate planning based on a long-term perspective. Urgent decisions - such as selecting locations, choosing technology, picking executors, deciding on the organizational culture of the assistance and the manner of communication with the community - often shape a physical and structural reality for years to come. It is thus essential that they are made in line with a long-term vision for rehabilitation and development. Moreover, infrastructure rehabilitation is not only a technical process. It is also an action of political and social significance. Every decision regarding infrastructure - water, energy, health - sends a political message. The allocation of resources affects not only access to services, but also power relations, levels of trust, and local communities' sense of belonging. For example, setting up

¹⁴ Mitvim Institute, EcoPeace Middle East (2024). [Recommendations for Essential Infrastructure and Healthcare in the Gaza Strip](#).

temporary clinics only in certain areas may be perceived as a political preference for one group over another, even when considerations are purely operational. Such perceptions shape public trust in rehabilitation institutions, and can determine the extent to which the population cooperates with the entire process.

For Gaza, a reconstruction strategy is not merely a technical matter of rebuilding—it is a critical choice with far-reaching implications for the economic, social, and political future of Gaza’s residents specifically, of Palestinians more broadly, and indeed of Israel as a whole. The central question is whether the reconstruction process will merely aim to restore the previous status quo with incremental improvements, or whether it will seize the crisis as an opportunity to fundamentally reshape infrastructure, governance, and the economy in a way that establishes a new trajectory of stability, independence, and justice.

Ultimately, if the goal is to address the deep-rooted structural issues, then returning to the previous conditions—or even merely establishing a stable, sustainable system—is not enough. What is needed is the design of a regenerative framework: one that can renew, grow, and expand its positive impact over time. This means not settling for survival or stability, but instead aiming for transformative, ongoing change across local and regional systems.

This is not about restoring what once was, but about building the foundations for a different kind of life—one rooted in a healthier society, a more inclusive and open economy, high-quality public systems, and strong community ties across local, regional, and cross-border spheres.

However, such rehabilitation of Gaza cannot be implemented in a vacuum. It must move forward in coordination with the broader context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. A fundamental difference lies between reconstruction implemented as part of a political process that leads to sovereignty and a comprehensive arrangement, and reconstruction implemented in the shadow of a unilateral Israeli pullout or one that perpetuates the status quo. Answers to fundamental questions such as whether the planning

includes the West Bank and if institutional, economic, and physical connectivity is possible between the two parts of the Palestinian system are critical to the success of reconstruction and its sustainability. This is perhaps the most critical link - between the vision of reconstruction and the political horizon. Reconstruction that does not integrate into a broad political process and fails to progress toward a solution of the conflict and justice for all - is incomplete and cannot last for long.

The reconstruction process must also be adapted to different geographic areas within Gaza in terms of their density, control, and accessibility, rather than attempting to apply a uniform solution to the entire area. Finally, the process should be geared toward a gradual transition from external emergency management to building local community capacity to assume ownership of services and infrastructure and ensure their future economic and social continuity.

"From Camps to Communities: Post-Conflict Shelter in Gaza"¹⁵ is a March 2025 Rand Institute report proposing a comprehensive approach toward postwar Gaza housing planning. The authors emphasize that Gaza's reconstruction is expected to take decades and requires multi-stage planning that combines temporary and permanent solutions, taking into account the population's social and physical needs. They specifically recommend combining temporary and long-term housing solutions. Key recommendations include: establishing future-oriented residential camps with a view to turning them into permanent neighborhoods; gradual rehabilitation of damaged neighborhoods ("gradual urbanization"); reconstruction of areas that have been completely destroyed; and the establishment of new neighborhoods in open areas. The report emphasizes the need for location-appropriate planning. It calls for temporary housing (such as tents and caravans) with basic infrastructure and the active involvement of the local community to ensure cultural and social suitability. This approach is meant not only to provide a roof over residents' heads, but also to support the building of strong communities, reduce dependence

¹⁵ S. Culbertson, K. Ruthenberg, R. Lane, N. Lehrer, M. E. Vaiana, & C. R. Anthony, "From Camps to Communities: Post-Conflict Shelter in Gaza," RAND Corporation, 2025.

on aid, and establish infrastructure for long-term reconstruction.

Most of the Gaza reconstruction reports and discussions emerging thus far deal with a process detached from the broader regional context. This document aims to provide a comprehensive in-depth look, concluding that sustainable reconstruction of Gaza, or of any war-devastated region, cannot take place within its borders alone. Effective reconstruction depends on the circles around the target area - regional ties, the involvement of international actors, and most importantly - the complex relationship between the sides to the conflict, in this case Israel and the Palestinians. For the residents of both Gaza and Israel, a secure future is not a separate goal but a common goal in a space of interdependence. Therefore, the necessary restoration is not only of buildings and physical infrastructure, but of relations, trust, and shared civil-environmental infrastructure.

The Building Forward Better (BFB) approach, which seeks to rebuild in a better, more comprehensive and just manner for the sake of future security and well-being is the most appropriate strategy for Gaza. The pre-war reality was clearly untenable, based as it was on distorted relationships between governmental, economic, and civilian spaces. It is thus incumbent upon us to effectuate fundamental change in all respects: from the physical infrastructure and public services, through the local and regional government systems, to the modalities of regularization, cooperation, and shared responsibility between all political parties, between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea. This paper offers a broad understanding of reconstruction - not only as a technical response to destroyed infrastructure, but as a profound process of building a new civil and political framework. Such a framework would focus not only on Gaza's reconstruction, but on reshaping the entire region - both Gaza and the Western Negev - as a space of stability, partnership, and opportunity for both peoples.

The case studies reviewed in the document demonstrate that successful reconstruction requires more than restoring the status quo ante: it depends on regional contexts, political consensus, and the building of credible institutions. Each of these models offers not only answers to

what to build - but how to build, and when the conditions are ripe for reconstruction leading to real change.

Reconstruction, then, can be a preservation mechanism - but also a lever for change. Its success will be measured not only by the pace of implementation, but also by its ability to lay the foundations for a different future: one based on belonging, independence and resilience. To do so, it must also incorporate the identity and collective experience of the local communities - in this case, also of Gaza - as a foundation of the shared vision. An inclusive, integrative vision based on true justice and rehabilitation is the only way to build the infrastructure for a decent life and a future of stability, partnership and peace.

3. Sustainable Reconstruction: Learning from Others

This chapter examines five case studies-Bosnia, Kosovo, Kuwait, Sri Lanka, and the Marshall Plan-in order to extract relevant lessons for the reconstruction of the Gaza Strip following the 2023-2025 war. While this is not a systematic comparative analysis, each case highlights a core insight that can be meaningfully applied to the Gazan context. The goal is to enrich the discussion with lessons drawn from diverse recovery efforts, emphasizing the interplay between political vision, governance structures, international responsibility, local community participation, and reconciliation between previously hostile groups. These insights can serve as a foundation for designing a reconstruction process that is not merely a crisis response, but a blueprint for a more stable and just future.

a) Bosnia and the Principle of the Return of Displaced Persons

Background: The Bosnian War (1992-1995) and its aftermath

The Bosnian War (1992-1995) was one of the most complex and brutal European conflicts since World War II. It erupted following the dissolution of Yugoslavia, with the country's three main ethnic groups - Bosnian Muslims, Croats, and Serbs - fighting for control of its territory. The conflict was characterized by widespread ethnic cleansing, genocide, mass expulsion of populations, and war crimes. Over 100,000 people were killed and 2.2 million displaced.

Among the many atrocities committed by the warring sides, the July 1995 massacre of 8,000 Muslim men and boys by Serbian forces in Srebrenica has been recognized as genocide by the International Criminal Court in The Hague. By the end of the war, in December 1995, about 1.2 million Bosnian refugees were living outside the country, some 350,000 of them in Germany.

The US-brokered Dayton Agreement ending the war divided the territory of Bosnia-Herzegovina into two autonomous entities - the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, mainly home to Bosnian Muslims and Croats, and the Serbian Republic of Bosnia (Republika Srpska) ruled by Serbs.

Each established an independent parliament and government, as well as police and judicial systems. The Bosnian-Croatian Federation was divided into 10 cantons, each with a local government. However, as per the Dayton Agreement, these two entities were unified within a confederacy known as Bosnia and Herzegovina, under a central government and international supervision. The confederacy was led by the largely symbolic three-member Council of Presidents representing each of the three main minorities - Bosniaks, Croats and Serbs - and administered by an elected Council of Ministers. A joint army was established in 2006 to replace the warring ethnic forces.

The Office of the High Representative (OHR), established in order to avoid deterioration into sectarian violence, was tasked with ensuring implementation of the agreement and supervision of the joint institutions. German politician Christian Schmidt has served as the UN High Representative in Bosnia (OHR) since 2021. The Commissioner is elected by the European Union.

Annex 7 and the Foundations of Post-War Return

The international community realized that returning those displaced by the war to their original homes was essential to Bosnia's rebuilding and healing. Despite criticism of the Dayton Agreement for the cumbersome political structure imposed on the parties, the state and international mechanisms have been effective in stabilizing the political system, responding to the challenges of returning displaced persons, resettling them and enabling restitution of their property. As such, it provides important and relevant insights for the process of sustainable reconstruction in our region.

First, the Dayton Agreement clearly anchored the right of the displaced to return to their original homes. It also established their right to restitution of property or compensation for property that cannot be returned. The

agreement called for ensuring the safe return of refugees and displaced persons to their homes, free from the fear of harassment, persecution or discrimination over their ethnicity, religious beliefs or political opinions. Finally, the document emphasized that the parties would not force returnees to stay in or move to places where their security was at risk or lacking basic conditions required for normal life.¹⁶

The right of return embodied in the declaration was crucial to determining the scope of rehabilitation and the size of the target population. The declaration regarding the principle of return ensured the displaced persons' rights throughout the rehabilitation process. In addition to the Dayton Agreement, and in order to boost confidence in the process, the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) was tasked with leading the implementation of Annex 7 that establishes the right of displaced persons and refugees to return to their homes. It soon became clear that a single action plan was insufficient and that a gradual process of three successive plans would be required with local authorities gradually assuming responsibility for the process.

The first phase of the program (1996-2000) led to the return of more than 500,000 displaced persons and refugees, primarily to areas where they had become the ethnic majority after the war—a process referred to as the "return of the majority." In addition, hundreds of thousands more had already secured permanent solutions, whether through returning to their homeland, obtaining permanent residency in host countries, initiating the process of naturalization, or acquiring citizenship outright.¹⁷

In the late 1990s, it became apparent that most of the returnees were those whose ethnic group controlled the area to which they had returned. A second plan was drawn up to address the "return of minorities", i.e., the return of displaced persons to areas where they would constitute an

¹⁶ Office of the High Representative (OHR), *General Framework Agreement for Peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina* (Dayton Peace Agreement), Annex 7, Article I(1), 1995.

¹⁷ International Crisis Group, *"Going Nowhere Fast: Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons in Bosnia-Herzegovina,"* ICG Balkans Report No. 23, Sarajevo/Brussels: ICG, 1 May 1997.

ethnic minority in the postwar territorial reconfigurations. Implementation of the second plan was much harder. Some houses and even entire villages had been demolished after the war to deter the return of minorities. Some returnees were denied access to employment, basic services and civil rights. Nevertheless, about 470,000 people were able to return to their homes or receive assistance in restoring or rehabilitating their property under terms of the Property Law Implementation Program (PLIP) carried out by international bodies such as the OHR, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), UNHCR, and the Bosnian government.

The Commission for Real Property Claims (CRPC) established in accordance with the Dayton Agreement was tasked with handling hundreds of thousands of claims for the restitution of homes, land, and properties to their rightful owners. The Commission examined the claims through an independent legal system, supported by the European Union and the United States, to ensure a transparent process based on international law and prevent political manipulation in the reconstruction process.¹⁸ The Commission acted in accordance with legal principles set forth in the Dayton Agreement, which stipulated that displaced persons had the right to return to their home or receive adequate compensation, that property seized during the war would be returned to its rightful owners, and that in cases where restitution was not possible, financial compensation or an alternative housing solution would be provided.

The CRPC examination of each claim, usually based on documents proving property ownership, took an average of 18 months. Compensation and alternative housing were only offered once efforts failed to recover existing properties. The process of repatriation and restitution of property was largely funded by the international community, in cooperation among bodies such as the European Union, the US government, World Bank, and UN agencies. The entire process took between three and ten years. The commission received over 200,000 property claims within a decade and

¹⁸ Hans van Houtte, "[Commission for Real Property Claims of Displaced Persons and Refugees \(CRPC\)](#)," Oxford University Press, February 2025.

assisted in the construction of hundreds of thousands of new homes.¹⁹

As part of the process, over one million displaced persons returned to their original home areas within a decade—considered one of the most successful return processes in history. Of these, approximately 440,000 had become refugees outside Bosnia during the war, and about 560,000 were internally displaced. From 1995 to 2004, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) alone invested nearly half a billion dollars in this effort.²⁰

Challenges and Difficulties of Returning Displaced Persons

The Dayton Agreement's legal principles regarding the right to return and restitution were designed to remedy injustices caused by the war and ensure stable and lasting peace. The return of over a million displaced persons to their original home areas is considered one of the most successful return processes in history. However, the process also faced numerous challenges that prevented the return of many.

Almost a decade after the war ended, a 2004 UNHCR report presented a complex picture: while some 1 million people had returned to their areas of residence - 440,000 of them from abroad and 560,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs) - less than half of all IDPs returned to their original homes (only to the areas from they hailed). The rate of return to the Republika Srpska was particularly low, pointing to the unofficial barriers to realization of this right.

As noted, the initial stage saw the return to displaced persons or refugees to the residential areas controlled by their ethnic group. Local authorities, especially in the Republika Srpska, repeatedly rejected the return of displaced persons from other ethnic groups in an attempt to preserve the demographic composition created during the war. This opposition was

¹⁹ Andrew Mayne, "Bosnia and Herzegovina 20 Years on from Dayton," *Forced Migration Review*, no. 50 (September 2015), <https://www.fmreview.org/dayton20/mayne>.

²⁰ Ron Redmond, "Returns to Bosnia and Herzegovina Reach 1 Million," [Briefing Note], UNHCR, 21 September 2004.

manifested not only in a lack of official cooperation, but also in ongoing failure to rehabilitate infrastructure using bureaucratic obstacles and issuing deterrent messages. This was compounded by the hostility of local residents, some of whom had moved into houses they had captured during the war and saw the return of the original owners as a threat to their personal and communal stability. Returnees often required NATO escorts to enter their homes, and some faced physical danger.²¹

The process of return gradually shifted from the exercise of a legal right to a de facto forced return. Many of the displaced were living in temporary housing which they forced to vacate and return to their original homes even in the absence of proper infrastructure. Between 1997 and 1999, Germany implemented a strict policy of repatriating refugees to their homeland, regardless of whether they could return to their areas of origin. For many, return was out of the question, especially for those expelled from areas that became part of the Republika Srpska (RS). In 1996 and 1997, only 1,125 people returned to Srpska, and in 1998 only 8,586.

It was not until the summer of 1999 that the first groups were granted renewed access to their villages in Srpska, but most Bosnian families refrained from returning to areas where they had become an ethnic minority. Some returned to complete destruction, without access to water, electricity, health, and education and a harsh emotional environment that deepened their sense of alienation and fear.²²

A large-scale process of return did not begin until 2001 - six years after the signing of the Dayton Agreement. However, a significant gap persisted between the Republika Srpska and the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina in terms of the rate of return by ethnic minorities. By 2007, three-quarters of the returnees had returned to the Federation of Bosnia

21 Monika Kleck, "Refugee Return - Success Story or Bad Dream? A Review from Eastern Bosnia," in: Martina Fischer (ed.) 2006. *Peacebuilding and Civil Society in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Ten Years after Dayton*. Münster: Lit-Verlag, 107-122, Berlin: Berghof Research Center for Constructive Conflict Management, 2006.

22 International Crisis Group, *Going Nowhere Fast: Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons in Bosnia-Herzegovina*, ICG Balkans Report No. 23, Sarajevo/Brussels: ICG, 1 May 1997.

and Herzegovina, and only a quarter to the Republika Srpska. Studies also show that embers of ethnic minorities who did return to Srpska were ten times more likely to suffer attacks and violence than those from the Serbian majority group who returned to their homes.²³

What is more, the physical rehabilitation was undermined by lack of coordination among aid organizations, institutional corruption, and lack of clear and fair criteria. Various nonprofits operated simultaneously in the same areas, but instead of pooling resources and adhering to a multi-stage plan of community rehabilitation, they operated in a decentralized and uncoordinated manner. Some associations provided completely built houses, others only distributed building materials to eligible returnees, and some only helped families found to be politically, financially or personally suitable.

Some unelected "village leaders" assumed broad powers, demanding bribes to include people in aid lists. As a result, homes were allocated to families who did not plan to return but wanted investment or holiday properties, leaving poor or elderly refugees homeless. The exclusion of women and the elderly from the decision-making circle and failure to provide them with adequate responses to their needs were particularly egregious.²⁴

Other problems that cropped up included nuisance claims, forced evictions, unfinished houses, inhumane conditions such as mine-strewn villages, proximity to mass graves and lack of basic infrastructure. Many women reported physical intimidation, deep trauma and pervasive insecurity.

When it became clear that some of the displaced persons - especially vulnerable populations - would never be able to return to their homes, a revised strategy was formulated for the implementation of Annex 7. The focus shifted to finding permanent solutions for them in their current places of residence. With this in mind, the Sarajevo Process - a regional

23 Bogdan Ivanisevic "Legacy of War: Minority Returns in the Balkans," *Human Rights Watch World Report*, January 2004

24 Monika Kleck, "[Refugee Return - Success Story or Bad Dream? A Review from Eastern Bosnia](#)," Berlin: Berghof Research Center for Constructive Conflict Management, 2007.

dialogue involving Bosnia, Serbia, Croatia and Montenegro was launched in 2005. The process received a significant boost with the signing of the Belgrade Declaration in 2011, followed by the launch of the Regional Housing Plan (RHP) in 2012.

This program has raised almost €300 million from various sources and aims to build some 27,000 housing units for 73,600 displaced persons in the four countries, while Bosnia has committed to providing housing solutions for some 14,000 people (5,400 families). At the same time, the CEB II project (launched through the Council of Europe's Development Bank) seeks to relocate displaced persons living in temporary housing to permanent social housing in 42 local authorities.²⁵

The EU supported the process with €7 million and UNHCR raised another €1.1 million to promote implementation of the strategy in 10 elected local authorities. At the same time, the UN's in-country team conducted projects to rebuild infrastructure and strengthen social resilience.²⁶

In 2013, a joint declaration by the Government of Bosnia, EU and UN representatives set out a multi-year approach to social inclusion of disadvantaged groups, as part of Annex 7's implementation. The effort focused on integrating displaced persons, strengthening local responsibility, and building long-term institutionalized mechanisms.

Finally, in 2015, nearly twenty years after the war, five major challenges were still hindering the implementation of Annex 7: the lack of effective national leadership, poor coordination among executing bodies, imbalanced quality and pace of planning, local government reluctance to bear responsibility, and continued dependence on external funding.²⁷

25 Regional Housing Programme, *Joint Initiative of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Montenegro and Serbia with Support from the European Commission, UNHCR, OSCE, and CEB, 2012-2023*.

26 Foundation for Local Democracy. "Steering Board of the Project 'Support to Durable Solutions of Revised Annex VII Dayton Peace Agreement Implementation Strategy' Established," *Foundation for Local Democracy*, March 5, 2015

27 Andrew Mayne, "Bosnia and Herzegovina 20 years on from Dayton," *Forced Migration Review* 50 (September 2015): 9.

Overall, despite the massive investment, impressive legal mechanisms and significant number of returnees, the repatriation of displaced persons in Bosnia exposed the gap between policy declarations and effective implementation. Prospects of resulting stability have been undermined by lack of coordination, systemic corruption, gender discrimination, poor resource management, and absence of comprehensive rehabilitation, generating new feelings of frustration, deprivation, and mistrust. A combination of strong political leadership, strategic coordination with the international community, formulation of joint needs-based action plans and funding continuity, as well as real integration of civil society, would have undoubtedly enhanced the success of the process.

The Bosnian experience demonstrates the power of a clear and binding international mechanism for the return of displaced persons, backed by a broad political declaration, clear legal principles, and dedicated institutions such as the CRPC. The establishment of the right of return in an official document such as the Dayton Agreement, together with the support of key international institutions (UNHCR, the World Bank, the European Union), created a framework of trust that enabled a large-scale process of return - one of the largest in modern history. The success of restitution and the recognition of the rights of more than one million displaced persons, underscore the importance of a binding international framework that supports the right of return as an integral part of the rehabilitation process. For the displaced persons, recognition of such a right, along with the establishment of a mechanism to ensure its realization, enables greater trust in the rehabilitation policy.

However, the flaws of the process must also be emphasized: no matter how effective a legal mechanism may be, when it operates within a centralized, cumbersome, and bureaucratic political system it can slow down the process and make it selective, unequal, and sometimes even harmful. A decade after the Dayton Accords, less than half of Bosnia's displaced persons had returned to their original homes, with many encountering hostility, deliberate destruction, corruption and institutionalized discrimination. Unelected institutions and non-transparent practices such as "village

leaders” or unofficial criteria for aid allocation have weakened public trust and created a deep sense of deprivation.

Any future mechanism for the return of displaced persons in Gaza will also need to ensure transparency, external monitoring mechanisms, and a guarantee of equality - not only for the reconstruction framework, but also for ancillary resources, infrastructure, and community security.

What Lessons Does the Bosnian Model of International Engagement Hold For Gaza?

In the case of Gaza, there are important similarities but also fundamental differences that require unique adaptations. Unlike Bosnia, most displaced Palestinians today do not face resistance from a rival local community in their areas of residence; rather, their return depends on the consent of a military force. Most residents of Gaza who have lost their homes expect to return to the neighborhoods that until recently were often ethnically and communally homogeneous.

Therefore, in the context of a comprehensive political agreement—which remains a prerequisite for reconstruction—the expected dynamic in Gaza differs significantly from past conflicts like in Republika Srpska. Currently, there is no anticipated clash between returnees and a re-entrenched opposing group. Instead, the return would be to a physically devastated, often completely abandoned space. Consequently, there is no forecasted resistance from a dominant local population. However, this reality introduces another central challenge: there is often no property left to return to, and the prospect of returning to a destroyed and unsafe environment presents serious risks.

As such, any promise of return will need to be paired with temporary housing solutions and rapid infrastructure development under international mechanisms—similar to proposals by the Arab League. Given the scale of destruction in Gaza, any return and compensation mechanism must not only recognize the right of return but also respond immediately to the existential needs of nearly two million displaced people who have lost their homes, belongings, communities, and surrounding infrastructure.

Restitution and future compensation cannot wait for the full reconstruction of Gaza. Instead, they must serve as a foundational condition for immediate social and community stability. This requires, alongside a robust claims mechanism, the establishment of a joint body-including Palestinian representation, regional stakeholders, and significant international participation (e.g., the European Union, UNDP, World Bank, and Arab partners). This body would coordinate the compensation process and the rebuilding of community infrastructure. It could manage a dedicated compensation and damage assessment fund, develop uniform criteria, establish oversight mechanisms, and set priorities across community, infrastructure, and personal recovery efforts.

In the process of resettlement, effective reconstruction in Gaza will need to address additional challenges beyond physical rebuilding. First and foremost, it requires early preparation for the threat of property being seized by powerful actors-such as criminal organizations, local militias, or other power groups that may take control of homes and engage in profiteering. These risks must be mitigated through legal, institutional, and community-based protection mechanisms.

In addition, the process will have to address transitional arrangements for temporary housing. To this end, the RAND Corporation suggests that such interim housing solutions should not merely serve as emergency responses, but rather function as the first step in a bottom-up reconstruction process. The model they propose emphasizes the gradual planning of spaces that can evolve from temporary camps into permanent neighborhoods, beginning with the early installation of basic infrastructure and the continuous involvement of local communities in both planning and implementation.²⁸

This approach not only enables a safe and just return for displaced people but also supports the creation of strong, resilient community spaces that are well-integrated into the local social and political fabric.

²⁸ S. Culbertson, K. Ruthenberg, R. Lane, N. Lehrer, M. E. Vaiana, & C. R. Anthony, *"From Camps to Communities: Post-Conflict Shelter in Gaza,"* RAND Corporation, 2025.

Funding for reconstruction and reparations is at the heart of the postwar reconstruction reality and can pose an additional challenge in determining a sustainable solution. Serbia (the aggressor party) did not pay compensation or fund the post-Bosnian war reconstruction due to a combination of legal, political and practical reasons. While the International Court of Justice (ICJ) ruled that Serbia had failed to prevent the Srebrenica genocide and to enforce justice against those responsible, it did not find it directly guilty of committing the genocide and therefore did not oblige it to pay compensation. Nor did the Dayton Accords include a mechanism for reparations between the countries due to the US desire to achieve a speedy end to the fighting. The international mechanisms established after the war, such as the Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia, also focused on personal criminal responsibility rather than state compensation claims. Political and economic considerations also prevailed: a compensation demand risked destabilizing the region, provoking broad opposition within Serbia and stalling its attempts to gain entry into the European Union.²⁹

Bosnia's postwar reconstruction was financed almost entirely by the international community, rather than by Serbian reparations. The World Bank, the European Union, the United Nations, the International Monetary Fund, as well as other partners have invested billions of dollars in rehabilitating infrastructure, housing, healthcare, and education. An international donor conference held in London just after the war, in early 1996, raised about \$5 billion for the initial reconstruction period. The EU played a key role through dedicated aid programs that incorporated investments in civilian infrastructure, government reforms, and public services. Reconstruction was also carried out under close international management by a High Representative responsible for the implementation of the Dayton Accords and the coordination of reconstruction activities. Hundreds of NGOs were active on the ground, providing humanitarian assistance, post-trauma treatments and refugee support.

29 International Court of Justice (2007). Application of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (Bosnia and Herzegovina v. Serbia and Montenegro), Judgment of 26 February 2007, ICJ Reports 2007, p. 43.

Bosnia is a clear example of reconstruction funded almost entirely by the international community, driven by a commitment to stabilization and reconciliation after violent conflict.³⁰

The funding issue will also be central to Gaza's reconstruction. Will the State of Israel be required to take part in financing it? What agreements and arrangements will be required to enlist the international community's financial support for reconstruction? How best to anchor a broader legal and political framework - perhaps in an interim agreement or a regional initiative - defining terms of responsibility, determining the damage caused to each side, and preventing uncertainty during the process recognizing the rights of displaced persons that could take years to implement?

Ultimately, a mechanism for the return of displaced persons was of critical importance for ensuring the effectiveness and stability of the reconstruction process in Bosnia. Establishing a similar mechanism for Gaza can draw on lessons from Bosnia-but must be tailored to the specific context. It would need to integrate recognition, compensation, and reconstruction immediately, under the shared responsibility of international and regional actors-and, subsequently, of the parties involved in the conflict. The declaration and mechanism are essential for guaranteeing the success and credibility of the reconstruction process. However, without smart, responsive, transparent, and inclusive planning, there is a risk that the return of the displaced will shift from a symbol of hope to a new source of mistrust, frustration, and deepening social inequalities.

One of the key insights from the Bosnian experience in post-conflict recovery is the tension between building back better and restoring a sense of community belonging, security, and local identity. While reconstruction can provide an opportunity to develop improved housing-more accessible, environmentally sustainable, equitable, and well-planned-it cannot detach itself from the fundamental question of who is returning, to where, and under what conditions.

30 *Bosnia and Herzegovina - The priority reconstruction program : from emergency to sustainability* (Vol. 1 of 3): An overview of progress and challenges for 1997 (English), Washington, DC: World Bank.

In Bosnia, there was an effort to return many displaced persons to their original areas as part of a recovery model based on belonging. However, in practice, the absence of a deep and binding political agreement across the federation meant that many return efforts faced complex and often unworkable realities, temporary arrangements, and heavy bureaucratic obstacles. Attempts to restore the pre-war situation (similar to the "Build Back Better" paradigm, BBB) without embedding it within new institutional, legal, and security structures risked perpetuating dispossession, interethnic tensions, and instability.

We must be cautious not to romanticize the idea of "return," and instead focus on how to build a **safer, more just future**—one that honors the rights of displaced persons and meaningfully improves their lives, even if it cannot fully or precisely recreate the past. This is the essence of the **"Build Forward Better" (BFB)** approach presented in the first chapter.

b) Kosovo and the International Model of Government

Background: The Kosovo War (1998-1999) and its aftermath

The Serbs' deep historic and emotional affinity for Kosovo, which they call the cradle of their nation, dates back to the 1389 defeat of Serbian Prince Lazar by the Ottoman Empire under the command of Sultan Murad I. The Serb defeat marked the start of five centuries of Ottoman rule of Kosovo, during which time it became home to an Albanian Muslim majority resulting from waves of conversion to Islam.

During the rule of the Ottoman Empire in the region, Kosovo was part of the Vilayet of Kosovo, which included areas from present-day central Serbia, Albania, Montenegro, and North Macedonia. The Ottoman administration allowed religious freedom, but heavy taxes imposed on Christians led many—primarily Albanians—to convert to Islam. Although the population was predominantly Serbian at the beginning of the period, uprisings, repressive measures, and Christian emigration led to an increase in the number of Albanians.

Until the late 19th century, a Serbian majority still existed in Kosovo.

When Serbia gained independence, demands to annex Kosovo-considered by Serbs to be "Old Serbia"-from the Ottomans intensified. Despite this demographic reality, Serbia only managed to regain control of Kosovo in 1912 following the First Balkan War. The territory was divided between Serbia and Montenegro, while the Albanians in the region, who had aspired to join the newly established Albanian state, were not included in it. Ultimately, in response to the occupation of large parts of Albania, Albanians engaged in guerrilla warfare alongside the Ottomans to liberate their homeland.

Albanians in Kosovo were recognized as a national minority during Tito's rule of Yugoslavia, and the 1974 Yugoslav constitution declared it an autonomous province. However, nationalization processes intensified following Tito's 1980 death, with Serbs in Kosovo feeling excluded and persecuted under Albanian majority rule. The Kosovar Albanians, for their part, demanded recognition of the territory as an independent republic within the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SRFY).

The rise of Slobodan Milošević to power in Serbia in the late 1980s, along with the strengthening of Serbian nationalism, led to a dramatic reduction in Kosovo's autonomy. In 1989, he delivered a nationalist speech marking the 600th anniversary of the "Battle of Kosovo," aimed at cementing his status as a leader during the disintegration of Yugoslavia. Following the speech, he sharply curtailed Kosovo's autonomy, dismantled its self-governing institutions, and imposed severe restrictions on cultural and linguistic freedoms in the province.³¹

The Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK) was founded in 1989 by a group of local intellectuals, in response to the increasing repression by the Serbian regime and attempts to revoke Kosovo's autonomy. Under the leadership of Ibrahim Rugova, the LDK became the Kosovar Albanians main political party in the 1990s. Unlike the militant movements that subsequently emerged, the party adopted a line of non-violent civil resistance and struggle for independence, inspired by the paths of Mahatma Gandhi and

³¹ Noel Malcolm, *Kosovo: A Short History*, London: Macmillan, 1998, pp. 339-345.

Martin Luther King. The LDK established a parallel system of institutions, known as the "underground state", comprised of alternative education and healthcare systems, and civil society organizations. In parallel presidential and parliamentary elections, Rugova was elected President of the Albanian Republic of Kosovo, a title but of great national importance, albeit symbolic in nature.³²

Nevertheless, Kosovar Albanians became increasingly frustrated in the 1990s, especially after the 1995 signing of the Dayton Agreement, which resolved the conflict in Bosnia but ignored the status of Kosovo. Their disappointment spawned the establishment of the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA), which launched armed operations in 1995 while a year later in 1996, the KLA claimed responsibility for a series of attacks against Serbian police stations. In 1997, after the collapse of Albanian institutions and the smuggling of large quantities of weapons, the Albanian rebellion escalated into open confrontation with the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia under Milošević.

Early 1998 marked the transition to full-scale fighting between the KLA and Serbian government and paramilitary forces deployed in Kosovo in response to KLA attacks. A massive Serb punitive campaign against KLA supporters claimed the lives of 1,500-2,000 civilians and combatants and displaced some 370,000 Kosovo Albanians by March 1999.³³

International Involvement in the Kosovo War

In February 1999, Western powers proposed a political arrangement detailing extensive autonomy for Kosovo under Yugoslav federal sovereignty but de facto separated from the central government in Belgrade. Under the Rambouillet Agreement, Kosovo was to have a president, prime minister, elected government, legislative assembly, Supreme Court, and a constitutional court. Kosovo was given full authority to enact laws, impose

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32 Howard Clark, *Civil Resistance in Kosovo*, London: Pluto Press, 2000. Especially chapters 2-4 on the formation of the LDK, its nonviolent resistance strategy, and the creation of parallel institutions by Kosovo Albanians.

33 Jurgen Friedrich, "UNMIK in Kosovo: Struggling with Uncertainty," *Max Planck Yearbook of United Nations Law* Vol. 9 (2005): 225-293.

taxes, promote economic and social development, and maintain external relations - without Serb or Yugoslav intervention. It as well guaranteed A **referendum on Kosovo's final status** after three years.

The agreement called for the withdrawal of the Yugoslav army and Serbian security forces from Kosovo, with the exception of a limited force to guard the border within a five-kilometer security zone. NATO was invited to deploy troops (KFOR) authorized to use force as necessary to enforce the agreement. The military force was to enjoy free movement throughout Yugoslavia, including use of its ports, airports, roads, and other infrastructure. The proposal also stipulated the establishment of an International Civilian Mission (CIM) appointed by NATO. But The Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, especially the Serbian part of the country, rejected the arrangement, refusing to allow in foreign forces. Following the agreement's failure and withdrawal of the international monitoring mission, Yugoslav forces launched a large-scale campaign against Albanian Kosovars, which saw mass expulsions and arrests, killings, village burnings and rapes.

The Yugoslav regime's crackdown on the Albanian population in Kosovo led to a military intervention by NATO, which began on March 24, 1999, with a 78-day aerial bombing campaign known as **Operation Allied Force**. The operation ended in June 1999 with the withdrawal of Serbian and Yugoslav forces from Kosovo and the deployment of a NATO international force (KFOR) along with a temporary United Nations civilian administration (UNMIK), in accordance with UN Security Council Resolution 1244.

During the fighting, approximately **1.2 to 1.45 million Kosovo Albanians** were displaced from their homes-many fleeing to Albania, North Macedonia, Montenegro, and other countries. After the hostilities ended, around **200,000 Serbs and other minority groups** fled Kosovo due to fears of retaliation, isolated attacks, and a hostile atmosphere. According to data from the **Humanitarian Law Center**, by the end of 2000, a total of **13,535 people** were documented as killed during the war: **10,812 Albanians, 2,197**

Serbs, and 526 members of other minority groups.³⁴

In the following years, rulings by the **International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY)** concluded that war crimes, forced deportations, and systematic terror against the Albanian population had been committed by Serbian forces. However, the court did not find sufficient evidence to prove intent to commit genocide; therefore, the events were not legally defined as genocide under international law.

Kosovo's Model of International Governance

Following the withdrawal of Serbian forces from Kosovo in June 1999, the UN Security Council established the United Nations Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK), in accordance with Security Council Resolution 1244. The mission was granted broad administrative authority to oversee the civilian governance of Kosovo during the post-war transitional period.³⁵

UNMIK's core objectives were defined as: ensuring the rule of law, providing essential services, creating conditions for regional stability, and laying the groundwork for the establishment of broad self-governance mechanisms.

Although Resolution 1244 emphasized the territorial integrity of Yugoslavia, the practical nature of UNMIK's activities-which included institution-building, managing elections, and supporting governance infrastructure-was often interpreted as a gradual process toward Kosovo's de facto independence.³⁶

34 International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY), *Final Report of the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY); and NATO's Operation Allied Force: Lessons for Future Conflicts* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2001).

35 UNMIK-United Nations Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo. [*Misioni i Administratës së Përkohshme të Kombeve të Bashkuara në Kosovë: Привремена административна мисија Уједињених нација на Косову*].

36 United Nations Security Council, *Resolution 1244 (1999): On the Deployment of International Civil and Security Presence in Kosovo*, S/RES/1244, 10 June 1999. See also: *UNMIK Mandate*, United Nations Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK).

UNMIK's mandate was anchored in Security Council Resolution 1244 of June 10, 1999. The resolution authorized the deployment of an international civilian and security presence in the territory of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. It entrusted Kosovo and its population to two complementary bodies: a civilian mission - UNMIK, and the Kosovo Force (KFOR) under NATO command intended to ensure order and security during the stabilization process. The mechanism stipulated a) Complete international control with the UN directly administering Kosovo and controlling its state institutions, the security apparatus, the economy, and local government b) Establishment of local government institutions with a transitional Kosovar government gradually assuming administrative powers designed to achieve governmental independence c) Deployment of an international security force (KFOR) led by NATO to prevent the renewal of violence between Serbs and Albanians d) The investment of billions of dollars by the international community in rehabilitation of infrastructure, education, and health services development in order to stabilize the local economy and mitigate social tensions.

Unlike regular military missions, UNMIK was given very broad administrative powers, which included control of civilian government. To address the multiplicity of missions and coordinate cooperation among the different bodies involved, the mission was based on four "pillars". Each pillar was placed under the responsibility of the Special Secretary-General's Representative (SRSG) and headed by a designated deputy.

Pillar I, humanitarian aid, was entrusted to the UNHCR, operating until the end of the emergency period in June 2000.

Pillar II, civilian governance, implemented by the UN, focused on restoring basic government services such as population registration, the education and health systems, municipal infrastructure, and strengthening local authorities. The UN also managed a unit charged with ensuring law and order, which dealt with the establishment of an independent judicial system, the operation of a civil and criminal judicial system, and the

development of professional policing forces.

Pillar III, democratization and institution building came under the purview of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) to advance the development of democratic representative institutions - from electoral campaigns, to local leadership training, to support for political parties and civil society.

Pillar IV, economic and infrastructure rehabilitation, was entrusted to the European Union, focusing on the rehabilitation of water and electricity systems, transportation, and communications, and the development of economic mechanisms to encourage entrepreneurship, employment, and growth.

UNMIK's additional goal was to promote human rights and support the process of repatriating and returning refugees and displaced persons to their homes. Its main political objective was to establish temporary self-governing institutions and accompany them through a gradual process of devolution that would mature into a permanent arrangement for Kosovo. The timing of this power transfer was left to UNMIK's discretion and its assessment of the maturity of local institutions.³⁷ Based on an approach of control, training and graded regulation, and in accordance with the final settlement agreed upon for Kosovo's status, UNMIK was supposed to transfer full responsibility to the local institutions and complete the international governance phase. However, the transition process was slow and took many more years than expected.

UNMIK's first five years can be roughly divided into three phases:

In the first phase, from July 1999 to January 2000, UNMIK and the Special Secretary-General's Representative (SRSG) held all executive and legislative powers. The mission functioned as direct and full government, without significant local involvement. In the second phase, from January 2000 to May 2001, UNMIK allowed local representatives limited participation in administrative decision-making, but they were not yet

³⁷ Jurgen Friedrich, "UNMIK in Kosovo: Struggling with Uncertainty," *Max Planck Yearbook of United Nations Law* Vol. 9 (2005): 225-293.

granted real authority. The third phase, from the first general elections for the Kosovo Assembly in November 2001 until 2004, was regulated by the "Constitutional Framework for Provisional Self-Government in Kosovo" issued by the Representative of the Secretary-General.

Kosovo unilaterally declared its independence on February 17, 2008. Serbian members of Kosovo's parliament boycotted the vote, and Serbia viewed the declaration as a violation of Article 8 of its constitution and therefore illegal. However, an advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice determined that the declaration did not violate international law and did not contradict UN Security Council Resolution 1244.³⁸

UNMIK's role has since been significantly reduced, especially after Kosovo adopted a new constitution that same year. At the same time, the European Union's Rule of Law Mission (EULEX), also formed under Resolution 1244, was launched in order to support and strengthen the local rule of law system. EULEX assisted the Kosovo authorities in managing sensitive matters such as law enforcement, the justice system, and customs services, while providing professional guidance, oversight of legal proceedings and criminal investigations. The mission strategy focused on building strong institutional frameworks, supervising local officials, and assisting in the fight against corruption, while promoting border security and the gradual transfer of authority to local authorities.³⁹

The mission encountered significant challenges, among them local sensitivities resulting tensions over Kosovo's unregulated status, and in particular the tense relations with Serbia. Building local capacities in the post-conflict environment was also a major challenge, a process

38 United Nations Security Council, *Resolution 1244 (1999)*, S/RES/1244 (1999), 10 June 1999; UNMIK, *Constitutional Framework for Provisional Self-Government in Kosovo*, UNMIK/REG/2001/9, 15 May 2001; International Court of Justice (ICJ), *Advisory Opinion on the Accordance with International Law of the Unilateral Declaration of Independence in Respect of Kosovo*, 22 July 2010.

39 Council of the European Union, *Council Joint Action 2008/124/CFSP of 4 February 2008 on the European Union Rule of Law Mission in Kosovo (EULEX Kosovo)*, Official Journal of the European Union, L 42, 16 February 2008; UNMIK, *Mandate and Functions*, United Nations Mission in Kosovo.

that required enormous resources and an extensive time period. The integration of local workers into the refurbished systems proved to be a slow and complex process. The mission has nonetheless recorded important achievements. It has played a crucial role in improving border management, significantly reducing smuggling and human trafficking. It has also contributed to strengthening the rule of law, although problems such as corruption and political interference have continued to delay the full realization of its objectives.⁴⁰ Official international supervision ended in September 2012, and Kosovo has since been fully responsible for its own self-government.

External economic dependence remains. The economic recovery pillar, managed by the European Union, focused on establishing a stable economic infrastructure for postwar Kosovo. One of its main achievements was the establishment of an active banking sector alongside the promotion of large-scale privatization of the economy, which until then had operated according to a socialist format. Despite high growth in the first three years after the end of the conflict, the local economy remained fragile and unstable. It has faced a decline in international aid, a severe shortage of private investment, and a high dependence on foreign sources.

Kosovo's unregulated international status proved a major challenge, limiting its access to international financial institution loans and preventing its equal integration into agreements and the global trade market. Thus, for example, Kosovo could not fully participate in the European Union's stabilization and association process. An alternative mechanism - *the Stabilization and Association Tracking Mechanism (STM)* established to deal with these obstacles. Comprising representatives of the EU Commission, UNMIK and the Kosovo Provisional Institutions, the mechanism's objective was to accompany reforms and establish regulatory standards preparing Kosovo for future integration into the European Union. This process was also accompanied by extensive international financial support.

⁴⁰ Mitvim Institute. "A Revitalized EUBAM Rafah: One Avenue for EU's Involvement in the Day After in Gaza," 2024.

Despite these efforts, the economic and political reality in the first decade after the war remained difficult. Unemployment stood at an average of about 50% during the first decade, and about 30% in the second decade. By 2023 it had dropped to 11%. This stabilization trend reflects continued improvement, but Kosovo still relies on external aid and faces a lengthy process of building independent economic infrastructure.⁴¹

Nonetheless, Kosovo currently meets most basic EU governing standards as reflected in the EU's December 2022 decision to grant it candidate status. Its continued advancement toward accession to the EU depends on rule of law reforms, the strengthening of public institutions, safeguarding the rights of minorities, and progress in regulating its relations with Serbia within the framework of the EU-run dialogue.

What Lessons Does Kosovo's International Governance Hold for Gaza?

The case of Kosovo illustrates how a gradual transition from a military regime to an independent civilian government can be managed through structured international oversight, which prevents political chaos and enables the building of stable institutions. A significant political shift in Gaza would allow for consideration of a similar international government to oversee the transition from Hamas rule to a new governance structure, in collaboration with the international community, local civil society, and Palestinian national institutions. However, the Kosovo case and the Gaza context are fundamentally different - especially with regard to the introduction of multinational forces and the sovereignty issue.

What is more, the NATO force (KFOR) played a critical role in maintaining postwar security in Kosovo, preventing re-escalation between the rival ethnic groups. A structural change in Gaza could pave the way for deployment of a multinational force (e.g., supervised by the United

⁴¹ Kosovo Agency of Statistics (KAS), *Labour Force Survey Q4 2024*, Pristina, 2025; World Bank, *Kosovo: Systematic Country Diagnostic Update*, Washington D.C., 2022; CEIC Data, *Kosovo Unemployment Rate Historical Data*, accessed June 2025; Ri-invest Institute, *Development and Employment in Kosovo: Scenarios and Policy Recommendations*, Pristina, 2019.

Nations or the Arab League) to maintain security and prevent internal conflicts.⁴² Kosovo, it should be noted, was given extensive international support to develop infrastructure, education and employment in order to prevent economic collapse and reducing dependence on external aid. In Gaza, too, economic investment along with international government would be crucial. It would help create jobs, rehabilitate infrastructure, and improve public services, in order to provide residents with a framework for the future.

Despite the success of the international model in Kosovo, significant challenges must be taken into account before implementing a similar model in Gaza. First, international rule would likely be regarded as foreign interference, stirring strong opposition by political and military groups viewing it as an infringement of sovereignty or a threat to their power.⁴³

What is more, the Kosovo model demonstrates the complexity of two-stage rule. The transition from international rule to full independence was a lengthy and charged process due to internal political tensions and significant international challenges, including difficulty in obtaining broad recognition of the country's independence.

42 ניר אריאלי, "פריסת כוח רב-לאומי בעזה: ההזדמנויות, האתגרים וההשלכות על ישראל", *מכון מיתוים*, 2023. תפיסה זו מהדהדת גם בגישתם של ידלין ואבנטל, הקוראים להקמת מנגנון פיקוח בינלאומי-ערבי כחלק מתהליך "ניצחון חכם" שישלב ביטחון, שיקום הדרגתי והחלפת שלטון חמאס ברשות פלסטינית מתפקדת. ראו: ידלין, עמוס ואבנטל, אודי, "נותרו ארבע דרכים לסיים את המלחמה - רק אחת לא תפגע אנושות בישראל", *Mako*, 28 במאי 2025.

43 Pere Vilanova, "[Kosovo: The Limits of International Post-Conflict Governance](#)," *Nota Internacional CIDOB* 146 (April 2016): 1-8.

Another major challenge relates to the long-standing economic dependence on external support. Despite extensive international investment, Kosovo remained impoverished for two decades after the war ended. Avoiding a similar situation in Gaza would require infrastructure for sustainable economic development reliant on independent growth engines. To this end, major infrastructure projects must be promoted - a seaport, an airport, the development of the gas field off the coast of Gaza, energy and transportation connectivity to the region, the development of industrial zones and the independent Palestinian economy.⁴⁴ Finally, Gaza's legal and political status must be addressed. According to international agreements and the Israeli-PLO agreements, Gaza is an inseparable part of the future Palestinian state, and not a separate entity from the West Bank. This raises a critical question: Will an international government in Gaza function as a separate system, or as part of an integrated system with the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank? The nature of the interfaces between the civil and political systems in Gaza and the West Bank will be a central component of any future political and economic reconstruction process.

The third and final challenge relates to prolonged economic dependence on external aid. Despite massive international investments, Kosovo remained impoverished for over two decades after the end of the conflict-a stark reminder that sustainable economic development cannot rely solely on grants or temporary assistance.

To avoid a similar situation in Gaza, it is essential to build a foundation for independent growth, driven by local engines rather than just foreign funding. This requires long-term investment in strategic infrastructure projects: a functioning seaport, an operational airport, development of offshore gas reserves, integration into regional energy and transportation networks, and the establishment of advanced industrial zones that can serve as the backbone of a self-sustaining Palestinian economy.⁴⁵ Without a commitment to sustainable economic growth, reconstruction initiatives

44 Pere Vilanova, "[Kosovo: The Limits of International Post-Conflict Governance](#)," *Nota Internacional CIDOB* 146 (April 2016): 1-8.

45 Ibid.

will lack long-term stability.⁴⁶

Can The Kosovo Model Be Implemented in Gaza?

The Kosovo model offers an important lesson, illustrating how a significant international force can serve as an effective transition mechanism from instability to functioning self-government. International governance in Kosovo has contributed to the establishment of governance institutions, ensuring security, and preparing the political and economic infrastructure for political independence, even if only partial. Such a model may be a key means of ensuring moderate and legitimate governance following the collapse of the Hamas regime in Gaza, combined with a process of reconstruction and institution-building. The Kosovo model cannot be directly transplanted to Gaza, but it provides important lessons that can be applied in an adapted manner. The transition to stable rule in Gaza requires international involvement, not as a substitute for the Palestinians, but as a temporary mechanism to prepare for true and acceptable self-rule as part of a broader political process.

However, fundamental differences distinguish the cases of Kosovo and of the Palestinians. While Kosovo was designated an independent political entity under international auspices, Gaza is considered by existing political agreements to be part of the future Palestinian state, which also includes the West Bank. The Palestinian Authority is already recognized as a legitimate governing body, likely ruling out international support for a separate or permanent government in Gaza not closely linked with the PA. The transition model in Gaza must therefore be structured as a complement to existing West Bank institutions, not as an alternative. In fact, multinational forces can only be introduced into Gaza at the PA's invitation in order to strengthen its institutions, stabilize the situation on the ground, and gradually hand all civilian and security control to legitimate Palestinian elements.

46 יצחק גל, "היום שאחרי מלחמת עזה 2023: בניית תשתית כלכלית-מדינית בעזה כחלק מהסדר ישראלי-פלסטיני בהקשר של שיתוף פעולה אזורי", מכון מיתווים, 2023.

Arieli has examined the feasibility of deploying a multinational force in Gaza once Hamas rule is terminated.⁴⁷ The document published by the Mitvim Institute analyzes the opportunities and challenges of such a move. It points to the potential to improve humanitarian and security aspects, strengthen the PA, promote a political process, and improve Israel's standing in the international arena. However, it also emphasizes that the move's success depends on various conditions: a clear UN Security Council mandate, broad legitimacy among the Palestinian public, cooperation with the PA, effective enforcement rather than just a symbolic presence, and integration into a comprehensive civil and political rehabilitation plan. Arieli also underscores the need for a gradual withdrawal mechanism as Palestinian institutions stabilize, as well as preparation for "spoilers" by Hamas and other armed factions that could disrupt the transition. In order to avoid deepening economic dependence, he proposes promoting sustainable infrastructure, with an emphasis on ports, aviation, energy, and industry.

In this context, the Kosovar model provides an important insight: international intervention is ineffective when disconnected from local mechanisms, but can be a critical lever when it serves as a bridge to legitimate self-government. Kosovo has been rehabilitated not only by an external presence, but by a careful combination of UNMIK temporary control and a gradual transfer of authority to local actors. This is the key lesson for Gaza: a stable transition of government will not occur spontaneously or unilaterally - it requires dedicated international support, a clear mandate, regional and international cooperation, and gradual empowerment of local institutions.

47 ניר אריאלי, "פריסת כוח רב-לאומי בעזה: ההזדמנויות, האתגרים וההשלכות על ישראל", מכון מיתווים, 2023. תפיסה זו מהדהדת גם בגישתם של ידלין ואבנטל, הקוראים להקמת מנגנון פיקוח בינלאומי-ערבי כחלק מתהליך "ניצחון חכם" שישלב ביטחון, שיקום הדרגתי והחלפת שלטון חמאס ברשות פלסטינית מתפקדת. ראו: ידלין, עמוס ואבנטל, אודי, "נותרו ארבע דרכים לסיים את המלחמה - רק אחת לא תפגע אנושות בישראל", *Mako*, 28, במאי 2025.

c) Post-Conflict Ecological Rehabilitation in Kuwait

Background: The Gulf War (1990-1991) and its aftermath

The Gulf War, which took place between August 1990 and February 1991, ended with the withdrawal of Iraqi forces from Kuwait after the intervention of an international US-led coalition. However, this withdrawal was accompanied by a deliberate "scorched earth" policy manifested in setting fire to hundreds of oil wells throughout the country. The fires burned for long months and released extensive amounts of greenhouse gases, soot and toxins into the atmosphere, causing a major environmental disaster.

The consequences were devastating. Agricultural lands turned into wastelands, underground water sources were contaminated by oil spills, and huge "oil lakes" formed in the country's low-lying regions. Thick layers of oil seeped deep into the soil, destroying flora and fauna and endangering groundwater sources. Moreover, the toxic clouds spread by the fires affected not only Kuwait but also neighboring countries, creating a multidimensional environmental and health crisis. Contaminated soil piled up to stop the spread of pollution remained untreated for many years.⁴⁸

The Kuwait Environmental Rehabilitation Program (KERP)

The United Nations Compensation Commission (UNCC) established in Geneva in accordance with Security Council Resolution 687 (1991) was tasked with handling claims and compensating for damages directly caused by the Gulf War. The committee distributed compensation in the amount of \$52.4 billion from a fund financed by allocating a percentage of Iraqi oil export revenues for reconstruction. Initially set at 30%, the rate gradually declined down to 3% in 2017. At a special 2022 session, the committee adopted a resolution stating that Iraq had met all its

⁴⁸ United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), *Environmental Consequences of the Gulf War*, Geneva: UNEP, 1991; NASA Earth Observatory, "Kuwait Oil Fires," 2001.

international obligations and paid all the approved compensation.⁴⁹

Against the backdrop of the devastating ecological consequences, the Kuwaiti government launched the Kuwait Environmental Remediation Program (KERP) in 2013 (more than 20 years after the war), in cooperation with the Kuwait Petroleum Company (KOC), the United Nations, the World Bank, and international environmental organizations. KERP is considered one of the largest environmental restoration programs in the world, with an estimated budget of \$3 billion. It included the treatment of about 26 million cubic meters of contaminated soil, spread over an area of 114 square kilometers. Extensive clearance of mines and unexploded ordnance (UXO) was also carried out, with approximately 1.65 million mines removed, leaving approximately 350,000 mines buried in the Kuwaiti desert. In 2023, the Kuwait Petroleum Company (KOC) signed new contracts totaling \$1.7 billion, designed to expand restoration efforts, while improving soil clearance techniques and rehabilitating areas severely affected by oil seepage.⁵⁰

The restoration plan was designed as a strategic response to the severe ecological damage caused by the Gulf War. Each of its five main components contributes to the thorough restoration of the damaged soil, water and ecosystems, and provides monitoring mechanisms and environmental education to ensure the preservation of the achievements over time.

The first stage of the plan focused on assessing the damage and mapping the area. Through advanced geological surveys, satellite simulations, and detailed soil tests, the most contaminated areas across Kuwait have been identified. The mapping served as a basis for setting rehabilitative priorities, and enabled the formulation of finding-based strategies for the precise allocation of resources and planning of technical intervention.

The program incorporated innovative soil purification technologies to deal

49 United Nations, ["Iraq Makes Final Reparation Payment to Kuwait for 1990 Invasion,"](#) *UN News*, 9 February 2022.

50 Dhari Al-Gharabally and Aisha Al-Barood, "Kuwait Environmental Remediation Program (KERP): Remediation Demonstration Strategy," *Biological and Chemical Research* 2015 (2015): 289-296.

with the unprecedented pollution levels. They included bioremediation, a process enabling microorganism break down of organic pollutants; soil washing techniques based on mechanical-chemical filtration; controlled fires to reduce concentrations of hazardous organic pollutants; and chemical purification, including controlled chemical reactions that help separate pollutants from the soil and from underground water sources.⁵¹

Another key component of the program focused on restoring water sources and preventing future contamination of underground aquifers. Pollution caused by the seepage of oil and toxic waste-particularly in the Raudhatain and Umm Al Aish aquifers-led to the development of advanced systemic solutions: excavation of contaminated soil, installation of deep monitoring wells, and the collection of hydrological models for risk assessment.

These systems were designed to ensure that pollutants would not re-enter the groundwater and to enable continuous monitoring and control. These efforts were part of a broader, ambitious systems-based approach aimed at ensuring the long-term protection of the country’s sensitive water resources.

An advanced monitoring and control system put in place to preserve the results of these efforts includes environmental sensors, ground control systems and satellite surveillance. The system enables the ongoing monitoring of soil, water and ecosystem conditions, and provides early warning of repeated deterioration. Its role as supporting infrastructure is considered a cornerstone of sustainable rehabilitation.⁵²

What Lessons Does KERP Hold for Gaza?

The environmental consequences of the war in Gaza since 7 October, 2023 are devastating and widespread. According to the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP), the volume of sewage discharged into the sea in Gaza has skyrocketed from about 13,000 cubic meters per day

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⁵¹ Ziltek. (2024, July). *Kuwait Environmental Remediation Program (KERP) - Case Study*. Land & Groundwater.
⁵² Ibid.

before the war to about 100,000 cubic meters daily today following the collapse of the sewage treatment systems. Many residents are forced to use brackish and contaminated water for daily needs - drinking, cooking, cleaning and hygiene - causing a severe health crisis.⁵³

In addition, assessments by UNEP and UN OCHA indicate the accumulation of over 39 million tons of waste and debris, including asbestos, unexploded ordnance, heavy metals, and biological residues. These pollutants pose an ongoing risk to public health and local ecosystems, raising concerns about long-term contamination of soil, water sources, and air. Critical environmental infrastructure has been completely destroyed, and the lack of clearance mechanisms has created an unprecedented environmental and public health emergency.⁵⁴

Extensive damage has also been caused to agriculture and the biosphere. By early 2025, about 80% of Gaza’s tree cover had been flattened, and about half the agricultural land had been rendered unusable. The infrastructure destruction, soil contamination and biodiversity loss pose a serious challenge to rehabilitation, while the infrastructure restoration itself is expected to emit at least 30 million tonnes of greenhouse gases, equivalent to the annual emissions of a country like New Zealand.

Despite the significant difference in terms of local resources, the Kuwait case study demonstrates that a large-scale environmental disaster requires a long-term rehabilitation plan, use of advanced technologies, and international cooperation. Implementing the KERP model immediately in Gaza can ensure effective and sustainable rehabilitation of land, water and ecosystems, with monitoring preventing future pollution. International support and an effective management mechanism will enable not only Gaza’s environmental rehabilitation, but also that of its economy and society. Implementation of a broad and long-term environmental

53 Mariam Abd el Hai, ["The Environmental-Humanitarian Impacts of the War in Gaza,"](#) *Arava Institute for Environmental Studies*, June 2024.

54 United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), [Environmental Impact of the Conflict in Gaza: Preliminary Assessment of Environmental Impacts](#), Nairobi, 18 June 2024.

restoration plan is therefore a prerequisite for sustainable restoration.

The KERP was launched two decades after the oil disaster in Kuwait, under conditions of economic and political stability. In Gaza, time is of the essence, requiring urgent action even while the conflict rages. This means the immediate establishment of rehabilitation and control mechanisms, even under conditions of ongoing violence, with a focus on steps that are not dependent on a comprehensive political arrangement. These steps must be based on regional and international partnerships.

Such an action plan, which includes the establishment of a dedicated funding mechanism and a long-term research and measurement system, can proceed separately from the political questions of ending the war and establishing a Palestinian state. In so doing, the environmental restoration plan will be integrated into a broader set of efforts to shape a stable political reality, and will contribute to the consolidation of the economic, ecological and institutional infrastructures of the future Palestinian state. The Kuwaiti reconstruction model can serve as an inspiration for the development of a strategic, multi-layered framework for environmental and health service rehabilitation in Gaza and the surrounding regional space. The experience of the Kuwaiti plan underscores the importance of comprehensive planning, advanced technologies, international cooperation, long-term control systems, and community involvement - all relevant and adaptable to Gaza's complex conditions.

Establishing a central coordinating body for environmental and health service rehabilitation is an essential cornerstone for the success of such a large-scale process. Similar to the KERP, an independent, non-governmental, and integrated mechanism should be established in Gaza to operate on the basis of scientific and managerial knowledge. This body will be responsible for overall planning of ecological and health service restoration, risk management and long-term preparedness, combining international donor resources and supervising the implementation of advanced technologies. The establishment of a regional-international "Joint Fund for Environmental and Health Rehabilitation in Gaza and the Coastal Region," for example, could operate in coordination with bodies

such as the Israeli Ministry of Environmental Protection, the Palestinian Regional Council, UNRWA, UNESCO, and the European Union. The fund will also deal with cross-border resources such as the aquifer, beaches, land, and infectious diseases.

As demonstrated by the Kuwait case study, the use of innovative soil and water cleaning technologies is yet another essential component for Gaza, where severe soil, groundwater, and seawater pollution requires scientific solutions adapted to local realities. Consideration could also be given to collaboration with leading institutions from around the world that have developed similar technologies for postwar restoration of agricultural land, as well as with organizations such as EcoPeace or the Arava Institute for Environmental Studies that are active in the region and experienced in sustainable environmental technologies. The massive quantities of waste in general, and construction waste in particular, which cannot be buried in such a small area, also pose a major challenge requiring technological solutions for recycling, sorting, and recovering the materials.

As with the previous recommendations, international cooperation is a prerequisite for the success of any environmental rehabilitation program in Gaza. The scale of destruction, the complexity of the challenges, and the absence of stable local governance require broad international involvement. The UN Environment Program (UNEP), for example, could serve as a regulatory and policy leader while the European Union could be harnessed as a key regulator, and financing and technical expert. The World Bank would provide budgetary management and transparency, while the OECD could handle the development of performance and monitoring indicators. The private sector should also be integrated into such broad-based efforts to develop infrastructure, environmental innovation, and technology, based on impact-based investments.

Establishing an "Environmental Recovery Trust for Gaza" based on a multi-partner trust fund model would ensure coordination, transparency and continuity. Serving as a magma fund, with donor financing channeled into a general pool rather than being tied to one single project or a specific donor country, this would reduce political interference and fluctuations,

and ensure that action is determined according to professional and objective priorities.

Another key component of an effective environmental rehabilitation plan is the establishment of a long-term monitoring and control system based on open-source data, systematic collection of environmental information, the establishment of regional laboratories, and full transparency to the public. An independent environmental monitoring system should be established to monitor the state of the soil, water, and public health over time. Cooperation among universities in the region, for example, could provide an advanced sensor network for monitoring pollutants, with students, scientists, and professionals taking part in the establishment of an independent scientific infrastructure and the strengthening of the local community and the potential of regional collaboration.

d) Community-Led Rehabilitation in Sri Lanka: Between Empowerment and Political Co-optation

Background: The Sri Lankan Civil War (1983-2009) and its aftermath

The Sri Lankan Civil War (1983-2009) was one of the longest and deadliest ethnic conflicts in South Asia. It was fought between the government of Sri Lanka, dominated by the Sinhalese Buddhist majority, and the Tamil rebel group-the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE)-which sought to establish an independent state in the northeastern region for the Tamil community.

The roots of the conflict lie in institutionalized discrimination and violent incidents against the Tamil minority since Sri Lanka's independence from Britain in 1948. Large-scale riots erupted in 1956, 1958, 1977, 1981, and 1983-culminating in "Black July," during which hundreds of Tamils were killed and the historic Jaffna Library, a cultural symbol for Tamils, was burned down.

The war lasted 26 years, during which both sides employed violent tactics. The Sri Lankan government was accused of indiscriminate bombings,

enforced disappearances, torture, and crimes against civilians. The LTTE became known for recruiting child soldiers, suicide bombings, kidnappings, and targeted assassinations.

The Sri Lankan civil war ended in 2009 with a decisive military victory, as government forces under President Mahinda Rajapaksa eliminated the LTTE's leadership, including founder Velupillai Prabhakaran, and dismantled the group's territorial and military presence. Unlike conflicts resolved through negotiation or ceasefire, Sri Lanka rejected international mediation and pursued a unilateral military solution, leaving no space for political compromise.

According to a 2011 report by a UN Secretary-General's panel of experts, around 40,000 civilians were killed in the final phase of the war alone. Overall estimates range from 80,000 to 100,000 fatalities, with some sources citing up to 170,000.⁵⁵ In addition, approximately 800,000 people were displaced during the conflict. One year after the war, 450,000 residents of the northern provinces remained displaced, and over 160,000 homes had been completely destroyed.⁵⁶

In addition to its devastating human toll, this so-called "ultimate victory" came at a steep social cost. While the Sri Lankan government prioritized large-scale infrastructure projects-such as highways, railways, and irrigation systems-urgent investments in permanent housing and community-level infrastructure were needed to alleviate widespread postwar poverty and foster long-term stability for affected populations.

The UN-Habitat Restoration Program

The United Nations Human Settlements Program (**UN-Habitat**) was established in 1978 following the first UN Conference on Habitat and Settlement (Habitat I) held in Vancouver in 1976. The conference

⁵⁵ United Nations, *Report of the Secretary-General's Panel of Experts on Accountability in Sri Lanka*, 31 March 2011; International Truth and Justice Project, *Death Toll from Sri Lanka's Armed Conflict* (n.d.).

⁵⁶ Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre. *Global Overview 2012: People Internally Displaced by Conflict and Violence*. 2013. Accessed April 25, 2025.

emphasized the need to address the challenges of urbanization, housing and urban planning, and led to the establishment of a dedicated body aimed at improving living conditions in urban areas and promoting sustainable urban development. Since its inception, UN-Habitat has been the central UN system's arm for urban, residential and spatial planning. The organization advises governments, promotes equitable housing policies, assists in the development of infrastructure in underserved and disaster-stricken areas, and supports advanced urbanization processes in developing countries. It operates in accordance with the "New Urban Agenda" adopted at the Habitat III conference in 2016, which aims to make cities equitable, safe, resilient, and sustainable in order to advance the UN's 2030 Global Development Goals.⁵⁷

UN-Habitat's Post-Conflict Reconstruction Program in Sri Lanka was launched in 2009, following the end of the civil war, after the government formally requested assistance for the reconstruction of the northern provinces. The organization worked in close coordination with the Presidential Task Force for Rehabilitation, Development and Security in the Northern Province (PTF), which had been established in May 2009 to lead strategic planning for resettlement, infrastructure development, and regional recovery.

The 19-member task force, headed by a senior presidential adviser, included the president's secretary, secretaries of key government ministries, and senior military officers. As its name implies, the PTF was given broad powers and served as the supreme authority for Northern District affairs in the post-conflict period, including the direction of all governmental and non-governmental bodies operating in the region.

UN-Habitat held regular meetings to update the task force on the progress of rehabilitation programs, arising challenges and the need for the PTF's support. Between 2009 and 2016, the organization assisted in the planning, supervision, and construction of many residential and

⁵⁷ UN-Habitat. (n.d.). *History, mandate, role in the UN system*. United Nations Human Settlements Program. <https://unhabitat.org/history-mandate-role-in-the-un-system>.

infrastructure structures in northern Sri Lanka. The rehabilitation program, funded in part by the UN and implemented by UN-Habitat, served as a pilot platform for new strategies and innovative construction methods. It achieved impressive results: 31,350 housing units were rehabilitated, along with 520 infrastructure facilities. Beyond physical rehabilitation, the program contributed to the reunification of displaced communities and return of many residents to their homes.⁵⁸ It is now clear that without the participation and expertise of UN-Habitat, the government lacked the technical capacity and implementation mechanisms necessary for effective rehabilitation and long-term recovery in the conflict-affected areas.

One of the key components of the program was a OwnerDriven Housing Assistance (ODHA) - a unique public participation process, with residents taking an active part in planning and construction. This process not only strengthened the sense of ownership and community responsibility, but also led to the integration of other important components, such as disaster risk reduction, environmental preservation, and the implementation of cost-effective and accessible construction methods. In addition, one of the program's main long-term contributions was the implementation of basic social and humanitarian principles - including equal opportunities, gender sensitivity, child-friendliness, accessibility for people with disabilities and a rights approach. These principles, which form an integral part of UN-Habitat's concept, were considered relatively innovative and resulted in sustainable restoration, development and stability after the war.

UN-Habitat's strategy also emphasized a permanent and immediate response to internally displaced persons (IDPs) through the establishment of permanent housing, rather than temporary solutions that risked perpetuating instability and poor conditions. The model implemented was based on owner-led rehabilitation, with families managing the rehabilitation of their homes under the professional guidance of UN-Habitat and partner

58 United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat), *Good Practices and Lessons Learned in Sri Lanka: Post-Conflict Reconstruction Programme*, (UN-Habitat Sri Lanka, 2009-2016).

organizations. Each family received a government grant sufficient for the construction of a new home from the ground up, turning the rehabilitation into an active process of local empowerment, rather than a patronizing social response.

Beyond the physical aspect, the program promoted employment, strengthened local government, and connected communities to service providers - creating a broad infrastructure for socioeconomic rehabilitation. A practical process of building a healthy, resilient and stable community had emerged.

This approach placed special emphasis on vulnerable populations - including people with disabilities, the elderly, and trauma victims - and was adapted to the special needs of each group. Women played a significant role in leading the process, leading community committees, managing local initiatives, and influencing the planning of the built space to suit family, cultural and security needs.

The program's success was made possible by close and multi-system cooperation: the central government took an active part and allocated resources, developed regulatory frameworks, and laid a legal infrastructure for land allocation, building permits, and the rehabilitation of public infrastructure. Despite its complex political history, the state chose to join hands with an international organization and with the communities themselves, and established coordination mechanisms between rehabilitation ministries, government agencies, and donors.

Partnerships with international actors - including the European Union, the governments of Australia, Switzerland, India and Japan - not only provided funding, but also professional know-how and logistical capabilities. Each project was adapted to the local context and was built with an understanding of real needs. This created effective synergy among donors, authorities and residents, transforming the projects from a set of separate initiatives into an integrated, deep and wide-ranging rehabilitation program.

UN-Habitat’s Sri Lanka program consisted of several phases, the first being a housing project funded by the Australian government. In cooperation with the EU, the activity was subsequently expanded to include community infrastructure. UN-Habitat also led an India-funded housing project, one of the largest in postwar Sri Lanka, as well as public infrastructure projects funded by Japan. Program directors were guided by a vision of holistic restoration, not only building houses but seeking to rehabilitate entire communities, restore hope, and establish a stable, resilient, and just fabric of life.

**Community Involvement and Active Participation:
A Key Rehabilitation Principle**

One of the fundamental principles of the UN-Habitat approach is the “People’s Process”, a rights-based model that places the local community at the heart of the rehabilitation process. This approach expands the understanding of rehabilitation to encompass not only buildings but also trust, solidarity and social cohesion - both within the community and with state institutions.⁵⁹

In this approach, local partners are not merely aid recipients but equal stakeholders. The rehabilitation phase is carried out through genuine partnership: women, men, youth, the elderly, people with disabilities, and marginalized populations all have a voice and participate in every stage of the project. They are involved in decision-making processes regarding spatial and housing planning, budget allocation, project supervision, and even in the construction itself-through community contributions, collective work, or the donation of locally sourced materials.

This model, centered on local empowerment, had both economic and socio-psychological impacts. The local community played an active role in all stages of the process-from decision-making on housing design and site selection, to resource distribution and budget oversight, and even direct involvement in the construction-whether through self-built efforts, community cooperatives, or by donating local materials.

59 UN-Habitat, *Good Practices and Lessons Learned in Sri Lanka*.

The model not only reduced costs and accelerated the pace of reconstruction, but also strengthened residents' sense of ownership and dignity toward their renewed environment. Rehabilitation became a collective community vision, not an external intervention. The result was a deep sense of ownership, empowerment, and personal-community responsibility, along with stronger ties between the community, local authorities, and broader civil society actors.

One of the main obstacles to post-war rehabilitation was the lack of functional institutional infrastructure in rural and remote areas. In these regions-where public service facilities had either been destroyed or never existed-government officials were forced to travel frequently between villages, disrupting the continuity, availability, and effectiveness of essential services such as healthcare, welfare, regional planning, and community management.

To address these gaps, existing community centers were converted into multi-purpose hubs. Permanent offices for local government representatives were established within them, turning these spaces into central access points for citizens to receive services, coordinate reconstruction activities, track requests, and reestablish the state's presence on the ground.

The experience yielded a clear lesson: when designing rehabilitation infrastructure, public buildings must not be viewed solely as engineering outputs. They should be conceived in advance as institutional-community spaces that serve everyday civic life as much as the recovery process. Such planning not only enhances the effectiveness of public services but also strengthens public trust in authorities-a critical component of long-term recovery.

In the Sri Lankan process, community groups such as rural rehabilitation committees and local civil society organizations played an active role in the process. Along with housing unit construction, emphasis was placed on developing essential public infrastructures such as roads, drainage and water systems, and kindergartens. These infrastructures played a dual

role, improving the quality of daily life and fostering a sense of stability, security, and unity after years of disconnection and division.

The inclusion of women in the process was not only a challenge, but also a significant lever for its success. Many women took an active part in community committees, underwent specialized training, and were involved in decision-making related to planning, construction, and project management. This involvement not only enhanced the quality of implementation but also contributed to social cohesion and community stability over time.

The performance of local women's organizations such as rural development committees was particularly striking. They excelled at detailed management of community infrastructure projects, meeting challenging schedules and operating within tight budget, and proved to be natural and important partners. Active integration of women's organizations in the planning, execution and management of rehabilitation has thus proven a valuable lesson not only as a step toward social justice, but also as an effective professional choice - especially in projects requiring community sensitivity, precise management and rapid response to changing needs.

Principles of environmental sustainability were also emphasized as an integral part of the overall restoration concept in the large-scale process led by UN-Habitat in northern and eastern Sri Lanka. That included putting in place technological, community and organizational solutions to mitigate potential damage stemming from the reconstruction projects and ensure sustainable life in the future.

Various other measures were also adopted to strengthen the environmental aspect of rehabilitation. Restoration programs incorporated environmental conservation components already at the planning stage, with an emphasis on green building materials, planting, community awareness, and integration into the local natural fabric. In order to limit the use of new raw materials and reduce damage to forests and land resources, recycled materials taken from destroyed buildings were widely used: doors, windows, roof tiles, wood and iron. These materials were used, among other things, to

build foundations and floors, and saved up to 60% in natural aggregates. Orchard trees and local tree treatment technologies were used to extend their durability and strengthen them as building material. Other ecological technologies used include waffle slabs, economical compacted blocks, minimal plaster, and reduced paint quantities. These measures were accompanied by information campaigns, courses for workers and homeowners, and extensive community outreach.

One of the main challenges was the inefficient use of materials by contractors and homeowners. UN-Habitat led a comprehensive training system to improve site planning, quantity calculations, proper mixing of cement and concrete, and storing materials in accordance with environmental standards. The change in perception yielded significant cost and raw material savings and less waste in construction areas.

The construction was accompanied by a large-scale planting program, in which over 170,000 trees were planted. The seedlings were supplied to families who planted them in their residential areas in keeping with the goals of strengthening the connection to the land and active community participation. Many families also took part in organic gardening and small-scale farming projects, which enhanced food security and economic independence.

With a view to rebuilding better (BFB), a plan was advanced to install cookstoves (ICS) with improved chimneys to prevent the severe air pollution caused by open-wood cooking in rural homes. These stoves reduced wood consumption and smoke, shortened cooking times, and improved the health of women and children. Women led the distribution and installation of ovens, which also benefited them from an occupational point of view.

To cope with water shortages stemming from annual drought and low rainfall in the northern and eastern provinces between March and September, UN-Habitat installed over 170 rainwater harvesting systems in private homes and public institutions, including community centers and kindergartens. The systems collected rainwater from rooftops,

transporting it to aboveground or underground tanks from where it was made available to poor populations living in remote areas. The system also assisted in home gardening and eased the risk of mosquito-borne disease like dengue fever by reducing standing water. Raising community awareness of the system's advantages has contributed to its widespread integration and acceptance.⁶⁰

Challenges to UN-Habitat's Restoration Program

The severe lack of critical infrastructure in remote rural areas confronted UN-Habitat's rehabilitation program in northern Sri Lanka with major challenges. The lack of proper access roads, bridges and basic transport infrastructure made it difficult to provide construction materials and effectively manage logistics, causing significant project implementation delays. Areas such as Mullaitivu, Kilinochchi and Mannar were particularly difficult.

Moreover, poor or non-existent communications infrastructure, such as telephone lines and cellular reception, created a functional disconnection of entire communities, which has made it difficult to monitor progress and respond to problems in real time. This highlighted the critical need for preliminary planning of access infrastructure and water and electricity systems, even before the physical restoration work begins. The development of basic infrastructure is not a luxury - it is an essential condition for the success of large-scale rehabilitation processes.

Another challenge lay in the presence of mines and unexploded ordnance (UXOs) in former residential areas. Residents and staff were given training to identify hazardous areas and adopt basic precautionary protocols, with special attention to children, the population most exposed to this risk. Collaborations with professional demining organizations and the integration of community awareness campaigns, along with meticulous engineering planning, were found to be necessary to ensure a safe work

60 United Nations Human Settlements Program (UN-Habitat), *Good Practices and Lessons Learned in Sri Lanka: Post-Conflict Reconstruction Program*, (UN-Habitat Sri Lanka, 2009-2016).

environment and allow residents to return to their homes. In some cases, restoration work could only proceed after extensive demining operations were completed and the area was declared safe. A quick response to such challenges required close coordination with local authorities, integrated community safety mechanisms, and continuity in providing the public with information and training.

Security as a whole also posed a challenge. The high level of security deployed in former conflict zones stirred feelings of discomfort among both returning residents and aid providers. The resulting tensions led to delays in the rehabilitation process and sometimes to contractor and organization reluctance to undertake projects.

Lack of government offices also presented problems, with project teams having to maneuver between remote villages, resulting in wasted time and compromised project efficiency. Lack of basic infrastructure, limited access, and stringent security requirements hampered daily operations, especially in Mullaitivu and Kilinochchi.

Rehabilitation as a Political Project: Empowering Groups at the Expense of Others

The complex postwar political and social conditions in Sri Lanka generated deep suspicion towards international bodies, especially on the part of local government institutions affected by external intervention during the fighting. This distrust resulted in delayed approval of urgent reconstruction initiatives and sometimes even prevented their implementation in the most sensitive areas in the north and east of the country. At the same time, Sri Lanka's experience emphasizes that even under tense political conditions, effective reconstruction requires a holistic approach - one that combines housing solutions, local economic development, environmental conservation, and large-scale cooperation with the international community. This experience may serve as a relevant model for reconstruction in Gaza, provided that it is implemented with careful adaptation to the local context and in full partnership with its population.

The reconstruction period was also affected by continued **military**

control of civilian areas, especially those populated by Tamils. Even after the fighting ended in 2009, significant military forces remained in these provinces. Civilian structures, including schools, as well as agricultural land and public infrastructure, were often used for military or commercial purposes drawing widespread criticism from human rights organizations and local residents. Rather than reassuring residents and aid workers, the military presence undermined the sense of security and freedom, and the civilian fabric. The economic impact was considerable: unregulated commercial activity by the military created unfair competition with local businesses, and sometimes even increased the costs of basic services. Crime rates also rose as a distinct ethnic and geographical characteristic linked to tensions between the government and local communities.⁶¹

In the absence of a clear distinction between civilian and military rule, many among the Tamil community viewed the rehabilitation process as alienated and exclusionary. Against this backdrop, UN-Habitat worked closely with the previously mentioned Presidential Task Force (PTF), which enjoyed broad powers in coordinating the rehabilitation, development and security in the Northern District. The agency worked closely with PTF's authority to approve projects, to direct the bodies operating in the field, and to monitor the pace of progress. UN-Habitat's joint work with this group was able to avoid unnecessary delays and to operate within the framework of a coordinated and clear policy.

The importance of close cooperation with state authorities throughout all stages of rehabilitation, from policy planning, through obtaining approvals, to actual implementation is a key lesson of the Sri Lankan process. The absence of such cooperation and coordination creates duplication, confusion, and even community resistance.

Along with the benefits of community-led rehabilitation, the case of Sri Lanka illustrates how rehabilitation can become a political tool in government hands. In the northern and eastern parts of the country-

⁶¹ Thiranagama, Sharika (2022). *Figures of Menace: Militarization in Postwar Sri Lanka*. South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies.

regions formerly controlled by the Tamil Tigers—the Sri Lankan government selectively allocated rehabilitation resources. Many Tamil communities were denied access to housing, services, and economic support, while Sinhalese settlements were prioritized in ways that suggested an intentional effort to alter local demographics. This unequal distribution not only delayed recovery for war-affected communities but also deepened ethnic divisions in the postwar period.

Sri Lanka's experience highlights a broader pattern: rehabilitation, when controlled by centralized or partisan actors, can be co-opted to reinforce power structures, reward loyalty, and punish dissent. This use of reconstruction as a political and demographic tool is not unique to Sri Lanka. Following the 2006 Second Lebanon War, for example, Hezbollah assumed control over the reconstruction of southern Lebanon, leveraging Iranian funds to rebuild homes, infrastructure, and social services.⁶² However, access to this support was often restricted to Hezbollah supporters, while those unaffiliated with the movement were excluded. Rather than facilitating national recovery, the process deepened existing political and sectarian divides.

A similar pattern emerged in Syria's post-civil war reconstruction efforts from 2018 to 2024. The Assad regime used reconstruction to consolidate control over key territories, reward loyal populations, and marginalize those perceived as oppositional. Property laws were manipulated to allow for the expropriation of land and homes from displaced or exiled regime opponents, and entire neighborhoods were reconfigured to shift demographics in favor of regime-affiliated groups. International funds and contracts, when accepted, were funneled through networks that bolstered regime patronage rather than addressing broad-based recovery needs.⁶³

Together, these cases demonstrate that rehabilitation is not inherently

⁶² Bou Akar, Reconstructing postwar Lebanon: A challenge to the liberal peace? *Conflict, Security & Development*, 7(3), 2007: 361-388. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14678800701556552>.

⁶³ Agha, M. O., & al-Rish, M., *Early recovery and rehabilitation in regime-controlled areas of Syria: An assessment*. Middle East Institute, 2024.

a neutral or benevolent process. When managed without transparency, accountability, or inclusive planning, it can be weaponized as a tool of political consolidation and demographic engineering. Rather than healing war-torn societies, such approaches risk entrenching divisions, undermining reconciliation, and reshaping postwar orders in the image of the dominant power. In this context, reconstruction becomes not a bridge to peace, but an extension of conflict by other means.

Community-Led Rehabilitation: Lessons from Sri Lanka and Implications for Gaza

As this document repeatedly illustrates, post-conflict reconstruction cannot be limited to infrastructure restoration alone. Sri Lanka's experience shows that successful reconstruction must be community-driven, based on the active participation of the local population, not only as stakeholders but as equal partners in planning, leadership and execution. It must be rooted in the environment while taking into account the challenges and resources available.

Broad community involvement creates a sense of ownership, increases trust between citizens and institutions, and contributes to strengthening social cohesion after a crisis. This requires multi-sectoral cooperation among central government, local authorities, international donors, and civil society organizations. Such a mechanism contributes to efficient, transparent, and responsible resource management, while dispersing power and allocation decisions.

Technological innovation can certainly improve the effectiveness of rehabilitation processes, but in order to be sustainable it must be adapted to the social fabric, cultural conditions and local capabilities. Special attention is also needed for disadvantaged populations - women, people with disabilities, residents of the periphery, and communities severely affected by the conflict - to ensure equal access to resources, opportunities and infrastructure.

The Sri Lankan model demonstrates an alternative to centralized reconstruction controlled from above. Instead of a bureaucratic-political

mechanism that distances citizens, it promoted an integrative process linking physical rehabilitation with social and economic healing. However, it also highlights an important caveat - rehabilitation managed by one party with a clear political interest can become a tool for deepening control and exclusion.

In the case of Gaza, this means that the success of reconstruction will not only be measured by the speed of construction or the amount of investment, but by the way opportunities are distributed: Who gets access to resources? Who sets priorities? Which communities are left out? And how does the rehabilitation process contribute to increased equality and access to resources, rather than having the opposite effect?

To this end, a fair, transparent and balanced mechanism must be established to allow for the just distribution of resources among all parts of society. Absent such a mechanism, rehabilitation risks strengthening one group at the expense of others and exacerbating rather than easing social tensions.

The lessons from Sri Lanka and elsewhere raise critical questions for shaping Gaza's reconstruction policy. Should Hamas, as a significant actor with deep roots in the local population be given a role in the reconstruction mechanism, and under what conditions? How can cooperation best be forged among the Palestinian Authority, Israel, and the international mechanism? What financial and regulatory tools will ensure an equal distribution of investments? How will transparency be maintained, and what control mechanism will ensure that the reconstruction serves the entire Palestinian society, and not just those in positions of power? How can the reconstruction mechanism be used to empower Palestinian women and to benefit from their critical contribution to success? These questions, and many more, are not only technical. They will determine whether reconstruction in Gaza becomes an opportunity to build a stable, egalitarian and sustainable society or an additional incentive to deepen divisions, polarization, and mistrust.

The reconstruction process should not be turned into a divisive political

tool, as was the case in Sri Lanka, Lebanon and Syria, where reconstruction resources have been used to establish the dominance of one group and exclusion of others. For Gaza this means ensuring that the reconstruction process is not conducted exclusively by a particular political actor, but is based on a fair distribution of resources among all groups and communities. Nonetheless, there is no escaping the fact that reconstruction has an inevitable political dimension. In Gaza's case it will also serve as a tool for building the political apparatus to replace the Hamas regime. In this sense, reconstruction should be leveraged as a tool to strengthen moderate, transparent, and inclusive governance institutions in order to garner public trust and serve as the basis for an effective Palestinian government in the future.

It is therefore important to distinguish between two potential political outcomes of the process: strengthening general governance mechanisms for the benefit of the public as a whole or a sectoral takeover of the rehabilitation mechanisms leading to exclusion and social fragmentation. In order to prevent the second outcome, power must be distributed among various international, local and community bodies, and supervision and regulatory mechanisms must be established to ensure that the reconstruction serves the common good and does not become a lever of control in the hands of cronies. Like the challenges identified in Bosnia and Kosovo, the case of Gaza emphasizes the need for close international supervision and involvement to ensure that reconstruction is universal, equitable, and transparent.

e) Europe and the Marshall Plan: Reconstruction, Interdependence and Stability

Europe and the Marshall Plan: historical background

It's hard to believe that just 80 years ago, at the end of World War II, Europe teetered on the verge of total collapse. Entire cities had been razed to the ground, transportation, water, and electricity systems were destroyed, economies collapsed, and government institutions faced deep instability and the challenge of caring for tens of millions of displaced people across

the continent. Food was scarce across Europe, and many lived in abject poverty, relying on food rations and emergency aid. Rising poverty, along with unemployment and despair, created a volatile platform for the rise of radical movements, a threat exacerbated by the spread of communism in the east and the start of the Cold War.

The United States recognized the strategic need for a comprehensive intervention to prevent further deterioration. Its first attempt, the Morgenthau Plan (1944), focused on punishment, disarmament, and broad restrictions on Germany. It was ultimately rejected due to its lack of positive vision. In 1947, Secretary of State George Marshall put forward one of the most ambitious reconstruction programs the world had ever known. The large-scale economic, social, and political aid program was designed not only to rebuild the ruins of war, but also to lay the foundations for renewed growth, political stability, and institutional strengthening in Western European countries.

The plan was launched with an infusion of about \$13 billion into Europe, distributed between April 1948 and June 1951, to rehabilitate physical, transportation and economic infrastructure. But the Marshall Plan was not limited to funding. It was based on tight oversight mechanisms designed to ensure the proper implementation of aid, economic liberalization and budgetary transparency. Beyond the resources themselves, the plan demanded regional cooperation, construction of new institutions, and creation of a foundation for partnership between former enemies. The Marshall Plan marked a profound change in perception, from the concept of enforcement to presentation of a vision. In many ways it served as the basis for the continent's successful rehabilitation based on partnership, rebuilding and a horizon of hope.

A crucial element in its success stemmed from its close integration with a new security arrangement - the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). The alliance emerged not only in response to the Soviet threat, but served as a key component in building a sense of regional security that allowed European countries to focus on civilian and economic reconstruction rather than rearmament. A collective defense arrangement, along with

the deployment of an American nuclear umbrella and the demilitarization of Germany, created a clear and stable environment of deterrence.

The Marshall Plan is still considered one of the most prominent examples of postwar reconstruction success. Its effects were evident not only in the economy, but also in the social, political, and security structures on the continent. The economies of Western Europe experienced rapid and impressive growth, with an average annual growth rate of about 5% the 1950s, which allowed for a rapid recovery from the widespread devastation of World War II. Economic reconstruction, in addition to reduced unemployment, contributed to social stability and the strengthening of democratic institutions. At the same time, the terms of aid set out in the plan encouraged regional cooperation, created positive interdependence between countries that had previously stood against each other, and laid the foundations for the first regional agreements, such as the Coal and Steel Agreement, the precursor of the single European economic market underpinning the establishment of regional institutions and long-term peace.

Many researchers contend that the Marshall Plan's direct economic impact was limited, attributing its success mostly to the political-institutional effect - i.e., the development of a free economy and regional cooperation. The United States did not only serve as a financier. It used its expertise, experience and knowhow to combine economic aid with the shaping of a new political-security order of Europe. In other words, the Marshall Plan succeeded not because it handed out money, but because it connected the resources to a comprehensive concept of security, partnership and shared horizon. It proved that physical reconstruction cannot stand alone. It must be rooted in a broad political-security context in order to serve as the basis for stable growth, deep rehabilitation and long-term peace.⁶⁴

Ultimately, the Marshall Plan restored Western Europe to the status of a major player in the international arena. Major emphasis was also placed on

⁶⁴ DeLong, J. Bradford & Eichengreen, Barry. *The Marshall Plan: History's Most Successful Structural Adjustment Program*. National Bureau of Economic Research, Working Paper No. 3899, 1991.

strengthening the West German economy, thereby bolstering the country's and continent's economic and political alliance with the United States. In so doing, the plan became a global model of integrated reconstruction - economic, institutional, and political, with short-term emergency aid translated into long-term measures to anchor stability and trust.

The Role of International Managers

The Marshall Plan was based on key regional mechanisms. The Economic Cooperation Administration (ECA) established in the United States to implement the Marshall Plan was tasked not only with distributing funds to eligible countries, but also with strict supervision of their compliance with the stipulated conditions. These included requirements for detailed plans, responsible fiscal policies, trade liberalization, and regional cooperation. The ECA also sent advisers and coordinators to the field to ensure that the plan was being carried out in accordance with the set goals, while increasing the effectiveness of the funds' use. In so doing, the ECA became not only a financial mechanism, but also a supervisory and enforcement body that dictated modern economic standards in postwar Europe.

The ECA's European counterpart was the Organization for European Economic Cooperation (OEEC), established in 1948 to coordinate and implement the Marshall Plan. In addition to managing implementation of the Marshall Plan, the organization was tasked with coordinating reconstruction efforts among the countries of Western Europe. The OEEC brought together 18 countries, many of which had faced each other as enemies during the war but realized that reconstruction required joint mobilization and overcoming tensions. The organization's main role was not only to distribute the Marshall Plan's aid funds, but also to encourage regional economic planning, drive trade liberalization, and lay the foundations for long-term cooperation.

This was the first time that international aid was explicitly conditioned on a commitment to inter-state cooperation. The OEEC required member states to present detailed reconstruction plans, coordinate national needs with regional goals, and work together to advance trade, industry and

infrastructure. In doing so, it promoted not only Europe's economic recovery, but also the principle of regional integration, laying the institutional foundation for what would later develop into the European Common Market and the European Union. In doing so, it contributed decisively to the creation and shaping of a new European space, with interdependence and shared interests replacing the suspicions and rivalries of the past.⁶⁵

The OEEC strengthened the principle of partnership between countries and made joint reconstruction a central goal. The member states were required to present national reconstruction plans, adapted to the overall regional plan, and to consult with each other for the purpose of distributing resources. The organization also promoted measures to remove trade restrictions, reorganize production systems, and improve infrastructure between the countries. The OEEC thus served as an initial institutional basis for regional economic cooperation, which was to become the cornerstone of European integration.

The Regional Agreements Born of the Marshall Plan

The countries themselves also strove for regional agreements and far-reaching integration. The European Payments Union (EPU) was established in 1950 as part of the effort to rehabilitate the European economy and promote regional coordination. Its main goal was to remove trade restrictions, liberalize the flow of goods, and solve the problem of foreign currency shortages in postwar European countries. The mechanism allowed countries to trade with each other while maintaining their overall balance of payments, with all calculations being made once a month on a net basis, rather than requiring immediate payment for each transaction separately. This system enabled the rapid resumption of inter-state trade, accelerated the recovery of national economies, and laid the groundwork for making Europe a more open and integrative economic space.

⁶⁵ OECD. "The Organization for European Economic Co-operation (OEEC)," Accessed April 25, 2025. <https://www.oecd.org/en/about/history/the-organisation-for-european-economic-co-operation-oeec.html>.

The European Payments Union (EPU) was designed to encourage the opening of markets, allow for a freer flow of goods, and reduce restrictions on payments and money transfers between countries. In doing so, it helped to revive the European economy and rapidly restore inter-state commercial activity. The regional institutions created at that time laid the foundation for the establishment of the European Common Market and, ultimately, the establishment of the European Union as we know it today. The Marshall Plan was therefore not only about repairing the damage of the war, but also about building institutional infrastructures that changed the face of Europe and led to regional unity, interdependence, and lasting stability. It was a restoration strategy that aimed to rebuild better, relying on old mechanisms but taking advantage of the restoration opportunity to rebuild in a better way.

The European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) established in 1951 combined the coal and steel industries of Germany and France, and later of other countries, under one supranational authority. This cooperation created a deep economic interdependence, which made the recurrence of military confrontation economically and politically unlikely.

In 1957, the process of economic rehabilitation, regional coordination, and increased cooperation led to the signing of the Treaty of Rome - a decisive step on the way to the establishment of the European Economic Community (EEC). The agreement, signed by six countries (France, West Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Belgium, and Luxembourg), stipulated the establishment of a free trade area, tariff unification economic policy coordination among member states. The Treaty of Rome manifested a transition from temporary mechanisms of economic rehabilitation to permanent and institutionalized cooperation recognizing that economic interdependence and shared institutions are the only way to ensure lasting peace and stability in Europe. The agreement provided continuity for the reconstruction concept that guided the Marshall Plan - not only physical rehabilitation, but a reconstitution of the entire political-economic space on the basis of which the European Union was ultimately established.

The Main Lesson: Interdependence and Shared Infrastructure as an Engine for Stability

Beyond the influx of funds and the construction of physical infrastructure, the Marshall Plan emphasized a fundamental strategic principle: successful reconstruction requires the establishment of an interconnected regional space, where economic interdependence, coordinated institutions, and shared infrastructure create constant incentives for cooperation and peace. Institutions such as the European Coal and Steel Community and regional trade agreements laid the economic and political infrastructure discouraging a return to conflict. Shared transportation networks, open regional markets, and connected energy systems have helped strengthen interstate ties and foster a sense of shared destiny.

In the context of the Middle East in general, and of Gaza in particular, the lesson is clear: physical and local reconstruction alone cannot guarantee long-term stability. A regional Marshall Plan should be established to focus not only on the rehabilitation of buildings, but also on promoting an appropriate security-strategic framework for joint regional water, energy, food, transportation and communications infrastructures, establishing supranational cooperation institutions, promoting cross-border economic agreements, and encouraging economic and technological interdependence to disincentivize renewed conflict. The European Marshall Plan demonstrates the critical importance of spatial consideration in the reconstruction process. Only by creating a connected and coordinated regional space can we ensure sustainable reconstruction leading to long-term stability, prosperity, and peace, rather than a return to an endless cycle of destruction and reconstruction.

However, the international system in 2025 differs greatly from that of 1945. The Americans had a central interest in promoting the Marshall Plan at the time in order to shape a European order that supported the global economy. The Marshall Plan and the concurrent establishment of regional mechanisms took place in a climate of multinational cooperation that also saw the rise of international institutions. The current global system is characterized by a struggle for control of the world order and challenges

the norms that have governed and shaped international and regional mechanisms for decades.

Despite the question marks hanging over the future international order, the United States - still the most influential power in the world - continues to signal that the Middle East is a strategic interest for its foreign policy. It encourages regional cooperation initiatives, such as the Abraham Accords, the Negev Summit, and the Middle East Gas Forum, as well as undertaking direct involvement in some conflicts. Indeed, American willingness to lead grandiose reconstruction programs has diminished, and the American public is less supportive of protracted overseas interventions. But other regional and international players may fill the void. Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, and even the European Union have already shown interest in significant regional initiatives, such as the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC). This interest reflects a growing trend among countries seeking to invest in economic stability and regional connectivity - not only for strategic reasons, but also as an opportunity to benefit from economic development and diplomatic influence.

This pattern is also evident in Lebanon's reconstruction efforts (following the Beirut port explosion), Qatari assistance to Gaza over the years, and the UAE's involvement in the reconstruction of selected areas in Syria. These initiatives suggest that regional reconstruction projects can move forward without direct US leadership as long as the parties involved share goals of stability, prosperity and cross-border connectivity.

In this context, the question is not only who will invest or lead, but also what kind of regional order will be shaped. Will it focus on empowering local communities, sustainable development, and collaborative infrastructure, or will it become a platform for quick profits for elite groups, while deepening social gaps and increasing dependency? Reconstruction is never a neutral process. It reflects a choice between models of control and a vision of partnership, between maintaining an existing order and shaping a new reality.

Ultimately, like Europe devastated after World War II, the Middle East of 2025 faces an urgent need for systemic and multidimensional reconstruction. Gaza, Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and even Iran and Israel after the war of June 2025 are all examples of damaged spaces that require integrative economic, infrastructure, government, and social responses. Reconstruction is not only a technical matter of rebuilding, but a strategic process that will dictate the face of the region for decades to come.

The interdependence between these areas is clear - any attempt to rehabilitate one area without regard to regional contexts is doomed from the outset to be a limited achievement. Most of the damaged areas are currently undergoing isolated rehabilitation processes, some even while further destruction is still underway. In the context of Gaza, as long as the fighting continues, it destabilizes the region and delays large-scale reconstruction. A sustainable solution to the Palestinian issue, and in particular to the reconstruction of Gaza, is not feasible without integrating it into a comprehensive regional perspective. The future of regional reconstruction will be determined not only by the question of what will be built, but **also of how and for whom**, and what values will guide it. Will rehabilitation bring about profound change, or reproduce the rifts that prompted the war and destruction?

4. Discussion and Summary: Guiding Principles for Sustainable Rehabilitation

Each of the case studies discussed - Bosnia, Kosovo, Kuwait, Sri Lanka and the Marshall Plan - met three key conditions that enabled an effective reconstruction process: **an end to the war** (not just a ceasefire), relative **political stability** and political certainty for reconstruction, **and international involvement** in funding, execution and supervision (including under coercion, if need be, as in the Balkan cases). Together, these three components created a framework for action that enabled the rehabilitation processes to proceed beyond the physical rebuilding and extend to the social, institutional and economic levels of long-term rehabilitation.

In the case studies of Bosnia, Kosovo, the Marshall Plan, and even Kuwait, the prominent role of international mechanisms was critical - not only for funding, but also for coordinating and supervising the processes in order to enable the flow of resources, institutional supervision, and maintain a consistent reconstruction framework even in the absence of local capacity to manage the process independently. Even when there was no comprehensive political arrangement in place (such as in Kosovo and Sri Lanka), a significant international presence, such as UNMIK or UN-Habitat, played a stabilizing role that enabled a gradual response, rebuilding national institutions as in Kosovo, and an immediate response to local needs, as in Sri Lanka. To the extent that international involvement does moves beyond the local level and expands to regional arrangements, as in the Marshall Plan, postwar recovery can become a key tool for creating a new, better regional order. A regional arrangement that enables sustainable development while dealing with geopolitical failures while ensuring the infrastructure for a long-term political arrangement.

Establishing dedicated bodies and tailored institutional centers, such as the CRPC in Bosnia or the Pollution Fund in Kuwait, has also proven important in allowing to address complex problems, while ensuring funding, coordination and follow-up. The case studies demonstrate the importance

of establishing regional and international mechanisms to accompany the rehabilitation process from its inception up to its orderly transition to a local authority. International mechanisms with a local emphasis, such as UNMIK, have ensured stability and provided the necessary time and tools for institution building and an orderly power transfer to local forces. International mechanisms that emphasized regional integration, such as the OECC in post-World War II Europe, were critical to ensuring the sustainability of local reconstruction and served to create new supranational frameworks that strengthened sustainable reconstruction efforts.

As explained in the theoretical section of this paper, sustainable rehabilitation requires long-term, conflict-sensitive planning, which combines immediate emergency response with gradual establishment of infrastructure, community institutions, and independent management capacity. Principles such as Do No Harm and Conflict Sensitivity are not merely moral recommendations, but necessary conditions for preventing a return to the cycle of violence. Rehabilitation, therefore, is not a technical process of construction, but rather political, social and environmental intervention with potential to strengthen trust, rehabilitate relationships, and lay the foundation for a shared future.

Various case studies show that the success of a rehabilitation process does not depend only on the scope of budgets or the speed of implementation. It requires first and foremost integrated, gradual and adapted planning, based on deep understanding of the three stages of rehabilitation: relief, reconstruction and development. The transitions between these stages are not always clear, and some stages even overlap, highlighting the need to formulate institutional, social, and functional indicators enabling an orderly transition from survival to stability, and then to growth.

However, indicators alone are not enough. Clear control and decision-making mechanisms must also be established in order to determine when certain conditions have been met and when it is possible to move on to the next stage. This requires an institutional framework with the authority to formulate data-based decisions, in cooperation between local,

international, and community bodies, to ensure that the rehabilitation process proceeds in a controlled and professional manner, free of political bias or short-term considerations.

Bosnia exemplifies the limitations of a Build Back Better approach that is detached from the socio-political context. Despite the success of restitution and infrastructure rehabilitation, the lack of conflict sensitivity has led to reinforcing existing ethnic boundaries, deepening identity divisions, and ultimately creating a "separated" rehabilitation that has allowed for a return to basic functioning, but not social stability. In contrast, the case of Sri Lanka represents significant implementation of the Build Forward Better approach: Rather than restoring pre-war conditions, the rehabilitation process sought to bring about profound change - through deep community participation, the establishment of new community infrastructure, gender equality, accessibility and the use of appropriate environmental technologies. The rehabilitation did not only reflect a "return to normalcy," but also a direction toward an improved reality that reflects the values of inclusion, sustainability, and local responsibility. This was the strategy that underpinned the Marshall Plan, which did not target a return to prewar life but rather capitalized on the rehabilitation process as an opportunity to create a new geopolitical reality.

As proven and these and other case studies, physical rehabilitation became sustainable only when it was backed by investment in social rehabilitation, employment development, a boost to local government, and community participation in decisions. Community-led rehabilitation, as implemented in Sri Lanka, demonstrates how direct citizen involvement enhances planning accuracy, strengthens a sense of belonging, and reduces dependence on external assistance.

Sustainable Rehabilitation Principles Derived from the Case Studies

- 1. Reconstruction must be part of an arrangement allowing for political stability.** As long as there is an ongoing threat of conflict, political instability or the absence of a clear governance structure, reconstruction may be temporary or incomplete. Moreover, the donor and involved countries guided by lessons of the past are likely shun a process of long-term reconstruction without guarantees of lasting political stability. The success of the reconstruction processes in Bosnia, Kosovo and Sri Lanka was contingent on stable political arrangements that ended the war, even if they did not resolve all the disputes.
- 2. An international envelope ensures stability for all parties involved.** The involvement of international and regional organizations, donor countries and dedicated foundations serves as a stabilizing factor, especially in areas where local actors do not have the independent capacity to carry out large-scale rehabilitation. Examples include the international governance in Kosovo (UNMIK), the Kuwait Environmental Restoration Program (KERP), the CRPC in Bosnia, and the OECC in Europe. In a tense geopolitical reality, the regional actors have an interest in being part of the reconstruction in order to ensure long-term stability, and hence they must be integrated into the international framework.
- 3. A clear solution must be formulated to the problem of the displaced persons from both a declarative and practical point of view.** The experience of reconstruction in Bosnia underscores that the return of displaced persons and the restitution of their property are essential components for long-term stability. An independent international legal mechanism is required to ensure the restitution of assets to their rightful owners, compensation for the displaced and alternative housing solutions.
- 4. Rehabilitation must be multidimensional - physical, political, social and economic.** Real reconstruction does not end with rebuilding infrastructure. It also entails economic development, strengthening

government institutions and rehabilitating civil society. In Bosnia and Kosovo, for example, resources were invested in creating jobs, stabilizing government mechanisms and improving social services, making reconstruction sustainable rather than only providing temporary repair. The participation of local communities in planning and execution in Sri Lanka, as previously highlighted, also contributed to their social and economic rehabilitation.

5. **Specific bodies and funds to repair targeted damage leads to effective results.** Each country that needed extensive reconstruction established dedicated bodies to address specific challenges. For example, the KERP in Kuwait that dealt with environmental pollution, the CRPC in Bosnia that focused on the restitution of displaced persons' property and the rehabilitation funds in Kosovo that assisted in physical and social rehabilitation. These models allowed for systematic treatment, stable funding and long-term monitoring and control.
6. **The involvement of local communities in all the rehabilitation stages ensures stability, a response to needs and sustainability.** Local community involvement boosts the legitimacy of the rehabilitation process, allows for a more accurate response to needs, and reduces dependence on external factors. The example of community-led rehabilitation in Sri Lanka demonstrates that when the local population is involved in planning, execution and decision-making as well as the entire rehabilitation process become more sustainable and efficient.

In conclusion, walking today through the streets of Dresden, Rotterdam, Napoli or Viterbo, it is hard to believe they were among the most devastated cities in Europe after World War II. The stone alleys, bustling squares and restored buildings hide the depth of the destruction they experienced. Even in the Balkan cities - Sarajevo, Mostar or Pristina - it is difficult to identify the traces of the wars, war crimes and mass murder that took place there only three decades ago. The trauma still lives in the hearts. But a different reality has emerged: new infrastructure, functioning institutions, and regional cooperation networks. Almost all of the Balkan countries now aspire to join the European Union, establish trust, and open

borders - precisely in places that once seemed irreconcilable.

Regional wars of recent years have wrought enormous destruction - in Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, Gaza, Sudan, as well as in Israel and Iran. But as in Europe and the Balkans, here too lies an opportunity: to replace the destruction with long-term reconstruction that strengthens stability, hope, and co-existence.

The case of Gaza is the most urgent and immediate of all. The reconstruction of the Gaza Strip is not just an engineering project, but a large-scale social, economic, and political process. Its success will be measured not only by the number of homes built, but also by residents' ability to believe they have a future. To this end, it is necessary to ensure coordination between aid agencies, clear principles of action, full participation of local communities, and the establishment and accompaniment of new independent and functioning public institutions, ensuring the return of displaced persons and a clear compensation mechanism.

Israel also has a crucial role to play. While in Serbia and Iraq post-war arrangements were imposed by the international community, in Sri Lanka, the victorious government had to lead and manage the reconstruction of entire regions almost entirely on its own. Israel must recognize its responsibility for the humanitarian disaster in Gaza and determine the areas in which it will be directly involved, where it will choose to act through partners, and how it can contribute to regional stability while safeguarding its internal peace and security needs.

It should now be clear: the reconstruction of Gaza is not only a moral or humanitarian obligation-it is also a clear Israeli interest. Only a stable Gaza, economically, socially, and environmentally connected to the region, can ensure long-term calm and security for residents of the south and for the country as a whole.

At the end of the day, the reconstruction process in Gaza will also depend on and be subject to a broader regional framework. It presents an opportunity to build collaborative infrastructures across the Middle East from Israel, Egypt, Lebanon and the Palestinian Authority to Saudi Arabia,

the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Qatar in the Gulf. Following nearly two decades of destruction and millions of refugees scattered around the world, the entire Middle East needs an opportunity to turn around. The question is not whether the rehabilitation process will begin, but when and how, and, most importantly, whether it will be motivated by responsibility and vision?

True reconstruction does not begin with concrete, but with trust. To break the cycle of destruction and lay the foundation for peace, requires a vision that includes pain, recognizes rights, and is built in partnership with - and not just for - local communities. Where destruction prevails, life can grow. Where fear is sown, hope can be planted, and where walls were once built, bridges could replace them. The choice is ultimately ours.



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