



**The Pearson Global Forum  
Part IV. Restoring Social Order**

**Local Politics and Reconciliation in Syria: A Case Study in Political Reconstruction Panel featuring:  
Peter Luskin, Managing Director and Co-Founder, Center for Operational Analysis and Research,  
Roger Myerson, Glen A. Lloyd Distinguished Professor of Economics, University of Chicago,  
Moderated by Katherine Baicker, Dean and Emmett Demon Professor, Harris School of Public Policy.**

MARIANNE AKUMU: Hello. My name is Mariana [Cum0 07:00:02], and I am a masters student, studying international development and policy at the Harris School of Public Policy. I'm also one of 25 recipients of the Obama Foundation Scholarship, which has enabled us to undertake this program here at the University of Chicago.

I come from Uganda, which is in east Africa, and prior to coming to Chicago, I was working with a non-governmental organization on various issues, including transitional justice, inclusive development, and humanitarian response.

Therefore, the forthcoming discussion is very pertinent and related to the work that I do. Now, Uganda is a very beautiful country that has unfortunately been plagued by cycles of violence throughout its history. This inability to find lasting solutions to the drivers of conflict, including unequal power distribution, unequal wealth distribution, tribalism, have perpetuated these cycles.

However, the most protected and violent conflict the country has witnessed has been the one involving the Lord's Resistance Army. And this has been led by a man named Joseph Kony, who some of you may have heard of. And this occurred in the north and eastern part of the country. And Kony began his quest to overthrow the government around 1986, and continued his violent fight up to around 2006, when there were attempts to engage in peace talks between the government and the LRA.

And while there was a succession of violence, there was no final peace agreement signed due to mistrust between both parties. Currently, Kony and his group are still alive and active, but operating from the dense Garamba forests in the neighboring democratic republic of Congo, whose violent history is even more harrowing than Uganda's.

In response, the government, along with international partners, have undertaken various development programs in order to breach the economic, social, and infrastructure gap between the north and the rest of the country. This gap, however, still persists despite various accountability measures, which include Dominic [Onwhen 06:59:07] who is one of the LRA's former top commanders, and is currently standing trial before the international criminal court in the Hague.

And in addition, locally, a junior commander is being tried before the international crimes division of the high court of Uganda. Both of these are part of the process of trying to ensure accountability for crimes that have been committed.

Now, take a moment, and think of someone you know who is 20 years old. Now imagine that, since their birth, they have been a witness, survivor, victim, or agent of violence. Usually, when there is violence happening somewhere in the world, our TV screens are filled with images of bombings, shootings, destruction, and people fleeing for survival. What is not often shown or focused on is the humanity behind the images. The people and the families affected. What happens afterwards?

What happens when the fire is no longer burning, and people are trying to rebuild their lives?

... when the fire is no longer burning and people are trying to rebuild their lives. How do you ensure that history does not repeat itself and that these atrocities are not committed again? These are some of the questions that transitional justice aims to answer.

One day while conducting a community meeting in a village in Gulu District, I met a young lady called Grace who told me a bit about herself. Grace was 14-year-old student during the height of conflict when the LRA attacked her school. Many of her classmates and teachers were killed and the buildings were completely burned down. She was abducted and forced to carry heavy luggage and walk thousands of kilometers to South Sudan where the LRA had their base. When they reached the base, as was custom, she was given to one of the rebel leaders as a wife and endured physical, psychological, sexual abuse on regular basis.

She stayed there for four years until she was eventually rescued. She returned home with two children. Her return home, however, was only the beginning of new challenges she'd face. She returned to find that her father, the family's main bread winner, had died. Her mother who survived was suffering from various illnesses and barely able support herself. Grace herself suffered from frequent nightmares. She was unable to find work and, due to having children to take care of, she was unable to go back to school. The community in which she expected to find solace ostracized her labeling her a rebel wife. Her children too carried the stigma and suffered from bullying in school.

In Acoli, the tribe to which Grace belongs, as in many African cultures which are patrilineal, one gains their identity and belonging from their father. Since Grace did not know her children's father's clan or home, it left the children without a sense of belonging and access to their cultural and material heritage. The traditional and cultural institutions that were once able to intervene in such situations were also transformed by the conflict which left many of the elders dead and the cultures eroded and institutions barely surviving.



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Our organization was able to provide Grace with two goats, which eventually multiplied, and this gave her a source of income to be able to pay school fees for her children and take care of herself and her mother. This recommendation came from Grace herself and was based on various factors including the amount of time and resources that would be required to take care of the goats, their market value, as well as the possibility of expansion.

In addition, we trained community facilitators in the village on aspects of human rights, reconciliation, and peaceful coexistence in order to be able to change community attitudes towards those who had returned rebel captivity. The facilitators worked with schools and other institutions, including the health centers and cultural institutions, to ensure that they were sensitive to the specific needs of survivors.

Grace was also integrated into a women's community group to give her a sense of belonging and friendship. Now Grace's story is only one among millions of complex stories born of conflict from around the world. Therefore, when discussing the restoration of social order, it is about the institutions, the infrastructure, but more importantly it is about the individual lives, the communities, the cultures that have been transformed and how they can be supported to rebuild their lives. This requires a wholistic and inclusive approach that has the most affected at the center of the solutions.

Thank you very much and please welcome the next panel.

KATE BAICKER: Good afternoon. My name is Kate Baicker. I'm the Dean of the Harris School of Public Policy and we've just heard one of the many powerful reasons that moving from the causes and consequences of violence to the restoration of political order and reconciliation is so important. That's a tall order for this panel and the last panel of the day, but we're incredibly fortunate to have two incredibly qualified people to speak to that and to raise some of the issue that you've heard about in Syria and discuss how they apply around the world.

First, on my left is Peter Luskin, who's the Managing Director and Co-Founder of the Center for Operational Analysis and Research, and has done remarkable work in Syria and Afghanistan and around the world. To his left you see Roger Myerson who is the Glen A. Lloyd Distinguished Service Professor of Economics at University of Chicago, a Pearson Institute affiliate, and a Nobel prize winner in economics. We are incredibly grateful to have your expertise.

I'd like to dive in, turning to you Peter. Thinking about the issues we've heard about throughout the day of the best of intentions for donors or for Western states in driving improvement in these war-torn areas can often go awry and how what looks good on paper can be perverted in practice. Tell us a little bit about how you've seen the translation of donor intentions to practical import on the ground.

PETER LUSKIN: That's a very good question. I guess to start, I really appreciate being here and it's been wonderful to hear a lot of uplifting stories like Grace's story.



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Syria is just a disaster. I don't know how else to put it right now. We're at a point in this conflict where the government of Syria has essentially retaken the vast majority of previously opposition-held areas. They're bracing for their final offensive, which will take place likely in the next year. What we're left with right now is, let's say, the pieces of civil society that we as the West have collectively contributed to over the last five years, six years.

I guess one of the biggest challenges in the Syrian conflict was that ... and we're talking about governance structures ... was that these local councils, which came together in roughly 2012, they were funded by different western countries, but they never had a monopoly on service provision. They never had monopoly on the use of violence, which is to say the judiciary would be paid for by the Swedes and it was going direct to judges, service provision was being taken care of INGOs, armed groups were receiving their money neither directly from the West or from the Gulf. Then as a consequence, these attempts at unifying the opposition failed. I think the Syrian opposition probably also deserved some credit for that. We collectively fragmented this and I'd say the most important aspect of it is in service provision.

KATE BAICKER: That's an interesting thread you're picking up on from panels we've heard earlier in the day about the contrast between a fragile state versus a fragmented state and the role that centralization plays in strengthening or weakening the existence of state infrastructure necessary to support the restoring of social order. I want to turn to Roger and put that to you in thinking about how governance matters and the right balance between a centralized authority versus local tribal councils or local groups that might be more accountable to the people on the ground.

ROGER MYERSON: I think with the University of Chicago and the Harris School trying to understand, social scientists, the foundations of successful societies and Syria's a terrible test case that forces us to think very hard about it. I come from general prejudice ... thinking about problems such as we've been talking about all day, I've come to believe that important proposition that's underappreciated would be that the foundations of a strong prosperous state depend on a balanced constitutional relationship between national political leaders and local leaders who are accountable within their communities.

The United States developed from local and provincial government that was democratically accountable to resonance a hundred years before we had our first national election. This is a country, maybe unique in the world, where the national constitution had to be ratified separately by the provinces. The political processes and the provinces determined whether the national constitution was accepted. This country is founded on the concept of the balance between national and local government. That is something that Americans have not taken sufficiently out in thinking about helping other countries. We think about democracy, but we don't think about federalism, which is absolutely fundamental to our country.



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What makes a state weak or fragile? I think the answer is either elite networks are too narrow to effectively govern or rivalries between different groups prevent the consolidation of an effective state. Either way the result is misery for people who live there and the sources of violence.

Let me just say, the international assistance community can provoke this, can exacerbate these problems. These are political problems of a country, of a region, of a people, and of a society, but the international community can exacerbate the narrowness problem because when international assistance is channeled through national leaders, it gives those national leaders less reason to try to be inclusive to negotiate the hard deals with local elites outside of the capital. You end up a narrow state one way and, of course, the other way is when different countries that may be international rivals back different rival groups within a country we help to tear it apart.

So either way, international assistance may bear for some of the guilt for a weak state. I would say both of these effects existed on steroids in a monstrous version in Syria. Syria exists, there is state which has specialized in trying to be narrow, to make sure that nobody is trusted for the provision of local public goods and justice. The state connections are necessary for protection and for public services and they have perfected the use of international recognition as a way of profiting. When people rose up in Syria against the state, perhaps because there wasn't a unified backing ... if the Western nations had provided some sort of unified backing for the revolution, perhaps it could have succeeded, but instead different backers have created conflict and to some extent the state itself. The Assad regime itself was deliberately exacerbating that.

PETER LUSKIN: Yeah. I think this is this interesting place that we're at right now, which is in the last nine months, let's say the vast majority of opposition-held areas have been reconciled. That's the word that people use, but it's not really the right word. It's kind of an Orwellian word.

As I think someone spoke to earlier on the last panel, it's these besieged areas which were besieged for five or six years ... which itself is an interesting thing to discuss briefly. How can this happen? Well, the only way for a siege last for five years is because somebody's profiting off of it. Right? For up until the fall of 2016, siege was simply a way for the regime to earn hard currency and basically prey upon people trapped in these areas.

Anyway, following the Russian intervention we've seen, I guess beginning of the winter of 2016 with Madaya and Zabadani, and then up until now which we saw last July as the fall of the South ... it's a process called reconciliation and basically, I think it was spoken to earlier, it's local capitulation. What's really interesting about this process is how armed actors, who you would think would be the ones most directly challenge the state, these guys are reconciled. In fact in the south, you had the fourth armored division was basically competing with the 5th Corps, which is backed by the Russians to reconcile as many combatants as possible and then to throw them on the next frontline.

Whereas service providers, which is to say kind of humanitarians ... although probably not humanitarians in the traditional sense of the word, because they are political actors, and local council leaders, civil society ... these guys are all basically forcibly displaced and that by the way is the last step of the reconciliation is they bring in the buses, the green buses and they put you on and they send you to the north. We've done a bunch of research about this, about the incorporation of armed actors, but what it speaks to is that the Syrian war has essentially been a war of service provision.

Then I guess this goes back to the donor policies we were talking about earlier. Humanitarian is a very easy thing to fund. It seems to be less controversial, but in the context of a fragile state, in the context of a complex crisis, providing services was directly challenging the legitimacy of the regime. For this reason, these are the people who are never coming home. Whereas the guys who carried weapons, they're not welcomed back I don't think, but they remain in their communities and have not been penalized to the extent that one would have expected.

KATE BAICKER: So then how do western powers, the U.S. and others, act as a force for good in the distribution of aid? How do they interact with local councils or local groups to make sure that aid is getting where it's doing the most good and to keep those groups from being co-opted by a regime that may have different interests?

PETER LUSKIN: I'm going to take this.

ROGER MYERSON: Go ahead.

PETER LUSKIN: This is really challenging because even the definition of humanitarian aid is kind of up in the area. Multi-mandate humanitarian organizations do things from the emergency humanitarian response all the way to peace building and reconstruction. By and large it's based upon this idea that they're neutral and impartial actors, but in the Syrian conflict they're not. I think even though it's very easy to channel aid, these organizations will not work with political entities. The UN pooled fund, and almost all humanitarians, worked instead through local civil society, right? I don't quite know what the answer is because on the one hand, to question the neutrality of humanitarians and say, "You must program this money through a local council," would obviously jeopardize their community acceptance. On the other hand, doing it this other way, which is allowing local civil society to deliver services, effectively undermines the sovereignty of any governing structure that you want to create.

ROGER MYERSON: I think the point is that while we recognize that a broad inclusive civil society is the foundation of a strong state that this is exactly what the Assad regime has worked to undermine systematically. To the extent that people who some independence and some local accountability have been permitted any local leadership prestige in Syria, my understanding is that it's exclusively people who are within a narrow sectarian group. As long as it's sectarian, especially if there's suspicion between different sects and different tribal or ethnic groups, then the regime is maybe prepared to tolerate that.



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The foot soldiers who fought for the revolution have been able to give up their arms, put the gun down, and then the regime gives them a gun back and says, "Now, welcome to the army." The civil society people, the people who were forming local councils, the proudest achievement of the Syrian revolutionaries from 2011 was the establishment of broad, inclusive, cross-sectarian, local councils to build trust and that's exactly what's most threatened by the regime. Those are the people who they know they want to suppress. I quote from Rick Barton's excellent book PEACE WORKS, page 176 if you like, where he reports that-

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Can you repeat that?

ROGER MYERSON: ... Yeah. Rick Barton's PEACE WORKS, he reports that, "Unfortunately the U.S. government just often acted like it didn't know how to engage with local groups. There was a desire to have a national front on top of it and that was something that the Assad regime was very good at manipulating to prevent the creation of," ... but I think what I would emphasize here is, and without support from the West, the Syrian revolution was betrayed and perverted by sectarian militias, sometimes would then purge other factions from the local councils. The local councils that were inclusive that remained, those are the ones that the Assad regime is most threatened by.

I think the U.S. and the European Union in particular has a huge ... let me say, it is right for all of us, it is humanly right to try to help, want the Syrian people to have a country that they want to return to, but Europeans have a particular, with the refugee hoard on their borders, have a real material interest also in supporting the reconstruction of Syria as a place that Syrians should want to return to.

What good can we do? Europe and the West have very little leverage, but I would want to say to maximize what little leverage is available, and I think Europe was probably going to be the leader in this, would be to offer generous budgets for reconstruction with wide-eyed that the Assad regime does welcome this hoping to profit from it. To some extent the Assad regime would prefer that that money all be managed, all the profits from the contracts, should go to Ba'athist-connected people and communities that rebelled the longest should be left to start. So, the aid has to be given in a way there is local control.

I would say an initial demand would be, "We're going to give you more money than you thought we would for reconstruction, but we insist that in every district, we're going to be allowed to open a district reconstruction office." The international assistance from Europe and America should go and there should be a district reconstruction officer who's going to connect with the old civil society people and say, "What do you really need. Who can we trust to deliver it?" Some fraction of the profits of our money are going to go to Ba'athist connection people, and of course we want to help those communities also."

The communities that were loyal to Assad deserve help and reconstructing, but the international community needs to be ready when those local development officers say, "We're getting resistance. The people we're talking to are being systematically arrested. They're not allowing us to help the communities that rebelled the longest." Then the whole process has got to be shut down and the governments at the highest level need to say, "Syria is not allowing us to help their own people, because they're insisting that it all be a political crutch for the regime. We're withdrawing the money until these demands are met."

I think that's kind of detailed engagement that is sensitive. Where national policy is sensitive to local political voices in Syria, is the best we can do to not just create a nation but to actually have positive political impact for the future impact of Syria as a nation.

PETER LUSKIN: Yeah, I guess I'd echo that and say just don't give it to UNDP. That would be the worst possible thing because they're quite close to the regime. Barring that, what else would work would be to continue doing exactly what we've been doing in that it was a mistake for the last six years in that caused a fair amount of political fragmentation, but moving forward political fragmentation in government-held areas ... maybe not fragmentation, but say diversification of influence may not be such a bad thing.

I guess the only goal is ensuring that it doesn't cement displacement and it doesn't allow the government to basically shore up the communities that have supported them, or what we're seeing kind of right now which is there are these fairly strategic areas. Things like the roads from Damascus to the airport, which I don't know if you've been to Beirut, but will be reconstructed in such a way that the local inhabitants, which previously were from a fairly low income background, that they're never able to return in this kind of ... Was it Le Corbusier? ... This is what the regime would like to do with this reconstruction money and that's the worst case. So anything short of that is a great victory.

KATE BAICKER: So you've highlighted the importance of the mechanism by which aid is allocated and monitored which I'm sure is a real challenge. Acknowledging that success is likely to be in small steps over a long time, what would success look like? How do we know that things are working? What would you like to see as early signs? Yeah, you.

PETER LUSKIN: It depends you would talk to, right? For the Europeans success would be safe returns.

KATE BAICKER: What about for the Syrians?

PETER LUSKIN: This is the end of phase one of the conflict, right? There's definitely phase two coming, without question, because these core grievances ... and Rebecca, I'm looking at you ... these core grievances have never been addressed, right? In fact, they're worse now than I think they were before the conflict began. I don't know what you do.





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ROGER MYERSON: Back up and say, I should have mentioned this earlier ... we should have had a third panelist, Madeleine Thomas, Peter's colleague. She's not very far away, she's in Canada but because she's a Syrian National and our government has a policy that's just made it impossible for her to be here. I'm ashamed that she's not here.

I think there's been a revolution against a regime and it's been suppressed with Iranian and Russian help. In many ways some of the revolution backfired in that it created openings for all kinds of militant fundamentalist that different kind of intolerance, obviously. There is still hope that as result of this resistance ... the Syrian people rose up because the way the regime was restricting power and manipulating the communities was intolerable. Is there any hope that the Assad regime will be a different Assad regime afterwards? Not much. I was trying to say what kinds of engagement with foreign donors could they use to try to maximize the probability that the regime will be a little different and if the West insists on it provides some incentives for the regime, perhaps allow some people to begin to serve their community in ways that make Syrians better off ... Obviously the number one way we would tell things were better is if everybody wants to go back home. That should be the goal.

KATE BAICKER: You don't look like an optimistic man.

PETER LUSKIN: I just don't know how you achieve this-

ROGER MYERSON: Yeah.

PETER LUSKIN: ... and I guess we as the U.S., but I guess we also as the international community, I don't see how you reform to the regime. We've been kind of waiting to see if the Russians, since 2016, if all of the sudden there's a surprise bombing by ISIS and [Tlass 07:27:05] comes back into power or someone like that.

Everyone I guess everyone looks to the Astana process then hopes that there's a way to create a more inclusive and just society. Inshallah.

KATE BAICKER: I think we have time for just a couple of questions from the audience. Given the short time horizon, I think we should accumulate a few questions and then let our panelists respond. I think the lights will come, but I can see even one hand in the dark. There we go. I think a mic is coming your way.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: I was involved in the formation of the local councils, each of those local councils. I'm very confused by the presentation. Local councils are not considered, by pretty much anyone as a major achievement by the West or by the Syrians. This was a Western construct that was foisted on the Syrians to give a face to the service provision, which was mentioned. A quick comment and then a question based on that.



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There really wasn't any space between the local councils and civil society. So the service provision was done through the civil society actors, through the local councils, local council brand, but the service provision was not done through the local councils. So my question is, how did the service provision in the rebel-controlled areas, the so called liberated areas, contribute to the fragmentation or how could it have been done differently.

KATE BAICKER: Thanks, and let's get one or two more questions and then let our panelists respond. I see a hand in the front here. There we go, mic coming your way.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Hello. Thank you so much for this panel. It's extremely interesting and both of you extremely knowledgeable about the subject. I wanted to ask the kind of reconstruction idea that you proposed here, would basically entail shifting or creating focus on areas that have been reconquered by the regime and monitoring the situation happening there. Currently people who are returning, refugees, are being arrested. Daraa and Northern Homs and Eastern Ghouta, people are being arrested there. There are severe restrictions on freedom of movement of people. The UN has information about cancer patients, other types of people who require treatment in Damascus, and they're not being allowed to go there for treatment. There essentially still under siege in Eastern Ghouta.

So for this reconstruction to even begin, people need to have some basic rights, like the freedom to move. How can you be hopeful about a reconstruction process when even people are in a way still living under a constant cloud of suspicion? The regime sees them as, they may have surrendered but they are still enemy population.

KATE BAICKER: Those are two very meaty questions. So I think I will turn to you to answer.

PETER LUSKIN: Just to start with, I'm not hopeful at all for the reconstruction. I agree with you and I don't know how you stop that from happening. Like I said, I don't know how you reform the regime.

I guess going to the council question, that was not part of the team that built local councils. I guess when you look at things like HTS and I guess ISIS as well. It seems like they were successful because I guess, let's say, three major reason, right? One, they had independent access to resources. So in the case of HTS, it's the border crossing, it's Bab al-Hawa, Morek, and I guess to a lesser extent Qalaat al-Madiq. With ISIS it's the [Mbaria 07:31:15] kind of hand-filtered fuel.

I guess the other piece that made them successful was that, one, they had control over resources which they could use to provide services directly to people. Two, they obviously had control over the armed groups because it was them. I guess I didn't see any of those factors with the exception of Darayya. I think that's the one community, and parts of the south but that's obviously more [Hourani 07:31:49] tribalism or clan behavior than anything else. By and large the councils, they were just as you said, they were coordination committee. Then I'm not a Ph.D., but I guess I just kind of contrast them to the



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success of what we would call radical extremist groups who were much better integrated in terms of governance and service provision than military capacity. Over to you, Roger.

ROGER MYERSON: I think the problems you quoted of the regime manipulating and not allowing cancer patients to ... I understand the regime wants to make sure it owns all the hospitals. This means any help that's given is either going to be channeled only to the regime and its supporters and to build up ... or unless ... in which case it's hopeless. If there's any hope, it's going to come from monitoring these abuses by the regime, holding them accountable, and having the donor nations be ready to withdraw their aid en masse when there's an abuse, whether to refuse to allow it in a district where there abuses happen or to withdraw from the entire country.

I oversimplified of course that United States did try to engage with ... Rick Barton's book talks about trying to help local police force in Aleppo, but not being allowed to give them money because of the need to vet that absolutely every policeman who is receiving any money from the United States assistance had never been involved with any terrorist organization. That required vetting and whatever that was, of course, physically impossible. We weren't set up to give really effective aid, but the other side of it is to recognize that ... let me just put it a different way.

As a general fundamental principal, a prosperous democratic society depends on having an ample supply of people with good reputations for excising public funds and public power responsibly to serve their communities. If in an abusive society, if that only exists in small communities, then you start with the communities. Inclusive council organizations that were deliberately meant to include people from ethnic and religious groups and sects that the regime had tried to pit against each other, that to give those people collectively some power in administering public services was to make a deep political change and while the humanitarian needs are also to be met, the prosperity of people ultimately depends on being part of a society with a functional political system. And I'm arguing that the-

ROGER MYERSON: And, I'm arguing that while investing in aid, we also need to invest in monitoring the usage of the aid, with a sensitivity to the creating opportunities for people to begin to develop forms of trusted local community leadership. To encourage trusted local community leadership, is as important as getting roads, and schools, put back together again. And, that is the issue and since the Assad Regime has always discouraged that, there's every reason to fear that there's nothing that can be done. And, that Syria is going maintain to be, for years to come, a place that many Syrian refugees will not wanna return to because they will fear for their lives, if they do. And, they will not see it as a community they want to live in.

ROGER MYERSON: That, for humanitarian reasons, and for selfish reasons of the west, there's lots of reasons to think that if there's any way to spend money to it, and part of what I was try to say is that, it's not just aid, it's also kind of depth of diplomatic investment. Not just at the national level, but at the



local level. It would be expensive but it would be a good investment, both for helping people in a very needy country, and for service the interests of the west.

KATE BAICKER: Well, that seems like a really important note to end on. So, please join me in thanking our panelists for this really illuminating conversation.