CHARTING SYRIA'S FUTURE

A Strategic Framework for Recovery and Renewal

Edited by Salam Fayyad

TIME BOOKS

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Acronyms

3RP .....Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan

AANES .....Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria

AQ .....Al-Qaeda

CENTCOM...U.S. Central Command

CIHRS .....Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies

CRPD .....Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities

CSIS .....Center for Strategic and International Studies

CSSR.....Civil Society Support Room

CT .....Counterterrorism

DDR.....Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration

DIC .....Department of International Cooperation (within MoFA)

DPI.....Digital Public Infrastructure

ERW .....Explosive Remnants of War

E.U. .....European Union

FSIA.....Foreign Sovereign Immunities Act

FTO.....Foreign Terrorist Organization

G2P .....Government-to-person

GCC.....Gulf Cooperation Council

GID .....General Intelligence Directorate

GL 25 .....General License 25

GSS .....General Security Service

HaD .....Hurras al-Din

HNAP .....U.N. Humanitarian Needs Assessment Programme

HTS.....Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham

ICC .....International Criminal Court

ICCPR .....International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights

IDLO .....International Development Law Organization

IDP.....Internally displaced person

IFI.....International financial institution

IIIM.....International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism

IMF .....International Monetary Fund

IOM .....International Organization for Migration

IRGC.....Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps

ISF.....Internal Security Forces

ISIS.....Islamic State of Iraq and Syria

ISP.....Internet Service Provider

JFS.....Jabhat Fateh al-Sham

JOC-I.....Joint Operations Command-Iraq

LMS .....Learning Management System

MoD .....Ministry of Defense

MoFA .....Ministry of Foreign Affairs

MoI .....Ministry of the Interior

MoSAL.....Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor

OFAC .....Office of Foreign Assets Control

OPCW .....Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons

PKK .....Kurdistan Workers' Party

PMF .....Popular Mobilization Forces

RPBA.....Recovery and Peacebuilding Assessment

SAA .....Syrian Arab Army

SARC.....Syrian Arab Red Crescent

SCD .....Syrian Civil Defense

SDF .....Syrian Democratic Forces

SNA .....Syrian National Army

SNHR .....Syrian Network for Human Rights

SSR.....Security sector reform

SST .....State Sponsor of Terrorism

STD.....Syrian Trust for Development

SWIFT .....Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication

U.N. .....United Nations

UNDP.....United Nations Development Programme

UNHCR .....United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

UNSC .....United Nations Security Council

UNODC .....United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime

USCIRF .....U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom

UXO.....Unexploded Ordnance

YPG .....People's Protection Units

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Timeline and Key Events

A Brief History of the Conflict

The Syrian civil war raged across the nation for nearly 14 years. It began in March 2011, when fifteen school children in the southwestern city of Deraa spray-painted slogans criticizing the regime. In response, these boys were arrested and tortured. This was the catalyst for a war that had been fermenting for decades. The Assad family had implemented authoritarian rule since Hafez al-Assad came to power in 1970 and had only intensified its control once Hafez's son Bashar began his rule in 2000. The family governed through a system that an American think tank, the Council on Foreign Relations, called "not just autocratic but also kleptocratic, doling out patronage to bind Syrians to the regime."[1] The Assad family empowered Alawite allies to dominate the security apparatus, exercising tight control over the Sunni majority. By 2011, anger with the strict Assad regime had long been mounting, compounded by critiques of corruption and economic stagnation. A severe drought from 2006 to 2010 only worsened the situation, with over a million rural Syrians having been internally displaced to the cities.

Protests continued to grow, and when the fifteen children were tortured in March 2011, outrage erupted. This quickly led to one of the most complex armed conflicts of the twenty-first century. In just a few months, the Free Syrian Army had formed, and within two years the Islamic State had seized Syrian territory across the eastern provinces (as well as western Iraq). Numerous foreign actors were also involved, with Turkey, Gulf states, and Western states

[1] "Syria's Civil War: The Descent into Horror," Council on Foreign Relations (December 2024).

supporting various opposition groups while Russia and Iran backed the regime and provided military support. With intense proxy warfare, civilian infrastructure was heavily damaged across the country, including hospitals, water and electric plants, and schools. By the time a ceasefire somewhat took effect in 2020, granting a measure of autonomy to opposition groups under Abu Muhammad al-Julani's Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) in the province of Idlib, around 500,000 people had been killed and over half of the pre-war population had been displaced either internally, or as refugees in the Middle East, Turkey, Germany, and beyond.[2]

Although the civil war was grueling, its end was swift. In November of 2024, with Assad allies Russia and Hezbollah (an Iranian-backed militia in Lebanon) weakened from their own wars, HTS was successful in launching an offensive that captured Aleppo and swept through Hama and Homs. On December 8, Assad fled for Moscow as Damascus fell to the opposition. HTS took over under al-Julani, who dropped his nom de guerre and resumed the use of his name Ahmad Hussein al-Sharaa, and installed himself as interim president in January 2025. In March, a constitutional declaration establishing a five-year transitional framework began, with executive powers concentrated in the presidency.

[2] "Conflict in Syria," Global Conflict Tracker, Council on Foreign Relations (updated February 2026).

Key Events in Post-Conflict Syria

November 27-December 8, 2024: A coalition of Syrian opposition forces led by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) carries out an offensive against the Assad regime in which they capture Aleppo, Idlib, Hama, Homs, and other important towns.

December 8, 2024: HTS-led opposition forces capture Damascus, ending more than 50 years of rule by the Assad family. Thousands of political prisoners are freed from Sednaya prison, the Assad regime's most notorious torture facility.

December 2024: Syria's new authorities arrest nearly 300 people, including informants, pro-regime fighters and former soldiers, in a crackdown on regime loyalists.

January 2025: Ahmad al-Sharaa declares himself interim president, then transitional president.

January 2025: Turkey establishes its "Go-and-see" policy for Syrian refugees. UNHCR launches their Operational Framework for Voluntary Return of Syrian Refugees and IDPs, predicting that 1.5 million refugees and 2 million internally displaced persons will return in 2025.

February 24-25, 2025: A National Dialogue Conference is held in Damascus to lay the groundwork for an interim constitution, including several representatives from former opposition governments and civil society.

March 6-7, 2025: Political violence erupts in Latakia and Tartus when a group of pro-Assad regime fighters ambush the new government's security forces, leading to deaths of security force members and clashes between the two groups. Government forces and aligned armed groups regained military and security control of most of the

region, but the clashes are estimated to have led to approximately 1,400 civilians killed.

March 9, 2025: President al-Sharaa forms two committees to address the violence, one an independent committee of judges and lawyers to investigate the violence on the coast and hold those responsible accountable, and the other a "Supreme Committee for Civil Peace" with a mandate to engage with coastal residents and safeguard their security.

March 11, 2025: The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) sign a deal with the interim Damascus government to integrate SDF-controlled civilian and military institutions in the northeast with Syria's new state institutions, although details on how SDF military operation would be integrated into Syria's Defense Ministry are not specified.

March 13, 2025: An interim constitution drafted by the constitutional committee is signed by President al-Sharaa, establishing a five-year transitional period, outlining the powers of the new government, and scheduling elections for 2030.

March 29, 2025: President al-Sharaa announces a transitional government with 23 ministers. While ministers are predominantly male and Sunni Arab, the cabinet does include members who are Druze and Alawite, as well as a Christian woman. The transitional government does not include a prime minister, and al-Sharaa consolidates executive power.

April 28, 2025: More than 100 people were reportedly killed in fighting between gunmen from the Druze religious minority, the new security forces, and allied Sunni Islamist fighters in the outskirts of Damascus and in Suwayda governorates. The violence erupted after a blasphemous audio recording falsely attributed to a Druze religious leader was shared widely on social media. During the fighting, Israel conducted airstrikes, including one near the

Presidential Palace in Damascus on May 3, in what Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said should serve as a "clear message" that Israel would not allow Syrian forces to be sent South of Damascus.

May 13, 2025: U.S. President Donald Trump announces that the U.S. will lift all sanctions on Syria and normalize relations with Syria's new government. Ten days later, the U.S. Department of the Treasury issued Syria General License 25 (GL 25), authorizing transactions prohibited by the Syrian Sanctions Regulations, and the U.S. Department of State issues a Caesar Act waiver.

May 16, 2025: Qatar and Saudi Arabia settle Syria's outstanding World Bank debt of USD 15.5 million, allowing the World Bank Group to reengage with the country to fund reconstruction and economic recovery.

May 17, 2025: Decree establishes the National Authority for Transitional Justice and the National Missing Persons Authority.

May 17, 2025: Syria's Defense Minister announces all major military units have been merged under the Ministry of Defense, formalizing the integration of most armed factions into a unified national army. He announces a 10-day deadline for any remaining small groups to join the ministry.

May 20, 2025: European Union foreign ministers agree to lift the remaining economic sanctions on Syria, completing a process of sanctions removal that they began in January 2025. However, the E.U. will maintain weapons-related sanctions on Syria.

May 20, 2025: U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio testifies before the U.S. Senate that Syria may be only weeks away from "potential collapse and a full-scale civil war of epic proportions."

May 29, 2025: The Syrian government signed a Memorandum of Understanding with a consortium of international companies led by UCC Holding and U.S. partners to develop major power generation projects in Syria, with a foreign investment valued at approximately $7 billion.

June 19, 2025: Syria carries out its first international bank transaction via the SWIFT system since the outbreak of its 14-year civil war, a milestone in its push to reenter the global financial system.

June 22, 2025: An attacker kills 25 people and injures 63 at a Greek Orthodox church in Damascus. The transitional government announces that the attacker was affiliated with ISIS.

July 5, 2025: Syria and the United Kingdom re-establish diplomatic relations following UK Foreign Secretary David Lammy's visit to Damascus.

July 7, 2025: The United States revokes the foreign terrorist organization (FTO) designation for al-Nusra Front, also known as Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS).

July 13–19, 2025: Fighting breaks out between Druze and Bedouin armed groups in Suwayda and surrounding villages in southern Syria. The violence is triggered by the robbery and assault of a Druze merchant by Bedouin fighters on July 11. The Syrian transitional government deploys armed forces to the area between July 14-16. A ceasefire is announced on July 15, but it collapses on July 18 with renewed fighting. Israel launches airstrikes targeting Syrian government forces with the stated goal of defending the Druze community. At least 1,013 people — including 26 children and 47 women — are killed in Suwayda during the violence, according to the Syrian Network for Human Rights.

July 18, 2025: U.S. Ambassador to Turkey and Envoy for Syria Tom Barrack announces that Israel and Syria reached a ceasefire agreement "embraced by Turkey, Jordan and its neighbors."

July 19, 2025: President al-Sharaa announces another ceasefire to end the Southern Syria clashes. Syria also announces 47 investment agreements with Saudi Arabia valued at more than USD 6 billion.

July 24, 2025: U.N. Special Envoy Geir Pedersen, briefing the Security Council, stresses that it is "absolutely vital that all major Syrian groups and components" and women be included as electors and candidates in any electoral process, and notes the political transition is "not yet fully inclusive."

July 26, 2025: Israel and Syria hold talks in Paris, facilitated by international partners, on a security arrangement.

July 27, 2025: The chairman of Syria's Higher Committee for People's Assembly Elections announces that Syria will hold its first parliamentary elections since Assad's fall between September 15–20.

August 1, 2025: The Syrian government announces the formation of a fact-finding committee to investigate the July Suwayda violence.

August 21, 2025: U.N. experts issue an alarm over the wave of attacks on Syrian Druze communities, noting that at least 105 Druze women and girls were abducted by groups affiliated with the Syrian government, with 80 still missing. In at least three cases, Druze women were allegedly raped before being killed. Approximately 192,000 people are displaced by the fighting.

August 26, 2025: The U.S. Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) publishes a final rule removing the Syrian Sanctions Regulations from the Code of Federal Regulations, consistent with the earlier executive order lifting sanctions on Syria.

September 24, 2025: President al-Sharaa addresses the U.N. General Assembly in New York — the first Syrian head of state to do so since 1967 — pledging accountability and national rebuilding.

October 5–23, 2025: Syria holds indirect elections for 122 of 210 seats in a transitional People's Assembly, including 119 initial elections and, subsequently, another three in a by-election, constituting the first elections since the fall of the Assad regime. Elections are postponed in Suwayda, al-Hasakah, and Raqqa due to security and political issues. Of those elected, 13 percent are women and minorities.

October 6–7, 2025: Clashes break out between the interim government's forces and SDF forces in Aleppo. A ceasefire is agreed the next day, brokered by the U.S.

November 6, 2025: The U.N. Security Council votes 14–1 (China abstaining) to lift U.N. sanctions on President al-Sharaa and Interior Minister Anas Khattab, which had been imposed during their time as leaders of HTS.

November 10, 2025: Syria formally joins the U.S.-led Global Coalition against the Islamic State. Syrian Information Minister Hamza al-Mustafa notes the agreement is "political and until now contains no military components."

November 2025: President al-Sharaa meets with President Trump at the White House.

November 28, 2025: An Israeli raid and airstrikes on the town of Beit Jinn in southern Syria kills 13 people, including two children, and wounds 25.

December 4, 2025: A delegation from the U.N. Security Council visits Damascus — the first such visit since the Council's founding

in 1945 — meeting with authorities, civil society, and affected communities.

December 5, 2025: Canada removes Syria from its list of countries that support terrorism and revokes its designation of HTS as a terrorist organization.

December 13, 2025: Two American soldiers and a civilian interpreter are fatally shot by a gunman during a joint patrol near Palmyra. U.S. Central Command attributes the attack to an ISIS gunman, and President Trump vows retaliation.

December 26, 2025: An attack on an Alawite mosque in Homs kills and injures civilians. The extremist armed group Saraya Ansar al-Sunnah claims responsibility, one of a series of attacks it has conducted on minority communities.

December 29–30, 2025: The Syrian government introduces new banknotes for the Syrian pound to replace those issued under the Assad regime. A curfew is imposed in Latakia following sectarian violence in the city.

January 2026: The Syrian interim government forcefully reasserts control over vast areas of eastern Syria previously controlled by the Kurdish-led SDF and the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES), after the March 2025 integration agreement stalled over disputes about Kurdish autonomy.

January 29, 2026: The Syrian interim government and the SDF reach a new agreement to integrate Kurdish forces and governing institutions into national government structures.

January 31, 2026: Large protests break out in Suwayda, with Druze demonstrators calling for self-determination and accountability for the violence committed against their community in July 2025.

February 4, 2026: The Syrian Petroleum Company, Chevron, and Qatar's Power International Holding sign a memorandum of understanding at the Syrian Presidential Palace in Damascus for offshore oil and gas exploration.

February 14, 2026: U.S. Central Command announces that U.S. forces have killed or captured over 50 ISIS fighters and struck over 100 ISIS infrastructure targets in Syria over the preceding two months.

February 27, 2026: The U.N. Security Council's sanctions committee removes HTS from its ISIS/Al-Qaeda sanctions list, a significant step toward legitimizing Syria's interim government internationally.

February 28 – March 2026: Regional escalation following U.S. and Israeli strikes on Iran creates spillover effects on Syria, with both Israeli and Iranian strikes targeting each other's assets and violating Syrian airspace, causing deaths and injuries on Syrian territory.

March 18, 2026: U.S. Special Envoy for Syria Thomas Barrack chairs a U.N. Security Council meeting on Syria, reaffirming the U.S. commitment to facilitating Syrian-led processes and supporting a unified Syria at peace with itself and its neighbors.

March 27, 2026: A U.N. human rights report concludes that more than 1,700 people were killed and nearly 200,000 displaced in the July 2025 Suwayda massacres, calling for greater accountability measures.

March 28, 2026: Individuals from the Sunni-majority town of Qalaat al-Madiq storm the neighboring Christian town of Suqaylabiyah, attacking shops, homes, and cars, before government forces restore order.

March 31, 2026: President al-Sharaa meets UK Prime Minister Keir Starmer in London to discuss opportunities for British businesses to contribute to Syria's reconstruction.

April 11, 2026: Hundreds of Druze hold protests in Suwayda, again calling for self-determination and accountability for the July 2025 violence.

May 11, 2026: The European Union announces plans to fully resume its 1978 cooperation agreement with Syria and begin formal talks on strengthening economic and security ties.

May 21, 2026: Syria joined the Global Initiative to Galvanize Political Commitment to International Humanitarian Law. Syria's Permanent Representative to the United Nations, Ibrahim Olabi, submitted the accession document to the President of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in Geneva.

May 22, 2026: The U.S. Department of State releases a set of "Investor Guides" to encourage U.S. companies to consider investment opportunities in Syria, signaling American confidence in Syria as a destination for responsible investment across sectors including electricity, oil and gas, technology, telecommunications, real estate, and banking.

May 24, 2026: Legislative elections for the People's Assembly are held in the formerly Kurdish-controlled areas of Hasakah governorate and the Ain al-Arab (Kobane) district to fill eleven seats left vacant following the September 2025 elections, owing to the government's lack of control over the northeast at that time.

Early June 2026: The People's Assembly convenes its first session, following the September 2025 elections and the May 2026 supplementary elections in the northeast.

June 14, 2026: U.S. Special Envoy Tom Barrack indicates that Syria and Israel are close to concluding a de-escalation agreement; meanwhile, reporting notes that Syria's government has located remnants of the former Assad regime's clandestine chemical weapons program, including raw materials and munitions.

June 16, 2026: President Trump publicly suggests that Israel allow Syria to "deal with Hezbollah," asserting that Damascus would do a "better job," a proposal raising acute anxieties in Lebanon given Syria's long history of intervention there; al-Sharaa denies reports of Syrian intervention in Lebanon as "completely false."

Executive Summary

I. Overview

The fall of the Assad regime in December 2024 ended more than six decades of authoritarian rule that had killed hundreds of thousands, displaced half the country's population, and reduced one of the world's most storied civilizations to rubble. Eighteen months later, Syria stands at a crossroads that will not remain open indefinitely. Sanctions have been lifted, embassies reopened, and billions in investment pledged. A transitional government is in place. Reconstruction has begun. But the window for getting the fundamentals right is narrow, and the costs of getting them wrong are severe.

This report examines eight policy domains critical to Syria's stabilization and recovery: security sector reform, minority protection, digital public infrastructure, designing a disability justice framework, strengthening Syrian civil society, reintegration of refugees and IDPs, rebuilding digital public infrastructure, external stakeholder alignment through diplomacy, and leveraging the removal of sanctions. Across each of these domains, a single pattern emerges. While Syria's transition has made tangible progress in restoring state authority, with ministries functioning, courts resuming operations, and security forces reconstituted, the harder work of building state legitimacy remains incomplete. Approximately one in every two Syrians remains displaced, either internally or externally as a refugee. Minority communities seek fuller representation in transitional institutions, government services are limited, and security gains remain fragile. These are not obstacles to dismiss but leading indicators of where Syria's efforts must now focus if the transition is to consolidate into durable

stability. This report presents a framework for Syria's stability, recovery, and renewal that builds on progress already achieved, and it outlines the steps needed to earn public trust and build strong institutions. The policy recommendations here are further intended to inform international thinking about Syria based on what is essential for transitioning into a future the Syrian people both want and deserve.

The most urgent priorities are:

- **Centralize the government's budget and payroll through the Ministry of Finance.** Syria cannot be governed until Damascus controls its own finances. As of spring 2026, the government operates without a published defense budget, no unified salary scale for military personnel, and no transparent mechanism for tracking how international support flows into or through state institutions. Some soldiers go months without pay; others receive salaries through consumer applications rather than treasury accounts. Turkey continues funding SNA factions directly, bypassing Damascus's chain of command entirely. But the problem extends beyond the military. Across ministries, the absence of centralized budget authority and auditable payroll systems creates conditions for misallocation, ghost payments, and the kind of institutional opacity that deters the foreign investment Syria desperately needs. Until the Ministry of Finance is established as the sole disbursing authority for all government personnel and financial operations — with a published budget, transparent pay scales, and a biometrically linked payroll — Damascus cannot credibly claim to command its institutions or account to its citizens and international partners for how reconstruction resources are being used.
- **Appoint a U.N. Special Envoy for Syria and a dedicated U.S. Syria envoy.** The vacancy of the U.N. Special Envoy position

is actively hampering coordination at a critical moment. The current U.S. Special Envoy portfolio spans Turkey, Iraq, and Syria — competing priorities that limit depth of engagement. Both appointments are low-cost, high-leverage, and overdue.

- **Restore the civil registry.** Since December 2024, Syria's civil registry has been severely disrupted nationwide. Without a valid identity document, a Syrian cannot access benefits, register a business, claim property, vote, or enroll a child in school. This is an administrative void through which reconstruction funds will be lost to fraud and misallocation. Restoring and digitizing the civil registry is a foundational prerequisite for nearly all reconstruction investments.
- **Establish measurable minority inclusion benchmarks.** Without a structured framework conditioning international support on verifiable progress on civilian protection, accountability, and equal protection under the law, external engagement will remain disconnected from conditions on the ground, and the conditions that caused the Druze and Alawite crises – which have already cost thousands of lives – will continue to compound.
- **Formalize the ISF-first model in the northeast and implement a DDR process that closes the reintegration gap.** ISF forces are integrating, a Kurdish governor is appointed, and the SDF's 60th Division is under organization within the MoD. The question, now, is whether this integration holds. As the January 2026 agreement progresses, SNA-affiliated units with anti-Kurd records should be geographically restricted from Kurdish-majority areas to limit their capacity as spoilers. Furthermore, Syria needs to implement a more comprehensive nationwide DDR program for fighters not absorbed into the MoD or ISF. The Syrian MoI, U.N., and international partners need to work together to

expand formal support for DDR programs, especially civilian reintegration.

Good governance for the Syrian people – safety, service delivery, rule of law – is in reach, but Syria's transition will not succeed on momentum alone. President al-Sharaa's transitional government and its international partners have a narrow window to provide the right kind of support before either complacency or renewed violence forecloses the options this moment has opened.

II. Key Recommendations

The following recommendations for the government of Syria and the international community are intended to inform broader international thinking on Syria and reflect the authors' view of what is necessary for a successful post-conflict transition. They are aimed at helping pave the way for a future the Syrian people want and deserve — one grounded in security, freedom, dignity, and economic opportunity.

A. Recommendations for the International Community

(1) External Engagement Recommendations

Reopen embassies in Damascus to promote stronger political and economic engagement.

The international community should reopen embassies in Damascus to strengthen political, economic, security, cultural, and social engagement. Without resident diplomatic missions that can engage daily with Syrian government counterparts, as well as actors in academia, civil society, and the private sector, prospects for effective coordination on reconstruction and foreign investment in Syria will be significantly hampered.

Create an International Policy and Aid Coordination Framework.

Promote the creation of an International Policy and Aid Coordination Framework, with Syrian government participation, that aligns security priorities and reconstruction incentives through coordinated, sequenced conditionality among key regional and international actors. Replace inconsistent external demands with a unified governance framework for Syrian stabilization and recovery.

Appoint a U.N. envoy for diplomatic reengagement.

Urgently appoint a U.N. envoy with cross-pillar leverage over political, humanitarian, and early recovery coordination.

Establish a discrete Israel-Turkey deconfliction mechanism.

Appoint a dedicated U.S. envoy to convene discrete bilateral engagement between Israel and Turkey that can help manage short-term escalation risks and begin working toward a long-term, mutually acceptable settlement.

(2) Security Recommendations

Establish and support diplomatic working groups.

The U.N. should appoint a full Special Envoy for Syria and establish a Special Political Mission with DDR chapter authority and a Security Monitoring mechanism. The U.S. should designate a senior director of assistant secretary equivalent with direct liaison authority to Syria's intelligence, defense, and interior ministries. The U.S. and regional partners should establish a hub-and-spoke system of diplomatic working groups to manage Turkish and Israeli security interests and minority integration.

Apply targeted legislative actions.

Increase security assistance to the MoI, conditional on reaching measurable minority recruiting benchmarks. Retain targeted sanctions on the MoD contingent on SSR progress. Oppose blanket economic sanctions.

Use U.S. leverage to advance a Syria Security agreement.

The U.S. should use its position to provide political cover for Damascus to take domestically risky actions while pressuring Israel to limit military action in Syria that undermines Syrian stability.

(3) Leverage the Lifting of Syrian Sanctions

Negotiate a settlement framework with judgment holders.

Following the removal of Syria's State Sponsor of Terrorism (SST) designation, negotiate a structured settlement framework between the U.S. and Syria to resolve outstanding legal judgments entered against Syria over the course of its designation. Drawing on the Libya and Sudan models, explore burden-sharing models with contributions from regional partners. This would provide victims with at least partial recovery — more than they are likely to see otherwise — while restoring Syria's sovereign immunity.

Leverage delisting.

Leverage delisting to advance the prospects of stability and sustainable economic recovery in Syria. A stable, reconstructed Syria is a strong partner in counterterrorism and a viable market for foreign investment in infrastructure, energy, and natural resources — whereas continued instability fosters the conditions in which groups like ISIS thrive. Delisting should be coupled with a snapback mechanism should Syria resume support for terrorist groups.

(4) Recommendations for the Reintegration of Displaced Syrians

Guarantee voluntary return and protect refugee status during exploratory visits.
Host countries must ensure Syrian refugees do not lose their legal status for making temporary visits back to Syria. Return must remain voluntary, safe, and dignified, in accordance with UNHCR standards and the principle of non-refoulement.
Expand and formalize reintegration services with the Syrian state.
Establish formal partnerships between the transitional government and UNHCR, IOM, and host country agencies to streamline cash grants, short-term shelter, and legal assistance for returnees. Community reception centers should be expanded and recognized as entry points into state service systems.

(5) Digital Public Infrastructure Recommendations

Establish a coalition of public and private partners.
Syria's digital public infrastructure should be developed through a coordinated international coalition involving multilateral institutions, key regional states, private-sector technology firms, and implementation partners with experience in digital governance systems. The coalition must prioritize Syrian ownership by investing in local technical capacity, leveraging diaspora expertise, and adopting open-source systems.
Commission a full-scale feasibility and costing study.
A major collaborative study led by international think tanks and technical institutions, as well as Syrian experts is needed to

develop a detailed roadmap for Syria's digital public infrastructure, including cost estimates, implementation timelines, financing strategies, and risk assessments to guide donor coordination and private-sector engagement.

Security commitments.

Security safeguards for Syria's digital public infrastructure should be embedded from the outset through enforceable legal protections, citizen audit mechanisms that enable any Syrian to see who has accessed their data, and independent international oversight, with U.S. and donor support conditioned on adherence to these standards.

Sequence investments deliberately.

Reconstruction assistance to Syria should be sequenced to prioritize the development of digital public infrastructure. Donors should condition sector-specific investments—including social welfare programs, DDR initiatives, and education projects—on the prior establishment of enabling systems such as digital payment rails, biometric registries, and credential databases, even where doing so may require delaying more visible reconstruction efforts.

(6) Civil Society Recommendations

Create a CSO-led registration database.

Through a Civil Society Support Room, centralize independent documentation of registration requirements and timelines, approval outcomes, and operational restrictions.

Consolidate and institutionalize CSO representation.

Create a more unified coordinating mechanism capable of both representing Syria's diverse civic actors and articulating shared positions in formal negotiations.

B. Recommendations for the Government of Syria

(1) Security Recommendations

(a) Recommendations for Immediate Priorities

Launch an International Task Force for the Badiyah.

Establish an intelligence fusion and deconfliction cell, hosted by Damascus, to coordinate multinational operations against ISIS in the central Syrian desert.

Lead with Internal Security Forces in reintegrating the northeast.

Formalize the Ministry of the Interior-first model in achieving the January 2026 SDF agreement and as standard practice for integrating contested and minority majority areas. The ISF should accelerate minority representation by giving local commanders hiring authority in Raqqa, Dier ez-Zor, and Hasakah. Concurrently, the MoD should geographically restrict SNA-linked units from operating near Kurdish-majority areas outside formal inclusion in peace and reconciliation activities.

Approach Suwayda with patience.

Lead engagement with Suwayda through infrastructure investment rather than security deployments. Pursue moderate leaders as primary interlocutors with the Druze community. Suspend further MoD deployments south of Damascus pending political progress and seek security agreement with Israel through intermediary diplomatic channels.

(b) Recommendations for Security Sector Reform

Publish a National Defense Strategy.

Publish a coherent National Defense Strategy establishing a tiered security architecture including MoI-led counterinsurgency with subordinate MoD support for large-scale violence and ISF-exclusive authority over internal policing and community security. Restructure the MoD around a brigade-centric model better suited to Syria's actual threat environment, embed civilian command accountability provisions, operationalize the May 2025 Code of Conduct with enforceable command accountability standards, and establish a formal pathway for foreign fighters to continue service contingent on enhanced vetting and allegiance to the Syrian state.

Build stratified counterterrorism units.

Establish regionally assigned counterterrorism units alongside a single national-level capability. Formally designate the Al-Asa'ib al-Hamra (Red Bands) as the national CT unit and structure it under the General Intelligence Directorate to insulate it from factional pressures in the MoD and facilitate international intelligence-sharing.

Centralize payroll disbursement.

As an integral component of much-needed reform of the public financial management system, establish the Ministry of Finance as the sole disbursing authority for all MoD and MoI personnel, approve a formal defense budget, publish transparent pay scales, and link the existing unified ID system to biometric enrollment and centralized payroll.

Implement a formal DDR plan.

Seek external support, formalize the Tasmiya voluntary disarmament process and establish a Civilian Reintegration

Office under the MoI. Explicitly include former SAA members in the DDR process.

Modernize detention infrastructure.

Prioritize biometric enrollment, guard force professionalization, and the relocation of terrorism-related prisoners to segregated, purpose-built facilities. Apply the same biometric and professionalization standards while pursuing deradicalization programming in ISIS family camps.

Establish returnee vetting and monitoring systems.

Require pre-registration for returnees to request information from host-country security services. Digitize border screening procedures and maintain a centrally accessible database to facilitate diaspora repatriation.

Expand UXO remediation.

Prioritize clearance in areas most susceptible to extremist recruitment and deploy all security force elements in remediation efforts. Pursue additional funding through HALO Trust from European and Gulf states in support of remigration and stabilizing conditions for investment

(2) Minority Protections Recommendations

Establish constitutional guarantees for inclusive governance.

Establish constitutional guarantees for equal citizenship and core freedoms. Adopt flexible electoral systems that reflect Syria's diversity while preserving national cohesion. Uphold these principles through constitutional and independent institutional safeguards.

Ensure minority inclusion through representative governance.

Guarantee minority inclusion within the transitional government through meaningful representation in national institutions, equal access to political leadership, and a decentralized unitary model that strengthens local participation while preserving national sovereignty.

Build inclusive and trusted security structures.

Expand minority representation across security and military institutions, develop community-based policing in minority areas, and provide credible, equitable security guarantees to all communities.

Advance justice, accountability, and reintegration.

Implement individualized accountability for conflict-related crimes, establish reintegration pathways for non-criminal actors, and support credible independent investigations that balance justice with long-term stabilization.

Address high-risk minority flashpoints through integration and protection.

Support Kurdish integration within a unified state, advance Alawite reintegration and stabilization, and strengthen protection frameworks for smaller vulnerable communities in coordination with international partners.

Restore rights, property, and social trust.

Implement property restitution mechanisms, protect religious and cultural rights across communities, and enforce clear anti-incitement and anti-hate measures to strengthen long-term stability.

Embed inclusion in economic recovery.

Direct stabilization funding toward high-risk and mixed communities, ensure equitable access to economic opportunity,

and establish transparent mechanisms for regional resource distribution in coordination with international partners.

Condition normalization and reconstruction on inclusion.

Condition diplomatic normalization, sanctions relief, reconstruction assistance, and economic engagement on measurable progress in minority protection, institutional inclusion, and civilian security.

Monitor inclusion through national benchmarks.

Establish a National Minority Inclusion Benchmark Framework to track progress in civilian protection, security-sector representation, local participation, and safe return. Calibrate international assistance and diplomatic engagement to verified progress against these benchmarks.

(3) Disability Justice Recommendations

Strengthen legal protections and establish a national disability database.

Amend Legislative Decree No. 19 to fully align with CRPD obligations, including adoption of an internationally standardized disability classification system. Establish and regularly update a national disability database to enable evidence-based policy planning. Ensure that disability definitions and certification processes do not place undue administrative burdens on persons with disabilities or their families.

Centralize implementation authority while strengthening independent oversight.

Vest primary implementation authority for disability policy within the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor, with formal coordination mandates across the Ministries of Health,

Education, Justice, and Local Administration. Strengthen the National Council for Persons with Disabilities as an independent oversight body empowered to conduct periodic performance reviews, require transparent reporting, and make findings publicly available.

Enact disability employment incentive legislation and expand vocational training.

Enact tax credits and licensing incentives for businesses that meet defined thresholds for employing persons with disabilities, phased in gradually beginning with larger enterprises. Pair incentive legislation with targeted vocational training and job placement programs, with programming designed to address the distinct barriers faced by women, older adults, and persons with mobility or sensory impairments.

Build enforcement capacity through international partnerships.

Partner with the International Development Law Organization (IDLO) to rebuild judicial and administrative capacity for enforcing disability-related protections. Adopt the World Bank's community-driven development approach to disability inclusion, which centers the participation of persons with disabilities in identifying local priorities and shaping policy implementation.

Rebuild a coordinated, community-based primary care system.

Prioritize rebuilding a state-led health system in which healthcare is treated as a public good delivered through locally embedded teams responsible for defined populations. Emphasize prevention, home visits, early intervention, and continuous monitoring, with rehabilitation services integrated into primary care. Integrate mental health services, including trauma-informed care for PTSD, into primary care delivery.

Integrate inclusive education into community-based service model.

Invest in teacher training for inclusive education and improve school-based access to assistive technologies. Coordinate education reform with health and rehabilitation service delivery at the community level to ensure that children with disabilities are not excluded from early learning opportunities.

Expand and accelerate UXO clearance as disability prevention.

Prioritize ERW clearance in areas with the highest rates of civilian return and displacement. Pursue additional funding through the HALO Trust from European and Gulf partners. Frame clearance efforts explicitly as disability prevention: each injury avoided reduces long-term pressure on Syria's healthcare system and social services.

(4) Civil Society Recommendations

Transition to a notification-based registration and funding system with a clear presumption of approval.

Replace discretionary prior-authorization procedures with a notification-based system that includes clear timelines and a formal presumption of approval when MoSAL and MoFA fail to respond.

Organize joint audit trainings for CSO staff and ministry officials.

Provide joint audit trainings facilitated by third-party actors (IFIs, pro bono arms of international audit firms, or nonprofit partners with regional experience) to strengthen compliance capacity, reduce arbitrary dissolutions and improve transparency and accountability across both government and civil society.

Pilot an ombuds institution within the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor.
Establish a dedicated mechanism within the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor providing CSOs with a neutral channel for appeals, consultation, and dispute resolution to strengthen trust between government and civil society.

(5) Recommendations for the Reintegration of Displaced Syrians

Prioritize civil documentation access for returnees.
As civil documentation is a prerequisite for accessing housing, employment, education, and political participation, provide pro bono legal services to returning Syrians to obtain civil documentation, identity papers, and passports, with expedited processes for children born in exile.
Establish legal support and interim housing for dispossessed property claimants.
Provide legal assistance for Syrians reclaiming homes that were destroyed, seized, or occupied during displacement, paired with affordable transitional housing while claims are adjudicated. Develop accessible, digitized land registries when resolving the backlog of competing claims.
Design an expanded educational curriculum for returning youth.
Develop an inclusive educational framework that accommodates varying academic levels, language backgrounds, and interrupted schooling histories.
Plan for a multi-year, phased return process and invest in absorption capacity.

Syria and its international partners should prepare for a decade-long return process in which households stagger migration as conditions improve. Investments in housing, services, and employment must precede large-scale return flows rather than lag behind them.

(6) Diplomacy Recommendations

Adopt a 12-Month sequencing package built around credible governance.

Prioritize five deliverables that converge across stakeholder interests: (1) launch a public financial management reform that channels all government revenues through the Ministry of Finance and disburses funds to line ministries and agencies exclusively in accordance with an approved budget, eliminating all extrabudgetary spending; (2) establish a border coordination cell with public reporting; (3) publish a quarterly counter-Captagon dashboard with a UNODC monitoring role; (4) advance early recovery projects under third-party-verifiable safeguards; and (5) maintain command discipline in the northeast and south to prevent local spoilers from triggering Turkish or Israeli escalation.

Frame transparency and monitoring as sovereignty-building.

Establish a "Delivery and Assurance Unit" attached to the president's office to interface with U.N. agencies and IFIs and produce a single implementation dashboard for investors and donors. Present safeguards domestically as anti-corruption instruments.

Pursue northeast integration as governance.

Sequence integration to prioritize border management, customs, and service delivery first, building joint command arrangements

gradually and avoiding gestures that signal collective punishment. Use U.N. Security Council language on stability and territorial integrity as multilateral validation when arguing domestically for sequencing over coercion.

Establish a refugee returns framework tied to absorption capacity.

Link district-level return facilitation to basic service restoration and housing rehabilitation, monitored through U.N. channels. This protects Syria's credibility with European donors for whom voluntary, dignified return is a condition of continued support.

(7) Financing Reconstruction

Seek alternative avenues of financing to fund reconstruction.

With Syria's post-conflict GDP in shambles after nearly fourteen years of civil war, the government must pursue alternative financing mechanisms for a reconstruction effort that international institutions estimate will exceed $200 billion. Options include:

- Resort to international institutions that assist with international security and capacity building. Examples include the United Nations Mine Action Service ("UNMAS") to assist with mine-clearing and the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund to provide capacity-building and training for Syrian government officials at no cost to the Syrian state.
- Mobilize coalition partners. Member states of the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS share Syria's interest in regional security. Press them to contribute military training and security assistance.

- Solicit donor state funding. Remind prospective donors that Syria's humanitarian crisis remains acute and that early investment in stability serves their own long-term interests.
- Tap international foundations and trust funds. Pursue dedicated funding to address the substantial volume of Assad-era legal claims filed against the Syrian state — whether through litigation defense or negotiated settlement.

Chapter 1. Security Sector Reform

Thomas Hinds[3, 4]

I. Introduction

Despite an end to over 13 years of civil war, Syria's security environment remains fraught with uncertainty and disruption, jeopardizing meaningful reconstruction efforts. Since the collapse of the Assad regime Israel has continued to conduct hundreds of air strikes, ISIS prepares for a future resurgence, both Russia and Iran scramble to retain influence, and internal conflict between Kurdish forces and the Turkish backed Syrian National Army (SNA) remains fragile under the January 2026 Agreement.[5] Meanwhile, in his 18 months in power, Ahmad al-Sharaa has struggled to cohere the rebel groups that fought Bashar al-Assad into a functional security

[3] This chapter was co-authored by an individual whose identity has been withheld at the co-author's request. Owing to sensitive professional engagements, the co-author has requested that their contribution to this chapter remain anonymous.

[4] The views expressed in this chapter are those of the co-authors and do not represent the official policy or positions of the US Army, the Department of Defense, the US Government, or any other institution with which either co-author is affiliated.

[5] Al Jazeera, "Israel Strikes Missile Depots, Air Defences in Syria's Tartous Region," *Al Jazeera* (16 December 2024); Andrew England, "US Fights ISIS Resurgence in Syria as Jihadis Try to Regroup," *Financial Times* (19 December 2024); European Union Agency for Asylum, "4.3 Areas under Control of the Syrian Democratic Forces," *EUAA Country of Origin Information* (March 2025).

apparatus.[6] Sharaa himself acknowledged as much in February 2026, saying the primary challenge facing Damascus was 'controlling the revolutionary street' and moving toward a unified army, free of factionalism.[7]

While all sectors of governance and daily life deserve attention—education, infrastructure development, public finance, etc.—the underlying security environment plays an outsized role in the pace and trajectory of Syria's recovery efforts. At the same time, al-Sharaa has to carefully balance his efforts to avoid overemphasizing security in ways that echo the transgressions of the Assad regime. This section assesses Syria's security landscape and provides recommendations for Syrian and international policymakers. It starts with a survey of the current security apparatus, to include the state of Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) efforts, followed by the principal threats Damascus faces, a set of immediate stabilization priorities, and recommendations for security sector reform (SSR).

A note on scope: SSR does not occur in isolation. Measures such as centralizing MoD payroll disbursement depend on public financial management reform, while Kurdish political integration depends on constitutional and governance frameworks addressed elsewhere in this report. Syria's reconstruction cannot proceed without security, and security cannot be built without reconstruction. Sustained insecurity discourages foreign investment and diaspora return while threatening state fracture. At the same time, prioritizing security consolidation at the expense of economic

[6] Al-Modon, "Bina' al-Jaysh al-Suri: I'adat al-Haykalah wa-Mu'adalat al-Tahawwul al-Mu'assasi [Building the Syrian Army: Restructuring and the Institutional Transformation Dilemma]," *Al-Modon* (December 2025).

[7] Ahmed al-Sharaa (Abu Muhammad al-Joulani), "Interview on First Year in Power," *Al-Jazeera Arabic* (16 February 2026).

relief, minority exclusion, and political legitimacy risks replicating the coercive security regime Syrians fought to overthrow.

II. The Syrian Security Apparatus

Damascus is struggling to build a security apparatus that is both capable and accountable. The MoD remains, in most respects, a coalition of re-flagged wartime factions rather than a national military. Of particular concern is the government's inability to regularly pay its soldiers through a centralized, treasury-controlled disbursement system, posing a serious risk to the MoD's legitimacy as a state institution.[8] Until Damascus is the paymaster, Damascus cannot be the commander. In the interim, parallel command structures and the interests of independent commanders pose a risk to unity.

The Internal Security Forces (ISF), by contrast, are making measurable, if uneven, progress. Despite experiencing the worst sectarian violence of the post-Assad period, the ISF has successfully stabilized Syria's coast through community-integrated policing. The model is proof of concept for incorporating the Kurdish-majority northeast into the national security architecture, despite fragility in the January 2026 agreement with the SDF. The U.N. Security Council's removal of sanctions on Interior Minister Anas Khattab in November 2025 further opened the space for international security partnerships.[9]

A. The Ministry of Defense

Today's Syrian MoD was formed in late January 2025 from the dissolution of dozens of armed groups and the integration of their

[8] Eqtsad, "Tafawut al-Rawatib fi al-Jaysh al-Suri al-Jadid [Pay Disparities in the New Syrian Army]," *Eqtsad* (May–July 2025).

[9] Security Council Report, "Syria: Monthly Forecast (November 2025)," *Security Council Report* (November 2025).

components into approximately 25 new divisions.[10] This nominal character is the primary obstacle to the institution's legitimacy. The MoD is led by Defense Minister Major General Murhaf Abu Qasra, and Chief of Staff Ali Noureddine al-Naasan, who were both promoted from within HTS through wartime competence and demonstrated loyalty to Sharaa. The rest of the MoD core was formed through the two dominant wartime "operations rooms" that coordinated factions allied against Assad: Fath al-Mubin, led by HTS from Idlib, and Fajr al-Hurriya, led by SNA-aligned groups with support from Turkey and a more anti-Kurd operational objective.[11] Accordingly, two thirds of the MoD's Division Commanders are HTS members, with the remainder drawn primarily from the SNA-aligned factions. An SDF-majority 60th Division is under organization as of writing, in accordance with the January 2025 agreement.

The MoD's current strength is estimated at 100,000 soldiers, with a stated intent to expand to 200,000.[12] In the interest of preserving immediate operational capacity, most of the MoD's divisions are, functionally, independent wartime armed factions re-flagged under the MoD's leadership umbrella (See Annex A: Syrian Order of Battle). Most of the units are also divisions in name only, containing comparable combat power to a small brigade and could act as a skeleton to expand if the MoD follows through on its pledge to double in size.[13] Re-flagging served the purpose of signaling prestige while corralling the many potentially destabilizing armed groups under the state's control, but a consequence is the forming of power centers separate from Damascus.

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[10] Institute for the Study of War and AEI's Critical Threats Project, "The New Syrian Army: Order of Battle," *ISW/CTP* (November 2025).

[11] Ibid.

[12] Ibid.

[13] Ibid.

Within the MoD, HTS loyalists make up between 15,000 and 30,000 personnel, while their SNA-linked counterparts have at least 30,000 soldiers formally enrolled and upwards of 70,000 fighters still organized into irregular militias outside the MoD's purview.[14] As such, President Sharaa has been unable to dominate the SNA like previous HTS competitors, and SNA leaders enjoy a lack of accountability to Damascus that poses serious risks to the security landscape. Some Syrian commanders are internationally sanctioned for human rights violations against Kurds during the war and the massacre of Alawites on the coast in March 2025.[15] The continued deployment of their units near Hama and Hasakah is a source of fear and tension among minorities.

Of secondary concern are the more than 4,000 foreign fighters that remain in Syria. The majority are ethnic Uyghurs belonging to the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP), numbering 15,000 when including their families, who maintain ties to al-Qaida affiliated leadership in Afghanistan and hold the stated purpose of creating an Islamic state in Xinjiang, China.[16] They are formally integrated within the 84th Division, but continue to pose risks without a more thorough integration or deportation framework.

The MoD will continue to lack legitimacy over its constituent parts until it can build administrative capacity. While an administrative unified database and formal identification card system were implemented in October 2025, the MoD has not confirmed biometric enrollment, and the ID system is not yet linked

[14] European Union Agency for Asylum, "Syria: Country Focus," *EUAA Country of Origin Information* (March 2025).

[15] European Union Agency for Asylum, "Syria: Country Focus," *EUAA Country of Origin Information* (July 2025).

[16] Charles Lister, "Building Syria's New Army: Future Plans and Challenges Ahead," *Middle East Institute* (20 November 2025).

to a centralized payroll.[17] Payroll is a critical vulnerability. As of spring 2026, no official unified salary scale for the MoD had been publicized. Testimony from soldiers indicates large pay disparities between units depending on faction affiliation, with some soldiers reporting going months without pay and working for meals only.[18] In one instance, failures to pay salaries within the 86th Division in June 2025 led to several hundred fighters defecting to the 66th Division.[19] When salaries are disbursed, it is often through consumer payment applications rather than through treasury controlled accounts.[20] While currently unreported, without an auditable personnel registry the risks of ghost-soldier fraud are high. Similar dynamics preceded mass payroll fraud in Iraq, Afghanistan, and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

The payroll problem reflects a larger opacity in defense financing generally. Funding is assumed to be coming from state assets and foreign supporters, but without a formal defense budget or audit mechanisms there is no transparency for line item expenditures or trust the MoD's needs will be met.[21] The current MoD funding delays are opaque for precisely this reason and mask what could be institutional cash-flow problems of commander level misallocation of funds. Another vulnerability is the Syrian state can be

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[17] Muhsen al-Mustafa, "Nahw Jaysh Suri Muwahhad: Qira'a fi Khittat Wizarat al-Difa' li-I'adat Haykalat al-Mu'assasa al-'Askariyya [Toward a Unified Syrian Army: Reading the Defense Ministry's Plan for Restructuring the Military Institution]," *Misdad / Syrian Center for Security and Defense Research* (February 2026).

[18] Eqtsad, "Tafawut al-Rawatib fi al-Jaysh al-Suri al-Jadid," *Eqtsad* (May–July 2025).

[19] Boaz Shapira, "Special Report: The New Syrian Army," *Alma Research and Education Center* (July 2025).

[20] Syria TV and North Press Agency, "200 Dollar lil-Mutazawwij: Hal Bada' Tawhid al-Rawatib fi al-Jaysh al-Suri? [200 Dollars for the Married: Has Salary Unification in the Syrian Army Begun?]," *Syria TV / NPA* (April 2025).

[21] World Bank, *Syria Macro Fiscal Assessment 2025*, World Bank (7 July 2025).

outcompeted for the loyalty of its own nominal soldiers. This is most egregious in the case of Turkey continuing to fund sanctioned SNA-factions directly, shifting accountability onto Ankara and aggravating the competitive pressures on Sharaa. In the worst case, SNA-factions are liable to operate as Turkish-backed anti-Kurd proxies outside Sharaa's control and as potential spoilers for integrating SDF units and the Kurdish northeast.

Lack of centralized control and enforced professional standards have already led to localized security disasters, including on the coast in March 2025 and intermittently with the Druze and Bedouin tribes in the south since summer 2025. In the former case, the 62nd and 76th Divisions responded to attacks by pro-Assad insurgents by descending on Latakia, Tartous and Hama alongside armed irregulars and perpetrating escalating, recriminatory violence on the Alawite-majority population.[22] In both cases the MoD demonstrated an incapacity to prevent or adequately stop violence — or, in the eyes of many Syrians, the will to do so. Understanding that the factions comprising the MoD are more liability than asset, Damascus has since sidelined them from internal security tasks in favor of the ISF.[23]

B. The Internal Security Forces

The Syrian ISF originated as the General Security Service (GSS), the police force that HTS established in Idlib. In April 2024, the GSS assumed responsibility for internal security across all HTS-dominated territories under the Syrian Salvation Government. This experience prepared the force for its restructured and expanded role under the Internal Security Command (ISC) within the Syrian

[22] European Union Agency for Asylum, "Syria: Country Focus," *EUAA Country of Origin Information* (July 2025).

[23] International Crisis Group, "Restoring Security in Post-Assad Syria: Lessons from the Coast and Suweida," *Crisis Group Middle East Report* No. 253 (10 December 2025).

Ministry of Interior (MoI). The MoI is led by Anas Khattab, who serves as both Interior Minister and General Intelligence Director (GID) simultaneously. Like Sharaa, Khattab is relatively young (39), and like Defense Minister Abu Qasra he is an engineer by education, distinguishing himself for focusing more on institutional design than Salafi jihadists of his cohort.[24] The consolidation of so much state security power under HTS and Khattab in particular raises long-term risks to representative government in Syria. An acute risk is HTS using the MoI's institutional capacity to suppress political competition during the ongoing constitutional process. In the near term, though, Khattab is received by many western governments as a competent, stabilizing figure, and his MoI has taken responsibility as the U.S.' counter-terrorism partner in Syria.[25] This is mirrored in the ISF which, contrary to the MoD, is ideologically aligned with Sharaa, organizationally coherent, and experienced in community policing.

The ISF employed 17,000 personnel in February 2025 and has since enacted accelerated recruiting procedures with the goal of graduating 800-1,000 members every few weeks.[26] ISF operations fall under the MoI's Security Deputy, with specialist departments, to include criminal investigations, anti-narcotics, border security, tourist police and cyber security established in May 2025 (See Annex B: Ministry of the Interior Organization). The ISF's capacity should be considered limited in scope, though external support from Qatar and Saudi Arabia is assisting in training ISF cohorts.[27] While the majority of ISF leadership is from HTS, provincial offices recruit

[24] Institute for the Study of War and AEI's Critical Threats Project, "The New Syrian Army: Order of Battle," *ISW/CTP* (November 2025).
[25] Ibid.
[26] European Union Agency for Asylum, "Syria: Country Focus," *EUAA Country of Origin Information* (March 2025).
[27] Al-Hal Net, "Syria's New Security Forces Undergo Intensive Training in Qatar and Saudi Arabia Amid Fears of Collapse," *The Syrian Observer* (22 May 2025).

locally, and efforts to recruit and train Kurds and religious minorities have been documented since August 2025[28].

The ISF's performance makes it a more trusted actor among Syrians. In contrast to the MoD's coastal massacre failures in March 2025, the ISF responded first in Homs with encouraging results.[29] By April the MoD had been removed from internal policing entirely, with the ISF taking over and implementing its community-recruited local policing model. In the 12 months afterwards, coastal Syria went from the most dangerous to the safest part of the country, with vigilante killings dropping nearly 90% from 23 to three per week according to Middle East Institute analyst Charles Lister.[30]

In accordance with the January 30, 2026 agreement with the SDF, Damascus is shifting from an MoD to an MoI first model in northeast Syria, with ISF forces already deployed to assume functions in Hasakah and Qamishli, including security responsibilities for former ISIS detention facilities.[31] ISF integration in Hasakah was accompanied by appointing the city's first Kurdish governor.[32] In context of the ISF's previous successes, this deescalation from military threats to building relationships with civil security and political representatives is an encouraging sign. Successful ISF integration with local Kurdish Asayish security forces would be a

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[28] European Union Agency for Asylum, "COI Query Response: Syria — SDF/Kurdish Developments (Q11)," *EUAA Country of Origin Information* (March 2026).

[29] International Crisis Group, "Restoring Security in Post-Assad Syria: Lessons from the Coast and Suweida," *Crisis Group Middle East Report* No. 253 (10 December 2025).

[30] Charles Lister, "Syria Data Update (Feb 17–24, 2026)," *Syria Weekly*, February 25, 2026, https://www.syriaweekly.com/p/syria-data-update-feb-17-24-2026.

[31] Security Council Report, "Syria: Monthly Forecast (February 2026)," *Security Council Report* (February 2026).

[32] Hawar News Agency (ANHA), "Governor Nour al-Din Issa Ahmed Arrives in Hasakah," *Hawar News* (4 February 2026).

critical step for the peaceful incorporation of the northeast into the rest of Syria.

C. Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Progress

Syria has no formal U.N. DDR program and does not use the term in its own policies, though its security transition goals broadly align with DDR's three pillars — disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration — each of which has produced uneven results.

Disarmament — Disarmament, or the active removal of weapons from the hands of non-state actors, is critical for the government to assume a legitimate monopoly on violence. Uncontrolled arms increase the risk of renewed conflict, former armed factions splintering into criminal or insurgent groups, and civilian violence post-conflict. Convincing Syria's population to voluntarily turn in their arms, though, relies on creating trust in state-provided security, or that arms are not necessary for personal protection, and that conflict returning is unlikely. Traditional disarmament programs use cash payments as incentives for voluntary arms turn-in. The Syrian state, however, does not have sufficient resources to take this approach, and has instead leaned on a process called "Tasmiya," or voluntary handovers brokered through local leaders. This approach, leaning on psychological factors encouraging normative group behavior, has achieved measurable results in reducing street level access to belt fed weapons and explosives.[33] Coverage remains non-comprehensive; multiple layers of agreements reduce but do not remove arms access. There likely remains apprehension among former regime members or Alawites turning in personal weapons for fear of retaliation. As one source told Al-Quds Al-Arabi, "there is fear of handing weapons to a ministry controlled by a single faction,"

[33] Middle East Council on Global Affairs, "Syria's Patchwork DDR: Holding a Transition Together with Loose Threads," *Middle East Council on Global Affairs* (1 February 2026).

or in other words fear of HTS' consolidated control of arms.[34] While the MoI treats cache recovery and busting weapons smuggling as a priority, it is unknown how many arms are being hidden and secured for future use.

Demobilization — Demobilization efforts, or policies to dissolve non-state armed groups, are even more mixed. While the majority of factions previously aligned against Assad have been reflagged within the MoD, as previously stated, they have not been restructured, and parallel chains of command exist. Years of fighting together under adverse conditions have built independent identities and powerful loyalties among individual factions that will likely take years for Damascus to undermine. Druze militias and the SDF are the largest armed groups outside the MoD, though under the January 2026 agreement the SDF is supposed to fold into four MoD brigades including a new special operations division.[35] Disagreement on the autonomy former SDF leaders will have in their MoD posts is a continued problem. If the SDF remains independent, it controls around 50,000 fighters, which will be difficult for Damascus to subdue conventionally.[36] All out conflict between the central government and the SDF would potentially see Ankara intervening on behalf of Damascus to prevent Kurdish armed groups from controlling territory on Turkey's border.

Reintegration — For those former fighters not joining the new MoD, reintegrating into civilian life is where Syria's DDR policy fails most. Syria still lacks basic economic opportunities, closing off

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[34] Al-Quds Al-Arabi, "Sab'at Juyush wa-Jama'a: Tahadiyyat al-Shara' fi Bina' al-Jaysh al-Suri [Seven Armies and a Group: The Challenges of Al-Sharaa in Building the Syrian Army]," *Al-Quds Al-Arabi* (11 January 2025).

[35] Institute for the Study of War and AEI's Critical Threats Project, "The New Syrian Army: Order of Battle," *ISW/CTP* (November 2025).

[36] Charles Lister, "Building Syria's New Army: Future Plans and Challenges Ahead," *Middle East Institute* (20 November 2025).

pathways for former fighters to earn a living and support their families. The risk of failed reintegration is greatest for the 70,000 Alawite former SAA officers and NCOs who are denied integration into the MoD and remain economically idle.[37] While violence from this population has been limited, their size and professional experience makes this group a high insurgent threat if they are able to organize around shared grievances and lack of opportunities in the new Syria.

III. The Threat Environment: Internal/Structural Threats

Damascus is immediately concerned with restoring Syrian territorial integrity through reintegrating both Suwayda and the Kurdish-majority northeast. Damascus further faces ongoing insurgency risks from the failed reintegration of former Assad fighters. Because these threats emerge internally, from how Damascus is trying to build its institutions, they are simultaneously more manageable and politically sensitive to al-Sharaa.

A. SNA Factionalism and Kurdish Integration Risk

A catastrophic breakdown in SDF integration would put Syria's largest, coherent armed groups into direct conflict, making it the top immediate risk to Syrian stability. SNA forces numerically equal or exceed HTS loyalists within the new MoD and reportedly continue to receive direct salaries from Turkey.[38] While nominally loyal to the central government, this dynamic makes it difficult for the formal chain of command to hold SNA units accountable. The faction commanders of the 62nd, 76th, and 86th Divisions hold active U.S. and E.U. sanctions for war crimes and have documented records of

[37] Middle East Council on Global Affairs, "Syria's Patchwork DDR: Holding a Transition Together with Loose Threads," *Middle East Council on Global Affairs* (1 February 2026).

[38] Pauline Vacher, "Turkey's Lingering Influence in Syria's New Army," *New Lines Magazine* (2 February 2026).

anti-Kurdish violence.[39] Their role in the MoD directly prohibits many western governments from supporting Syria's military, driving Sharaa into greater dependence on Turkey for security assistance. Sharaa is likely unsatisfied with the relationship but, similar to how he dealt with rival jihadist factions during the civil war, his approach suggests following a strategy of slowly building power over time while siphoning off support from the SNA lower ranks until their leadership can be directly challenged without adverse political or destabilizing security consequences. Ankara's direct funding of SNA factions bypasses Damascus's chain of command and creates structural incentives for those factions to prioritize Turkish interests over Syrian government directives.

In the meantime, the August 13, 2025 Ankara defense agreement creates legal grounds for joint Turkish-Syrian action against the SDF, a possibility Turkey directly messages to threaten the SDF and encourage Damascus to increase pressure on the Kurds.[40] This structural dynamic directly produced the January 2026 offensive after repeated noncompliance with the former integration agreement.[41]

Ideally, Turkish military pressure provides political cover for SDF leader Mazlum Abdi to comply with the January 2026 agreement against the wishes of PKK hardliners. However, if Ankara is unhappy with compliance or future renegotiated conditions between Damascus and the SDF, it may activate SNA units as proxies to spoil relations. Even without direct orders from

[39] Human Rights Watch, *World Report 2026: Syria*, Human Rights Watch (2026).
[40] Aydinlik, "Türkiye-Suriye savunma anlaşması ne anlama geliyor? [What Does the Turkey-Syria Defense Agreement Mean?]," *Aydinlik* (14 August 2025).
[41] Security Council Report, "Syria: Monthly Forecast (February 2026)," *Security Council Report* (February 2026).

Ankara, units such as the 86th Division in the vicinity of Hasakah pose a high impact risk of unilateral Kurdish provocation.[42]

B. Druze Insurgency in Suwayda

There is a moderate, medium-term risk of Israeli-backed Druze militias leading Suwayda's secession from Syria. Suwayda has seen recurring cycles of communal violence and MoD overreach, beginning with the July 2025 intervention that left over 1,000 dead and 36 villages destroyed.[43] Fresh fighting was reported as recently as April 12 2026, with no framework for incorporating Druze-majority territory into the rest of the country.[44] The most problematic secessionist militia to Damascus is Hikmat al-Hijiri's National Guard. Al-Hijiri's forces are militarily weaker than the SDF and do not represent a majority position within the Druze community, but any attempt to forcibly defeat them will likely drive more Druze into their camp and risk greater religiously motivated communal violence. Furthermore, Israel's backing of al-Hijiri acts as a decisive veto against large-scale MoD involvement.

Israel presents itself publicly as the protector of the Druze community and has responded to MoD operations south of Damascus with repeated air strikes. Israel's military actions serve the dual purpose of extending its own buffer zone east of the Golan Heights.[45] Israel's military overmatch against Syria means territorial violations have thus far been uncontested. However, formal Israeli-backed secession by Suwayda could lead to further disintegration of the Syrian state along religious and ethnic lines and would likely

[42] European Union Agency for Asylum, "Syria: Country Focus," *EUAA Country of Origin Information* (July 2025).
[43] Security Council Report, "Syria: Monthly Forecast (April 2026)," *Security Council Report* (April 2026).
[44] Ibid.
[45] Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies, "Syria, the Druze, and the Crisis in Suwayda," *Moshe Dayan Center, Tel Aviv University* (August 2025).

provoke a response from Turkey, which has messaged an increasingly anti-Israeli position in the region. The Druze are likely highly sensitive to progress in incorporating the Kurds from the northeast; peaceful integration of SDF-controlled territories will be observed by the Druze as a demonstration of the central government's commitment to minorities, while failure on the Kurdish track will harden Druze resistance.

C. Impatient Factions, Foreign Fighters, and Alawite Insurgency

War-induced fatigue and hope for post-Assad governance have contributed to significant decreases in inter-faction violence since January 2025. However, the risk that economic barriers to civilian reintegration drive former fighters to resume armed activity is significant and increases proportionally with the absence of tangible economic improvement. The greatest risk to al-Sharaa is that the approximately 70,000 Alawite military professionals organize around shared grievances and become an active insurgent threat. Former Assad officials are reportedly spending millions to accomplish just that.[46] MoD involvement in the March 2025 coastal massacres and subsequent lack of accountability likely suppressed Alawite insurgent activity in the short term while increasing shared grievances in the long term. Persistent lack of DDR policies targeting the Alawite community are another failed opportunity.

A secondary risk for internal stability is the continued presence of thousands of foreign fighters, many with extreme transnational agendas.[47] Foreign jihadists fought under the HTS umbrella during the Syrian civil war but may pose a threat if they see Sharaa's renunciation of al-Qaida and the Islamic State as an unforgivable

[46] Justin Salhani, "Syria's Challenges to Rebuild Its Armed Forces," *Al Jazeera* (4 January 2026).

[47] Muhsen al-Mustafa, "Nahw Jaysh Suri Muwahhad," *Misdad / Syrian Center for Security and Defense Research* (February 2026).

ideological failure. The Syrian government needs a framework for either professionalizing and naturalizing fighters who give up jihadist aspirations — or returning non-compliers to their home nation's custody.

D. Unexploded Ordnance

While armed violence across the country has dropped considerably relative to the conduct of the civil war, the Syrian people continue facing stark reminders of the residual danger they face. Specifically, unexploded ordnance (UXO)—encompassing everything from landmines and artillery shells to long-forgotten and hidden improvised explosives—has emerged as an acute threat impacting recovery efforts. While this is a threat faced at the local level, it is occurring at a national scale, with Syria being described as "the greatest humanitarian impact of landmines and unexploded ordnance anywhere in the world."[48]

Syria has experienced a marked increase in UXO incidents since the fall of the Assad regime as its people repopulate previously abandoned areas and attempt to resume their former ways of life, with over 570 deaths and 850 injuries in just the first nine months of 2025.[49] These occurrences have an inhibiting effect on repopulation, reconstruction, access to healthcare, and agricultural work, all of which are felt most acutely in rural or agrarian communities.[50] Areas with high UXO density also correlate with limited state presence and economic marginalization — conditions that historically facilitate extremist recruitment. With UXO-related incidents continuing to increase, the state will further feel increased pressures on its medical

[48] Mines Advisory Group, "A New Landmine Crisis in the Middle East," *MAG* (27 May 2025).
[49] Karam Shaar, "The UXO Threat: Syria's Hidden War Against Landmines and Explosives," *karamshaar.com* (24 September 2025).
[50] Ibid.

and social welfare systems, further depressing the prospects for recovery.

IV. The Threat Environment: External/Transnational Threats

Al-Sharaa's forces are arrayed against an Islamic State that has reconstituted faster than anticipated, exploiting the northeast's instability and the collapse of detention infrastructure to rapidly expand. Meanwhile, continued threats from Hurras al-Din and residual Iranian proxy networks compound an already crowded threat environment.

A. The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria

ISIS was the largest and most singularly disruptive unified actor during the course of the Syrian Civil War, carrying out attacks that killed thousands, capturing territory spanning thousands of square kilometers, and fielding an army in the tens of thousands.[51] After the group's territorial defeat in March 2019, its fighters transitioned from a proto-state construct to a clandestine insurgency. The organization's activities during this post-caliphate period were fairly muted until the October 7th Hamas attack on Israel, after which attacks exploded from 18 across all of Syria in September 2023 to a localized peak of 100 attacks in March 2024.[52] Attack deaths rose in parallel from a low of 25 across Syria in September 2023 to a high of 133 in the same localized peak.[53]

While ISIS increased its attack activity after October 7th, its capacity to engage in attacks, and re-establish support and facilitation networks, increased exponentially after the collapse of

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[51] James Jeffrey, "Briefing with Special Representative for Syria Engagement and Special Envoy for the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS Ambassador James Jeffrey," *U.S. Department of State* (25 March 2019).

[52] Charles Lister, "ISIS Syria Attack Data – September 2024," *Syria Weekly* (1 October 2024).

[53] Ibid.

the Assad regime and subsequent conflict between Ahmad al-Sharaa's state military and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in the country's northeast. Hamid al-Shatri, head of the Iraqi National Intelligence Service (INIS), publicly stated that ISIS' manpower quintupled in Syria, rising from 2,000 to approximately 10,000 fighters.[54] With the reduction of SDF pressure in response to Damascus' offensives, ISIS members very likely had increased opportunities to re-establish themselves in the urban centers, making them far more difficult to locate, isolate, and remove from the civilian population.[55]

This explosion in manpower is due, in some degree, to a series of escapes and releases from prisons controlled by the SDF during government offensives in early 2026. As of mid-2024, the SDF and their civilian counterparts in the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) held approximately 9,800 detainees in a series of 20 or more prisons scattered across their territory.[56] Many of these facilities were improvised from their former uses as schools or administrative offices and lacked typical security or detention-specific infrastructure.[57] Hundreds of ISIS fighters escaped from SDF-administered prisons during the government offensives in January 2026, while over 5,700 were transferred preemptively from prisons across Syria to detention facilities in Iraq.[58] This pales in comparison to the 15,000-20,000 ISIS families that

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[54] Loveday Morris and Mustafa Salim, "Iraqi Spy Chief Warns of Reemerging Threat from ISIS as Its Ranks Swell," *The Washington Post* (26 January 2026).

[55] Caroline Rose and Colin P. Clarke, "The Return of ISIS," *Foreign Affairs* (18 September 2025).

[56] Devorah Margolin, "The Collapse of Indefinite Detention in Northeast Syria: Implications Seven Years Later for Syria and Beyond," *CTC Sentinel* (April 2026).

[57] Miriam Berger, "Here's What We Know about the ISIS Prisons Controlled by the Syrian Kurds," *The Washington Post* (12 October 2019).

[58] Tucker Reals, "U.S. Military Says Controversial Transfer of Thousands of ISIS Suspects from Syria to Iraq Complete," *CBS News* (13 February 2026).

the U.S. intelligence community estimates escaped from the al-Hol camp during the same timeframe, providing an enormous opportunity for ISIS to reconstitute its base of radicalized supporters.[59]

Many of these fighters and supporters likely fled to the central Syrian desert—Al Badiyah—given its emergence as ISIS' last remaining safe haven after its territorial defeat. Owing to its harsh terrain, lack of population centers and associated security forces, and tribal ties, the Badiyah became key terrain for ISIS as it scattered surviving members across a large swath of under-governed land.[60] Their activity in the desert ranged from intelligence gathering to ambushing transiting security forces and even establishing training camps for children smuggled from places like al-Hol and al-Roj, preparing them to become the group's next generation of fighters.[61] The importance of ISIS' new center of gravity became clear when President Trump ordered U.S. forces to conduct large-scale airstrikes across the area in response to an ISIS attack that killed two U.S. soldiers in 2025.[62]

B. Hurras al-Din

Hurras al-Din (HaD) traces its genesis in Syria to the early days of the civil war, and the movement led by Ahmad al-Sharaa—then operating under the nom de guerre Abu Muhammad al-Jolani—and other senior al Qaeda (AQ) figures. What began as Al-Nusra Front, AQ's affiliate in Syria, rebranded to Jabhat Fateh al-Sham (JFS) for a

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[59] Colin P. Clarke, "What the Escape of at Least 15,000 Detainees Means for ISIS," *The Washington Post* (25 February 2026).

[60] Tariq Hemo, "The ISIS 'Invisible State' in Syria's Badiyah Desert," *Kurdish Center for Studies* (18 August 2024).

[61] Jeff Seldin, "Islamic State Group Smuggling Boys to Desert Training Camps," *VOA News* (3 August 2021).

[62] Lyndal Rowlands, "Trump Says US Has Launched Large-Scale Attacks on ISIL in Syria," *Al Jazeera* (20 December 2025).

period before its final evolution into Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS). This final transition gave birth to HaD, which consisted of AQ loyalists who rejected the emerging moderation of JFS and HTS under al-Sharaa's leadership.[63] Al-Sharaa recognized the threat posed by HaD early on and arrested several of its members—formerly his close compatriots—shortly after the transition from JFS to HTS.[64]

The longstanding relationships between some HaD leaders and former HTS personnel—now transition government officials—represents a risk of penetration to al-Sharaa's administration. Perhaps more significantly, the threat posed by HaD to the West gives ample justification for focus from al-Sharaa. The U.S. acknowledged this threat publicly in 2019, which was followed by a campaign of targeted airstrikes that was sustained even beyond the fall of the Assad regime, with a body of U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) press releases explaining that the strikes were concentrated on terrorists who "plan, organize, and conduct attacks against civilians and military personnel from the U.S."[65]

The group publicly announced its dissolution shortly after the collapse of the Assad regime, but international observers believe this to be a façade. The UN's Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team assessed HaD's strength to remain over 1,000 operatives who have "adopted a covert, decentralized structure with cells across all Syrian governates."[66] The persistent efforts to plot

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[63] Mona Alami, "Syria's Largest Militant Alliance Steps Further Away from al-Qaida," *The New Humanitarian* (6 December 2017).

[64] Ibid.

[65] U.S. Central Command, "CENTCOM Forces Kill Senior Operative of Terror Group Hurras al-Din, an Al-Qaeda Affiliate," *U.S. CENTCOM* (30 January 2025).

[66] United Nations, "Thirty-Seventh Report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team Submitted Pursuant to Resolution 2734 (2024) Concerning ISIL (Da'esh), Al-Qaida and Associated Individuals and Entities," *UN Security Council Document S/2026/44* (4 February 2026).

attacks against the West, increased freedom of maneuver post-Assad, and potential to disrupt Syria's domestic situation—as the group did with its participation in the March 2025 Alawite massacres—serves as a significant challenge to al-Sharaa's government and presents incentives for third parties to act unilaterally within Syria's borders.[67]

C. Iran's Proxies

Integral to its efforts to prop up the Assad regime was Iran's deployment of proxy forces to Syria under Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) leadership. Lebanese Hezbollah, Liwa Fatemiyoun, and Liwa Zainabiyoun formed the most significant core of Iran's proxy forces in Syria, effectively functioning as the primary military force sustaining the Assad regime against armed opposition for over a decade. While these groups largely withdrew from Syria during or immediately following Assad's abscondment, they continue to pose potential threats to the transitional government through three avenues.[68] First, the possibility of stay-behind forces cannot be ignored—it would have been in Tehran's interests to leave small groups of personnel in place to maintain local support networks capable of receiving and integrating additional forces in the future, as well as to collect intelligence. Second, thousands of fighters from these groups were spirited across the border into neighboring Iraq where they were integrated into Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) bases, with little more than a long and porous border preventing their reinsertion into Syria.[69] Third, the

[67] U.S. Office of the Director of National Intelligence, "Hurras al-Din," *National Counterterrorism Center* (January 2026).

[68] Masood Farivar, "What Happened to Iranian Proxies in Syria?" *VOA News* (13 December 2024).

[69] Hassan al-Araji, "The Fatemiyoun/Zainabiyoun Influx: Iraq's Intensified Hosting of Two U.S.-Designated Terrorist Groups," *Washington Institute for Near East Policy* (11 February 2025).

greatest risk is what these groups could bring to bear if they are able to reestablish themselves more broadly in Syria, which would be a return of Iranian malign influence and ability to disrupt al-Sharaa's governance.

D. Returnees

As of the end of 2024, nearly 6 million Syrians remained in refugee status abroad, with over half of them residing in neighboring Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan.[70] Unsurprisingly given that large population, there is a large body of incidents of violent extremist attacks or plots involving Syrian nationals abroad. Beyond those who conducted attacks—or were caught planning them—an alarming number have likely been radicalized, with one study finding that over 46% of Syrian refugees in Jordan alone subscribing to "radical thought, beliefs, and intentions."[71] Just as the West asked itself if an influx of Syrian refugees would pose a threat of terrorism, the al-Sharaa government will naturally face this same question as the rate of return increases.[72]

V. Immediate Stabilization Priorities

A. Launch an International Task Force for the Badiyah

The Badiyah, while deeply problematic from a security standpoint, offers a unique opportunity to drive international cooperation for the new government. Several Western and regional states have acute security interests in the Badiyah, viewing its role as the most likely platform from which ISIS can train and deploy operatives or otherwise execute spectacular attacks, and Damascus

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[70] UNHCR, "Refugee Data Finder," *UNHCR* (December 2024).

[71] Diab al-Badayneh, "Strains and Radicalization Among Syrian Youth Refugees in Jordan," *International Journal of Scientific Research* (July 2017).

[72] Daniel Byman, "Do Syrian Refugees Pose a Terrorism Threat?" *Brookings Institution* (27 October 2016).

can capitalize on those overlapping interests by using the Badiyah as a vehicle for security cooperation. As such, al-Sharaa should seek to form an international task force, led by the transitional government, specifically focused on clearing and establishing security in the Badiyah.

The most feasible construct would likely be an intelligence fusion and deconfliction cell, hosted by the Syrians at a secure location outside, but proximate to, Damascus. Modeled on Joint Operations Command-Iraq (JOC-I), which coordinated multinational intelligence and operations under Iraqi sovereign authority, al-Sharaa's security apparatus would be able to use international support to drive Syrian operations while also providing a forum for deconfliction of unilateral action by outside actors—which, executed under the auspices of this construct, would still be ostensibly Syrian-led. If successful, this could be built upon to form a parallel entity focused on the threat posed by Iran's proxies as conditions evolve.

B. Lead with the ISF in Reintegrating the Northeast

The January 2026 agreement validates this approach by having MoI forces enter Hasakah and Qamishli first. This should be formalized in policy as the standard practice for reintegration. The agreement also envisions Asayish merging into the ISC/MoI.[73] The ISF should accelerate integration by giving Kurdish ISF commanders local hiring authority. The ISF is demonstrably more trusted by minority communities than the MoD. Further trust can be won by prioritizing local Arab, Kurdish, and minority recruits in Raqqa, Deir ez-Zor, and Hasakah provinces.

The MoD should geographically restrict SNA-affiliated units from operations near Kurdish-majority areas and segregate them

[73] Kurdistan24, "Syria Begins Integrating Kobani's Asayish Forces into Interior Ministry as Siege and Humanitarian Crisis Persist," *Kurdistan24* (27 February 2026).

from their SDF-affiliated counterparts in the near term. These units' anti-Kurd history makes them risky as reintegration spoilers. Exceptions should be made where these units can take part in productive peace and reconciliation dialogues. Exerting greater control over SNA-affiliated units – such as the 62nd, 76th and 86th Divisions – may be risky without political cover, necessitating outside pressure. President Sharaa and the MoD can gain incremental leverage, however, by starting phased redeployments and pushing Turkey to route financial support for SNA affiliates through a treasury-controlled payroll system. Syria should recommit to its train and equip relationship with Turkey while resisting any expansion of the Ankara defense agreement that gives Turkey operational authority over Syrian MoD units.

C. Approach Suwayda with Patience

The rapid loss of trust between the Druze and the Syrian security apparatus calls for a policy of building economic relationships with Suwayda before security ones. Syria should lead with infrastructure investment agreements, using electricity, water and road repair as the primary instruments of engagement to build ties back to the central government. Damascus should pursue a strategy of sidelining al-Hijiri and engaging with Sheikhs Hinnawa and Jerboa as primary interlocutors between the government and the Druze community. The Druze are likely watching the Kurdish integration closely. Success there significantly improves Suwayda's political climate. Opportunities for ISF integration should be sought, though Damascus should treat further MoD deployments to the south as off the table pending political progress.

Israel will likely retain its military presence in the south. Syria should not respond to Israeli airstrikes and mitigate the risk of conflict through regular diplomatic channels, using the U.S., UAE and Jordan as intermediaries. Jordan's support for professionalizing MoI forces in Suwayda makes it a productive counter to

destabilizing Israeli interests. President Sharaa should continue to convey his commitment to the 1974 Disengagement Agreement alongside openness to negotiating a new security arrangement with Israel.

VI. Recommendations for Security Sector Reform

A. Publish a unified National Defense Strategy

The Syrian government needs to publish and approve a coherent National Defense Strategy that presents a vision for the MoD's role in the new Syria. The Defense Strategy should distinguish security operations along three tiers:

- Tier 1: Actions to defeat ISIS, prevent its reconstitution, and defeat organized, anti-government armed insurgency. MoI led, with MoD support.
- Tier 2: Responses to tribal or criminal violence. MoI has control, with MoD providing operations support only where conditions exceed ISF capacity.
- Tier 3: Internal policing, checkpoint operations and community security. These should be explicit MoI/ISC functions outside the MoD's authority.

Syria's defense strategy should avoid naming or planning against an external pacing threat. Syria's military lacks the capacity for organizing around conventional deterrence of its more militarily powerful neighbors and should instead focus on defeating sub-state territorial threats while engaging with outside sovereign actors diplomatically.

To effectively fulfill Tier 1 functions, the defense strategy should task the MoD with restructuring around a brigade-centric organization better suited to counterinsurgency and responding to tribal or criminal violence. The MoD's current declared goal of 200,000-300,000 soldiers across 25 brigades is unrealistic for Syria's

capacity over the next decade and ill-suited to respond to Syria's actual threat environment.[74] A brigade-centric model is nimbler for rapid crisis response and can be better equipped to combat ISIS and large-scale anti-government forces. This approach has the added political benefit of drawing power away from influential, independent division commanders by restructuring incentives and diluting command authority below the division level. The MoD could implement this change by reflagging 10-12 current notional divisions as brigades or battalions while retaining investment in 6-8 priority divisions. Concurrently, the MoD should increase investment in existing drone and special forces units with demonstrated operational effectiveness while building out more cross-factional specialist brigades covering air defense, signals and cyber capabilities. Building these brigades from scratch with faction-agnostic recruiting will institutionalize their loyalty to the MoD. The MoD can realistically lay the groundwork for reorganizing along these priorities within the interim government's five-year mandate.

The strategy should also make explicit the command relationship between the President, Defense Minister, and military chain of command to embed civilian control provisions and formalize professional accountability. The MoD's May 2025 Code of Conduct is a promising start for setting professional military standards and should be operationalized in the Defense Strategy by establishing clear standards for when commanders are relieved or criminally referred.[75] The risk in setting public command accountability standards is that they discredit the government if not implemented, but the current system's opacity is far worse for building trust between the Syrian people and their military. The strategy should

[74] Charles Lister, "Building Syria's New Army: Future Plans and Challenges Ahead," *Middle East Institute* (20 November 2025).

[75] Aaron Y. Zelin, "Syria's Ministry of Defense Releases a New Code of Conduct for Everyone in the Military," post on X (formerly Twitter) (30 May 2025).

also thank foreign fighters for their service in defeating Assad and set a formal pathway for foreign fighters to continue service, contingent on enhanced vetting and allegiance to the Syrian state over any faction or ideology.

The MoD should prioritize expanding its professional military education system alongside roll-out of the National Defense Strategy. HTS adopted a successful military academy model during the civil war using former SAA officers as instructors.[76] Today, both Turkey and Saudi Arabia are training Syrian MoD cohorts within their own systems.[77] While coming at the expense of direct foreign influence, Syria should push for Ankara and Riyadh's assistance building out a domestic officer education pipeline using the HTS military academy as a model. MoD control over its own professional development system is critical for inculcating the objectives of the National Defense Strategy and values of the Code of Conduct in the next generation of Syrian military leaders.

B. Build Stratified Counterterrorism Units

Given the ethnic and religious fractures still recovering across the country, along with mobility limitations for security forces, Syria would benefit from a stratified counterterrorism structure, with selected units assigned regional responsibilities in addition to a single national-level unit. Regional units could minimize ethnic and religious tensions through their existing makeup and geographic alignment while allowing Damascus to maintain a larger operational capacity than just a single national capability could provide. This construct should employ specific existing units, including the SDF's Tîmên Operasyonên Taybet (Special Operations Teams) and Yekîneyên Antî Teror (Anti-Terror Units), due to their established

[76] Charles Lister, "Building Syria's New Army: Future Plans and Challenges Ahead," *Middle East Institute* (20 November 2025).
[77] Ibid.

history of successful operations. Providing these units a degree of autonomy and separation from Damascus may also provide their longstanding international partners enough space to maintain support and intelligence sharing arrangements that would otherwise be ceased if they were directly controlled by the new government.

Damascus will still require a national-level counterterrorism capability for its most high-profile or sensitive operations. The Al-Asa'ib al-Hamra ("Red Bands") are likely the existing unit best positioned to fill this role, and they may be doing so informally already. Formally designating the unit would serve to streamline external support, training, funding, etc. along with any preconditional vetting and intelligence sharing frameworks. This unit would also benefit from Syria's national intelligence services, and their foreign partners, in ways that the localized counterterrorism units could not. Maturation of this unit into a professional capability would require additional investment from external supporters, such as the Turks, Jordanians and Qataris, in the form of training, equipping, and intelligence sharing. Structuring national CT capabilities under the GID would insulate them from the factional pressures affecting MoD reform and facilitate the intelligence-sharing arrangements these partnerships require.

C. Centralize Payroll Disbursement

The Ministry of Finance should be established as the sole disbursing authority for all MoD and MoI personnel. Public pay charts should be established, and a defense budget approved. External monetary support for Syrian security personnel and equipment should be routed through the Treasury. The MoD must immediately link its existing, unified ID system to biometric enrollment and a centralized payroll. Transparent payroll adoption is contingent on concurrent reforms within the Ministry of Finance, emphasizing the whole of government link between public financial management and security.

D. Implement a Formal DDR Plan

The MoI should set a national disarmament standard that formalizes the Tasmiya process with explicit criteria. The government should continue to use local notables as brokers for voluntary handovers where possible while preparing enforcement against non-compliant holdouts. The Syrian government should seek external support from experienced personnel in the U.S. government and the U.N. DDR Section in designing, resourcing and implementing DDR programs. The MoI should establish a Civilian Reintegration Office under the Civil Status Directorate, using that support to provide livelihoods programming, psychosocial support and civilian transition pathways to demobilized fighters not absorbed into the MoD or ISF, including former SAA professionals. The MoI and MoD should also leverage their external partners for assistance vetting personnel to open opportunities for foreign fighters without creating security risks.

E. Detention Modernization

Syria's detention problems are neither new nor easily solvable. But incrementally modernizing the existing system will allow the government to make immediate improvements and set the conditions for long-term solutions once the country is stabilized. To that end, Damascus should prioritize biometric enrollments, guard force professionalization, and ruralizing detention facilities for terrorism prisoners.

Biometric enrollment would allow the government to maintain a record of identities, affiliations, and accusations in a system where existing documentation, if any, is largely analog. This would benefit substantially from a federated system where local security forces and central government officials alike have visibility and access to the same data. While some SDF-operated prisons received specific guard force training from international partners, the new

government's capacity is likely limited to those who oversaw the Idlib-based detention facilities run by HTS. Professionalizing the force, and specifically training them for detention operations, will help mitigate against both internal and external threats. With many existing facilities located in populated areas, the risk of prison escapees immediately blending into the civilian population and disappearing is considerable, as is the ability for armed groups to gain close access to security perimeters undetected. Moving prisoners associated with terrorism specifically to rural, purpose-built facilities mitigates both of these risks.

While not traditionally thought of in terms of detention, Syria's various refugee camps will likely need to undergo similar modernization efforts given the reality of their populations—primarily ISIS families. The camps should experience the same biometric enrollment processes and guard force professionalization, while also receiving deradicalization efforts and resources facilitated by the international community. Keeping these populations in the camps indefinitely on a radicalization cycle only stands to increase the long-term threat to Damascus, and this approach will be aimed at gradually mitigating that risk.

F. Returnee Vetting and Monitoring

Damascus should prioritize establishing systems to screen and vet its returnee population as a precaution against further destabilization, with special emphasis on international partnerships. Requiring returnees to preregister their travel with ample time for government officials to request information from the security services in the country or countries where a returnee has been living since departing Syria will allow Damascus to better assess potential threat vectors. Similar to detention modernization, border screening procedures should be digitized to enable the same level of biometric enrollment to support identity verification and post-return monitoring if required. Maintaining a centrally accessible database

would further enable the security apparatus to investigate threats in the event derogatory information is provided by foreign services post-hoc.

G. Unexploded Ordnance Remediation

The transitional government should expand its remediation efforts with a focus on prioritizing areas most susceptible to extremist recruitment based on historical trends, existing economic and agricultural situations, and an event-density analysis of known UXO incidents. Given the scope and scale of Syria's UXO environment, al-Sharaa's security forces will likely all need to participate in remediation efforts in order to address the problem within the decade, which will require external support in the form of training and equipment. While foreign military partners should be the primary providers in this context, Damascus should seek additional avenues of outside support. In particular, advocacy for additional restricted funds—only authorized for use in UXO remediation—should be pursued with HALO Trust as the primary partner. This can be achieved by emphasizing the two primary sets of interests beyond traditional security concerns: European states want to encourage remigration efforts to ease the burden on their own economies and social welfare systems, and the Gulf States seek an environment stable enough to justify economic investment. For the U.S., post-ISIS stabilization and preventing re-radicalization in affected communities is a direct CT interest, making UXO remediation a defensible line item in security assistance packages. HALO Trust estimates that at least 1,500 full time staff, at a cost of USD 40 million annually, is required to support an expansion of their activities in Syria.[78]

[78] The HALO Trust, "Syrian Fatalities since the Fall of the Assad Regime," *The HALO Trust* (4 December 2025).

VII. Recommendations for International Actors

A. Establish and Support Diplomatic Working Groups

The U.N. needs to establish a full envoy for Syria. While Deputy Special Envoy Claudio Cordone has been briefing the UNSC monthly, lack of an on the ground representative hinders the UN's ability to coordinate directly with the Syrian government on SSR and DDR. The U.N. should prioritize DDR support to Syria, starting with the U.N. DDR Section and expanding with a U.N. special political mission concept with DDR chapter authority. The U.N. should also establish a Syria Security Sector Monitoring mechanism within the political mission that assists the Syrian MoD in tracking payroll flows, unit headcount and incident attribution.

The U.S. should name a senior director or assistant secretary equivalent within the National Security Council or State Department to manage the Syria desk and give that individual the authority to directly engage with the Syrian intelligence, defense, and interior ministries, as well as their equivalents in neighboring countries. The current portfolio of the U.S. Special Envoy for Turkey, Iraq, and Syria spans competing priorities that limit the depth of engagement on Syria specifically. Delegating authority to a dedicated Syria desk will increase the U.S.'s capacity to effectively respond to Syrian security concerns, particularly as the U.S. military has completed its withdrawal from all military bases in the country.[79]

The U.S. and its regional partners should step up as international conveners on Syrian security issues. Because Turkey and Israel do not share bilateral relations, the U.S. should establish a hub-and-spoke system of diplomatic working groups focused on specific issues, leveraging strong relations with the UAE and Jordan to help

[79] Jared Szuba, "US Troops Depart Syria, Ending Decade of Presence in Fight Against ISIS," *Al-Monitor* (16 April 2026).

lead discussions. Initial working groups, or spokes, should focus on issues pertaining to Turkey, to Israel, and to the Kurds and seek the following objectives:

- Turkey track: mediates between Turkey and Damascus on SDF red lines and SNA accountability. Ensures progress on the January 2026 agreement with the SDF continues to address Turkey's security interests by denying PKK activity on the border. Seeks to prevent Turkey's use of the SNA as a proxy force in Syria. Indirectly mediates between longer term conflicting Turkish/Israeli interests in Syria.
- Israel track: mediates between Israel and Damascus on renegotiating and implementing the 1974 Disengagement Agreement. Seeks alternative security arrangements strengthening Israeli border and Druze security interests while denying the repeated use of Israeli kinetic strikes. Also indirectly mediates between Turkish and Israeli interests.
- Kurdish track: supports implementation of the January 30 agreement by maintaining pressure on Mazloum Abdi's forces to comply and pressure on Damascus to protect Kurdish rights.

The United Kingdom and France should also support diplomatic working groups by providing multilateral legitimacy and through their influence in the UNSC to push for SSR and DDR frameworks.

B. Apply Targeted Legislative Actions

The U.S. should increase security assistance to the MoI alongside Jordan, Saudi Arabia and Qatar, prioritizing training, equipment, and digital systems infrastructure. The U.S. should also authorize support for DDR programming administered through the MoI, focusing on civilian reintegration. The U.S. should condition its assistance on measurable minority recruiting benchmarks. Specifically pushing for more Christians to join internal security

forces in the near term will build the greatest immediate trust-building dividends. Syrian Christians are seen by other minorities as a bellwether and interlocutor for inter-communal relations, and increasing their representation will also build confidence in Sharaa's government among Christian-majority western states.

Governments should retain targeted sanctions on the Syrian MoD contingent on SSR progress, and replacing individual designated leaders with records of human rights abuses. Governments should oppose measures that apply sanctions on the Syrian banking, energy, and reconstruction sectors in response to future security concerns. Blanket economic sanctions are more likely to empower malign foreign influences and criminal-jihadist networks.

C. Use U.S. Leverage Strategically

The U.S. should use its leverage across the region to strike a new Syria deal supporting Syria's security and prosperity. The U.S. is most helpful to President Sharaa personally by providing external cover for taking politically risky actions. Sharaa is unlikely to overcome Turkish resistance to centralizing control over SNA payrolls without pressure from the United States, and he faces similar domestic constraints to removing sanctioned commanders, reining in the SNA, and expelling foreign fighters. The U.S. should consider threatening sanctions on the MoD, conditioning State Sponsor of Terror removal, and conditioning security sector grants/training on meeting these accountability and reform benchmarks. The U.S. should also offer leverage over Israel in exchange for Syria meeting stated security objectives. Israel is heavily invested in operations throughout the region and reliant on the U.S. for its security needs. The U.S. should pressure Israel to limit airstrikes and troop deployments to genuinely existential Druze protection scenarios to provide Damascus with the room to approach Suwayda with economic and governance instruments. The

U.S. should also make the case to Israel that a Damascus capable of enforcing its own border agreements and managing internal security is preferable, from an Israeli security standpoint, to a fragmented state.

VIII. Chapter Conclusion

Security sector reform is the foundation of Syria's transition. Without a military that answers to Damascus, a payroll that flows through the treasury, and a policing model that minority communities trust, every other reconstruction priority rests on unstable ground.

Chapter 2. Minority Protection as a Foundation for Stability

Heather Mercer

I. Introduction

Syria's post-Assad transition has created a narrow but consequential opportunity to shape the country's long-term political order. The central challenge is not simply rebuilding state institutions but rebuilding them in a way that is viewed as legitimate across Syria's deeply fragmented society. Minority inclusion, therefore, sits at the center of the transition, not only as a question of protection from violence, but as a broader issue of whether diverse communities are meaningfully integrated into governance, security, and economic structures that will define the emerging state.

The transition under the interim government presents a mixed and evolving picture. While the collapse of the Assad regime created space for institutional reform, renewed international engagement, and political reconfiguration, core structural challenges remain unresolved, including concentrated executive authority, weak accountability mechanisms, fragmented security structures, and limited pathways for meaningful political participation. Recent sectarian violence, insecurity in minority areas, and ongoing mistrust among communities such as Alawites, Druze, and Kurds underscore the fragility of the transition and raise broader questions about the state's ability to provide impartial protection.

The durability of Syria's post-Assad order will depend on whether communities come to view the state as representative, inclusive, and capable of ensuring equal protection under national institutions. Achieving that outcome will require moving beyond symbolic participation toward inclusive governance, impartial security structures, constitutional protections grounded in equal citizenship, and reconstruction strategies that address regional disparities and communal mistrust. The following analysis examines the principal challenges undermining inclusive state consolidation and outlines policy recommendations designed to strengthen legitimacy, social cohesion, and long-term stability.

II. Background: Syria's Transition, Minority Landscape, and Strategic Pressures

The collapse of the Assad regime in December 2024 ended more than five decades of centralized rule and a conflict that killed an estimated 350,000 to 600,000 people, leaving Syria deeply fragmented, economically devastated, and institutionally weakened. In the aftermath, the transitional government led by Ahmad al-Sharaa moved quickly to consolidate authority, suspend the 2012 constitution, and establish a five-year transition framework.[80] Yet the transition continues to unfold under severe structural pressure: more than 16.5 million Syrians require humanitarian assistance, approximately 7 million remain internally displaced, and over 90 percent of the population lives below the poverty line.[81] These conditions have constrained efforts to rebuild state legitimacy and national institutions.

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[80] Dima Moussa, "Approaching the Constitutional Process in Post-Assad Syria," ConstitutionNet (International IDEA), March 8, 2025.

[81] Philip Loft and Claire Mills, *Syria after Assad: Consequences and Interim Authorities 2025* (London: UK House of Commons Library, July 23, 2025).

Syria's transition is further complicated by its demographic and geographic diversity. Kurds, Alawites, Christians, Druze, and smaller communities such as Yazidis, Armenians, Assyrians, and Ismailis remain concentrated in strategically significant regions tied to border security, energy infrastructure, and local governance. The Christian population alone has declined from approximately 2.1 million in 2011 to between 300,000 and 579,000 today because of displacement, insecurity, and emigration.[82] Kurdish-led forces, particularly the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), emerged during the civil war as a dominant actor in northeastern Syria and a central U.S. partner in the campaign against the Islamic State.[83] Meanwhile, Druze-majority regions in Suwayda and Alawite coastal areas increasingly developed localized security dynamics outside full central control. Collectively, these realities make minority inclusion not simply a political concern, but a structural requirement for state cohesion and long-term stability.

Historically, the Assad regime managed Syria's diversity through centralized authoritarianism and selective minority co-optation. Political and coercive authority remained concentrated within an Alawite-dominated security apparatus, while controlled forms of minority participation projected pluralism without altering the regime's underlying power structure.[84] The civil war fundamentally transformed this system. State authority fragmented, non-state armed groups proliferated, and external actors—including Iran, Russia, Turkey, and the United States—became deeply

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[82] Danish Immigration Service, *Syria: Situation of Certain Groups*, Country of Origin Information (COI) Report (Copenhagen: Danish Immigration Service, December 2025).

[83] Philip Loft and Claire Mills, *Syria after Assad: Consequences and Interim Authorities 2025* (London: UK House of Commons Library, July 23, 2025).

[84] Dania Arayssi and Ava Gilder, *Preventing Another Sectarian Authoritarian System in Syria* (Washington, DC: New Lines Institute for Strategy and Policy, October 2025).

embedded in the conflict.[85] By the end of the war, Syria functioned less as a unified state than as a multi-actor system with competing zones of control and overlapping security structures.

Current governance arrangements reflect both continuity and disruption. The March 2025 Constitutional Declaration established a highly centralized presidential system that concentrated authority within the presidency through executive control over cabinet appointments, judicial selection, and legislative composition, while minority inclusion remained largely symbolic rather than substantive.[86] Constitutional provisions requiring the president to be Muslim and identifying Islamic jurisprudence as the principal source of legislation have reinforced minority concerns regarding equal citizenship and political participation.[87] Minorities also remain largely excluded from senior security and intelligence leadership positions where decision-making authority over protection is concentrated.

The security environment remains the most immediate test of state legitimacy. Syria has not fully consolidated a monopoly on the use of force, and autonomous or semi-autonomous armed actors continue to exercise influence across parts of the country, particularly in the northeast and the south.[88] Sectarian violence in coastal Alawite regions in March 2025 and large-scale clashes in Suwayda in July 2025 exposed the state's limited capacity and

[85] Philip Loft and Claire Mills, *Syria after Assad: Consequences and Interim Authorities 2025* (London: UK House of Commons Library, July 23, 2025).

[86] Dania Arayssi and Ava Gilder, *Preventing Another Sectarian Authoritarian System in Syria* (Washington, DC: New Lines Institute for Strategy and Policy, October 2025).

[87] *Ibid.*

[88] International Crisis Group, *Restoring Security in Post-Assad Syria: Lessons from the Coast and Suweida*, Middle East Report No. 253 (November 26, 2025).

willingness to provide consistent and impartial civilian protection.[89] [90]Across communities, insecurity remains widespread, though experienced differently: Alawites fear collective punishment tied to the former regime; Druze communities remain distrustful of centralized authority; Kurds face uncertainty surrounding integration and autonomy; and Christians and smaller minorities continue to confront sporadic violence and weak institutional protection.[91]

These conditions reveal a set of underlying structural tensions that define Syria's transition: centralization versus decentralization, symbolic inclusion versus substantive participation, state authority versus militia influence, and national integration versus fragmentation. Minority inclusion, therefore, represents not simply a normative objective but a core determinant of long-term political stability. Where communities are integrated into governance, security, and economic systems, they reinforce national cohesion; where they are excluded, localized insecurity risks escalating into broader fragmentation and renewed instability.

III. Key Challenges to Inclusive State Consolidation

A. Building a Civic State Beyond Sectarian Governance

At the center of Syria's transition is whether the emerging state can move beyond a system historically shaped by exclusion, centralized coercion, and sectarian power concentration. The fall of the Assad regime created an opportunity not only for political transition but for redefining the relationship between the Syrian

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[89] Lidia Bernd, "A Dangerous Echo of Iraq's Past: Syria's Minorities in a Post-Assad Era," *Georgetown Security Studies Review* (2026).

[90] International Crisis Group, *Restoring Security in Post-Assad Syria: Lessons from the Coast and Suweida*, Middle East Report No. 253 (November 26, 2025).

[91] Lidia Bernd, "A Dangerous Echo of Iraq's Past: Syria's Minorities in a Post-Assad Era," *Georgetown Security Studies Review* (2026).

state and its citizens. Inclusive governance is therefore directly tied to long-term stability, national cohesion, and the prevention of renewed conflict.[92]

The early transition produced mixed results. Syria avoided total institutional collapse, ministries resumed operations, and public confidence initially remained relatively high. Arab Barometer surveys found 81 percent confidence in the presidency and 84 percent confidence in national security institutions, while 76 percent of respondents viewed President al-Sharaa's policies more favorably than Assad's rule.[93] Yet much of this support appears rooted in postwar exhaustion and hopes for stability rather than confidence in an inclusive political order. The deeper structural problem is that the transition has restored state authority faster than equal citizenship. Political power remains concentrated within narrow executive and security networks, while many Syrians continue to view the state through the lens of communal competition rather than shared national belonging.

The presidential system that was established under the March 2025 Constitutional Declaration provides for only limited institutional checks on executive authority. The initially proposed 150-member People's Assembly (later expanded to 210 seats) further reflects a tightly managed political process, with two-thirds selected through centrally supervised committees and one-third appointed directly by the president.[94] Although minorities and women have received some formal representation, inclusion has often appeared symbolic rather than substantive. Sunni Islamist and HTS-linked

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[92] Deyaa Alrwishdi, "An Urgent Call to Break the Cycle of Division and Exclusion in Syria," *Just Security*, April 17, 2026.

[93] Arab Barometer, Factsheet: Post-Assad Syria – Arab Barometer Survey (Princeton, NJ: Arab Barometer, December 5, 2025).

[94] Philip Loft and Claire Mills, *Syria after Assad: Consequences and Interim Authorities 2025* (London: UK House of Commons Library, July 23, 2025).

actors continue to dominate the security sector and core state institutions, while Alawites, Druze, Christians, Kurds, and Yazidis remain largely absent from meaningful leadership positions.[95]

The constitutional framework has further complicated efforts to build a genuinely civic state. Article 3.1 maintains Islam as the religion of the president and Islamic jurisprudence as the principal source of legislation, effectively excluding non-Muslims from the presidency and raising broader concerns regarding equal citizenship.[96] Other provisions condition rights and freedoms on vague concepts such as "public order" and "national security," granting authorities broad discretion over political and social freedoms.[97] Analysts have increasingly argued that the transition reflects a growing tension between Islamist governance and Syria's pluralistic social composition.[98]

Minority distrust has deepened as sectarian violence and uneven protection continue. ETANA survey data found that over 85 percent of Sunni respondents felt safe under the transitional authorities, compared to only 21 percent of Alawites and 18 percent of Druze respondents.[99] Violence along Syria's coast in March 2025 killed at least 1,400 Syrians, most of them Alawite civilians, while later

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[95] Dania Arayssi and Ava Gilder, *Preventing Another Sectarian Authoritarian System in Syria* (Washington, DC: New Lines Institute for Strategy and Policy, October 2025).

[96] Aaron Y. Zelin, *Religious Freedom in Syria's Post-Assad Transition*, testimony submitted to the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, November 13, 2025 (Washington, DC: The Washington Institute for Near East Policy).

[97] ETANA. *Between Symbolism and Substance: Syria's Transition at 6 Months*. July 2025.

[98] Shaul M. Gabbay, "Pluralism Under Siege: Islamization, Minority Persecution, and the Erosion of Civil Liberties in Post-Assad Syria," *Advances in Social Sciences and Management* 4, no. 2 (April 2026):112-118.

[99] ETANA. *Between Symbolism and Substance: Syria's Transition at 6 Months*. July 2025.

fighting in Suwayda displaced more than 128,000 people.[100] These incidents reinforced broader minority fears that equal citizenship remains conditional rather than guaranteed.

Ultimately, Syria's transition faces a central contradiction: the state is being rebuilt administratively faster than politically. Ministries and security institutions have returned, but inclusive citizenship has not consolidated alongside them. Without meaningful political inclusion and equal protection under national institutions, Syria risks reproducing a new form of centralized authoritarianism rooted in many of the same structural drivers that contributed to the country's collapse.

B. Fragmented Security Structures and Uneven Civilian Protection

No issue more immediately shapes public confidence in Syria's transition than security and who receives protection under the emerging state. Although the interim authorities have moved quickly to rebuild formal security institutions, coercive authority remains fragmented, weakly institutionalized, and inconsistently trusted across communities. Rather than consolidating a unified national security framework, Syria has developed a hybrid system in which state institutions coexist with partially integrated armed factions, localized militias, and competing regional actors. The result is not simply insecurity, but unequal insecurity: different communities experience dramatically varied levels of protection and trust in the state.[101]

The security landscape remains dominated by former HTS factions, tribal militias, Druze armed groups, remnants of pro-Assad networks, Turkish-backed factions, and the SDF in northeastern

[100] Siddhant Kishore, "Sectarian Violence and the Price of Ignoring Transitional Justice in Syria," *Just Security*, Nov 7, 2025.

[101] International Crisis Group, *Restoring Security in Post-Assad Syria: Lessons from the Coast and Suweida*, Middle East Report No. 253 (November 26, 2025).

Syria.[102] Although some armed groups have formally entered state structures, integration remains incomplete and often superficial. HTS affiliates continue to dominate the Ministries of Defense and Interior, while civilian oversight mechanisms remain minimal and security institutions heavily dependent on factional loyalty.[103] Limited training, weak accountability, and ideological influence within security structures have reinforced minority fears that the emerging order reflects partisan consolidation rather than neutral state-building.

The March 2025 violence along Syria's coast exposed the dangers of this fragmented system. Following attacks by Assad-linked insurgents in Latakia and Tartous, government responses devolved into sectarian massacres targeting Alawite civilians.[104] Human rights organizations documented widespread reprisals, killings, kidnappings, displacement, and property confiscations tied to communal identity.[105] Similar dynamics emerged during the July 2025 Druze-Bedouin violence in Suwayda, where fighting killed more than 1700 people and displaced roughly two hundred thousand civilians.[106] Reports documented summary executions,

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[102] *Ibid.*

[103] ETANA. *Between Symbolism and Substance: Syria's Transition at 6 Months*. July 2025.

[104] Siddhant Kishore, "Sectarian Violence and the Price of Ignoring Transitional Justice in Syria," *Just Security*, Nov 7, 2025.

[105] Danish Immigration Service, *Syria: Situation of Certain Groups*, Country of Origin Information (COI) Report (Copenhagen: Danish Immigration Service, December 2025).

[106] International Crisis Group, *Restoring Security in Post-Assad Syria: Lessons from the Coast and Suweida*, Middle East Report No. 253 (November 26, 2025).

arbitrary detention, looting, and abuses committed by multiple actors, including government-linked forces.[107]

The unresolved status of the SDF and the Kurdish-administered northeast remains one of the most consequential security issues facing Syria's transition. Although Damascus and the SDF have entered an active integration process involving joint security arrangements and phased incorporation of some SDF units into state institutions, disputes persist over command structures, local governance, resource control, and Kurdish autonomy.[108] Failure of the integration process could trigger renewed confrontation involving Damascus, Kurdish forces, Turkish-backed factions, or ISIS remnants.

Christians and other minorities continue to experience highly uneven protection depending on region and local power structures. In Wadi al-Nasara, authorities reportedly failed to implement plans to integrate local Christian volunteers into General Security, while subsequent attacks on churches and civilians reinforced broader perceptions of vulnerability and abandonment.[109]

Ultimately, Syria's security transition suffers from a fundamental contradiction: coercive institutions are being rebuilt faster than public trust in their neutrality and legitimacy. Security forces and central authority have expanded more quickly than accountability mechanisms and civilian confidence, leaving many communities dependent on sectarian identity, local militias, or regional power balances rather than equal protection under national institutions. As

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[107] Danish Immigration Service, *Syria: Situation of Certain Groups*, Country of Origin Information (COI) Report (Copenhagen: Danish Immigration Service, December 2025).

[108] "Syrian Forces Deploy in Hasakah under Ceasefire Agreement with SDF," Al Jazeera, February 2, 2026.

[109] Daniel Allott and Jordan Allott, "Syria's Transition Is Driving Its Minorities Out," *Newsweek*, February 16, 2026.

a result, Syria remains vulnerable to recurring violence, fragmentation, and renewed communal conflict.

C. The Kurdish Question and the Challenge of Territorial Integration

The unresolved status of the Kurdish-administered northeast represents one of the clearest tests of whether Syria can move beyond centralized authoritarian rule toward a genuinely inclusive political order. The Kurdish question sits at the intersection of territorial control, security integration, constitutional design, resource distribution, and foreign intervention. Unlike other minority communities, the northeast is not simply a vulnerable population seeking protection within a centralized system, but a politically organized and militarily entrenched region with functioning institutions and longstanding international partnerships.

Since 2012, Kurdish-led authorities under the newly renamed Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) have developed extensive governance and security structures independent of Damascus.[110] The region contains much of Syria's remaining hydrocarbon and agricultural wealth, including most of the country's productive oil infrastructure, giving northeastern authorities substantial economic leverage while making reintegration essential for broader national recovery.[111]

The central dispute between Damascus and Kurdish authorities reflects competing visions of the Syrian state itself. The al-Sharaa government has pursued centralized sovereignty and reintegration under unified national institutions, while Kurdish political actors

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[110] Rojava Information Center, "North and East Syria Post-Assad: Challenges and Opportunities," December 18, 2025, 1–18.

[111] Dilan Okcuoglu, "Federalism in Post-Assad Syria: Toward Durable Peace in a Pluralist Society," *Middle East Policy* (2026): 1–22, https://doi.org/10.1111/mepo.70033.

increasingly view decentralization and local autonomy as necessary safeguards against renewed authoritarianism.[112] Although framework agreements and ceasefire arrangements moved negotiations into an active implementation phase during 2025–2026, the process remains deeply fragile and unresolved.[113] [114]

Turkey further complicates the Kurdish issue through its longstanding opposition to Kurdish autonomy along Syria's northern border. Turkish-backed offensives displaced large civilian populations and damaged infrastructure in Kurdish-controlled areas, while Ankara has continued pressuring Damascus to reduce autonomous SDF military structures.[115] At the same time, northeastern Syria remains central to broader international counterterrorism concerns because of detention facilities linked to ISIS fighters and affiliated families.[116]

The Kurdish question ultimately represents a broader test of whether Syria can balance territorial reintegration with meaningful political inclusion. Any attempt to impose reintegration through coercive centralization rather than negotiated accommodation risks reigniting conflict and undermining long-term stabilization.

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[112] Dima Moussa, "Approaching the Constitutional Process in Post-Assad Syria," *ConstitutionNet* (International IDEA), March 8, 2025, https://constitutionnet.org/news/voices/approaching-constitutional-process-post-assad-syria.

[113] "Syrian Forces Deploy in Hasakah under Ceasefire Agreement with SDF," Al Jazeera, February 2, 2026.

[114] Feras Dalatey, Suleiman Al-Khalidi, Orhan Qereman, and Jonathan Spicer, "Risk of Missteps Hangs over U.S.-Backed Ceasefire Deal in Northeast Syria," *Reuters*, February 13, 2026.

[115] "Turkey Says Kurdish-Led SDF Does Not Appear to Advance Integration with Damascus," *Reuters*, December 22, 2025.

[116] Feras Dalatey, Suleiman Al-Khalidi, Orhan Qereman, and Jonathan Spicer, "Risk of Missteps Hangs over U.S.-Backed Ceasefire Deal in Northeast Syria," *Reuters*, February 13, 2026.

D. Alawite Reintegration and the Risks of Collective Punishment

How Syria treats its Alawite community may become one of the clearest indicators of whether the transition moves toward reconciliation or reproduces new forms of communal exclusion. The collapse of the Assad regime dismantled a political and security system in which Alawites were disproportionately represented across the military and intelligence apparatus, leaving many vulnerable to association with the crimes of the former regime.[117]

Following Assad's fall, many Alawites increasingly feared they would be treated not as citizens, but as presumed "Assadists" or regime remnants. The March 2025 coastal massacres became a defining turning point in minority perceptions of the transition. Government responses to insurgent attacks quickly devolved into large-scale sectarian violence targeting Alawite civilians, while authorities failed to prevent widespread reprisals despite mounting evidence of abuses.[118] [119] Reports documented kidnappings, displacement, property confiscations, and attacks tied to communal identity, further deepening perceptions that the new political order either could not or would not protect Alawites equally.[120]

At the same time, the transitional authorities face legitimate security concerns regarding former regime networks and loyalist insurgents operating in coastal regions. Yet the absence of credible

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[117] Adam Fefer, *Regime Change and Minority Risks: Syrian Alawites After Assad* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, July 2025).

[118] UK Visas and Immigration, *Country Policy and Information Note: Religious Minorities (excluding Alawites), Syria, February 2026 (accessible)* (London: UK Home Office, updated April 14, 2026).

[119] Siddhant Kishore, "Sectarian Violence and the Price of Ignoring Transitional Justice in Syria," *Just Security*, Nov 7, 2025.

[120] Danish Immigration Service, *Syria: Situation of Certain Groups*, Country of Origin Information (COI) Report (Copenhagen: Danish Immigration Service, December 2025).

transitional justice mechanisms and individualized accountability processes has contributed to collective punishment dynamics rather than reducing them. Broad communal exclusion risks reproducing patterns similar to post-2003 Iraq, where de-Baathification and sectarian exclusion contributed to insurgency and long-term instability.[121]

Preventing long-term instability therefore requires separating individual criminal accountability from communal identity while restoring confidence in impartial state protection. Without such efforts, Syria risks institutionalizing a system in which large portions of the population perceive the post-Assad order not as a national transition, but as a sectarian transfer of power.

E. Uneven Economic Recovery and Localized Marginalization

Economic recovery has become inseparable from broader questions of legitimacy and inclusion. Although portions of the state apparatus resumed operations following Assad's collapse, reconstruction has unfolded unevenly across regions, reinforcing disparities in access, representation, and state support.[122] More than half of Syria's population remains vulnerable to food insecurity, while sanctions, displacement, corruption, and infrastructure collapse continue to constrain recovery.[123]

These disparities are particularly visible in marginalized governorates such as Suwayda, where politically driven layoffs and centralized restructuring measures reinforced local mistrust toward

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[121] Lidia Bernd, "A Dangerous Echo of Iraq's Past: Syria's Minorities in a Post-Assad Era," *Georgetown Security Studies Review*, 2026.

[122] ETANA. *Between Symbolism and Substance: Syria's Transition at 6 Months*. July 2025.

[123] Dilan Okcuoglu, "Federalism in Post-Assad Syria: Toward Durable Peace in a Pluralist Society," *Middle East Policy* (2026): 1–22, https://doi.org/10.1111/mepo.70033.

Damascus.[124] Economic insecurity in Alawite coastal regions following the March 2025 massacres further deepened social vulnerability and weakened already fragile communities.[125] In northeastern Syria, unresolved disputes over oil revenues, agriculture, border crossings, and resource-sharing mechanisms continue to complicate integration and reconstruction.[126]

Several analyses warn that centralized reconstruction without meaningful regional inclusion risks reinforcing fragmentation rather than strengthening national cohesion. It stands to reason that regions perceiving themselves as excluded from reconstruction or denied equitable economic opportunity will be less inclined to view the emerging state as legitimate or representative.

F. International Legitimacy and the External Politics of Inclusion

Syria's transition is unfolding under intense international scrutiny, where external legitimacy increasingly depends on how the emerging state manages inclusion, accountability, and civilian protection. Since Assad's fall, Damascus has restored diplomatic ties, expanded international engagement, and secured partial sanctions relief, yet much of this normalization remains conditional and politically fragile.[127]

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[124] International Crisis Group, *Restoring Security in Post-Assad Syria: Lessons from the Coast and Suweida*, Middle East Report No. 253 (Brussels: International Crisis Group, November 26, 2025).

[125] UK Visas and Immigration, *Country Policy and Information Note: Alawites and Actual or Perceived Assadists, Syria, July 2025 (Accessible)* (London: Home Office, updated April 14, 2026).

[126] Dilan Okcuoglu, "Federalism in Post-Assad Syria: Toward Durable Peace in a Pluralist Society," *Middle East Policy* (2026): 1–22, https://doi.org/10.1111/mepo.70033.

[127] International Crisis Group, *Restoring Security in Post-Assad Syria: Lessons from the Coast and Suweida*, Middle East Report No. 253 (Brussels: International Crisis Group, November 26, 2025).

Western governments and international institutions have largely adopted a cautious "wait-and-see" approach. Although the United States removed HTS's terrorist designation in July 2025 and several European governments reopened diplomatic engagement with Damascus, international support has become increasingly tied to benchmarks related to minority protection, accountability, and institutional reform.[128] Continued sectarian violence and weak civilian protection have damaged Syria's international credibility and reinforced concerns that the transition may be reproducing exclusionary governance patterns under new leadership.[129]

The politics of inclusion also intersect directly with regional competition. Israel has justified intervention in southern Syria through claims of protecting Druze communities, while Turkey continues framing Kurdish autonomy as a national security threat.[130] International actors increasingly view sanctions relief and reconstruction assistance as instruments of leverage tied to measurable progress in inclusion and civilian protection.

Ultimately, Syria's transition is confronting not isolated minority grievances, but a broader crisis of state legitimacy. Governance centralization, fragmented security structures, communal mistrust, uneven reconstruction, and conditional international support reinforce one another. Without credible inclusion embedded across governance, security, and reconstruction frameworks, efforts to stabilize Syria risk reproducing many of the same structural dynamics that contributed to the country's collapse.

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[128] Philip Loft and Claire Mills, *Syria after Assad: Consequences and Interim Authorities 2025* (London: UK House of Commons Library, July 23, 2025).

[129] Dania Arayssi and Ava Gilder, *Preventing Another Sectarian Authoritarian System in Syria* (Washington, DC: New Lines Institute for Strategy and Policy, October 2025).

[130] Mohammed A. Salih, "Post-Assad Syria: Challenges, Opportunities, and the US Role in Shaping Its Future," Foreign Policy Research Institute, January 14, 2025.

IV. Policy Recommendations

A. Establish Constitutional Guarantees for Inclusive Governance

Codify a civic, non-sectarian state grounded in equal citizenship, guarantee core freedoms, and adopt flexible electoral systems that reflect Syria's diversity while preserving national cohesion. Uphold these principles through constitutional and independent institutional safeguards to ensure durable inclusion.

B. Ensure Minority Inclusion Through Representative Governance

Guarantee minority inclusion within the transitional state through meaningful representation in national institutions, equal access to political leadership, and a decentralized unitary model that strengthens local participation while preserving national sovereignty.

Early institutional design will shape whether Syria develops a representative political order or reproduces centralized systems of exclusion. Transitional institutions should therefore include minorities, women, civil society actors, and regional representatives within executive, economic, and security-related bodies. Political participation and eligibility for office should not depend on religion, ethnicity, sectarian affiliation, or proximity to armed actors, while constitutional protections for religion, expression, assembly, and political participation should be reinforced through enforceable legal safeguards and independent courts.

Syria should adopt a decentralized unitary governance model that preserves sovereignty while expanding local participation in education, administration, infrastructure, and municipal services. This approach offers a middle path between coercive centralization and federal fragmentation, particularly in northeastern Syria, where localized governance systems cannot realistically be dismantled without renewed instability. Electoral reforms should avoid rigid

sectarian quota systems that institutionalize communal competition and encourage broader political participation across communities.

Implementation should focus on constitutional drafting, decentralization legislation, electoral reform, and judicial capacity-building with participation from minority representatives, civil society actors, and local governance stakeholders.

C. Build Inclusive and Trusted Security Structures

Expand minority representation across security and military institutions, develop community-based policing in minority areas, and provide credible, equitable security guarantees to all communities.

D. Advance Justice, Accountability, and Reintegration

Implement individualized accountability for conflict-related crimes, establish reintegration pathways for non-criminal actors, and support credible independent investigations that balance justice with long-term stabilization.

Security-sector reform is central to restoring state legitimacy in post-conflict Syria. Reform efforts should focus on nationally integrated security institutions capable of exercising professional and accountable authority. Minority participation should expand across military, intelligence, police, and internal security institutions, particularly within command-level positions.

Community-based policing should be expanded in minority-concentrated and high-risk areas where distrust toward national security actors remains acute. Locally recruited officers are often better positioned to improve civilian cooperation and de-escalate tensions, but these models must remain integrated within unified national command structures and subject to standardized oversight. The government should also strengthen rapid-response capabilities

for sectarian violence and establish civilian oversight mechanisms capable of reviewing abuses and operational conduct.

Security reform must be integrated with transitional justice and reintegration policies. Accountability mechanisms perceived as collective punishment or politically selective risk driving further instability. Investigations and prosecutions should therefore remain individualized and evidence-based, while reintegration frameworks should include vetting procedures, professional retraining, and conditional amnesty structures for non-criminal actors. Independent investigative bodies, supported where necessary by international technical assistance, should oversee evidence collection and investigative review processes.

E. Address High-Risk Minority Flashpoints Through Integration and Protection

Support Kurdish integration within a unified state, advance Alawite reintegration and stabilization, and strengthen protection frameworks for smaller vulnerable communities in coordination with international partners.

The integration of Kurdish-administered regions remains one of the most sensitive challenges facing Syria's transition. Northeastern Syria is strategically significant because of its role in border security, counterterrorism operations, oil production, and trade infrastructure. Integration efforts should preserve Syria's territorial integrity while recognizing Kurdish cultural identity and maintaining meaningful local governance participation. Existing governance and security -structures cannot realistically be dismantled through coercive absorption without generating renewed instability. Integration should therefore proceed through negotiated agreements establishing phased security integration, joint command structures, revenue-sharing systems, and formal dispute-resolution mechanisms. Continued coordination between

Kurdish-led security actors and national institutions will remain essential to preventing the resurgence of ISIS and maintaining stability in northeastern Syria.

Alawite reintegration represents an equally important stabilization challenge. Coastal Alawite communities remain vulnerable to retaliation and exclusion because of their historical association with Assad-era institutions. Stabilization efforts must therefore distinguish clearly between accountability for individual crimes and communal blame directed at broader populations. Reintegration efforts should prioritize merit-based access to state institutions, localized reconstruction, employment reintegration programs, and credible civilian protection mechanisms in heavily affected coastal regions.

Smaller minority communities—including Druze, Christians, Yazidis, and Assyrians—face distinct vulnerabilities tied to geography and localized insecurity. Protection strategies should therefore prioritize coordination between community leaders, municipal authorities, and security actors, including protection protocols for religious institutions and rapid-response coordination during communal incidents. International partners can support these efforts through stabilization funding, mediation, and local governance capacity-building.

F. Restore Rights, Property, and Social Trust

Implement property restitution mechanisms, protect religious and cultural rights across communities, and enforce clear anti-incitement and anti-hate measures to strengthen long-term stability.

Large-scale displacement, property seizure, and sectarian violence created extensive legal disputes and barriers to return across Syria. Stabilization efforts must therefore focus on restoring enforceable rights frameworks capable of addressing unresolved claims tied to housing, land, documentation, and communal

targeting. The government should establish accessible property claims procedures, independent adjudication bodies, digitized land registries where feasible, and transparent enforcement mechanisms capable of resolving disputes consistently.

Protection of religious and cultural rights is equally important, particularly in areas affected by sectarian violence and intimidation. This includes protection for churches, mosques, shrines, cemeteries, clergy, and cultural institutions vulnerable to targeting or political manipulation. The government should also establish enforceable anti-incitement and anti-hate frameworks targeting sectarian rhetoric and public advocacy of violence. Public messaging campaigns and local dialogue initiatives can further reduce polarization and reinforce coexistence.

G. Embed Inclusion in Economic Recovery

Direct stabilization funding toward high-risk and mixed communities, ensure equitable access to economic opportunity, and establish transparent mechanisms for regional resource distribution in coordination with international partners.

Economic recovery will significantly influence whether reconstruction reduces instability or reinforces existing regional and sectarian disparities. Recovery efforts perceived as politically selective or exclusionary risk intensifying grievances in areas already affected by displacement and economic collapse. Stabilization funding should therefore prioritize high-risk and heavily affected communities where infrastructure collapse, unemployment, and service deprivation intersect with localized insecurity.

Recovery strategies should also expand equitable access to employment, vocational training, financial services, and entrepreneurship opportunities, particularly among youth, displaced populations, former combatants, and economically

marginalized regions vulnerable to recruitment by militias or extremist organizations. Transparent resource distribution mechanisms are especially important in northeastern Syria, where disputes over oil revenues, agriculture, and border infrastructure remain unresolved. Implementation should prioritize transparent allocation systems, local consultation mechanisms, and coordination between national institutions, local authorities, and international donors.

H. Condition International Engagement on Inclusion Outcomes

Condition diplomatic normalization, sanctions relief, reconstruction assistance, and economic engagement on measurable progress in minority protection, institutional inclusion, and civilian security.

I. Monitor Inclusion Through National Benchmarks

Establish a National Minority Inclusion Benchmark Framework to track progress in governance, civilian protection, security-sector representation, local participation, property restitution, and safe return. Calibrate international assistance and diplomatic engagement to verified progress against these benchmarks.

International normalization, sanctions relief, reconstruction funding, and economic engagement remain major sources of leverage during Syria's transition. Without mechanisms linking support to measurable institutional progress, external engagement risks becoming disconnected from conditions on the ground. A phased "Test–Expect–Leverage" framework can help sequence international engagement by evaluating observable actions tied to minority participation, civilian protection, accountability, restitution, and local governance participation.

International actors and Syrian authorities should establish public benchmarks tied to governance inclusion, civilian protection,

security-sector representation, property restitution, safe return, and reintegration processes. Data collection should combine government reporting, independent monitoring, civil society participation, and international verification where appropriate. Verified progress can then be linked to calibrated incentives, including expanded diplomatic engagement, sanctions relief, reconstruction assistance, and economic support. Sustained coordination among the United States, European governments, Gulf states, multilateral institutions, and regional actors will remain essential to maintaining coherent leverage and avoiding fragmented international approaches.

V. Chapter Conclusion

Syria's transition is ultimately a contest over the nature of the post-Assad state and whether diverse communities come to view it as legitimate, protective, and worth participating in. Military control alone cannot achieve that outcome. Durable states depend not only on coercive authority, but on public confidence that institutions operate impartially across sectarian, ethnic, and regional lines.

The warning signs already visible across Syria—sectarian distrust, uneven protection, localized insecurity, unresolved territorial tensions, and fears of exclusion reflect deeper uncertainty over who the emerging political order is designed to serve. Where communities perceive governance and security systems as selective or exclusionary, fragmentation is likely to persist through local militias, communal isolation, and reliance on external actors. Minority inclusion is therefore not peripheral to stabilization, but central to whether stabilization becomes durable.

The transition requires more than rebuilding institutions; it requires rebuilding trust in the state itself. Governance structures, security institutions, economic recovery, and legal protections must reinforce equal citizenship and reduce fears of domination rather than reproduce new forms of exclusion beneath the surface of formal

state consolidation. Syria's trajectory remains open, and political choices made during this period—particularly those shaping inclusion, protection, and participation—will determine whether the country moves toward a more integrated political order or remains vulnerable to renewed instability.

Chapter 3. Designing a Disability Justice Framework

Martin Palomo

I. Introduction

Following nearly 14 years of conflict, Syria faces a reconstruction challenge that extends beyond physical infrastructure. Among the populations most affected by the war, and most systematically excluded from governance, are the roughly 28 percent of Syrians who live with a disability. This figure is nearly double the global average and reflects the sustained toll of conflict-related injuries, healthcare collapse, and displacement.[131] As return movements accelerate and explosive hazards continue to produce new injuries, the number of persons with disabilities in Syria is likely to increase in the near term. As reconstruction efforts advance, ensuring that institutional and economic rebuilding processes are inclusive will be critical not only for protecting vulnerable populations, but for enabling communities to actively participate in shaping their own social and economic futures. Embedding disability inclusion within reconstruction efforts is not peripheral, but central to achieving sustainable and cohesive post-conflict recovery.

This section analyzes the scope and patterns of vulnerability facing persons with disabilities in Syria, examines how displacement and explosive remnants of war compound those challenges, and

[131] Humanitarian Needs Assessment Programme (HNAP), Disability in Syria: Investigation on the Intersectional Impacts of Gender, Age and a Decade of Conflict on Persons with Disabilities (2021), 4.

advances a set of recommendations for legal, institutional, and health system reform. Syria's transitional government faces competing demands across sectors. The framework proposed here is designed to be achievable within those constraints, grounded in existing legal commitments, aligned with international standards, and sequenced to support near-term action while guiding reconstruction over the longer term.

II. Scope and Patterns of Vulnerability

Syria's disability crisis is both widespread and uneven. According to the U.N. Humanitarian Needs Assessment Programme (HNAP), approximately 28 percent of Syrians aged two and older live with a disability.[132] This rate rises above one-third among internally displaced persons (IDPs).[133] Of the estimated 3.5 million Syrian residents with disabilities, 1.8 million are also internally displaced, reflecting the compounding vulnerabilities faced by conflict-affected populations.[134] Households with more than one member with a disability are nine percent less likely than other households to meet their basic needs, underscoring the broader economic consequences of disability prevalence for household resilience and national recovery.[135]

These patterns manifest differently across demographic groups. Children, women and girls, and older adults each face distinct and

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[132] Ibid.

[133] Humanity & Inclusion, "Nearly One-Third of People in Syria Have a Disability," January 9, 2025, https://www.hi-us.org/en/nearly-one-third-of-people-in-syria-have-a-disability.

[134] Humanitarian Needs Assessment Programme (HNAP), Disability in Syria: Investigation on the Intersectional Impacts of Gender, Age and a Decade of Conflict on Persons with Disabilities (2021), 4.

[135] Human Rights Watch, "It Was Really Hard to Protect Myself": Impact of the Armed Conflict on Children with Disabilities in Syria (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2022), 18.

intersecting barriers that shape their access to services, economic participation, and long-term well-being.

A. Children with Disabilities

Approximately 19 percent of children under 18 in Syria have disabilities.[136] Households with children with disabilities are twice as likely to report feeling unsafe performing daily activities due to discrimination and exclusion.[137] Children with disabilities aged 6 to 17 are less likely to attend school than their peers, a gap that has long-term implications for economic participation and social inclusion.[138] Access to assistive devices such as wheelchairs, hearing aids, and prostheses remains severely limited. During the conflict, children with hearing and developmental disabilities were at heightened risk of abandonment during periods of active violence because they could not perceive or respond to rapidly unfolding threats.[139] Approximately half of all Syrian children exhibit symptoms of PTSD, with an estimated 7.5 million requiring mental health support, a burden that sits heaviest on those with pre-existing disabilities.[140]

B. Women and Girls with Disabilities

Women and girls with disabilities face compounded vulnerabilities driven by the intersection of gender inequality and disability-related exclusion. Roughly nine percent of Syrian households are headed by women, and 43 percent of female

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[136] Humanitarian Needs Assessment Programme (HNAP), Disability in Syria: Investigation on the Intersectional Impacts of Gender, Age and a Decade of Conflict on Persons with Disabilities (2021), 4.
[137] Ibid., 27.
[138] Ibid., 13, 23.
[139] Human Rights Watch, "It Was Really Hard to Protect Myself": Impact of the Armed Conflict on Children with Disabilities in Syria (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2022), 2.
[140]Ibid., 28.

household heads have disabilities.[141] Women with disabilities are 84 percent less likely to be employed than men with disabilities, and among those who are employed, average earnings are 40 to 50 percent lower.[142] Women with disabilities are also six times more likely to be unemployed than men with disabilities, with only 12 percent of females with disabilities employed compared to 74 percent of males.[143] These labor market disparities compound the risks of economic hardship, social exclusion, and gender-based violence. As of March 2025, 8.5 million Syrians required gender-based violence services, 93 percent of whom were women and girls.[144] Women with disabilities are disproportionately represented in that figure, facing heightened exposure due to intersecting factors including widowhood, displacement, and caregiving responsibilities.[145] Without deliberate attention to the compounded vulnerabilities of women with disabilities, Syria's recovery risks entrenching the same inequalities the conflict exposed.

C. Older Adults with Disabilities

Available evidence suggests that up to 96 percent of Syrians aged 65 and older live with a disability, a figure that reflects both the lasting effects of conflict and the structural barriers to healthcare

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[141] Humanitarian Needs Assessment Programme (HNAP), Disability in Syria: Investigation on the Intersectional Impacts of Gender, Age and a Decade of Conflict on Persons with Disabilities (2021), 9.
[142] Ibid., 9, 19.
[143] Ibid., 16.
[144] United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), "Gender-Based Violence Area of Responsibility (AoR)," Syrian Arab Republic Humanitarian Response Priorities 2025, accessed March 2026, https://humanitarianaction.info/plan/1276/article/gender-based-violence-aor-0.
[145] European Asylum Support Office (EASO), Syria: Situation of Women, Country of Origin Information Report (Luxembourg: European Asylum Support Office, February 2020), 11, 42.

access that older populations face.[146] Mobility-related impairments frequently prevented older Syrians from evacuating during active conflict, increasing their exposure to abandonment.[147] Those who remain now face damaged infrastructure and a severely degraded health system with limited capacity to provide ongoing care. Older persons with disabilities are more likely to experience serious chronic conditions requiring continuous treatment, yet face compounding barriers of cost, transportation, and physical inaccessibility that make reaching services acutely difficult.[148]

Unmet health needs among older Syrians produce cascading consequences: worsening physical conditions, increased dependence on family members who are themselves often economically precarious, and deepening social isolation. Only 13 percent of Syrian men with disabilities over 65 are employed, while employment among women with disabilities in this age group falls below one percent.[149] These dynamics are not addressed by general reconstruction measures alone. Community-based health delivery, accessible rehabilitation services, and targeted accommodations within employment frameworks are each necessary to ensure that older Syrians with disabilities can participate in and benefit from Syria's recovery rather than being left further behind by it.

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[146] Humanitarian Needs Assessment Programme (HNAP), Disability: Prevalence and Impact—A Nationwide Household Survey Using Washington Group Methodology (2019), 7.

[147] HelpAge International, Missing Millions: How Older People with Disabilities Are Excluded from Humanitarian Response (London: HelpAge International, 2018), 38.

[148] Ibid., 39.

[149] Humanitarian Needs Assessment Programme (HNAP), Disability in Syria: Investigation on the Intersectional Impacts of Gender, Age and a Decade of Conflict on Persons with Disabilities (2021), 17.

III. Disability and Displacement: Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons in Syria

Displacement has significantly amplified vulnerability for persons with disabilities. Disability prevalence among Syrian refugee households in Lebanon and Jordan reaches approximately 60 percent.[150] Among these households, roughly one in five individual refugees identified as having a disability.[151] Among IDPs within Syria, prevalence appears even higher, with HNAP estimating approximately 36 percent of IDPs have a disability.[152] As return movements accelerate, with more than one million refugees and 1.9 million IDPs having already returned, the number of persons with disabilities residing inside Syria will increase, placing additional strain on already degraded healthcare and social service infrastructure.[153]

The International Rescue Committee estimates that 43 percent of hospitals, 63 percent of primary healthcare facilities, 81 percent of electricity networks, and 33 percent of schools have been damaged or destroyed.[154] For persons with disabilities, whose needs for rehabilitative care, assistive devices, and accessible infrastructure are greater than those of the general population, this degradation poses acute barriers to reintegration. Without targeted interventions,

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[150] iMMAP, Disability Assessment among Syrian Refugees in Jordan and Lebanon (2018).
[151] Humanity & Inclusion (Handicap International), "1 in 5 Syrian Refugees Has a Disability, New Survey Reveals," September 19, 2018, https://www.hi-us.org/en/news/1-in-5-syrian-refugees-has-a-disability-new-survey-reveals.
[152] Humanitarian Needs Assessment Programme (HNAP), Disability Prevalence and Impact: IDP Report Series 2020 (Syria: HNAP, Fall 2020), 3.
[153] United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), "Syria Emergency," Operational Data Portal, accessed March 2026, https://data.unhcr.org/en/country/syr.
[154] International Rescue Committee (IRC), Syrians on the Move: Refugee Returns Intentions Policy Briefing (September 2025), 1-3.

the return process risks reinforcing structural inequalities rather than reversing them.

IV. Explosive Remnants of War and the Continued Production of Disability

At the height of the Syrian conflict, approximately 30,000 people per month acquired disabilities as a result of conflict-related violence and conditions.[155] While the end of active hostilities has reduced that rate, explosive remnants of war (ERW), including landmines, unexploded ordnance (UXO), and improvised devices, continue to produce new injuries and deaths. Humanity and Inclusion estimates that roughly one million explosive munitions were used during the Syrian civil war. Given a minimum failure rate of 10 to 30 percent, between 100,000 and 300,000 explosive hazards likely remain scattered across the country.[156]

Syria recorded 1,015 ERW casualties in 2024, surpassing Afghanistan and second only to Myanmar globally.[157] Preliminary data for 2025 suggests approximately 650 UXO incidents in the first nine months alone, resulting in roughly 570 deaths and 850 injuries.[158] Children represent approximately 25 percent of victims. Roughly 61 percent of child casualties occur in yards, schools, or

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[155] Saeed Shahabi et al., "Nine Years of War and Internal Conflicts in Syria: A Call for Physical Rehabilitation Services," Disability & Society 36, no. 3 (2021): 508–9, https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2021.1888283.

[156] Humanity & Inclusion (Handicap International), Explosive Ordnance Contamination in Syria (February 2025), 1.

[157] International Campaign to Ban Landmines, Landmine Monitor 2025 (Geneva: ICBL-CMC, December 2025), 4.

[158] Karam Shaar Advisory Limited, "Syria Landmines 2025: The UXO Threat to Recovery," Syria in Figures, September 24, 2025, https://karamshaar.com/syria-in-figures/syria-landmines-2025/.

residential areas. Displaced persons account for roughly 26 percent of all explosive ordnance victims.[159]

The scale of Syria's ERW problem means clearance will span generations. Mozambique required 23 years to clear approximately 86,000 explosive items; Iraq cleared roughly 11,540 over four years.[160] Syria's estimated contamination is significantly larger. Each new injury increases pressure on a healthcare system already incapable of providing adequate long-term rehabilitation care.[161] ERW contamination is therefore not only a security and humanitarian issue but a structural driver of disability that must be addressed as a core component of reconstruction policy.

V. Policy Recommendations

The challenges facing Syria's transitional government are multifaceted, with competing priorities shaping discussions about the country's future. As reconstruction efforts move forward, it is essential that these processes promote social cohesion. Recognizing that rebuilding Syria will take decades, this section advances a set of policy recommendations focused on rebuilding inclusive legal, institutional, and service delivery systems that can be implemented in the near term while also guiding reconstruction over the long term. While implementation will be an ongoing process, these recommendations provide a framework for enabling individuals with disabilities to actively participate in shaping reconstruction processes and rebuilding their communities while contributing to Syria's social and economic recovery.

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[159] Humanity & Inclusion (Handicap International), Explosive Ordnance Contamination in Syria (February 2025), 4.
[160] The Carter Center, Explosive Weapons Use in Syria, Report 4: Northeast Syria (Atlanta: The Carter Center, November 2020), 2.
[161] Humanity & Inclusion (Handicap International), Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities in the Syrian Humanitarian Response (March 2021), 3.

A. Legal and Institutional Reform

Syria's legal framework for disability has evolved in recent years. In July 2024, the former government introduced Legislative Decree No. 19, which improved protections against discrimination and affirmed rights to healthcare, education, and political participation. The Decree aligns more closely with the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), which Syria signed in 2007 and ratified in 2009, than its predecessor, Law No. 34 of 2004.[162] In December 2025, the Ministry of Higher Education hosted a conference that recommended activating the National Council for Persons with Disabilities, establishing a national disability database, and amending Decree No. 19 to align with international standards.[163] These signals of institutional intent are an opening the transitional government should act on.

(1) Strengthen legal protections and establish a national disability database.

Amend Legislative Decree No. 19 to fully align with CRPD obligations, including adoption of an internationally standardized disability classification system. Establish and regularly update a national disability database to enable evidence-based policy planning. Ensure that disability definitions and certification processes do not place undue administrative burdens on persons with disabilities or their families.

(2) Centralize implementation authority while strengthening independent oversight.

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[162] Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), 2024 Legal Needs Assessment: Persons with Disabilities in Northwest Syria (April 2025), 5.

[163] Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA), "Syria to Adopt National Disability Strategy as Part of Public Policy," SANA, December 19, 2025, https://sana.sy/en/syria/2284435/.

Vest primary implementation authority for disability policy within the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor, with formal coordination mandates across the Ministries of Health, Education, Justice, and Local Administration. Strengthen the National Council for Persons with Disabilities as an independent oversight body empowered to conduct periodic performance reviews, require transparent reporting, and make findings publicly available. Legal protections that lack enforceable accountability mechanisms will remain largely symbolic.

(3) Enact disability employment incentive legislation and expand vocational training.

Syria's transitional legislature should enact employment incentive legislation modeled on frameworks used in comparable post-conflict and transitional states. Such legislation could include tax credits or reductions for businesses that meet a defined threshold for employing persons with disabilities, for example requiring that a minimum percentage of a company's workforce consist of disabled employees in order to qualify for preferential tax treatment. Business licensing conditions could also be structured to reward compliant employers with streamlined renewals or reduced licensing fees. To ensure effectiveness, the framework should be accompanied by clear disability definitions aligned with the CRPD and an accessible certification process. Enforcement should be phased in gradually given current institutional capacity constraints, beginning with larger enterprises before extending to small and medium-sized businesses.

Saudi Arabia has previously implemented comparable incentive structures, offering a regional precedent for the approach. Incentive legislation alone, however, will be insufficient without parallel investment in vocational training and job placement programs targeted at persons with disabilities. Women with disabilities face a particular gap: only 12 percent are employed compared to 74 percent

of men with disabilities, and average earnings for those who do work are 40 to 50 percent lower.[164] Closing this gap requires both demand-side incentives for employers and supply-side investment in skills development, with programming designed to account for the distinct barriers faced by women, older adults, and persons with mobility or sensory impairments.

(4) Build enforcement capacity through international partnerships.

Partner with the International Development Law Organization (IDLO) to rebuild judicial and administrative capacity for enforcing disability-related protections.[165] Adopt the World Bank's community-driven development approach to disability inclusion, which centers the participation of persons with disabilities in identifying local priorities and shaping policy implementation.[166] Without accessible complaint mechanisms and credible legal recourse, reporting requirements alone will be insufficient to ensure compliance.

B. Health System Reform and Disability-Inclusive Care

Syria's health system was already structurally fragile before 2024, marked by inconsistent financing, geographic concentration in urban centers, and increasing reliance on out-of-pocket spending.[167] Fourteen years of conflict compounded these weaknesses: roughly

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[164] Humanitarian Needs Assessment Programme (HNAP), Disability in Syria: Investigation on the Intersectional Impacts of Gender, Age and a Decade of Conflict on Persons with Disabilities (2021), 14 - 16.

[165] International Development Law Organization (IDLO), "Building Judicial Capacity," IDLO, accessed March 2026, https://www.idlo.int/what-we-do/peace-and-democracy/building-judicial-capacity.

[166] World Bank, Disability Inclusion and Accountability Framework (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2022), 46.

[167] Orwa Al-Abdulla et al., "The Health System in Syria (2000–2024): Assembling the Pieces of a Fragmented System—A Scoping Review," Health Research Policy and Systems 23, no. 85 (2025): 10.

half of health facilities are not fully functional, at least one-third of health clinics have been partially or fully destroyed, and ambulance services have been cut in half. Syria now spends less on public health than Yemen, a country ranked at the bottom of the global human development index.[168]

The system's fragmentation presents a distinct challenge beyond physical destruction. Over the course of the conflict, a large share of doctors and nurses left the country, while humanitarian organizations stepped in to deliver a substantial portion of services.[169] The result is a patchwork of provision with limited coordination, uneven geographic coverage, and no clear state authority over delivery. This externalized model sustained basic care during the conflict but is not a foundation for equitable or sustainable health coverage. For persons with disabilities, who depend on rehabilitation services, assistive devices, and continuity of care that ad hoc humanitarian delivery cannot reliably provide, the fragmentation problem is especially acute. Rebuilding the system will require a deliberate transition from this externally driven structure to a coordinated, state-led model capable of reaching underserved populations consistently.

(1) Rebuild a coordinated, community-based primary care system.

Drawing on the Cuban primary care model as a reference point, prioritize rebuilding a state-led system in which healthcare is treated as a public good delivered through locally embedded teams

[168] United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), The Impact of the Conflict in Syria: A Devastated Economy, Pervasive Poverty and a Challenging Road Ahead to Social and Economic Recovery (2026), 36.
[169] Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), "Stabilizing Syria: Rehabilitating Syria's Public Health System in a Fragile Transition," CSIS, July 29, 2025, https://www.csis.org/analysis/stabilizing-syria-rehabilitating-syrias-public-health-system-fragile-transition.

responsible for defined populations.[170] Emphasize prevention, home visits, early intervention, and continuous monitoring, with rehabilitation services integrated into primary care rather than siloed in specialized facilities.[171] This approach is particularly critical for persons with disabilities, who require continuity of care that a fragmented, externally driven system cannot reliably provide.

(2) Expand access to assistive devices and mental health services.

Prioritize restoring supply chains for assistive technologies, including wheelchairs, hearing aids, and prostheses, through partnerships with international organizations such as Humanity and Inclusion. Integrate mental health services, including trauma-informed care for PTSD, into primary care delivery. Given that approximately 7.5 million Syrian children require mental health support, and that children with disabilities are among the most underserved, early intervention programming should be designated a reconstruction priority.[172]

(3) Integrate inclusive education into community-based service delivery.

Invest in teacher training for inclusive education and improve school-based access to assistive technologies. Coordinate education reform with health and rehabilitation service delivery at the community level to ensure that children with disabilities are not excluded from early learning opportunities. Barriers to education

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[170] Lilia Turquina González Cárdenas et al., "The Family Doctor and Nurse Program: Development of the Health Care Model in Cuba," Revista Panamericana de Salud Pública 42 (2018): 2–3.
[171] C. William Keck and Gail A. Reed, "The Curious Case of Cuba," American Journal of Public Health 102, no. 8 (2012): e13–e15.
[172] Human Rights Watch, "It Was Really Hard to Protect Myself": Impact of the Armed Conflict on Children with Disabilities in Syria (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2022), 28.

translate directly into long-term economic and social exclusion, perpetuating cycles of marginalization that undermine Syria's broader recovery.

C. ERW Remediation as Disability Prevention

(1) Expand and accelerate UXO clearance in high-risk areas, with disability-prevention framing.

Prioritize ERW clearance in areas with the highest rates of civilian return and displacement, including rural and formerly contested zones where contamination is most acute. Pursue additional funding through the HALO Trust from European and Gulf partners in support of remigration and reconstruction. Frame clearance efforts explicitly as disability prevention: each injury avoided reduces long-term pressure on Syria's healthcare system and social services. Deploy all available security force elements in remediation efforts.

VI. Chapter Conclusion

Disability in Syria is not only a legacy of past conflict but an ongoing feature of its recovery. The return of millions of displaced Syrians, the persistence of explosive hazards, and the collapse of healthcare delivery will together continue producing new disabilities even as the country rebuilds. Addressing this reality requires more than humanitarian response. It requires sustained investment in legal protections that are enforceable, health systems that are inclusive, and economic frameworks that actively support participation.

The transitional government has signaled awareness of the gaps. The December 2025 conference on disability policy and the acknowledgment of the need for a national disability strategy reflect institutional recognition that current frameworks are insufficient. The recommendations advanced here are designed to build on that recognition with clear actions that account for Syria's capacity

constraints while establishing the foundations for durable inclusion. Persons with disabilities are not peripheral to Syria's reconstruction. They represent more than one in four Syrians, and their participation in shaping Syria's future is essential to achieving the social cohesion that stability requires.

Chapter 4. Strengthening Syria's Civil Society Environment

Sejal Goud

I. Introduction

Syria's civil society sector is already outpacing formal government institutions in service delivery, yet the regulatory environment it operates in was designed by a government that sought to eliminate it. Throughout 53 years of brutal rule, the regimes of Hafez and Bashar al-Assad worked tirelessly to plunge Syria's independent civil society organizations (CSOs) into darkness, dissolving countless groups in the name of order and granting monopolies to state-led unions that served as surrogates for their agenda.[173] While most Syrian CSOs in regime-held areas were forced out of operation, numerous underground organizations continued to provide vital political awareness, women's empowerment, legal support, material relief, and cultural services.[174] Concurrently, a parallel base[175] of Syrian CSOs took root in exile.[176]

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[173] Maya Al Jarf, "At a Crossroads: Civil Society in Post-Assad Syria and the Struggle for Independence," *HuMENA*, (accessed 2 May 2026).

[174] Mazen Garibah, "The Dynamics of Underground Civil Society in Syria's Regime-Held Areas," *Kalam Chatham House* (21 May 2021).

[175] "Outcome Report: CSSR Strategy Survey for 2025," *Civil Society Support Room*, (16 September 2024).

[176] Marta Welander, "Civil Society in Exile, Reconciliation and the Future of Syria: The Role of the Emerging Syrian Civil Society in Lebanon," *Global Campus Arab World*, (2015).

In designing a new framework for Syria, a crucial objective will be transitioning away from these conditions of secrecy and operational repression. The fall of the Assad regime marked the beginning of a new era for Syrian CSOs, with existing actors emerging from the shadows and new organizations seeking first-time registration within the country. Think tanks like the Center for International & Strategic Studies (CSIS) have described the current state of freedom of expression and civil society operating space in Syria as "vibrant."[177] Nevertheless, most Syrian CSOs stress that a *cultural shift* towards civic openness is not the same as a *regulatory shift* or the creation of a new *social contract*.[178] Monitors, including the Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies (CIHRS), caution that the continued presence and enforcement of Assad-era organizational laws creates a "standing legal toolset" that the new regime is slowly mobilizing against CSOs.[179] Further, attempts by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA) to absorb the functions of other ministries are leaving CSOs in the midst of a bureaucratic "turf war."[180] The governance challenges identified elsewhere in this report underscore the essential role of a strong, independent civil society sector as a foundation for Syria's recovery and long-term stability, rather than merely a supplementary component.

II. Establishing the Importance of Strong and Independent Syrian Civil Society

Civil society actors are key agents of change, particularly in contexts with constrained resources and low trust in central

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[177] Mona Yacoubian and Will Todman, "Syria's Promise and Challenges One Year after Assad's Fall," *CSIS*, 4 December 2025).

[178] Haid Haid, "Syria's Expanding but Fragile Civic Space: Opportunities and Risks in the Post-Assad Transition," *Arab Reform Initiative*, (4 December 2025), 5.

[179] Cathrin Schaer and Omar Albam, "How an Assad-Era Law Is Threatening Syrian Civil Society," *Deutsche Welle*, (5 February 2026).

[180] International NGO representative, interview with author (30 April 2026).

institutions.[181] As political scientists Rana B. Khoury and Wendy Pearlman argue, the international community's narrow focus on Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) leaders and the specific ambitions of transitional president Ahmad al-Sharaa are misplaced.[182] Although working to establish Damascus-led security, service delivery, and public financial management remain priorities, they write that "the most important factor determining the shape of Syria's future, and also its strongest asset for a transition…is the country's own civil society."[183] Similarly, the Atlantic Council has called civil society "Syria's greatest asset"[184] and the Bonn International Centre for Conflict Studies has deemed civil society "the only insurance policy for Syria."[185]

According to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, the term "Syrian CSO" refers to any organization whose exclusive purpose is to undertake activities within Syria or support the Syrian community abroad, regardless of place of registration.[186] Syrian CSOs are already driving forward tangible change and are doing so more rapidly than official institutions.[187] Notable examples from 2025 include the Swedish-funded Civil Society and People's Participation in Decision-Making in Syria Programme. In the city of Ar-Raqqa alone, 130 Programme youth worked together to host 22 public forums and secure three

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[181] "Governance," *World Bank Group*, (accessed 2 May 2026).

[182] Rana B. Khoury and Wendy Pearlman, "Why Syria's Civil Society Is the Key," *Journal of Democracy* 36, no. 2 (April 2025), 59–67.

[183] Ibid.

[184] Tara Kangarlou and Merissa Khurma, "Syria's Civil Society Must Take Center Stage in Reconstruction," *Atlantic Council*, (7 December 2025).

[185] Osman Bahadır Dinçer, "Observations from a Visit to Syria: Reconstruction, Social Fragmentation, and the Limits of Return Discussions," *Bonn International Centre for Conflict Studies*, (accessed 3 May 2026).

[186] "Turkey | Syria: Operational Presence of Syrian Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) - Sectors and Themes," OCHA, (April 2016).

[187] "Whose Civil Society?" *Syria in Transition Issue 30*, (accessed 3 May 2026).

municipal policy changes, including a streamlined process for displaced children to re-enroll in schools.[188] In Idlib, activists funded by the Programme successfully lobbied for four municipal by-laws. Their achievements include provisions for a youth budget and the creation of a digital platform that has directly connected 800 citizens with local authorities.[189] Other essential CSO activities across the country include rebuilding critical infrastructure, delivering emergency health services, integrating returnees, and contributing to transitional justice procedures.

Applying a structural lens, CSO contributions feed directly into global methodologies for good and stable governance,[190] with investors often using CSO operating space as an additional data point for the ease of doing business in a country.[191] Syria saw the world's largest score improvement in Freedom House's March 2026 *Freedom in the World* analysis.[192] This development is encouraging because CSO inclusion and registration procedures are directly captured in the report's political rights and civil liberties scores, though it bears reiterating that the country continues to fall under the index's "not free" classification, hence the need for a more inclusive regulatory framework around these organizations.[193]

Such a framework should embrace cooperation between government and civil society, rather than a dynamic of rivalry. Until

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[188] "A Quiet Revolution for Democracy Taking Shape in Syria," *Norwegian People's Aid*, (12 September 2025).

[189] Ibid.

[190] "Tools for Measuring Civil Society's Enabling Environment," *International Center for Not-for-Profit Law*, (accessed 4 May 2026).

[191] International NGO representative, interview with author (30 April 2026).

[192] "The Growing Shadow of Autocracy: Freedom in the World 2026," *Freedom House*, (March 2026), https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2026-03/FIW2026_final_digital%20(1).pdf.

[193] "Freedom in the World 2026 Methodology Questions," *Freedom House*, (March 2026).

recently, the United States government was a major funder—via grants and contracts—of 30% of American nonprofits, in addition to its extensive funding of CSOs abroad.[194] Other positive examples include the annual "Civil Society and Government - Best Practices of Cooperation" campaign in Ukraine[195] and the UAE's Ministry of Social Development, which awards seed and scale grants to local CSOs through its Empowerment Fund.[196] Governments prosecuting international crimes increasingly depend on civil society organizations to gather and analyze evidence, document witness testimony, and support case preparation.[197] The choice to pursue partnership with civil society rather than competition stems from the recognition that independent organizations have specialized expertise and are capable of implementing sensitive services.[198] Syrian transitional authorities have verbally expressed interest in such cooperation but have not yet produced the necessary frameworks to make this possible.

III. State of Affairs for CSOs Operating in Syria

A. Initial Expressions of Support

From the very outset of the transition, the al-Sharaa government has frequently voiced its support for civil society. Representing the new authorities, Rola al-Aghbar, Director of Non-Governmental

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194 Cathleen Clerkin, Anna Koob, and David Wolcheck, "How Reliant Are Nonprofits on Government Grants?," *Candid*, (6 February 2025).

195 Daria Hrosul, "Strengthening Connections between Civil Society and Government Institutions," *EU Neighbors East*, (27 May 2024).

196 "NPO Empowerment Fund," *Ministry of Community Empowerment*, (accessed 4 May 2026).

197 John M. Balouziyeh and Stephen J. Rapp, "The Role of Civil Society in Promoting Corporate Accountability for International Crimes," *Journal of International Criminal Justice* 22, no. 2 (May 2024): 365–384, https://doi.org/10.1093/jicj/mqae009.

198 Dyana P. Mason, "Government-Nonprofit Relationships," *University of Oregon Libraries*, (2022).

Organizations at the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor (MoSAL), has emphasized the need to create a complementary relationship between civil society and government based on principles of "responsibility and transparency."[199] At a time when much about the future direction of the country was uncertain, statements from Syrian CSO leaders reveal that the first months of the new administration were welcomed as a "seismic shift"[200] and were "widely seen as a period of unusual openness, with a permissive atmosphere that allowed civic activity to flourish."[201] During the first weeks of the transition, CSOs registered under the previous regime were given the green light to continue, while several newer organizations received verbal confirmation to start up operations.[202] In a panel discussion convened by the International Bar Association, Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR) founder and executive director Fadel Abdulghany commented on the importance—previously unimaginable for entire generations of Syrians—of raising a banner with the phrase "human rights" outside of the organization's office in Damascus.[203] Alongside this symbolic act, SNHR has openly criticized the al-Sharaa government's transitional justice scheme, parliamentary elections, and temporary constitution. None of this speech has been met by government retaliation.[204] This, in itself, represents a significant milestone. It signals a notable shift toward greater civic space and tolerance of free speech previously unknown under the Assad regime.

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[199] Omar Alaa Eldin, "Civil Society Strengthens Its Presence in Syria," *Enab Baladi*, (June 2025).

[200] International NGO representative, interview with author (30 April 2026).

[201] Haid Haid, "Syria's Expanding but Fragile Civic Space: Opportunities and Risks in the Post-Assad Transition," *Arab Reform Initiative*, (4 December 2025), 5.

[202] International NGO representative, interview with author (30 April 2026).

[203] "Assessing Human Rights and Justice in Transitional Syria: One Year On," *International Bar Association*, (28 January 2026).

[204] Ibid.

Further support for civil society can be seen through the country's National Dialogue Conference, which culminated in a February 25, 2025 meeting. Though critics note that the conference was a "tick-box exercise"[205]—invitations were sent with only one day of advance notice and key civil society actors were excluded—authorities still dedicated one of six moderated workshops to the future role of CSOs.[206] Moreover, of the 18 nonbinding recommendations emerging from the conference, No. 16 specifically recognizes "The need for the participation of civil society institutions in supporting the community, and activating the role of civil associations to support government efforts in reconstruction, and the state's support for civil society organizations to ensure their effective role in achieving development and stability."[207] During the March 2026 unveiling of MoSAL's 2026-2028 national strategic plan, Minister Hind Kabawat lifted up the important role of civil society in the strategy's development, adding that "the government today operates within a framework of full partnership with civil society organizations, which have proven over the past years their value, the importance of their work, and their impact on society."[208]

B. Legal Framework

Despite these overt calls for—and assurances of—stronger CSO inclusion, the operating environment on the ground reveals practical gaps. From a legal perspective, Syrian CSOs are governed by the Associations Law No. 93 of 1958, an outdated statute "not designed

[205] International NGO representative, interview with author (30 April 2026).

[206] Beatrice Farhat, "Syria's National Dialogue Conference Calls for Reforms, Constitutional Draft," *AL-Monitor*, (25 February 2025).

[207] "The National Dialogue Conference Adopts a National Covenant and Charter as an Essential Step in the Process of Building a New Syrian State," *Syrian Arab News Agency*, (25 February 2025).

[208] "Syrian Social Affairs Ministry Launches Strategic Plan, What Are Its Goals?," *Enab Baladi*, (9 March 2026).

to enable civil society but to discipline it."[209] The policy affords officials broad discretion to merge, suspend, and dissolve organizations and their activities. Though CSOs were initially optimistic that the law would no longer be enforced, it has already been used by transitional officials to cancel public-facing events[210] and to restrict spontaneous gatherings inside NGO offices.[211] Other recent applications of the law include government officials inserting themselves into the hiring decisions of various CSO boards—procedures that should fall under the sole discretion of the organization. Concerns over the standing Associations Law have been amplified by the March 2025 Constitutional Declaration. Although Article 14 asserts the freedoms of association and unionization and Article 12 reiterates Syria's commitment to all previously ratified treaties and conventions—including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)[212]—Article 23 weakens these rights by empowering authorities to restrict association, expression, and participation on the sweeping grounds of public order, morality, and national security.[213]

In light of these challenges, CSO leaders are placing their faith in the creation of a new civil society law. "That law will only talk about the registration or the legal entity of civil society, but will do nothing in terms of setting the other parameters these organizations have to work [within]. And yet, there's a strong expectation within civil

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[209] Haid Haid, "Syria's Expanding but Fragile Civic Space: Opportunities and Risks in the Post-Assad Transition," *Arab Reform Initiative*, (4 December 2025), 8.
[210] Cathrin Schaer and Omar Albam, "How an Assad-Era Law Is Threatening Syrian Civil Society," *Deutsche Welle*, (5 February 2026).
[211] Haid Haid, "Syria's Expanding but Fragile Civic Space: Opportunities and Risks in the Post-Assad Transition," *Arab Reform Initiative*, (4 December 2025), 23.
[212] "Joint Position Paper on the Directive from the Minister of Social Affairs and Labor: Restrictions on NGOs Must Be Suspended and Civic Space Expanded," *Syria Justice & Accountability Centre*, (22 October 2025).
[213] Haid Haid, "Syria's Expanding but Fragile Civic Space: Opportunities and Risks in the Post-Assad Transition," *Arab Reform Initiative*, (4 December 2025), 7.

society that this needs to come first," one expert explained.[214] As MoSAL formulates the contents of such a framework, the Ministry has reportedly initiated outreach to several local organizations.[215] This move provides hope that development of the policy will involve a greater degree of consultation than the National Dialogue Conference.

C. Domestic Registration and Permission Procedures

Following an initial period of verbal notifications, MoSAL has sought to formalize the status of CSOs headquartered in Syria. The Ministry does not readily publish registration numbers, though interviews with MoSAL officials reveal that approvals have been granted to at least 2,443 organizations across all provinces.[216] Registered organizations are now permitted to operate in multiple regions of the country, marking a significant departure from the previous regime's approach. This change is expected to facilitate the reduction of geographic disparities.[217] Whereas a healthy CSO presence now exists in Damascus and in northern Syria, coastal and rural regions remain gravely underserved.[218]

Despite the large number of organizations that have successfully obtained registration, many civil society actors continue to face uncertainty about their status. A standardized checklist of required documents is not easily accessible, and among CSOs that can assemble a complete application, waiting periods are long and

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[214] International NGO representative, interview with author (30 April 2026).

[215] Ibid.

[216] Omar Alaa Eldin, "Civil Society Strengthens Its Presence in Syria," *Enab Baladi*, (June 2025).

[217] Haid Haid, "Syria's Expanding but Fragile Civic Space: Opportunities and Risks in the Post-Assad Transition," *Arab Reform Initiative*, (4 December 2025).

[218] "Syria's Transition Hangs in the Balance: CIHRS Report on Civil Society's Struggle for a Voice," *Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies*, (3 November 2025), 21.

uncertain. In many cases, organizations—including those that had just renewed their registration shortly before December 2024—are spending up to one year in legal limbo, creating a chilling effect on their impact and planning abilities. Though MoSAL enforcement has been relatively relaxed given capacity constraints, actors found in violation of the Associations Law may face up to three months of imprisonment along with considerable financial penalties.[219] Since the Ministry has opted to provide provisional six-month permits to some groups, organizations like SNHR are dividing their annual operating plans into two phases to provide greater flexibility. The tightening of requirements has also stoked fear in areas like Suwayda, where minority-led groups suspect that registration will usher in greater surveillance.[220]

Beyond the general need for CSOs to register as legal entities, organizations must also seek permission for individual activities. This process involves overlapping authorities, as bodies like MoSAL, the Higher Aid Commission, the Directorate of Public Affairs, governors, and other administrators have been known to provide conflicting responses.[221] Organizations are ostensibly owed a response within 60 days of submission, though this benchmark often elapses without communication. A particularly alarming facet of the approval process is the lack of an appeals mechanism, leaving CSOs without effective recourse in cases where their rights have been violated. These types of administrative design choices tend to garner little international attention, making them the preferred approach to

[219] Ibid.

[220] Ibid.

[221] Haid Haid, "Syria's Expanding but Fragile Civic Space: Opportunities and Risks in the Post-Assad Transition," *Arab Reform Initiative*, (4 December 2025), 14.

sidelining civil society in countries with a history of high-profile CSO repression.[222]

D. International Registration and Permission Procedures

While the most significant barriers facing international CSOs operating in Syria were previously related to physical access, organizations now view rapid bureaucratization as their most pressing challenge.[223] To date, only 80 organizations are estimated to have received official clearance, with the majority of acceptances issued in late April 2026.[224] Unlike domestic registrations, which are channeled through MoSAL, international CSO requests fall under the purview of MoFA. Concerns over MoFA's influence are widespread within and beyond civil society networks. The UK Government has reshared[225] CSIS reports stating that MoFA is a "key locus of power," with representatives embedded across every government ministry.[226] While coordination across ministries underlies a stable government, this case is better described as MoFA using its authority to monopolize domestic policy decisions.

On a practical level, international civil society groups registering in Syria must submit a letter from the lawyer authorized to represent them in Syria, a letter from a representative of their headquarters, their organizational statutes, biographies of their board members, a rental agreement, and their planned programming for the year, among smaller documents.[227] Technically, this packet is to be

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[222] Andrew Heiss, "Measuring Repression through Restrictions on Civil Society," *Innovations in Human Rights: Concepts, Data, and Measurement*, (18 January 2026).
[223] International NGO representative, interview with author (30 April 2026).
[224] Ibid.
[225] "Country Policy and Information Note: Criticism of the Government, Syria, April 2026 (Accessible)," *UK Government*, (14 April 2026).
[226] Mona Yacoubian and Will Todman, "Syria's Promise and Challenges One Year after Assad's Fall," *CSIS*, (4 December 2025).
[227] International NGO representative, interview with author (30 April 2026).

notarized by the Syrian embassy located in the place of the CSO's headquarters. However, Syria lacks functioning diplomatic representation in most countries, including major CSO hubs like Switzerland. Consequently, registration requests are forwarded directly to MoFA in Damascus, where they are likely to face greater political scrutiny. Similarly, international CSO staff stationed in Syria are largely reliant on tourist visas, which complicates access to official services and institutions.[228]

Once registration is granted, organizations are redirected from MoFA's Office of International Organizations and Conferences to the Department of International Cooperation (DIC). The DIC is responsible for shaping the CSO's memorandum of understanding with other ministries and for arranging all meetings between the CSO and the al-Sharaa government. Any interactions between an international CSO and a Syrian ministry are to be attended by the MoFA representative posted within said ministry. Field visits throughout the country also require 20 working days of advance notice. In the words of one international NGO representative, there are many "different kinds of conditionalities in place, which to be honest, are deeply problematic for humanitarian space and don't serve any sort of positive purpose."[229]

E. Access to Funding

Syrian CSOs are doubly threatened by donor fatigue and by obstacles to accessing committed funding.[230] Under the previous regime, international aid was required to enter the country through the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC) or Asma al-Assad's Syria Trust for Development (STD), two bodies that were non-governmental in

[228] Ibid.

[229] Ibid.

[230] Nicholas Heras and Nidal Betare, "How Can Civil Society Build a Better Syria?," *New Lines Institute*, (19 December 2024).

name but that systematically channeled assistance away from community needs and into the pockets of state leaders.[231] Following large-scale changes in the staffing of these entities, transitional authorities initially insisted that foreign funding and registrations should continue to be managed by SARC and STD, while expressing some flexibility around reevaluating this position. Using collective action approaches, the CSO community negotiated with the new government to remove this requirement.[232] In a leaked memorandum, MoFA announced in April 2026 that the requirement had been repealed and that all approvals will now be handled by the Ministry directly.[233] Whether this development is positive or if it will further empower MoFA to restrict certain organizations remains unclear.

Even before this decision, CSOs' assumption that the new administration would not enforce so-called 'foreign-agent laws' was shattered.[234] In October 2025, MoSAL Minister Kabawat issued a directive reprimanding domestic CSOs for accepting funding from

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[231] Nidal Betare, Sasha Ghosh-Siminoff, and Munzera al Awad, "A Crisis of Conscience: Aid Diversion in Syria and the Impact on the International Aid System," *New Lines Institute*, (June 2022).

[232] International NGO representative, interview with author (30 April 2026).

[233] The Amargi (@the_amargi), "The Syrian Transitional Government has revoked the status of the Syrian Arab Red Crescent and Syrian Development Organization as "national partners," demanding all future aid agreements be vetted by the Foreign Ministry. Framed as a "reset," the move seeks to replace "restrictive frameworks" with tighter governance to curb fund misuse and ensure aid reaches all regions — free from security interference. Neither SARC nor SDO has responded publicly, leaving humanitarian operations in limbo. Critics warn this centralization risks politicizing aid, while officials insist it's about accountability. The decree, effective since early April, signals a sharp shift in how aid flows — and who controls it — in Syria's fractured landscape.," *X*, (3 April 2026, 10:55 a.m).

[234] "Syria's Transition Hangs in the Balance: CIHRS Report on Civil Society's Struggle for a Voice," *Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies*, (3 November 2025), 3.

abroad without prior approval.[235] Citing the recommendations of the U.N. Special Rapporteur on the Rights to Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and of Association (A/HRC/23/29), the Syria Justice and Accountability Center and 30 peer CSOs issued a joint response later that month. The group letter notes that "requiring associations to notify the government of their funding sources and expenditures constitutes a direct threat to their functional independence and may be used as a pretext to silence critical or opposing voices," adding that the "Special Rapporteur's report clearly states that both registered and unregistered associations must be allowed to seek, receive, and use funds and resources from individuals or entities—local or international—without prior authorization or unjustified obstacles."[236] Although the directive was issued by MoSAL, there is speculation that the push for funding authorizations is again being spearheaded by MoFA, which seeks to assert itself as a "gatekeeper."[237]

The weak formal banking system creates a second layer of operational challenges. At present, most organizations continue to rely on informal *hawala* networks, with few CSOs able to open a bank account within Syria or access transfers through SWIFT. Additional concerns held by organizations include liquidity and currency availability. The Central Bank of Syria and MoFA recently announced that all withdrawals must be made in Syrian Pounds rather than U.S. Dollars, though the going into effect of the policy has been postponed for six months.

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[235] "Syrian 'Social Affairs' Warns Associations against External Funding," *Al-Modon*, (October 2025).

[236] "Joint Position Paper on the Directive from the Minister of Social Affairs and Labor: Restrictions on NGOs Must Be Suspended and Civic Space Expanded," *Syria Justice & Accountability Centre*, (22 October 2025).

[237] International NGO representative, interview with author (30 April 2026).

IV. Recommendations

A. Create a CSO-led registration database through the Civil Society Support Room

Subjectiveness and discretion across ministries and other political bodies responsible for the CSO registration process have generated suspicion that transitional officials are approving requests on the basis of ideological alignment and personal connectedness, simultaneously rejecting or deliberately slow-rolling the applications of organizations with more proactive agendas.[238] "From my understanding—looking at which organizations have and haven't gotten registration so far—certainly those organizations with smaller budgets and those organizations who work on rule of law, human rights, civic space, peacekeeping, transitional justice….haven't been receiving registration or haven't got that go-ahead,"[239] summarized one international CSO leader.

During periods of institutional transition, information asymmetries often create opportunities for arbitrary enforcement. Although humanitarian organizations appear to face less interference than groups engaged in more overtly policy-oriented activities, these patterns are currently documented through individual anecdotes rather than systematic data. As a result, it remains difficult to raise awareness, build international pressure, and advocate for meaningful and measurable reforms.

Documentation of registration timelines and approval outcomes should be centralized through the Syrian Civil Society Support Room (CSSR). Established in 2016 under the auspices of the Office of the U.N. Special Envoy for Syria, the CSSR serves as a dedicated platform for Syrian CSOs to express priorities, engage in U.N.

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[238] Haid Haid, "Syria's Expanding but Fragile Civic Space: Opportunities and Risks in the Post-Assad Transition," *Arab Reform Initiative*, (4 December 2025).
[239] International NGO representative, interview with author (30 April 2026).

processes, and meet with international stakeholders. The CSSR has provided valuable mapping services and continues to actively deliver statements on Syria's civic space, even despite the vacancy of the full Special Envoy position. Crucially, ownership of the CSSR is required to sit with Syrian CSOs.[240] The platform boasts an extensive network, engaging over 1,300 Syrian civil society actors as of November 2025.[241]

In February 2026, the CSSR published *Building Bridges*, a report that reflects on the platform's policy influence and appetite to reform its activities to meet the political moment.[242] By drawing on its cross-border coalition and pivoting from simple mapping efforts to the comprehensive, CSO-led documentation of successes and obstacles, the CSSR would provide valuable insights for both domestic and international civil society actors. While the onus is ultimately on MoSAL and MoFA to publish clear application checklists for initial registrations and subsequent activity permissions, the CSSR is also well-positioned to immediately improve the information environment by consolidating knowledge-sharing. The CSSR should conduct active outreach to CSOs to ensure that a broad range of missions and organization types are represented. To mitigate fears of retribution, particularly among minority-led CSOs, the CSSR should allow organizations that are unregistered or with pending registration to redact their names in any public-facing outputs, while still providing general details about the CSO's characteristics. If the aggregate data reveals that organizations providing gap-filling functions for the state are given greater liberties as compared to organizations that present themselves independently, the CSRR may then draw on its U.N. relationships to file a formal complaint with

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240 "Home," *Civil Society Support Room*, (accessed 3 May 2026).

241 "Building Bridges: Lessons from the Syrian Civil Society Support Room," *Civil Society Support Room*, (19 February 19 2026).

242 Ibid.

the ICCPR secretariat. This is an area where international pressure can help turn the tide, as the al-Sharaa government is notably more responsive to foreign pressure than domestic advocacy.[243]

B. Transition to notification-based registration/funding with a presumption of approval

As MoSAL consults with CSOs to develop a new framework governing their registration, organizations should proactively push for a notification-based system. Calls for abandoning prior authorization requirements in favor of notification have been referenced in over 50 think tank interviews with Syrian civil society actors, indicating a substantial consensus that now must be directly communicated to the government.[244] Transitional authorities may argue that prior authorization mechanisms are necessary to prevent foreign political interference or financial abuse. However, notification-based systems paired with end-of-year audits can still preserve state oversight while substantially reducing opportunities for arbitrary administrative restriction. The following comparison table from the Damascus Institute adds further weight to the argument advanced by CSOs, revealing that the Syrian Associations Law of 1958 is far more controlling than peer laws in terms of initial establishment, administrative intervention, funding approvals, and dissolution decisions.

Table: Comparison of Syrian, Tunisian, and Turkish Association Laws, adapted from the Damascus Institute[245]

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[243] "Syria's Transition Hangs in the Balance: CIHRS Report on Civil Society's Struggle for a Voice," *Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies*, (3 November 2025), 31.

[244] Ibid.

[245] Muhammad Al-Sukari, "Syrian Organisations and Associations: Building a National Strategy from the Legacy of Tyranny," *Damascus Institute*, (28 February 2025).

Criterion	Syria (1958)	Tunisia (2011)	Turkey (2004)
Freedom of Establishment	Licensing	Notification	Notification
Role of the State	Direct administrative & security intervention	General supervision	General supervision
Funding	Strict restrictions	Freedom of funding & transparency	Freedom of funding & transparency with some restrictions
Dissolving Associations	By administrative and security decree without judicial oversight	By an independent judicial ruling	By a judicial or administrative ruling

Crucially, the period following notification must not be ambiguous. Both MoFA and MoSAL are under reasonable obligation to state that, if no response is provided after a certain number of days, organizations can safely operate with the presumption of approval. Although the Associations Law No. 93 of 1958 technically states that organizations are registered by default after 60 days of a pending application, neither MoSAL nor MoFA has issued clear guidance confirming that this standard will be upheld. A comprehensive policy update must reflect the responsibilities of both ministries, ideally reducing the timeframe to 30 days to facilitate organizations' operations, but at a minimum adhering to the existing 60-day benchmark. While domestic CSOs primarily liaise with MoSAL, they remain subject to MoFA discretion when attempting to access foreign funding; and, while international CSOs

are shepherded by MoFA, they still collaborate with MoSAL when implementing social works projects. Although transitional authorities continue to engage constructively with unregistered groups out of necessity, the general understanding is that all CSOs must register officially and not just by default.

In Uzbekistan, a country where CSOs face similar operating and registration challenges, the Ministry of Justice is required to deliver decisions pertaining to foreign funding within 25 days.[246] The fact that any approval process for foreign funding exists—regardless of timeline—is considered problematic by watchdog groups like the International Center for Not-for-Profit Law. Nevertheless, MoFA is unlikely to relinquish all control. Following the approach of smart incrementalism, the push should be to harmonize the resulting civil society law and any future updates to the Associations Law No. 93 of 1958 with Article 22 of the ICCPR to the extent that is politically feasible.[247]

C. Organize joint audit training for CSO staff and ministry officials

As the transitional government continues to emphasize formalization, CSOs will need to become proficient in the new requirements. Early reporting indicates that MoSAL is actively reviewing CSO performance evaluations.[248] In the future, organizations should also expect stricter financial audit standards as Damascus gradually builds up public and private financial management protocols. Although better-funded international CSOs have full teams dedicated to audit preparation, grassroots CSOs based in Syria possess far less historical experience in this domain

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[246] "Uzbekistan Civic Freedom Monitor," *International Center for Not-for-Profit Law*, (29 April 2026).

[247] Ibid.

[248] "Syrian 'Social Affairs' Warns Associations against External Funding," *Al-Modon*, (October 2025).

and face substantial capacity constraints in obtaining this knowledge. Lessons from the High Atlas Foundation's work to equip Moroccan CSOs with financial management skills reveal the importance of tailoring training to the local banking context.[249] In settings like Syria, trainers should not simply rely on boilerplate 'best practices.' Rather, the curriculum should recognize ideal standards while reflecting on-the-ground realities.

Beyond a lack of shared procedural understanding, qualities like mistrust, low interpersonal familiarity, and limited opportunities for sustained partnership tend to characterize government-civil society relationships around the world. This is particularly true in Syria. Addressing these weaknesses will be essential not only for the operational success of Syrian civil society, but also for the broader goals of reconstruction and reconciliation. For this reason, it is recommended that third-party facilitators organize joint audit training for CSO staff and officials across MoSAL, the Ministry of Finance, and MoFA. A corporate-led training is likely more palatable to the transitional government, which has contracted out many of its transparency efforts. In 2024, leading audit firm PwC Middle East completed pro bono projects across Lebanon, Palestine, Saudi Arabia, and UAE, allowing nonprofits and other social enterprises to build capacity around financial matters and making them a good candidate to provide similar free services in Syria.[250]

Several countries have recognized the benefits of bringing together the public and social sectors. Estonia, for example, collaborates with the Open Government Partnership to create opportunities for civil society leaders to train alongside government

[249] Cheikh Akmach, "Empowering Local CSOs: Financial Management Training," *High Atlas Foundation*, (13 August 2023).

[250] "PwC Middle East's corporate sustainability initiatives impact over 33,000 beneficiaries with over 16,000 volunteer hours," *PwC*, (5 December 2024).

civil servants.[251] Arranging a similar joint audit training in Syria would produce several positive outcomes. First, stronger interpersonal relationships may reduce the frequency of arbitrary denials currently being issued by ministry officials.[252] Second, teaching CSOs to comprehensively document their financial activities would provide the government with greater confidence that a notification-based system, as discussed in Recommendation #2, could function effectively. Third, stronger financial oversight capacities would improve the long-term ability of CSOs to serve as a check on government transparency. Civil society has historically played a major role in anti-corruption efforts. As officials slowly establish public budgets, CSOs will be better equipped to identify discrepancies relating to spending within each organization's area of expertise.[253]

D. Consolidate and institutionalize CSO representation

Syria currently lacks a single institution capable of both coordinating diverse civil society actors and articulating unified policy positions on shared institutional challenges. The aftermath of the 2025 National Dialogue Conference reveals a strong appetite among civil society groups to engage actively and constructively in future planning efforts. Calls for a second, more inclusive national dialogue have emerged across levels of society, from grassroots CSOs to multilateral mechanisms like the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic.[254] For the

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[251] Kersty McCourt, "Four Steps to Build Dialogue Between Government and Civil Society," *Open Government Partnership*, (24 January 2023).

[252] Cathrin Schaer and Omar Albam, "How an Assad-Era Law Is Threatening Syrian Civil Society," *Deutsche Welle*, (5 February 2026).

[253] "How Audit Offices Collaborate with Civil Society," *Canadian Audit and Accountability Foundation*, (2021).

[254] "A/HRC/61/62 Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic," *United Nations General Assembly*, (12 March 2026).

country to chart the most successful path forward, CSO inclusion must extend beyond tokenism, as genuine participation in peace and dialogue processes is correlated with a better operating environment for CSOs.[255] Initial MoSAL workshops related to the new civil society law represent a promising start, but they also highlight the need for a coordinating body among CSOs.

Post-conflict comparative research from the Latin American context indicates that the strength and extent of *intra-CSO coordination* shapes the success of peace negotiation outcomes.[256] An initial attempt at coordination can be seen through the Syria NGO Forum, which was formed in late 2025 to harmonize the work of five regional fora. While this effort represents a strong starting point, the forum focuses exclusively on the delivery of humanitarian aid and therefore captures only one segment of Syria's broader civic landscape.

Madaniya, a Syrian-led platform launched in 2023, provides a second model. The initiative brings together "well-established NGOs and CSOs, grassroots community-based organisations, unions, syndicates, associations, media outlets, think tanks, research centres, private sector entities with a social impact focus, and voluntary groups" to expand civic space.[257] The organization helps mediate differences and tensions between various actor types. However, Madaniya's leadership has made clear that the network does not seek to operate by consensus and does not issue joint statements.

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[255] Emanne Khan, "Seminar Summary - From Participation to Protection: The Role of Civil Society in Post-Conflict Peace Agreements," *Boston University Global Development Policy Center*, (5 December 2022).

[256] Nathanael Eschmann and Desirée Nilsson, "Better Together? Civil Society Coordination during Peace Negotiations," *Cooperation and Conflict* 58, no. 1 (March 2023), 42–60.

[257] "Madaniya: One Year On," *Syria in Transition,* (June 2024).

Essentially, the country needs an organization that bridges the gap between the Syria NGO Forum and Madaniya—one that represents the diversity of Syria's civic actors while also articulating unified positions on shared institutional challenges. Securing an institutionalized seat for this organization would create a clear and consistent touchpoint for consultation in formal government dialogues, negotiations, and forums.

E. Pilot an ombuds institution within the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor

Syrians must grapple with the degree to which CSOs and government institutions are formally integrated. While some organizations have opted to increase ties with the transitional government, others view this closeness as a form of betrayal.[258] A prominent example of an organization pursuing the former approach is the Syria Civil Defence (SCD). Known colloquially as the White Helmets, the SCD functioned as a highly trusted corps of firefighters and first responders during the later years of the Assad regime. Following a majority vote by its board, the formerly independent group was folded into the Ministry of Disaster and Emergency Response Management in 2025.[259]

While the case of the White Helmets illustrates the potential advantages of integrating trusted CSO action into central operations, bolstering the independence of civil society—particularly organizations operating within minority communities—should remain the priority. Independence does not have to mean a lack of coordination or support between government and civil society.

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[258] "Syria's Transition Hangs in the Balance: CIHRS Report on Civil Society's Struggle for a Voice," *Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies*, (3 November 2025), 6.

[259] Lauren Frayer and Jawad Rizkallah, "With Assad Gone and Syria's War over, the White Helmets Have a New Mission," *NPR* (21 April 2025).

Rather, CSOs benefit from access to clear, impartial, and institutionalized channels for consultation and dispute resolution. This need is particularly relevant in the context of the CSO registration process, which lacks a meaningful mechanism for appeals.

An ideal long-term outcome would involve Syria formalizing an ombuds office within the People's Assembly, which is recognized as the closest approximation of representative governance at the national level. However, the meeting schedule of the People's Assembly is already falling behind al-Sharaa's promised schedule.[260] Given the uncertain and delayed trajectory of this body, it is more realistic to pilot such a mechanism within MoSAL, which has demonstrated greater openness to working with civil society actors.

At its core, an ombuds institution provides citizens and organizations with a neutral mechanism for raising concerns, appealing administrative decisions, improving government accountability, and facilitating active consultation.[261] In Syria, such a mechanism could help address one of the most persistent weaknesses in the current CSO environment: the absence of meaningful dispute-resolution and appeals procedures surrounding registration, funding approvals, and operational permissions. This type of institution is particularly valuable during periods of political transition, when legal frameworks remain fluid and trust in state institutions is still developing.

Comparative experience suggests that ombuds institutions are most effective when they combine formal investigatory powers with active public engagement. Turkey, for example, maintains a

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[260] "Will Syria's Parliament Meet on Sharaa's Timeline?," *Asharq Al Awsat*, (23 April 2026).

[261] Teresa Anjinho, "The Role of Ombudsman Institutions in Supporting Civil Society Engagement," *European Ombudsman*, (22 April, 2025).

comparatively strong ombuds institution and is a member of The Association of Mediterranean Ombudsmen, of which the Arab League is an observer. These practices help increase institutional visibility, improve responsiveness to citizen concerns, and build public trust in administrative processes. However, establishing an ombuds office alone is insufficient. As the Council of Europe has noted, such institutions must actively make themselves visible and accessible, particularly in countries with substantial rural and minority populations.[262]

V. Chapter Conclusion

As Syria enters the next chapter of its history, civil society actors—headquartered domestically and internationally—will serve as key shapers of the nation's physical and social fabric. While the transitional administration has publicly embraced the importance of CSOs, a significant gap remains between these declarations and the practical realities organizations face on the ground, making the current moment a significant opportunity to charter a new social contract between the state and these independent institutions.

The five recommendations presented in this section provide an incremental, mutually reinforcing framework for CSO inclusion and operational ease. By documenting registration timelines and outcomes through the Civil Society Support Room, CSO actors gain concrete insights into patterns and can tailor their pressure tactics. Broader advocacy should be accompanied by coordinated efforts to shape the creation of the new civil society law, the enforcement of a prior-notification system, and any other policies that address the shortcomings of the Associations Law of 1958. These changes are expected to come with stronger audit requirements, making it important to bring CSO staff and ministry officials together to

[262] Naomi Creutzfeldt, "Panel 2: The Ombud, Citizens and Democratic Participation," *Council of Europe*, (accessed 3 May 2026).

develop common technical and interpersonal understandings. The two final recommendations build further bridges between government and civil society, while still bolstering CSO independence in the face of MoFA and MoSAL control. A dedicated platform offers an opportunity for civil society organizations to institutionalize shared positions, while piloting an ombuds institution within MoSAL would provide much-needed avenues for dispute resolution.

Chapter 5. Reintegration of Syrian Refugees and IDPs

Zubaida Qaissi

I. Introduction

The displacement of Syrians since 2011 has been one of the largest humanitarian crises in recent history.[263] Of Syria's pre-war population of 21 million people, more than half have left their homes.[264] There are 5.5 million Syrian refugees[265] still dispersed across 130 countries.[266] Within Syria, there are 7.4 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) who have been forced to leave their homes and find refuge elsewhere in the country.[267] As with any displaced population, return has long been a dream for these Syrians. When Assad's regime fell, the possibility for Syria to recover from over a

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[263] John Balouziyeh, *Hope and a Future: The Story of Syrian Refugees*, Time Books (2017), p. 16; "Syria Refugee Crisis Explained," USA for UNHCR, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, March 13, 2025, https://www.unrefugees.org/news/syria-refugee-crisis-explained/.

[264] Radwan Ziadeh, "Syria's Demographic Changes Buttress Assad's Authoritarianism," *Arab Center Washington DC*, March 1, 2019, https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/syrias-demographic-changes-buttress-assads-authoritarianism/.

[265] "Refugee Statistics," USA for UNHCR, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, April 2025, https://www.unrefugees.org/refugee-facts/statistics/.

[266] "Syria Refugee Crisis Explained," March 13, 2025.

[267] "Syrian Refugee Crisis: Aid, Statistics and News," USA for UNHCR, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, June 2025, https://www.unrefugees.org/emergencies/syria/.

decade of civil war presented a renewed opportunity for the displaced to realize that dream.

The obstacles to such a return remain immense. Consider Syria's continued instability, decimated infrastructure and weakened economy, and the uncertainty for displaced Syrians balancing the risky question of return with their precarious legal and financial statuses in exile. Yet, despite these concerns, the majority of displaced Syrians – 80 percent by one UNHCR survey – have loudly voiced their longing to return home.[268] These Syrians remain proudly invested in contributing to their homeland's needs and rebuilding the nation.[269] Any policy plans that aim to rebuild Syria with the goal of good governance must consider the role of the displaced in such a nation-rebuilding project, and so must tackle the challenges that returnees face to make their long-term integration possible.

II. The State of Displacement and Return Today

Displacement has driven Syrians away from their home in diverging directions, most of which have proven to be extremely precarious contexts. For those who escaped through the borders and sought refugee protection, more than half landed in neighboring countries, namely Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey,[270] where their legal

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[268] "Repatriation Explained: Why Syrian Refugees Are Voluntarily Returning," USA for UNHCR, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, March 12, 2025, https://www.unrefugees.org/news/repatriation-explained-why-syrian-refugees-are-voluntarily-returning/.

[269] For example, see Maha Yahya, Jean Kassir, and Khalil el-Hariri, "Unheard Voices: What Syrian Refugees Need to Return Home," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, April 16, 2018, pp. 39-40.

[270] "How Many Syrians Have Returned Home One Year since the Fall of Al-Assad?" Al Jazeera, Al Jazeera, December 8, 2025, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/12/8/how-many-syrians-have-returned-home-one-year-since-the-fall-of-al-assad.

status is precarious and opportunities are severely limited.[271] Many report being unable to afford their living needs and requiring humanitarian assistance,[272] with as much as 90 percent of Syrians in Lebanon and Turkey and 93 percent of those in Jordan reporting financial difficulties and requiring humanitarian aid to survive.[273] Most Syrian refugees in these countries also struggle with a lack of access to educational and job opportunities and limited social and governmental services,[274] with as many as 750,000 school-aged Syrian refugee children in Turkey, Jordan, and Lebanon lacking access to formal education due to "barriers such as child labor, enrollment requirements, language difficulties, and a lack of affordable transportation."[275] This vulnerable position has exposed Syrian refugees to further risks including child labor, gender-based violence, and other possibilities for exploitation.[276] IDPs, despite being geographically close to their homes, remain numbered at over six million.[277] Most live in or near major cities such as Damascus's Rif Dimashq (suburbs of Damascus), Aleppo, and Idlib and report similarly insecure conditions.[278] The persistence of IDPs' displacement, in addition to new internal displacements after

[271] "Syria Refugee Crisis Explained," USA for UNHCR, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, December 1, 2025, https://www.unrefugees.org/news/syria-refugee-crisis-explained/#WhatisthecurrentsituationinSyria.

[272] "Syrian Refugee Crisis: Aid, Statistics and News."

[273] "Syria Refugee Crisis Explained," December 1, 2025.

[274] Ibid.

[275] "Education for Syrian Refugee Children," Human Rights Watch, Human Rights Watch, Accessed May 16, 2026, https://www.hrw.org/tag/education-syrian-refugee-children.

[276] "Syria Refugee Crisis Explained," December 1, 2025.

[277] "How Many Syrians Have Returned Home One Year since the Fall of Al-Assad?"

[278] Ibid.

December 2024,[279] demonstrates that the end of the Assad regime is only the first of many steps in the process of return and reintegration for the displaced.

Nonetheless, many Syrian IDPs, as well as a sizable number of refugees, have already begun to return. Between December 2024 and June 2025, more than a million refugees returned from neighboring countries such as Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan, and nearly two million IDPs returned to their hometowns.[280] Most refugees have been returning to Aleppo, Homs, and Rif Dimashq while IDPs have been returning to Aleppo, Idlib, and Hama.[281] This indicates that the displaced population has been largely urban and can be vital to rebuilding the major cities of Syria.

III. Why Focus on Return

The return of displaced Syrians poses a generative challenge and a key to the rebuilding of post-Assad Syria.

Critically, most Syrians want to return. Working toward ameliorating conditions on the ground in Syria and facilitating such returns is a necessary step in healing after decades of political violence, an authoritarian suffocation of political life, and civil strife. Some may also be forced to return. There were still tens of thousands of Syrians seeking asylum in the European Union and the United Kingdom by December 2024. Those applicants' claims of fear of persecution are no longer considered applicable, as in the case of the EU's December 2025 declaration to Syrian asylum applicants

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[279] "Annual Country Report 2024: Syrian Arab Republic," World Food Programme, World Food Programme, March 2025, https://www.wfp.org/operations/annual-country-report?operation_id=SY03&year=2024#/33423.

[280] "Syrian Refugee Crisis: Aid, Statistics and News."

[281] "How Many Syrians Have Returned Home One Year since the Fall of Al-Assad?"

indicating that "opponents of al-Assad and military service evaders 'are no longer at risk of persecution.'"[282] Others have a tenuous legal status as refugees, which will likely eventually lead to return, voluntarily or otherwise. Although Syrian refugees in Lebanon and Jordan are granted protections by the UNHCR against refoulement, Lebanon and Jordan do not offer further protections to refugees such as the rights to freedom of movement, protection, and work given they are not signatories to the United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees.[283] Syrian refugees in these countries are left feeling unwelcome and unsupported, which is not a baseless reaction as this legal lacuna is known to exist partially in order to prevent the integration of refugees into these host countries and to ensure they leave eventually.[284]

Beyond its inevitability, return is vital to rebuilding, because returnees have long expressed an interest in going back to a Syria to whose growth and development they can contribute on the basis of active political participation and nation-building. Interviews with returnees have demonstrated that these sentiments proliferate. Al-Jazeera reported about a management administration professional from Damascus, who described "feeling 'like I have never left Syria before, with one difference, the feeling of belonging to this country, to this nation, this land.'"[285] He continued to express a common theme across many such narratives: "When the regime fell, I knew that relief had come, the bombing had ended, and the time was near for us to return to our homes, even though they were destroyed and demolished. We would return and rebuild them."[286]

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[282] Ibid.

[283] Yahya, Kassir, and el-Hariri, 11.

[284] Ibid, 11.

[285] "How Many Syrians Have Returned Home One Year since the Fall of Al-Assad?"

[286] Ibid.

These issues, fundamental aspects of citizenship and cohesive nationhood, were denied to many who were displaced due to the former regime's repression. Returnees are now enthusiastic to jump at the opportunity to become part of a new Syria promising good governance. When surveyed in 2018, participants in a Carnegie Endowment for International Peace study on Syrian refugees in Lebanon and Jordan expressed an interest in not only returning home but also in actively participating in a new political vision for Syria that mends its war-inflicted wounds and the breakdown of Syrian society and its state.[287] Syrians interested in return insist that they want to see inclusive and democratic governance for all Syrians regardless of sectarian or ethnic identity to prevent any further fragmentation,[288] a new political culture in Syria that adheres to the values of freedom, equality, justice, and the rule of law, and robust mechanisms for postwar reconciliation and building national unity and coexistence.[289]

Syrians returning to a post-Assad Syria are enthusiastic to rebuild their homes and are feeling a sense of belonging for the first time, motivating them with eagerness to participate in Syria's future. They are a resource to Syria, and so conditions in Syria must make their return and reintegration possible to facilitate this as a reciprocally beneficial process. Furthermore, displaced Syrians have an important role to play in the processes of transitional justice, with many holding personal connections and testimonies which can strengthen the process of making sense of the damage of the war in order to heal from it.

Overall, returning Syrians can rebuild social bonds and trust and reinvigorate diverse communities' connections beyond sectarian divides, only strengthening the goal of open political culture and

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[287] Yahya, Kassir, and el-Hariri, pp. 40-41.

[288] Ibid.

[289] Ibid, 39-40.

participation. This can pay off in the long run in increased social cohesion and stability, which will bolster efforts to rebuild Syria's infrastructure and socioeconomic landscape.

IV. Conditions in Syria and Challenges to Return

Although Syrians within and outside the country have largely expressed hope since the Assad regime was ousted in December 2024, they remain anxious about the future, in regard to both restoring living conditions in the short term and successfully transitioning to a model of good governance in the long term. The majority of refugees are invested in return, but only 27 percent have been making immediate plans to return.[290] Instead, most are waiting to see more stability and resources on the ground, unable to commit to returning when the possibility of renewed displacement looms.[291]

A. Infrastructure, Housing, and Living Conditions

Syria's infrastructure and economy have been devastated by the civil war. Just between 2011 and 2016, according to the World Bank's estimates, Syria's cumulative losses in gross domestic product (GDP) were USD 226 billion, about four times its GDP in 2010.[292] Basic resources like electricity and running water are still not securely available to residents,[293] with Syria's energy sector continuing to fall short of meeting residents' needs, resulting in electricity blackouts during which only economically able Syrians can utilize a generator, a costly investment for most.[294]

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[290] "Repatriation Explained: Why Syrian Refugees Are Voluntarily Returning."
[291] Ibid.
[292] Yahya, Kassir, and el-Hariri, p. 6.
[293] "Repatriation Explained: Why Syrian Refugees Are Voluntarily Returning."
[294] Heba Gowayed, "Refugees Return to Syria: Challenges and Uncertainties," *Arab Center Washington DC*, August 1, 2025, https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/refugees-return-to-syria-challenges-and-uncertainties/.

Syria today faces massive housing shortages and infrastructure and service gaps. According to the UNHCR's reporting in December 2025, living conditions in Syria are still extremely fragile, with housing, schools, and basic services such as water systems and health facilities suffering great damage or being stretched beyond capacity.[295] For those who have already returned from displacement, many are arriving in homes and neighborhoods that are not inhabitable.[296] Some displaced Syrians may also be returning to find their homes destroyed and uninhabitable[297] or their properties claimed by others.[298] Returnees who cannot live in their old homes face unaffordable rents in addition to generally high living costs.[299] As a result, some Syrians, including returnees, have resorted to living in tents, makeshift shelters, and damaged buildings.[300]

B. Work and Educational Opportunities

The UN has reported that Syrian returnees continue to face challenges related to access to gainful employment and schooling.[301] Even when jobs are available, the salaries are not sufficient to support the cost of living.[302] The education system is struggling too, with over 7,000 schools left partially or completely destroyed and over 2 million children out of school.[303] Some returning children's educational history has also been inconsistent due to cost and lack of access (whether in Syria during the conflict or abroad where their

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[295] "Syria Refugee Crisis Explained," December 1, 2025.
[296] Ibid.
[297] "Repatriation Explained: Why Syrian Refugees Are Voluntarily Returning."
[298] Yahya, Kassir, and el-Hariri, p. 6.
[299] "Repatriation Explained: Why Syrian Refugees Are Voluntarily Returning."
[300] Gowayed.
[301] "Repatriation Explained: Why Syrian Refugees Are Voluntarily Returning."
[302] "How Many Syrians Have Returned Home One Year since the Fall of Al-Assad?"
[303] "Syrian Arab Republic: Education," UNICEF, United Nations Children's Fund, 2026, https://www.unicef.org/syria/education.

education is not guaranteed).[304] The UN reports that nearly half of all Syrian refugees are under 18, so education will be essential to what returnees and projects to rebuild Syria need.[305]

C. Ongoing Violence

Importantly, Syria has not yet quelled all violence and secured safe living conditions for its residents, a fact which concerns long-time residents and returnees alike. Violence between Syrian factions and from other geopolitical actors has persisted[306] and Unexploded Ordinances (UXOs), such as remnant landmines, continue to cause immense fear in Syria.[307] Much of the post-December 2024 violence has caused new displacements (up to one million new IDPs by early 2025) and disrupted access to humanitarian and basic services.[308]

V. Key Concerns for Return and Policy Recommendations:

A. Legal Risks for Asylum Seekers and Preventing Coerced Return/Refoulement

Refugees may be hesitant to commit to returning to Syria with the threat of losing their legal status abroad, a safety net which they require while the situation is still unstable in Syria. This fear of a new displacement is palpable. To facilitate long-term return, the chance to visit home without losing status can help displaced Syrians make more viable return plans by first learning about the conditions on the ground and checking on their former homes. In fact, the UNHCR reports that 60 percent of surveyed Syrian refugees expressed that

[304] Gowayed.
[305] "Syria Refugee Crisis Explained," December 1, 2025.
[306] Ibid.
[307] Gowayed; "Syria Refugee Crisis Explained," December 1, 2025.
[308] "Annual Country Report 2024: Syrian Arab Republic."

such visits would help them with their decision to return long-term.[309]

Most importantly, return must remain a voluntary choice that honors their right to freedom of movement. As the UNHCR asserts, return is a "fundamental right of refugees, and all returns must be voluntary, safe and dignified."[310]

Policy Recommendation: Countries hosting Syrian refugees must guarantee that they will not lose their refugee status should they choose to visit Syria to check on the conditions on the ground and their former homes. This can take the form of Turkey's "Go and See" program for Syrian refugees, which allows one member in each Syrian refugee household to make three temporary visits to Syria before committing to permanent return.[311]

B. Long-Term Reintegration Efforts for IDPs and Refugees' Specific Needs

As IDPs and refugees seek return from different and particular circumstances and to a wide range of home environments, their needs for return and reintegration will vary, so a diverse approach to common and divergent needs will set up the right foundation for their return. Some common needs nonetheless include healthcare (including mental healthcare), housing and services, and safe and stable livelihood.

Many organizations, especially the UNHCR, have already begun offering services to vulnerable Syrians including returnees, such as providing transportation support at border crossings, one-time cash

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[309] "Repatriation Explained: Why Syrian Refugees Are Voluntarily Returning."
[310] Ibid.
[311] Omar Kadkoy, "'Go and See' to Return: Turkish Policy and Syrian Reality," *Heinrich Böll Stiftung - Istanbul*, April 15, 2025, https://tr.boell.org/en/2025/04/15/go-and-see-to-return-turkish-policy-and-syrian-reality.

grants that help returning families as they arrive home, and short-term shelter and household necessities, in addition to legal assistance and help repairing homes.[312] The UNHCR has also set up community centers throughout Syria which receive returning families and identify their needs and connect them with the resources they require.[313]

Policy Recommendation: Expanding programs like the aforementioned UNHCR's through instating formal collaborations between such organizations and the new Syrian state, as well as host countries from which some refugees may return, can streamline the transition for displaced Syrians' return and reintegration.

C. Documentation, Housing, Youth

(1) Documentation

Many displaced Syrians' national documentation and travel paperwork may be expired or missing, while some may also be returning with their children who might not have any Syrian documents.

Policy Recommendation: Offering free and accessible legal services to returnees to obtain their civil documents, proof of identity papers, and/or passports will help them feel less precarious. This can also be a symbolic gesture which reinstates a sense of belonging.

(2) Housing

For those who have lost their original homes, whether they have been destroyed or taken over by others while they have been away, securing documentation of their ownership of their property and/or

[312] "Syrian Refugee Crisis: Aid, Statistics and News."
[313] "Repatriation Explained: Why Syrian Refugees Are Voluntarily Returning."

financial support in rebuilding their homes can set them on a path toward a greater sense of stability.

Policy Recommendation: Offering legal support to those seeking to regain ownership of their homes will allow returnees to begin the process of settling back home. While they await these legal proceedings, securing short-term safe and comfortable housing that is integrated in their original communities and offered at a feasible price can ensure a smoother transition as well.

(3) Focus on Youth

With approximately half of all Syrian refugees being under 18,[314] a substantial number of returnees may be youth who have grown up only knowing war, conflict, and displacement and will require great support for their health and development.

Policy Recommendation: This generation of returnees will benefit from an expanded educational curriculum designed for various degrees of academic and linguistic skills and community-building programs which aim to integrate them into a new safe Syria to which they can feel proud and empowered to belong.

D. Community Building

Return to a country fractured by sectarian violence and civil strife, much as the situation has changed since December 2024, is both an opportunity to mend the breakdown of Syrian society and still a painful and fraught process in which old traumas and divides flare up. Building cohesion and encouraging the re-forming of communities as displaced Syrians return will be vital to the larger project of rebuilding Syria.

Policy Recommendation: Community building and civil and political participation must be emphasized as desired and supported

[314] "Syria Refugee Crisis Explained," December 1, 2025.

steps by the current regime. Communicating and demonstrating commitment to good governance and transitional justice, updating displaced Syrians about current conditions and plans for their amelioration, and clearly outlining initiatives for promoting care networks and communal participation will encourage displaced Syrians to consider return with less doubt and greater clarity.

E. Return as Long-Term and Continual

Given the difficulties in committing to return, displaced Syrians will likely have to make multiple returns before they permanently settle back home. This is consistent with many other historic displaced populations. For example, it took nearly ten years after the end of the conflict in Bosnia and Herzegovina for one million refugees and IDPs to return home.[315] As with many other historic migration trends, households tend to stagger their migration, beginning with one family member who can go and begin laying the groundwork for the rest of the family to migrate too.[316]

Policy Recommendation: Long-term reintegration for displaced Syrians will require the Syrian government and refugees' host countries to support displaced Syrians making multiple returns (such as through the aforementioned "Go and See" programs as well as financial assistance) to begin to rebuild their lives at home and reform their relationships, community ties, and political and social identities before they can return durably.

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[315] Samuel Davidoff-Gore and Susan Fratzke, "The Complicated Reality of Syrians' Return," *Migration Policy Institute*, December 2024, https://www.migrationpolicy.org/news/post-assad-returns-syria.

[316] Kara Ross Camarena and Nils Hägerdal, "When Do Displaced Persons Return? Postwar Migration among Christians in Mount Lebanon," *American Journal of Political Science* 64 no. 2 (2020): 223–39. https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.12500.

VI. Chapter Conclusion

The return of Syria's displaced population is not a dream deferred to future generations; it is a prerequisite to Syria's stability, recovery, and renewal. The roughly 13 million Syrians who remain displaced, internally and abroad, represent nearly half of the pre-war population,[317] and their reintegration will determine whether Syria rebuilds as a coherent state or one ready to fall apart once again. In addition to the aforementioned recommendations, durable return is mutually dependent on progress documented throughout this report: restoring basic administrative services, enforcing property rights through credible legal institutions, providing security that minority communities can trust, and building economic conditions that make return viable.

[317] Radwan Ziadeh, "Syria's Demographic Changes Buttress Assad's Authoritarianism," *Arab Center Washington DC*, March 1, 2019, https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/syrias-demographic-changes-buttress-assads-authoritarianism/.

Chapter 6. Rebuilding Digital Public Infrastructure

Judah Guggenheim

I. Introduction

Syria faces reconstruction needs at an immense scale. One regional official interviewed by the Carnegie Endowment put the challenge plainly: "We must rebuild the state before we can rebuild the country."[318] The civil registry is suspended, the banking system is barely functional, education systems are fractured and incomplete, and DDR programs have no joint data platform. Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI) — consisting of a foundational layer of digital identity, a middle layer of interoperable data exchange, and an application layer to facilitate government services — is the missing connective tissue of Syria's recovery. Without it, sector-by-sector investments in government programs, economic opportunities, schools, and military integration will underperform or fail entirely. With a comprehensive national DPI framework, every reconstruction dollar will go further. The heavy institutional work of building ministries, civil service, administrative systems, and inclusive democracy is still to come, but actual governance can come much more imminently through incremental steps: security coordination, provision of government services, and economic rebuilding. DPI can facilitate each of those steps.

The section proceeds as follows. After situating Syria's conflict and current governance reality, it explains what DPI is and why

[318] Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2025.

Estonia's experience building a digital state from a post-authoritarian blank slate is the most instructive model available. It then argues for Syria's adoption of the Estonian DPI framework, specifically looking at four domains where the evidence for impact is strongest: governance, economic recovery, education, and DDR. It addresses feasibility and the four most serious objections to the DPI-first argument. It closes with four concrete policy recommendations directed at American and international policymakers for the advancement of Syria's recovery through DPI.

II. Background

Much work remains to democratize, unify, and fully stabilize Syria. In the meantime, Syria must continue to improve its domestic infrastructure and capacity to rebuild. The heavy institutional work of building ministries, civil service, administrative systems, and inclusive democracy is still to come, but actual governance can come much more imminently through incremental steps: security coordination, provision of government services, and economic rebuilding.

The reconstruction gap is not only financial. Even if there was a coalition that had amassed the entire budget Syria would need to rebuild, it would be very difficult to transfer that money to the proper authorities and distribute it where it needs to go. There is not yet a coordinating mechanism that can align the dozens of donors, multilateral institutions, and national and corporate partners whose involvement will be necessary. This gap, along with the numerous sectors where infrastructure must be rebuilt, highlights the need for a comprehensive national Digital Public Infrastructure embedded in Syria's rebuilding process.

III. DPI: What It Is and Why It Matters for Syria

A. Defining DPI

Digital Public Infrastructure operates beyond a single technology or project. DPI serves the same function as physical infrastructure (such as roads, electricity grids, or water networks), enabling interactions between citizens, governments, and markets at a national scale. The G20's New Delhi consensus defines this function well: "[DPI consists of] shared digital systems that should be secure and interoperable and can be built on open standards and specifications to deliver and provide equitable access to public and private services at societal-scale and are governed by legal frameworks and enabling rules to drive development, inclusion, innovation, trust and competition and respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms."[319]

DPI architecture is typically described as three layers. The base layer is physical, consisting of fiber optic cables, mobile networks, data centers, and reliable electricity. This is the primary layer needed to operate digital technologies. Once this layer is in place, the identity and data layer can be built. This second layer consists of digital systems which provide identity confirmation, interoperability networks for government service databases to communicate securely and work together, and payment rails that move money and resources between parties. Above this layer are applications themselves. These are the services that governments (and other organizations) will actually use for practical purposes. Examples include e-government portals, social benefit payments, registries for personal and business (or land) records, and educational services. The main goal of a comprehensive DPI framework is to invest in foundational layers, a far more efficient

[319] G20 Digital Economy Ministers' Meeting Outcome Document and Annexes, G20 (August 2023).

national system than building siloed applications individually on top of fragmented infrastructure. With the proper digital foundations, each application built on them will inherit their shared interoperability, security, and scale.

Substantial evidence supports DPI's potential for economic impact. A 2023 UNDP/Dalberg study, which analyzed potential DPI effects across seventy low- and middle-income countries, projected that by 2030, DPI deployment could accelerate these countries' combined GDP to USD 19.2 trillion. This represents a growth two to three years faster than without DPI.[320] With specific regard to payment systems (which will be crucial in Syria for government services and foreign investment, hiring, or remittances), the GSMA found that mobile money contributes to a country's GDP by 1.7% on average, with effects rising in developing African countries to 4.1% (West Africa) or 5.9% (East Africa).[321] In Syria, where the entire economy must effectively be rebuilt, the multiplier effect of correctly laying foundational digital infrastructure could save billions of dollars.

B. Estonia as a Model for DPI Reconstruction

When envisioning a Syria rebuilt on DPI, one must look to the precedent set by Estonia. In 1991, Estonia emerged from Soviet rule with degraded infrastructure, limited working IT systems, and a GDP per capita roughly one-eighth of neighboring Finland's. Although countries offered to provide piece-meal technological services, the newly independent Estonian government instead chose to build digital infrastructure from scratch.[322]

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[320] "The Human and Economic Impact of Digital Public Infrastructure," United Nations Development Programme (July 2023).

[321] The State of the Industry Report on Mobile Money 2025, GSMA (April 2025).

[322] Michael Bitton, "The Estonian Miracle: E-Estonia and the Future of Digital Infrastructure," NYU School of Professional Studies (1 April 2025).

The Tiger Leap program, launched in 1996, connected 97% of Estonian schools to the internet by the following year. In 2001, X-Road was launched. This data exchange layer allows hundreds of government databases to query each other efficiently but securely, without a centralized database. That same year, the government issued a compulsory national digital ID card for citizens to easily access government systems. By 2024, Estonia became the first country to provide 100% of its government services available digitally. Today, 2,300 public and private services use X-Road, which processes 2.7 billion queries annually and saves an estimated 820 to 1,400 years of bureaucratic time per year.[323]

This enhanced efficiency will greatly serve Syria's rebuilding, as a country with limited resources or trained manpower. As Syria rebuilds the public services necessary to function as a thriving state, it can base its decisions on Estonia's infrastructure design. Syria has decades of global DPI lessons to draw from, and companies (like Estonia's own Cybernetica) exist with years of experience. Syria can contract these companies and potentially work to develop local talent. Additionally, Syria can rely on the core security feature of the Estonia model, by which no single database holds all citizen data and every query is logged and auditable by an individual citizen. This design makes mass surveillance significantly harder than in a centralized model, which will particularly resonate with Syrians concerned after Assad's surveillance history.

The applicability to Syria is imperfect but instructive. Syria is far larger and more diverse than Estonia, and it has suffered far worse destruction. While Estonia faced some digital repression under the Soviet Union, the Assad regime's legacy is far worse — deep inspection, internet shutdowns, and mass surveillance. However, the core lesson of Estonia holds: when faced with a genuine blank

[323] "E-Estonia, the Information Society since 1997," Centre for Public Impact (2 September 2019).

slate moment, as Syria faces now, the right response is to draw on technology and expertise to implement a comprehensive system of digital public infrastructure.

IV. DPI Applied: Four Domains of Impact

A. Good Governance: Services, Identity, and Civil Registry

Many large questions remain to be answered regarding Syria's future, including the extent of its democracy, the role its current government should play on the world stage, accountability for Assad's crimes, and regional interactions with Syria's neighbors. While those questions demand time and thoughtful consideration, there is much that can be done in the meantime to improve the lives of millions of Syrians. In simple terms, we can refer to this as good governance, with al-Sharaa's government providing services to elevate its people. In order to do so, however, the infrastructure needs to be in place to know who those people are and to distribute benefits to them. Syria currently cannot do this.

Since the fall of Assad in December 2024, civil registry services have been suspended nationwide, citing damage to data networks and electronic registration systems. In the northeast, registry offices have remained completely closed, with no reactivation in sight as of early 2026.[324] Without a valid identity document, a Syrian cannot access benefits, register a business, claim property, vote, or enroll a child in school. Lawyer Samer Al-Hassan, quoted in a Syrian Observer investigation, described the situation as a "wide legal void" unprecedented in modern Syria's history: "Without [civil registration], children are deprived of education and healthcare,

[324] "Northeast Syria: The Closure of Civil Registries and Its Impact on the Right to Legal Personality," Syrians for Truth and Justice (13 January 2026).

women lose access to marriage and inheritance rights, and families are unable to establish legal lineage."[325]

A national ID system, built on biometric enrollment and linked to a civil registry database, is the structural solution to this crisis. The necessary architecture is widely established, consisting of mobile enrollment units that can reach rural communities, diaspora outreach programs, and a federated database for records to be held and shared across governorates. This would enable government-to-person (G2P) benefit payments that reach their true targets; business registration, licensing, and tax collection; property restitution based on pre-war registries; voter registration for al-Sharaa's promised future elections; and real-person verification in government contracting to enforce anti-corruption policies. The "once-only" doctrine means that a citizen will only ever input their information once: government services would be able to securely access the correct citizen from the shared digital platform without needing their personal information. DPI would therefore facilitate the provision of vital services, while protecting the privacy of a population traumatized by the Assad-era surveillance.

B. Economic Recovery: Payment Rails and the Formal Economy

Syria's economy faces challenges particularly suited for the solution of DPI-enabled payments. The formal banking sector was hollowed out by the Assad regime's politicization and international sanctions, and it was essentially non-functional by the time the regime fell. In its place, a system of informal exchangers emerged known as the *ṣarrāf* networks, which operate through principles of *ḥawāla* — the system of transferring money without moving physical cash, based on trust and a network of brokers. These networks

[325] "'Wide Legal Void': Ongoing Suspension of Civil Registry Services Deprives Syrians of Rights and Turns Them into Victims," The Syrian Observer (15 September 2025).

gained popularity for their reputation as fast, flexible, and deeply trusted by the communities they serve. However, they are largely invisible to regulators, prone to capture by armed actors, and unable to generate the audit trails required by international donors and investors. As the PeaceRep report "From Cash to Code" put it, if shaped responsibly, this hybrid system can support stabilization; if neglected, "it risks reinforcing political capture, enabling illicit finance, and undermining international confidence."[326]

The strong need for comprehensive financial systems means that this digital infrastructure is already being built. SWIFT transactions resumed in June 2025 after thirteen years of Syrian isolation. Mastercard signed a memorandum of understanding with the Central Bank of Syria in September 2025, and Visa followed in December with a partnership to deploy EMV chip cards, digital wallets, and QR payment infrastructure. The Syrian Electronic Payment Platform is already live. Positive signs exist through these developments, but they simultaneously invoke a warning: if electronic payment rails continue to be built through individual partnerships, Syria will end up with a fractured economic system rather than a seamless electronic model. Fast interventions are necessary to ensure the economy is rebuilt through deliberately built DPI.

Recent evidence has been compiled from northeast Syria, where Mercy Corps Ventures and the digital platform HesabPay piloted a program using stablecoin — cryptocurrency pegged to the U.S. dollar. Between early and mid-2025, the program distributed stablecoin-based agricultural aid to 100 smallholder farmers across 10 communities in Al-Hasakah governorate, reaching an estimated 400 to 500 people. The results indicated that payment time fell from an average of 28 days, under the traditional informal money transfer

[326] Rebecca Thompson, From Cash to Code: Payment Rails as Peace Infrastructure in Syria, PeaceRep, University of Edinburgh (16 December 2025).

agents, to under one day using stablecoin. Costs fell by 60% and transaction traceability was 100%. Perhaps most tellingly, 72% of participants said they preferred stablecoin payments over cash for future programming.[327] The success of this pilot in Al-Hasakah, a diverse and under-resourced agricultural area, is proof of concept of digital payment systems across the country.

Ultimately, DPI will enable digital payment rails to serve as the circulatory system of reconstruction. Teacher salaries paid on time create incentives for teachers to show up. DDR stipends paid directly to verified individuals rather than faction commanders break a major corruption vector in demobilization programs worldwide. Diaspora remittances, a massive and largely untapped source of reconstruction capital, can be structured through programmable payment schemes that match donor funding or link transfers to investable purposes. The Refugee Law Initiative at the University of London has argued that DPI-enabled remittance structures could transform what are currently transfers to family members for immediate consumption into investable capital for Syria's rebuilding. Foreign firms and investors, who currently face opacity and unpredictability in Syrian markets, can enter more confidently when payment systems, business registration, and contract verification are digitally auditable. DPI will therefore serve as a force-multiplier for economic reconstruction.

C. Education: A National Virtual Classroom System

Syria's education crisis is a generational emergency. UNICEF estimates that one-third of schools have been damaged or destroyed,

[327] "Pilot Insights: How Stablecoins Transformed Aid in Syria—96% Faster, 60% Cheaper," Mercy Corps Ventures (16 October 2025).

and that approximately 2.4 million children remain out of school.[328] But the numbers alone do not capture the full problem. To the extent that Syrian children have been educated, millions of them have done so across at least five different national systems: Turkish, Lebanese, Jordanian, German, and what remained of Syrian curricula in various opposition and government zones. Their educational records are fragmented, untransferable, and often simply lost. Many refugee families have made explicit that they are hesitant to return to Syria unless their children can continue schooling without losing years of progress. Education continuity is thus both a welfare issue and a demographic precondition for return.[329]

Syria is not starting entirely from scratch. Assad passed Presidential Decree No. 34 in 2014, establishing an Electronic School framework that was the basis for some online learning.[330] A UNDP and E.U.-funded blended learning program for Syrian refugees in Turkey, running from 2019 to 2020, reached over 28,000 students and demonstrated that offline-capable, teacher-supported digital learning can work even in low-connectivity environments.[331] A study in 2024 of 320 Damascus University students found that digital learning platforms were positively correlated with improved

[328] "A New Chapter for Education in Syria: Back-to-Learning Campaign Presents New Opportunities to Millions of Students in Syria," UNICEF (21 September 2025).

[329] Fateh Shaban, "Integrating Returning Refugees into Syria's Education System: A Proposed Strategy Based on Post-Conflict Experiences," Damascus Institute (21 January 2025).

[330] "Syrian Cabinet Approves Draft Law on E-Government," Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA) (15 February 2017).

[331] "Coronavirus Forces Online Learning: A Project with Syrian Refugees in Turkey Might Already Set an Example," United Nations Development Programme (3 April 2020).

outcomes, a result particularly pronounced for women (who comprised 80 percent of higher education respondents).[332]

The DPI framework for Syria's particular education needs is a national virtual classroom system built on three components. First, a National Learning Management System (LMS): an offline-capable, blended-learning platform that connects students to curricula regardless of whether they are in Damascus, Al-Hasakah, or Germany, with teacher support built into the architecture rather than treated as optional. Second, a digital credential registry: an immutable, shareable record of all educational attainment that makes Syrian qualifications verifiable by employers, universities, governments, and international accreditation boards in whatever country a Syrian is living in. Third, a remote access layer that pushes high-quality content — including connections to global open educational resources, like those developed by elite American universities — to students in areas where physical school infrastructure does not yet exist. The entire system is linked to the civil ID layer, so that a student's educational record follows their identity regardless of the challenges of their physical location.

D. DDR and Military Integration: The Case for a Unified Data Platform

Disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration programs are crucial for Syria's stable reconstruction. Without them, the transition from war to peace has no institutional mechanism for processing the people who fought the war and uniting various armed factions. Syria presents an unusually complex DDR challenge. Standard DDR assumes a peace agreement and a defined actor list, but Syria has

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[332] Mohnnad Shbat, "Effectiveness of Digital Learning Platforms in Promoting Syrian Students' Digital Skills at the Faculty of Education, Damascus University," International Journal of Science Academic Research, vol. 5, no. 6 (June 2024), pp. 7590–7595.

neither. HTS, former Syrian Arab Army elements, Turkish-backed factions, local militias, and Iranian proxy remnants all require simultaneous processing and integration. The SDF, now formally committed to integrating into Syrian state institutions under the January 2026 agreement, presents its own challenge: tens of thousands of fighters whose absorption into national forces remains incomplete and contested. All of these actors answer to different authorities, bring radically different levels of trust toward any central process, and hold or formerly held territory across different zones.[333]

So far, the transitional government has pursued what the Middle East Council on Global Affairs has called "patchwork DDR": a de facto process of dissolving factions and absorbing fighters into new state forces, without a coherent policy framework or civilian reintegration component.[334] Former regime officers and fighters, particularly from the Alawite community, have been largely excluded from the new military without being given economic alternatives. The consequences became visible in March 2025, when former Alawite commanders formed armed militias that launched attacks on government forces, triggering retaliatory violence that killed an estimated 1,400 civilians in the coastal areas.[335] The Atlantic Council's June 2025 analysis of DDR in Syria is blunt: "The absence of DDR programs emerges as one of the most pressing challenges. [...] The current challenge is not only the lack of funding but also the

[333] Haid Haid, "Syria's Patchwork DDR: Holding a Transition Together with Loose Threads," Middle East Council on Global Affairs (1 February 2026).
[334] Ibid.
[335] "UN Syria Commission Finds March Coastal Violence Was Widespread and Systematic: Outlines Urgent Steps to Prevent Future Violations and Restore Public Confidence," Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (14 August 2025).

absence of operational structures capable of absorbing such programs."[336]

A unified data platform is not a substitute for political will or adequate funding, but it will greatly increase the ability for either to be effective. Such a platform would enable a biometric combatant registry that prevents double-registration and ghost stipends, historically the largest root of corruption in DDR programs; a weapons management database with serial-number logging of surrendered arms that makes disarmament claims verifiable; direct digital benefit payments to verified individuals, not faction commanders; cross-referencing against transitional justice documentation to screen those entering reconstituted national security forces; and an Integrated Case Record System (the IOM's existing standard) that links each ex-combatant digitally to vocational training, health services, community placement, and compliance tracking.[337]

Digital platforms are increasingly used for similar purposes in modern militaries, in the developing and developed world. Unified situational awareness is the precondition for command and control in any stable army, as it allows military and civilian leaders to know where their assets are and what they are doing. Modern joint military operations are built on the recognition that unified data platforms transform fragmented units into coherent, accountable forces. The same logic applies to DDR. Without a comprehensive data platform, Syria is left with a manual process lacking an audit trail and accountability. With such a platform, there exists a clear and verifiable system.

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[336] Muhsen Al-Mustafa, "Why DDR Programs Are the Missing Link to Syrian Stability," Atlantic Council (10 June 2025).

[337] Integrated Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Standards (IDDRS), United Nations (2006).

V. Feasibility

Syria's DPI does not yet have a precise price tag, but the available evidence supports cautious optimism on feasibility. DPI is exceptionally cost-effective relative to the infrastructure it enables: unlike a hospital or a highway, a well-designed identity and data exchange system is built once and then serves every sector simultaneously. For example, Estonia's total investment in X-Road and its e-governance ecosystem over thirty years amounted to several hundred million euros[338]. That investment now saves a significant amount annually in bureaucratic time alone and underpins a digital economy worth many times that in a contribution of 4-7% of total Estonian GDP.

For Syria, the financing architecture already exists in outline. The World Bank's ID4D initiative funds digital identity in fragile states.[339] The UNDP's 50-in-5 campaign provides technical assistance, open-source toolkits, and peer-learning networks for exactly this kind of zero-to-DPI buildout. The E.U.'s €620 million commitment announced in January 2026 includes institutional capacity building, a natural home for DPI investment. The IMF has offered payment system technical assistance. Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkey, and Germany each have both strategic stakes and existing financial relationships with Damascus.

The technology baseline is lower than Estonia's in 1991 but higher than sometimes assumed, and it is improving quickly. Syria's DPI must be designed for offline-first operation — allowing applications to function without constant connectivity and then to sync when networks become available — and for SMS-based fallback on identity verification. These are standard features of DPI

[338] "E-Estonia, the Information Society since 1997," Centre for Public Impact (2 September 2019).
[339] "Identification for Development (ID4D)," World Bank Group (2019).

deployments across sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia. Although the political fragmentation of Syria's internet is a complication, we can again look to the X-Road model which allows distributed databases in different governance zones to share specific, consented data without requiring a unified national network. With the existing technology available through decades of global DPI experience, and with international support networks for training and implementing such technology, it is quite feasible to institute robust DPI as the core of Syria's reconstruction.

VI. Policy Risks

A. Surveillance Recurrence

As noted, the Assad regime turned Syria's prior digital infrastructure into a system of mass control. The regime oversaw deep inspection of all internet traffic, state ownership of Internet Service Providers (ISPs), the Syrian Electronic Army's targeted hacking of dissidents and journalists, and foreign commercial surveillance technology. In the words of Access Now, Syria became "one of the most dangerous places in the world to use the internet."[340] Given this history, building a new national digital identity system carries real risk of replicating the tools of repression.

The response to this objection must be architectural as much as political. While political commitments to non-surveillance can be reversed, architectural design components are harder to undo. The federated model ensures that data remains distributed, no central database holds everything, and every query is logged and citizen-auditable. This makes mass surveillance through the system structurally harder than in a centralized model. The system could be further secured through an independent oversight body, codified in

[340] Kassem Mnejja and Marwa Fatafta, "Reclaiming Syria's Digital Future," Access Now (22 May 2025).

the constitutional declaration or in primary legislation, with international membership and genuine enforcement power. While some risk will ultimately remain, and these safeguards can be misused if political will erodes, the alternative is worse. Not only is the absence of strong DPI inefficient for Syria's recovery, it also enables tools of control: in the existing paper-based information void, those who cannot prove their identity cannot access their rights.

B. Political Fragmentation

An important objection holds that a comprehensive national DPI requires a unified political authority that Syria does not yet have. Even with Turkish-backed factions still operating in the north and HTS dominating the center and west, cross-zone coordination remains a real challenge — how can a national DPI system function across territories with different political frameworks?

The Estonian X-Road architecture was specifically designed to answer this question. When Estonia developed their DPI, others including Finland, Faroe Islands, and Iceland each maintained their own X-Road instance that interoperates with Estonia's. This cross-border DPI showed that interoperability does not require political unification. It requires technical standards and bilateral agreements on what data can be shared and under what conditions. The January 2026 agreement integrating the SDF into Syrian state institutions — reached after government forces retook most of the northeast — shows that cross-zone coordination is achievable even under contested political conditions.[341] Ultimately, some amount of political unification is required in Syria, even if different territories

[341] Haid Haid, "Syria's Patchwork DDR: Holding a Transition Together with Loose Threads," Middle East Council on Global Affairs (1 February 2026).

maintain measures of autonomy. DPI can be part of deepening that coordination without waiting for full political resolution.

C. Infrastructure Dependency

Syria faces daily power outages, slow internet, and damaged telecommunications infrastructure, all of which might suggest that digital services would fail, erode trust, and ultimately set the project back. This is a legitimate concern, and it is why the phasing of DPI layer implementation matters. Electricity and fiber connectivity are immediate prerequisites. The international community has already recognized this pressing need and are working to develop this physical infrastructure. For example, the SilkLink project — a public-private partnership launched by Syria's Ministry of Communications in May 2025 and awarded to Saudi Arabia's stc Group for USD 800 million — will install 4,500 kilometers of fiber-optic network connecting Damascus, Aleppo, and eastern Syria, establish data centers, and build a submarine cable landing station at Tartus, with full deployment expected within 24 months.[342] This demonstrates how DPI needs can themselves drive international investment: like fiber optic cables and internet connectivity, digital payment systems and infrastructure attract private capital in ways that purely humanitarian rationales do not.

D. Digital Exclusion

Rural communities, the elderly, and the illiterate may be underserved by a digital system that gates access to services behind a device or a literacy threshold. This is a genuine risk, and again we can look to Estonia's experience where digital services are universal in principle, but where digital literacy gaps have persisted. The response is not to avoid digital systems but to design them

[342] stc Group / Submarine Networks, "stc Group Signs Agreement to Implement SilkLink Project in Syria," February 2026; Enab Baladi, "Syrian Ministry of Communications Launches SilkLink Project," May 13, 2025.

inclusively from the start. This includes physical service points with trained human intermediaries (the "assisted digital" model), multilingual interfaces, and systematic digital literacy programs — potentially in partnership with organizations like the UN's Giga Initiative, which connects schools in low-connectivity settings. The UNDP's DPI playbook includes human-centered design as a core principle precisely because the technology alone is insufficient.[343]

VII. Policy Recommendations and Future Steps

A. Establish a Coalition of Public and Private Partners

A coordinated coalition is needed to finance and build Syria's DPI. On the public side, the U.S. should work through the World Bank, UNDP, and IMF to ensure that Syrian recovery funds, many of which already exist, pool multilateral financing, provide technical assistance, and coordinate with bilateral donors specifically for the development of comprehensive and national DPI. Germany, with its large Syrian diaspora and strong commitment to Syria's stabilization, is the natural European anchor. Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey each have strategic stakes and existing relationships with the Syrian government.

On the private side, Visa and Mastercard have already begun investing in and interacting with the Syrian government, and their participation in a broader DPI consortium should be formalized. Telecommunications firms — including those already involved in the Ugarit 2 fiber program[344] — should be recruited as infrastructure co-investors, with returns tied to expanded market access as Syria's digital economy grows. Technology firms with experience in DPI deployments in comparable contexts should be engaged as

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[343] "The Human and Economic Impact of Digital Public Infrastructure," United Nations Development Programme (July 2023).

[344] Kardo Roj, "Syria Partners with U.S. Tech Firm to Upgrade Internet Infrastructure," North Press Agency (3 May 2025).

implementation partners. These include Cybernetica (Estonia's X-Road builder), the Digital Impact Alliance, and regional players in the Gulf tech ecosystem.

Crucially, the coalition should be structured to prioritize Syrian-led technology development. Syria has technical talent in its diaspora and in its remaining domestic institutions. Support mechanisms and incentive structures to channel diaspora expertise back into Syrian DPI development should be built into the coalition's design from the beginning. To ensure that DPI built for Syria is truly owned by Syria and operated successfully in the long-term, there must exist: open-source architectures that do not create vendor lock-in; investment in training Syrian government officials and civil society technologists alongside the technical systems, like those programs run by the World Bank[345]; support for a Syrian digital public sector workforce that can operate and evolve these systems over time; and governance structures that give the Syrian government and Syrian civil society genuine authority over the system's development. International partners should explicitly commit to a transition-to-ownership timeline and to sustained technical assistance through that transition.

B. Commission a Full-Scale Feasibility and Costing Study

The most immediate gap in the evidence base is a rigorous, granular costing of what a Syrian DPI system would actually require in terms of budget, timeline, technical sequencing, and institutional design. This study should be led by one or more major U.S. think tanks in partnership with international technical institutions (Cybernetica/UXP, World Bank ID4D, UNDP 50-in-5) and Syrian civil society and technical experts. It should produce a public deliverable that includes sector-by-sector DPI cost estimates; a phased implementation timeline with clear milestones; an analysis

[345] "Identification for Development (ID4D)," World Bank Group (2019).

of financing options and gaps; and a risk assessment. This study would serve as the foundation for donor coordination and private sector engagement.

C. Security Commitments

Security commitments to DPI design must be established even before systems are built. Concretely, this means: the constitutional or legislative codification of an independent data protection authority with genuine enforcement power; citizen audit rights as part of the technical architecture, enabling any Syrian to see who has accessed their data; and an international advisory board with civil society and technical representation that monitors implementation. Access Now, the Citizen Lab, and the Digital Impact Alliance are among the organizations with the expertise and credibility to play a monitoring role. The United States should make adherence to these design principles a condition of its support and should use its diplomatic leverage to ensure that other major donors adopt the same standards.

D. Sequence Investments Deliberately

Not everything can happen at once, and the temptation to fund high-visibility sector projects like clinics, schools, and roads before the foundational information layer is in place will be strong. The U.S. and its partners should resist this temptation by explicitly conditioning reconstruction financing on DPI preconditions. Concretely, this means that no G2P benefit program should be funded before a digital payment rail is in place to deliver it. DDR program financing should be conditioned on an operational biometric combatant registry. Education reconstruction programs should be funded with a parallel investment in the credential registry to make those educational investments verifiable and portable. This sequencing discipline may be politically difficult, as there is a deep need for visible sector programs to provide services

to Syrians, but it is crucial to enabling long-term and efficient reconstruction.

VIII. Chapter Conclusion

This section has focused on four domains where the evidence for DPI's impact is strongest, but the application set is far broader. Health care platforms can share information across the 120 health actors operating in Syria, allowing the Ministry of Health to see and interact with its own health system and ensuring necessary medical access to patient histories in Syria's mobile clinic network. A digitized land registry, built using satellite imagery and digitized paper records, would enable property restitution claims to be processed at a speed and scale that manual systems cannot match. Water and energy management systems, built on DPI principles, could improve the efficiency of what remains of Syria's damaged infrastructure. Judicial and transitional justice record systems, linking the documentation of the Assad regime's crimes to vetting processes and accountability mechanisms, are another DPI application that serves both justice and security goals.

DPI is not, by itself, a complete solution to Syria's reconstruction challenges. However, it can provide the foundational architecture necessary to support other reconstruction initiatives and significantly enhance their effectiveness and reach. The scale of Syria's destruction requires robust information infrastructure to coordinate reconstruction efforts effectively. Rebuilding the country depends on the ability to identify citizens accurately, deliver payments reliably, verify the identities and eligibility of returning refugees, and integrate former armed factions into state institutions in an orderly manner. None of these objectives can be achieved efficiently without digital identity systems, interoperable data exchange frameworks, and secure payment rails.

Chapter 7. Engaging External Stakeholders through Diplomacy

[Author name withheld][346]

I. Introduction

Syria's post-Assad transition has reopened questions about the exertion of sovereign authority while neighboring states and major external actors retain enforceable stakes in a country's territory, security architecture, and political economy. Since late 2024, Damascus has regained diplomatic space and attracted conditional re-engagement from donors and regional investors. Yet the U.N. Security Council (UNSC) continues to treat Syria as a case in which political arrangements, humanitarian delivery, and counter-terrorism risks remain tightly coupled.[347]

This section argues that a central challenge for President Ahmad al-Sharaa and the new Syrian government is governing within an externally constrained operating environment in which different actors hold different kinds of leverage: some can impose immediate security costs, while others gatekeep finance, sanctions relief, and international legitimacy.

Syria's feasible operating space is the range of actions Damascus can take while preserving domestic authority and legitimacy

[346] Due to sensitive work-related engagements, the author of this chapter has requested that this chapter contribution remain anonymous.

[347] United Nations Security Council, Verbatim Record of the Security Council Meeting on the Situation in the Middle East (Syria), S/PV.10094 (January 22, 2026), https://docs.un.org/en/S/PV.10094.

without provoking neighbors or losing conditional external support. Sovereignty in post-Assad Syria is therefore contested and negotiated, not simply restored. Israel and Turkey can impose immediate kinetic, territorial, or coercive costs; the U.S., Europe, Gulf states, the U.N. system, and IFIs control slower but decisive leverage over finance, sanctions relief, recognition, and recovery mechanisms. Israel's equities center on denying hostile strategic capabilities on Syrian territory, while Turkey's focus is on preventing a Kurdish-led autonomous entity.

The central challenge is misalignment. External demands can be mutually inconsistent: one actor may press for rapid coercive integration in the northeast while another sees that approach as a trigger for instability or conditionality; one may prioritize fast investment in sectors another deems security-sensitive. When coordination fails, otherwise workable policies become politically toxic, appearing to concede to one external agenda while inviting punishment from another. Damascus's choices are therefore not simply whether to accept external demands, but whether and how to confront conflict-era political-economy structures without provoking domestic backlash or losing external confidence.

II. External Actors

A. Israel

Israel's approach to the new Syrian government is security-first threat denial, backed by a willingness to impose rapid costs outside negotiated channels. In July 2025, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said Israel had set a "clear policy" of demilitarization "south of Damascus, from the Golan Heights and to the Druze Mountain area," signaling a geographic conception of Israel's security requirement that extends well beyond the immediate border

zone.[348] Days earlier, Netanyahu and Defense Minister Israel Katz issued a joint directive ordering the IDF to "immediately attack" regime forces and weaponry within that area, underscoring a posture of active enforcement.[349]

Alongside coercion, Israel has explored conditional security arrangements focused on de-escalation rather than normalization. Reuters reported in September 2025 that Syria and Israel were inching toward a security deal, short of a peace treaty, under U.S. pressure,[350] following reported earlier direct contacts focused on security.[351] In parallel, Israel has held Syria's leadership responsible for cross-border incidents, implying a deterrence model that treats Damascus as accountable for actions originating on Syrian territory.[352]

While it has been less explicitly articulated in public, a core concern of Israeli policymakers has been maintaining Israel's strategic "freedom of operation" in Syria, particularly given ongoing direct military confrontation with Iran. In this context, the sparsely reported 2025 Israeli airstrikes linked to tensions around Turkish intentions to establish military airbases in eastern Syria[353] are an

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[348] Prime Minister's Office (Israel), "Statement by Prime Minister Netanyahu" (July 17, 2025), https://www.gov.il/en/pages/spoke-syria170725.
[349] Prime Minister's Office (Israel), "Joint statement by PM Netanyahu and Defense Minister Katz" (July 15, 2025), https://www.gov.il/en/pages/spoke-joint150725.
[350] Reuters, "Under US pressure, Syria and Israel inch toward security deal" (September 16, 2025), https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/under-us-pressure-syria-israel-inch-toward-security-deal-2025-09-16/.
[351] Reuters, "Exclusive: Syria and Israel in direct talks focused on security, sources say" (May 27, 2025), https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/syria-israel-direct-talks-focused-security-sources-say-2025-05-27/.
[352] Reuters, "Israel strikes Syria after projectiles fired, holds Sharaa responsible" (June 3, 2025), https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/israeli-military-says-two-projectiles-crossed-syria-towards-israel-2025-06-03/.
[353] Alma Research and Education Center, "Syria: Turkish Presence in Military Airports and Aerial Friction with Israel" (March 25, 2025), https://israel-

important indicator of Israel's willingness to act to project and maintain freedom of operation across Syria, despite the clear escalation risks.

B. Turkey

Turkey's approach to the new Syrian government is best understood as a bid to convert wartime influence into a durable post-conflict order in northern Syria, anchored in three priorities: preventing a Kurdish-led autonomous security entity on its border, enabling refugee return conditions, and ensuring a unified Syrian state that does not provide permissive space for PKK-linked actors. In official terms, Ankara has framed support for Damascus around counter-terrorism, reconstruction, and an "inclusive and unifying approach," while signaling that "full integration" is required for stabilization.[354] Turkish officials and security sources described January 2026's Damascus–SDF agreement as a "historic turning point" for restoring state authority and eliminating what Turkey defines as terrorism.[355] This is reinforced by President Erdoğan's public insistence that Kurdish forces in Syria must lay down arms and disband, casting the northeast settlement as both a Syrian state-building project and an extension of Turkey's domestic security agenda.[356]

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alma.org/syria-turkish-presence-in-military-airports-and-aerial-friction-with-israel/.

[354] Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "No: 9, 18 January 2026, Regarding the Ceasefire and Full Integration Agreement Announced in Syria," January 18, 2026, https://www.mfa.gov.tr/no_-9_-suriye-de-aciklanan-ateskes-ve-tam-entegrasyon-anlasmasi-hk.en.mfa.

[355] Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Joint Press Conference by Foreign Minister H.E. Hakan Fidan and Foreign Minister of Iran H.E. Abbas Arakchi" (January 30, 2026), https://www.mfa.gov.tr/disisleri-bakani-sayin-hakan-fidan-in-iran-disisleri-bakani-abbas-arakci-ile-ortak-basin-toplantisi--30-ocak-2026.en.mfa.

[356] Reuters, "Turkey's Erdogan says Kurdish forces in Syria must lay down arms and disband now," January 21, 2026, https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-

C. Jordan, Lebanon, and Iraq

Jordan, Lebanon, and Iraq approach the new Syrian government primarily through a shared "spillover" lens: managing refugee returns, border stability, and transnational security and criminal economies. Return dynamics sit at the center of this agenda. UNHCR reporting on Jordan documents substantial return movement through 2025, while also underscoring that sustainability depends on conditions inside Syria, not only policy preferences in host states.[357] Regional planning documents similarly frame returns as inseparable from early recovery, livelihoods, and basic services capacity in communities of origin.[358] Lebanon's emphasis on returns is especially politically charged, with organized voluntary return mechanisms reflecting both domestic pressure and the continued need for international oversight and safeguards.[359]

Border security is the second common pillar. For Jordan in particular, the Captagon economy and associated trafficking networks have been a persistent priority. The U.N. Office on Drugs and Crime's post-regime-change assessment notes disruption to large-scale Captagon manufacturing, while stressing the adaptive character of synthetic drug markets, implying that durable gains

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east/turkeys-erdogan-says-kurdish-forces-syria-must-lay-down-arms-disband-now-2026-01-21/.

[357] UNHCR, "UNHCR Jordan: Year-End Analysis on Returns to Syria (8 December 2024–31 December 2025)" (February 15, 2026), https://reliefweb.int/report/jordan/unhcr-jordan-year-end-analysis-returns-syria-08-december-2024-31-december-2025-0.

[358] IOM and partners, Syria Regional Refugee & Resilience Plan (3RP) 2026 (February 5, 2026), https://crisisresponse.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbdl1481/files/appeal/pdf/2026_Syria_Regional_Refugee_Resilience_and_Response_Plan_2026.pdf.

[359] UNHCR, "UNHCR-IOM Supported Organized Voluntary Return Programme" (Lebanon), accessed April 29, 2026, https://help.unhcr.org/lebanon/en/unhcr-iom-supported-organized-voluntary-return-programme/.

require sustained enforcement.[360] Iraq's border agenda is more tightly linked to counter-terrorism and cross-border militancy. U.N. Security Council deliberations continue to treat ISIS risks, detention-related instability, and governance vacuums in eastern Syria as salient, with direct spillover relevance for Iraq.[361]

D. GCC

GCC engagement with the new Syrian government is best understood as transactional stabilization: deploying capital, political normalization, and sectoral projects to shape Syria's recovery trajectory while mitigating regional spillover. Saudi Arabia's February 2026 investment agreements with Damascus illustrate this approach, spanning aviation, telecommunications infrastructure, and other reconstruction-adjacent sectors, and presented publicly as support for Syria's economic recovery and reintegration.[362] The scale and choice of sectors matter: the Saudi "SilkLink" fiber project, for example, is framed as strategic infrastructure intended to rebuild connectivity and position Syria as a regional data and transit hub.[363] However, without the necessary governance reforms and financial

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[360] UNODC, "Illicit 'Captagon' Manufacturing Disrupted following Regime Change in Syria, Says New UNODC Research Brief" (December 22, 2025), https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/press/releases/2025/December/illicit-captagon-manufacturing-disrupted-following-regime-change-in-syria--says-new-unodc-research-brief.html.

[361] United Nations Security Council, Verbatim Record of the Security Council Meeting on the Situation in the Middle East (Syria), S/PV.10094 (January 22, 2026), https://docs.un.org/en/S/PV.10094.

[362] Saudi Press Agency, "Saudi Arabia, Syria Sign Major Investment Agreements …" (February 2026), https://spa.gov.sa/en/N2506917.

[363] stc Group, "stc Group Signs Agreement to Implement SilkLink Project in Syria" (February 25, 2026), https://www.submarinenetworks.com/en/systems/asia-europe-africa/silklink/stc-group-signs-agreement-to-implement-silklink-project-in-syria.

mechanisms that enable this investment, the Syrian government also risks leaving significant money on the table.

Security spillovers are the second most common GCC driver. The Captagon economy, in particular, has become a Gulf-facing security and public health concern, and Gulf analysis increasingly treats action against trafficking networks as a test of Syrian state capacity and seriousness about regional responsibilities.[364]

At the same time, Gulf priorities are not identical. Recent analysis highlights a Saudi desire to position itself as a stabilizing anchor while limiting Iranian influence and managing competition from other regional actors, including Turkey, the UAE, and Qatar.[365] In practice, the GCC has fewer coercive levers than Israel or Turkey. It operates through investment, diplomatic recognition, and the credibility signals that can unlock broader donor and private-sector participation. For al-Sharaa, this makes the Gulf primarily an enabling constituency, but also a demanding one: Gulf capital will be sensitive to security conditions, corruption risk, and delivery credibility, and it can slow quickly if projects become politically toxic or operationally insecure.

E. Iran and Russia

Under Assad, Iran and Russia were pillars of regime survival: Tehran provided fighters and enablers, while Moscow supplied decisive air power and diplomatic cover. The Assad regime previously could rely on Iranian and Russian subventions alongside

[364] Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington (AGSIW), Khalifa Al Nahyan, "Rise of Captagon Trafficking in the Gulf" (analysis), https://agsi.org/analysis/rise-of-captagon-trafficking-in-the-gulf/.
[365] AGSIW, "Assad's Fall Prompts Initial Gulf Unity but Differences and Concerns Are Emerging" (2025), https://agsi.org/analysis/assads-fall-prompts-initial-gulf-unity-but-differences-and-concerns-are-emerging/.

war-economy revenues, a model that is no longer available to Damascus in the same form.[366]

For Russia, the center of gravity has narrowed toward protecting core equities, especially Tartus and Hmeimim, and converting a legacy intervention into a transactional relationship with the new authorities. Despite Assad's fall, Moscow retains leverage through basing, debt, and mediation, but with reduced bandwidth and a more limited appetite to underwrite reconstruction.[367] Russian official messaging has emphasized that basing is governed by interstate agreements and remains a matter for negotiation with the new leadership, signaling continuity of interest even as Moscow's role becomes more conditional and bargain-based.[368]

Iran's influence has been weakened substantially since Assad's fall. Tehran was forced to evacuate most assets and forces from Syria and is now viewed more suspiciously by Damascus, even as Iran seeks to preserve connective tissue to allied networks.

F. The U.S.

The U.S. approach to the new Syrian government is anchored in three priorities: preventing an ISIS resurgence, stabilizing the northeast through workable security arrangements, and shaping Syria's external alignment. In U.S. messaging at the Security Council in January 2026, Washington presented the new government's late-2025 decision to join the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS as a major

[366] International Crisis Group, "A Helping Hand for Post-Assad Syria," https://www.crisisgroup.org/cmt/middle-east-north-africa/syria/helping-hand-post-assad-syria.
[367] Samuel Ramani, "Russia's Enduring Grip on Syria," Royal United Services Institute (RUSI), November 2025, https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/russias-enduring-grip-syria.
[368] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, "Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's interview with Rossiya …" (December 29, 2024), https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1989678/.

shift and linked continued international support to credible follow-through on counter-ISIS and stabilization commitments.[369]

Sanctions policy illustrates both opportunity and leverage. The Treasury Department's May and June 2025 actions implemented broad Syria sanctions relief and termination of the prior Syria sanctions program, while explicitly retaining targeted designations against Assad-linked figures, human rights abusers, narcotics traffickers, terrorists, and Iran and its proxies.[370] The State Department's Syria advisory similarly emphasizes that relief is intended to support recovery while maintaining tools against designated actors and illicit finance.[371] An additional layer is the recognition of the importance of coordination. However, the U.S.-Israel-Iran war has revived questions about the durability and direction of U.S. commitments, increasing the risk that Syria policy could be reprioritized or reversed at speed.

G. Europe

European engagement with the new Syrian government has prioritized widening early recovery and diplomatic contact while keeping political and legal "snap-back" options if governance deteriorates. The European Commission's January 2026 "new chapter" framing set out a partnership agenda tied to a Syria-led transition, humanitarian needs, and economic recovery, explicitly

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[369] U.S. Embassy Syria, "Remarks at a UN Security Council Briefing on the Political and Humanitarian Situations in Syria" (January 22, 2026), https://sy.usembassy.gov/remarks-at-a-un-security-council-briefing-on-the-political-and-humanitarian-situations-in-syria-6/.

[370] U.S. Department of the Treasury, "Treasury Issues Immediate Sanctions Relief for Syria" (press release, May 23, 2025), https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/sb0148; and U.S. Department of the Treasury, "Treasury Implements President's Termination of Syria Sanctions Program" (press release, June 30, 2025), https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/sb0183.

[371] U.S. Department of State, "Sanctions and Export Controls Relief for Syria" (advisory, December 18, 2025), https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2026/03/Advisory-for-Syria-3.9.26.pdf.

linked to scaled E.U. financial support for 2025–26;[372] in parallel, the E.U. has stressed migration equities and accountability, declaring itself "committed to helping to create the conditions for safe, dignified, voluntary and sustainable returns to Syria"[373] and emphasizing protection of civilians and minorities and cooperation with U.N. mechanisms.

The U.K. has converged with this logic but placed a more overt political bet on engagement, welcoming al-Sharaa's April 2026 London visit as a "significant moment" in deepening the relationship.[374] For Damascus, Europe is therefore primarily a gatekeeper constituency: rarely coercive on its own, but able to unlock recovery finance, market access, and legitimacy, and decisive in shaping the wider donor and IFI (international financial institution) environment that determines whether early recovery becomes scalable.

H. Multilaterals and IFIs

For the new Syrian government, multilaterals and the IFIs are primarily legitimacy and delivery platforms, focused on humanitarian access, civilian protection, and demonstrable stabilization. The U.N. development system is positioning itself in the early recovery space between relief and reconstruction: UNDP

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[372] European Commission, "EU opens new chapter in its relations with Syria" (IP/26/61, January 8, 2026), https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_26_61.

[373] Council of the European Union, Council Conclusions on Syria (June 23, 2025), para. on returns, https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-10688-2025-INIT/en/pdf.

[374] Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, "We urge the international community to remain focused on supporting progress towards Syria's economic recovery and long-term stability: UK statement at the UN" (April 22, 2026), https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/we-urge-the-international-community-to-remain-focused-on-supporting-progress-towards-syrias-economic-recovery-and-long-term-stability-uk-statement-at-.

frames this around restoring basic services, livelihoods, and local administration, offering Damascus visible performance before larger reconstruction finance arrives,[375] while the U.N.'s country analysis stresses institutional fragility and service collapse, strengthening the case for incremental, monitorable interventions.[376] The IFIs are re-entering incrementally with safeguards, the World Bank through risk-managed delivery mechanisms for basic services and the IMF through technical assistance.[377, 378] For Damascus, this is both opportunity and constraint: IFI involvement can unlock broader confidence and pooled financing, but only if the government tolerates monitoring and transparency that may be politically difficult at home.

III. The Syrian Government's Operating Window and Core Risks

The permissive envelope is real but narrow. Syria has gained diplomatic space and early re-engagement, but its practical autonomy remains bounded by coercive neighbor equities and conditional external support. The key question is where constraints converge into feasible bargains, and where they collide in ways that shrink Damascus's room for maneuver.

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[375] UNDP, "Flash Update: Urgent Basic Services Needs and Early Recovery Priorities in Sheikh Maqsoud and Ashrafieh, Aleppo" (January 12, 2026), https://www.undp.org/syria/publications/flash-update-urgent-basic-services-needs-and-early-recovery-priorities-sheikh-maqsoud-and-ashrafieh-aleppo.

[376] United Nations in Syria, Common Country Analysis (2026, PDF), https://syria.un.org/en/download/205236/312773.

[377] World Bank, "World Bank Group Confirms Support to Syria's Recovery" (press release, November 19, 2025), https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2025/11/19/syria-world-bank-group-confirms-reengagement-plans-and-support-for-recovery.

[378] International Monetary Fund, "IMF Staff Concludes Staff Visit to Syria" (press release, February 25, 2026), https://www.imf.org/en/news/articles/2026/02/25/pr26062-syria-imf-staff-concludes-staff-visit-to-syria.

A. Where Constraints Converge: Expanding the Envelope

The clearest convergence sits in governance domains where multiple actors share functional interests and performance is visible. Border stability and suppression of illicit economies are the obvious examples. Jordan, Iraq, and GCC states want stronger Syrian border governance; UNODC's assessment that Captagon manufacturing has been disrupted gives Damascus an opportunity to convert political change into a durable capacity signal. Success would reassure neighbors, Gulf investors, and IFIs at the same time.

Early recovery and basic services are the second convergence zone. IFIs have signaled sequenced re-entry around basic services and safeguards, while the U.N. development system presents early recovery as a bridge between relief and reconstruction. Visible gains in electricity, water, and municipal services would strengthen al-Sharaa's legitimacy, provided Damascus accepts monitoring and fiduciary discipline that may be politically awkward at home.

A third convergence zone, albeit more fragile, is stabilization through workable arrangements in the north and northeast. The U.N. Security Council's press statement welcoming steps framed as supporting stability, territorial integrity, and integration shows the multilateral "reward structure" for progress on this file.[379] Turkey, the U.S., and Europeans differ sharply on sequencing and safeguards, but all have incentives to avoid a security vacuum that invites ISIS resurgence or renewed interstate escalation. The scope for agreement lies less in shared values than in shared risk management.

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[379] United Nations Security Council, "Security Council Press Statement on North-East Syria (SC/16293)" (February 12, 2026), reproduced via Security Council Report, https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/un-documents/document/sc-16293.php.

B. Where Constraints Collide: Traps That Can Shrink the Envelope Quickly

The first collision trap is the northeast settlement. Turkey wants the elimination of an autonomous Kurdish-led security order and meaningful command-and-control consolidation. Yet a coercive pathway risks instability and counter-ISIS setbacks that alarm Washington and European donors. Moving too slowly risks Turkish escalation; moving too hard risks governance breakdown and conditionality tightening.

The second trap sits in the south and in Israel's freedom-of-operation doctrine. Israel's stated demilitarization goals extend beyond the immediate border and are backed by rapid enforcement. For Damascus, the feasible path is verifiable threat reduction and disciplined border governance; the binding risk is that Iran-linked networks or strategic capabilities trigger Israeli action, chilling investment and early recovery.

A third trap is Israel–Turkey friction on Syrian territory. Israeli signaling that it will defend freedom of operation, including against developments linked to potential Turkish basing, creates an escalation vector in an already crowded theater. Because Turkey is a NATO member, incidents in Syrian airspace could widen quickly. Damascus has limited ability to control that escalation ladder.

The final collision trap concerns strategic economic alignment. The U.S. has shown that critical infrastructure choices can be treated as security questions, and therefore as triggers for pressure even amid broader engagement.[380] Gulf capital can widen Syrian room to maneuver, but its effectiveness depends on donor and sanctions

[380] Reuters, "Washington Presses Syria to Shift from Chinese Telecom Systems" (February 26, 2026), https://www.reuters.com/world/china/washington-presses-syria-shift-chinese-telecom-systems-2026-02-26/.

gatekeepers tolerating the sectoral and alignment choices embedded in investment packages.

IV. Policy Recommendations for the Syrian Government

A. Adopt a 12-Month Sequencing Package Built around "Credible Governance Wins"

Damascus can expand its operating envelope fastest in areas where multiple stakeholders converge and where performance is visible. Four deliverables should be prioritized.

Credible border governance. Establish a single empowered border coordination cell (customs, border police, intelligence liaison) with clear command lines and monthly public reporting on interdictions, seizures, and crossing throughput. Neighbors and investors use border discipline as a proxy for whether the state is consolidating authority rather than tolerating a fragmented coercive economy.

Anti-Captagon action with visible metrics. Move to sustained dismantling of supply chains. UNODC's assessment that Captagon manufacturing has been disrupted after regime change is a political opportunity, but it also implies illicit markets will adapt unless enforcement becomes routine and institutionalized.[381] Publish a quarterly dashboard (seizures, major arrests, asset freezes) and invite a technical monitoring role for UNODC to harden credibility.

Early recovery projects under transparent safeguards. The World Bank's re-engagement offers opportunities in basic services and institutional strengthening, structured through delivery

[381] UNODC, "Illicit 'Captagon' Manufacturing Disrupted following Regime Change in Syria, Says New UNODC Research Brief" (December 22, 2025), https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/press/releases/2025/December/illicit-captagon-manufacturing-disrupted-following-regime-change-in-syria--says-new-unodc-research-brief.html.

mechanisms that manage fiduciary risk. A small number of high-visibility projects (water pumping, clinics, municipal waste) should be designed for measurable outputs and third-party verification. UNDP's early recovery framing provides a ready template for packaging this as rapid stabilization rather than "reconstruction" rhetoric.[382]

Disciplined command-and-control in sensitive areas. The two most dangerous escalation vectors remain the northeast settlement and the southern theater. In both, the priority is predictable command discipline to prevent local spoilers from triggering Turkish or Israeli escalation, or a collapse of donor confidence.

B. Political Management: Safeguards as Sovereignty-Building

The domestic political risk is that transparency and monitoring are framed as external tutelage while livelihoods stagnate. The government should explicitly frame safeguards as a tool for preventing corruption, and in the long term potentially for recovering resources that corruption previously diverted. In practical terms, create a small "Delivery and Assurance Unit" attached to the President's office that interfaces with U.N. agencies and IFIs, standardizes procurement and reporting, and produces a single implementation dashboard for investors and donors. This aligns with IFI expectations that credibility and capacity precede scale.[383]

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[382] UNDP, "Flash Update: Urgent Basic Services Needs and Early Recovery Priorities in Sheikh Maqsoud and Ashrafieh, Aleppo" (January 12, 2026), https://www.undp.org/syria/publications/flash-update-urgent-basic-services-needs-and-early-recovery-priorities-sheikh-maqsoud-and-ashrafieh-aleppo.
[383] IMF, "IMF Staff Concludes Staff Visit to Syria" (press release, February 25, 2026), https://www.imf.org/en/news/articles/2026/02/25/pr26062-syria-imf-staff-concludes-staff-visit-to-syria.

C. Northeast: Integration as Governance, Not Humiliation

Turkey's threshold is substantive integration, but coercive implementation risks insurgency dynamics and counter-ISIS setbacks that alarm the U.S. and Europeans. A workable approach is a sequenced bargain: integrate border management, customs, and service delivery first; build joint command arrangements gradually; and avoid gestures that signal collective punishment. The Security Council's language on stability, territorial integrity, and integration provides the multilateral "reward structure" Damascus can cite when arguing internally for sequencing over coercion.[384]

D. Refugee Returns: Link Returns to Absorption Capacity

Returns are a shared neighbor pressure point, but premature or coercive return dynamics will destabilize Syria and trigger European and U.N. backlash. UNHCR and the regional 3RP consistently frame sustainable returns as dependent on conditions in Syria, including services and livelihoods.[385] Establish a returns framework that ties district-level return facilitation to basic service restoration and housing rehabilitation, and that is monitored through U.N. channels to avoid allegations of coercion.

V. Policy Recommendations for the International Community

A. Create a "Friends of Syria" Coordination Group

The binding constraint is often not a single red line but inconsistent external demands on Damascus. Syria is unlikely to take

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[384] UN Security Council, "Security Council Press Statement on North-East Syria (SC/16293)" (February 12, 2026), reproduced via Security Council Report, https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/un-documents/document/sc-16293.php.

[385] IOM and partners, Syria Regional Refugee & Resilience Plan (3RP) 2026 (February 5, 2026), https://crisisresponse.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbdl1481/files/appeal/pdf/2026_Syria_Regional_Refugee_Resilience_and_Response_Plan_2026.pdf.

politically difficult steps without coherent external expectations, with the U.S. as the central convenor. A Friends group should function as an operational sequencing mechanism, not a diplomatic photo opportunity.

Security equities should be aligned with recovery conditionality in a compact that avoids competing vetoes. Membership should include Syria, the U.S., the E.U./E3, the GCC, Turkey, Jordan, Iraq, and the U.N. (SRSG and OCHA/UNDP), with the World Bank and IMF as observers. Israel could participate through a parallel technical deconfliction track.

Workstreams should cover border security and counter-smuggling, stabilization and counter-terrorism, and early recovery, refugee returns, and integration. Syrian deliverables should be linked to reciprocal steps: sanctions calibration, project approvals, investment de-risking, and diplomatic engagement.

B. Proactive Diplomatic Re-engagement

A U.N. envoy with cross-pillar leverage over political, humanitarian, and early recovery coordination should be appointed urgently. The U.S. should also appoint a Syria envoy to provide policy leadership and cohere international expectations. European governments should accelerate re-opening embassies to support implementation and IFI engagement on the ground.

C. Establishment of a Discrete Israel–Turkey Deconfliction Mechanism

The emerging Israel–Turkey friction in Syria is a material escalation risk given Turkey's NATO status. A dedicated U.S. envoy would be well-placed to convene discrete bilateral engagement between Israel and Turkey that can help manage short-term escalation risks and begin working toward a long-term, mutually

acceptable settlement.[386] This could have the second-order effect of helping to mitigate the shared risk (as seen by this group) of re-established Russian and Iranian influence within Syria.

VI. Chapter Conclusion

Syria's post-Assad transition has opened diplomatic space, but al-Sharaa governs inside a permissive envelope shaped by coercive neighbor equities and conditional external support. Where constraints converge, progress on border control, illicit economies, and early recovery can expand operating room and build legitimacy. Where they collide, the northeast settlement, Israel's and Turkey's security doctrines, and strategic infrastructure choices create traps in which mis-sequencing can collapse support or trigger escalation. Syria's stability will therefore depend on external coordination as well as domestic consolidation. A Syrian sequencing package, matched by a Friends of Syria mechanism and a U.S.-brokered Israel–Turkey deconfliction channel, offers the best route to widening the envelope while containing the highest-order risks.

[386] James F. Jeffrey, "Syria at a Crossroads: U.S. Policy Challenges Post-Assad," Washington Institute for Near East Policy (February 10, 2026), https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/syria-crossroads-us-policy-challenges-post-assad.

Chapter 8. Leveraging Syrian Sanctions

John M. Balouziyeh

I. Introduction

Since 1979, Syria has been designated by the United States as a State Sponsor of Terrorism (SST), triggering a dense web of legal, financial, and diplomatic consequences under U.S. law—most significantly through the terrorism exception to the Foreign Sovereign Immunities Act (FSIA). Although the designation was originally premised on the Assad regime's support for violent non-state actors, its continued application is increasingly misaligned with present circumstances. The current Syrian government has publicly committed to defeating rather than supporting terrorism, raising serious questions about whether the designation remains consistent with the applicable statutory criteria and broader U.S. foreign policy objectives.

This section argues that Syria's SST designation should be removed on five interconnected grounds: (1) the factual predicates underlying the designation have fundamentally changed with the fall of the Assad regime; (2) the designation disproportionately burdens the Syrian people, who were the primary victims of the prior regime; (3) continued designation is incompatible with Syria's USD 216-USD 400 billion reconstruction needs; (4) the designation undermines Syria's stabilization, which in turn adversely impacts international security; and (5) delisting would create a pathway for a negotiated settlement that would provide victims with recoveries that the current regime of default judgments cannot deliver. This section proceeds in five parts, addressing the FSIA legal framework,

Syria's litigation exposure, the policy case for delisting, the mechanics of removal, and concluding recommendations.

II. The Foreign Sovereign Immunities Act: Legal Framework

Nations designated as SSTs are subject to a comprehensive set of restrictions under U.S. law, including prohibitions on foreign assistance, bans on defense exports, stringent dual-use export controls, and limits on access to U.S. financial institutions. SST designation also activates the FSIA's terrorism exception,[387] which strips a designated state of sovereign immunity and confers jurisdiction on U.S. courts to hear civil claims for personal injury or death caused by acts of torture, extrajudicial killing, aircraft sabotage, hostage taking, or the provision of material support for such acts, where those acts were committed by an official or agent of the foreign state acting within the scope of their duties.[388]

To invoke the terrorism exception, three additional conditions must be satisfied. First, the foreign state must have been designated as an SST at the time of the act or designated as a result of it, and must either remain designated when the claim is filed or have been designated within the six months preceding the filing.[389] Second, the claimant or victim must generally be a U.S. national, member of the armed forces, or a U.S. government employee.[390] Courts have also recognized derivative claims: a U.S. national who is the legal representative of a non-U.S. national victim may bring a claim for solatium or wrongful death on the victim's behalf. Third, the claimant must have afforded the foreign state a reasonable opportunity to arbitrate the claim.

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[387] Foreign Sovereign Immunities Act of 1976, 28 U.S.C. § 1605A (2024).

[388] 28 U.S.C. § 1605A(a)(1).

[389] 28 U.S.C. § 1605A(a)(2)(A)(i)(I).

[390] 28 U.S.C. § 1605A(a)(2)(A)(ii).

III. Syria's Litigation Exposure under the FSIA

Syria has been designated as an SST since 29 December 1979, making it the first nation ever listed.[391] It is one of only four currently designated states, alongside Cuba,[392] Iran, and North Korea. Since its designation, hundreds of civil actions have been brought against Syria in U.S. courts. Following the September 11, 2001 attacks, litigation increased substantially. From February 2011 through April 2026, U.S. courts entered 302 judgments against Syria totaling more than USD 31 billion,[393] the overwhelming majority—299 of 302, or 99%—in the U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia.

Under D.C. law, monetary judgments are enforceable for twelve years from entry and may be renewed indefinitely for successive twelve-year periods.[394] Syria therefore cannot simply "turn over a new leaf": judgments for acts attributed to the Assad regime will remain enforceable against the successor government regardless of how much the new government's behavior has changed. At least 186 additional cases filed since January 2001 remain pending. Three pending cases alone—including cases arising from the October 7, 2023 attacks—seek a combined USD 10 billion in damages.[395] Conservative estimates place the ultimate aggregate liability at USD 100 to USD 150 billion.[396]

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[391] "State Sponsors of Terrorism," Bureau of Counterterrorism, U.S. Department of State, available at https://www.state.gov/state-sponsors-of-terrorism.

[392] President Joe Biden removed Cuba from the list on 14 January 2025, but President Trump reinstated the designation hours after his second inauguration on 20 January 2025.

[393] Advanced data analytics search run by Lex Machina, LexisNexis (25 April 2026).

[394] "Report by the Director-General: Progress in the Elimination of the Syrian Chemical Weapons Programme," OPCW, EC-111/DG.2 (2 November 2025), p. 7.

[395] Serdar Dincel, "Syria joining US-led anti-ISIS coalition meeting 'marks a new chapter,' says US envoy," Anadolu Agency (10 February 2026).

[396] This figure represents the aggregate damages sought in publicly reported cases in which the amounts demanded are specified in the complaint or summons (as of

IV. Policy Grounds for Delisting Syria

A. Syria's Changed Behavior

The new Syrian government represents a material break from the Assad regime. High-level diplomatic engagement has culminated in a visit by President al-Sharaa to Washington in November 2025—the first visit by a Syrian head of state to the White House. The government has publicly reaffirmed its obligations under the Chemical Weapons Convention and signaled cooperation with the OPCW, including commitments to dismantle undeclared chemical weapons stockpiles remaining from the prior regime.[397] Syria's accession to the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS, which U.S. Envoy Tom Barrack described as "a new chapter in collective security,"[398] further demonstrates alignment with the international counterterrorism framework—a posture directly contrary to the conduct that originally justified the SST designation. These steps parallel the behavioral changes that led to the delisting of Sudan in 2020[399] and Libya in 2006.[400]

B. The Syrian People Should Not Bear the Prior Regime's Liabilities

During more than a decade of civil war, the Assad regime killed hundreds of thousands of Syrians, subjected many more to torture

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25 April 2026), on the assumption that Syria does not appear to defend the suits and that default judgments are entered in the amounts demanded.

[397] "Report by the Director-General: Progress in the Elimination of the Syrian Chemical Weapons Programme," OPCW, EC-111/DG.2 (2 November 2025), p. 7.

[398] Serdar Dincel, "Syria joining US-led anti-ISIS coalition meeting 'marks a new chapter,' says US envoy," Anadolu Agency (10 February 2026).

[399] Anthony J. Blinken, "Receipt of Funds for Resolution of Certain Claims Against Sudan," U.S. Department of State (31 March 2021).

[400] "Implementation in the Export Administration Regulations of the United States' Rescission of Libya's Designation as a State Sponsor of Terrorism and Revisions Applicable to Iraq," *Federal Register* (31 August 2006).

and forced disappearance, and displaced more than 13 million people—roughly half the country's population.[401] The Syrian people were the principal victims of the conduct that gave rise to SST designation. Maintaining the designation now requires that same population to absorb the fiscal consequences of the prior regime's conduct: every dollar paid toward satisfying legacy FSIA judgments is a dollar unavailable for rebuilding homes, schools, hospitals, and the basic public infrastructure that displaced Syrians will need upon return.

Continued designation functions, in practice, as a mechanism that transfers the financial consequences of past wrongdoing from the perpetrators—members of the Assad regime, many of whose senior members are in prison, on trial, or living in exile—to the Syrian population that suffered under them. This outcome is difficult to justify either on deterrence grounds or as a matter of elementary fairness.

Nor can Syria simply "turn over a new leaf" by adopting prospective behavior that rejects terrorism while expecting judgments for past misconduct to lapse. As established above, most judgments issued under the Foreign Sovereign Immunities Act terrorism exception do not lapse with the passage of time to offer a clean slate where Syria reforms its ways. This is because the vast majority of judgments issued against Syria have been entered in the U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia. Under D.C. law,[402] monetary judgments are enforceable for 12 years from entry and

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[401] "Syrian Arab Republic," UNHCR - The UN Refugee Agency, available at https://www.unhcr.org/where-we-work/countries/syrian-arab-republic?utm_source=chatgpt.com&dataset=POP&yearsMode=range&selectedYears=%5B2012%2C2026%5D&level=OPR&category=PTY&fundingSource=ALS&compareBy=%5B%22category%22%5D&levelCompare=%5B%5B%22OSYR_ABC%22%5D%5D&viewType=chart&chartType=bar&contextualDataset=BUD&tableDataView=absolute.

[402] D.C. Code § 15-101.

may be indefinitely renewed for successive 12-year periods.[403] These judgments, if properly renewed, have the potential to remain enforceable indefinitely, creating a perpetual enforcement horizon. The practical consequence is that, even if Syria undertakes substantial reforms and reorients its governance toward compliance with international human rights law, it may nonetheless continue to face liability for judgments arising from conduct attributed to the Assad regime.

C. The Impact on Reconstruction

The World Bank estimates the cost of rebuilding Syria's damaged physical assets at USD 216 billion;[404] United Nations assessments, which account for full economic recovery and institutional reconstruction, place the total much higher, with some as high as USD 400 billion.[405] The UNDP has warned that "at current growth rates, Syria's economy will not regain its pre-conflict GDP level before 2080," and that annual economic growth must increase six-fold to compress recovery to ten years.[406] Against this backdrop, Syria's current GDP stands at approximately USD 21 billion—less than the USD 31 billion in judgments already entered against it.

If Syria remains designated as an SST, acts attributable to the Assad regime can continue to be brought under 28 U.S.C. § 1605A's ten-year statute of limitations through approximately December 2034. Conservative estimates suggest that aggregate liabilities could

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[403] Under the Federal Rules of Civil Procedure, enforcement of a federal money judgment is governed by the law of the state in which the rendering court sits. Federal Rule of Civil Procedure 69(a); *see also* 28 U.S.C. § 1962.

[404] "Syria's Post-Conflict Reconstruction Costs Estimated at $216 billion," Press Release, World Bank Group (21 October 2025).

[405] "UN estimates that Syria requires around USD400 billion for reconstruction," *MENAFN* (28 January 2025).

[406] "Accelerating Economic Recovery is Critical to Reversing Syria's Decline and Restoring Stability," UNDP (20 February 2025).

ultimately exceed USD 100 billion[407]—nearly half the World Bank's reconstruction cost estimate. Syria faces a stark dilemma: it can refuse to satisfy judgments, thereby foreclosing its participation in U.S.-linked financial and commercial markets; or it can pay, diverting scarce reconstruction funds toward legacy obligations. Either path carries significant consequences. Delisting, by contrast, would help stabilize Syria's future and preserve resources necessary for rebuilding.

D. Strengthening International Security through the Stabilization of Syria

A Syria able to focus on reconstruction and governance rather than perpetual litigation exposure is more likely to achieve the political stability necessary to combat terrorism, prevent the resurgence of non-state armed groups, and contribute to regional security. Stability in Syria also benefits the United States by creating opportunities for U.S. private sector investment in infrastructure development and in Syria's mining, energy, offshore hydrocarbons, and tourism sectors. By contrast, continued instability fosters the conditions that threaten U.S. interests, regional stability, and international security.

E. A Claims-Resolution Process Is Better for Victims

Delisting creates an opportunity for the United States to negotiate a settlement framework with Syria to resolve outstanding judgments in exchange for restoring sovereign immunity. The Libya and Sudan precedents establish that this approach is workable and preferable for victims. When Libya was delisted in 2006, it agreed to pay

[407] The figure is likely in the range of $100 to $150 billion, but could be higher, based on the aggregate damages sought in publicly reported cases in which the amounts demanded are specified in the complaint or summons (as of 25 April 2026), on the assumption that Syria does not appear to defend the suits and that default judgments are entered in the amounts demanded.

approximately USD 1.5 billion to settle at least 26 lawsuits, some of which issued judgments for much higher amounts. For instance, in one case involving a 1989 bombing, a U.S. district court judge had ordered Libya to pay USD 6 billion in damages.[408] When Sudan was delisted in 2020, it paid USD 335 million, supplemented by USD 150 million from the United States under the Sudan Claims Resolution Act, settling claims that included one USD 10.2 billion judgment.[409]

Without a negotiated settlement, the practical alternative for most judgment holders is no recovery at all: Syria has consistently declined to appear in U.S. courts, and its limited commercial engagement in the United States provides few assets available for attachment. A structured framework modeled on the Libya and Sudan precedents—one that accounts for Syria's post-conflict economic constraints and the potential for burden-sharing contributions from regional partners would provide victims with meaningful, if partial, compensation that the current enforcement environment cannot deliver.

V. Mechanics of Delisting

Removal of Syria's SST designation is governed by Section 6j of the Export Administration Act of 1979 and the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961, as amended.[410] A foreign country may be removed from the SST list through one of two statutory pathways.

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[408] Kimberly Kindy, "Families Who Sued Libya See Their Victory Voided: U.S. Pact Nullifies $6 Billion Award in '89 Bombing Over Africa," *Washington Post* (22 December 2008), available at https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/national/2008/12/23/families-who-sued-libya-see-their-victory-voided/efb7ccfc-2b8f-4d0e-8a5b-06c5b5edbb88.

[409] *See Opati v. Republic of Sudan*, 590 U.S. 418, 418 (2020) (confirming the $10.2 billion judgment).

[410] Pub. L. No. 87-195, 75 Stat. 424 (codified as amended at 22 U.S.C. § 2151 et seq.).

The first is the Six-Month Non-Support Certification, under which the President submits a report to Congress certifying that the state has not provided support for international terrorism for at least six months, has provided assurances it will not do so in the future, and that removal is consistent with U.S. national security and foreign policy. Syria may be removed 45 days after notice to Congress if neither the House nor the Senate blocks the action.

The second, and preferable, pathway for Syria is the "Fundamental Change" Certification, which allows unilateral presidential delisting where there has been a fundamental change in the leadership and policies of the government, the government does not support terrorism, and the government has provided written assurances it will not support terrorism in the future. This pathway avoids the 45-day congressional review period and is tailored to precisely the circumstances Syria now presents: regime change coupled with a public repudiation of the prior government's conduct. It is the same mechanism used to delist Iraq in 2004 following the fall of Saddam Hussein.[411]

The U.S. government has already taken preliminary steps toward delisting. In June 2025, President Trump issued Executive Order 14312 directing the Secretary of State to "take all appropriate action to review the designation of Syria as a State Sponsor of Terrorism."[412] A November 2025 Tri-Seal Advisory issued jointly by the Departments of State, Treasury, and Commerce confirmed that the review is ongoing.[413] Syria remains designated as of the date of this

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411 "Certification Permitting Rescission of Iraq as a Sponsor of Terrorism," *Federal Register* (30 September 2004).

412 Executive Order 14312, Federal Register, Vol. 90, No. 126 (30 June 2025), p 4.

413 "Tri-Seal Advisory," U.S. Department of State, Department of the Treasury, Department of Commerce (10 November 2025), p. 1.

writing, but the legal framework for removal is in place and the factual predicate is satisfied.

VI. Chapter Conclusion

Syria's continued designation as a State Sponsor of Terrorism is a policy in tension with itself. It was designed to penalize a government that sponsored terrorism; it now burdens a population that suffered under that government. The Assad regime is gone. The conduct that justified designation—decades of support for terrorist organizations, the use of chemical weapons, and systematic atrocities against the Syrian people—belongs to a government that no longer exists.

The legal consequences of continued designation are severe. U.S. courts have entered more than USD 31 billion in judgments against Syria, with at least 186 cases pending that could add USD 100 billion or more in liability. These judgments are enforceable indefinitely under D.C. law. Every dollar diverted to satisfying legacy obligations is a dollar unavailable for a reconstruction effort estimated to cost between USD 216 billion and USD 400 billion—against a GDP of just USD 21 billion.

The policy case for delisting is compelling across every dimension examined here. Syria's new government has pursued diplomatic normalization with the United States, joined the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS, and reaffirmed its commitment to the Chemical Weapons Convention. These are the actions of a government seeking reintegration into the international order, not a State Sponsor of Terrorism. The Libya and Sudan precedents demonstrate that delisting need not mean abandoning accountability: it enables a structured settlement that provides real compensation to victims—compensation that the current regime of default judgments and sovereign asset evasion cannot deliver.

The "fundamental change" certification pathway is available to the President, Executive Order 14312 has already initiated the review, and the factual predicate is satisfied. What remains is the political will to act. Removing Syria's designation is not a concession—it is a recognition of changed reality and a foundation for a better outcome for American victims, for Syria, for the region, and for a foreign policy architecture that responds to facts rather than historical inertia.

Concluding Observations: A Window for Renewal

Syria's transition has already achieved what many thought impossible. A nation that many feared would relapse into civil war has instead produced a functioning state, reestablished diplomatic ties across the region, and begun the work of rebuilding institutions after more than six decades of authoritarian rule. These are not small achievements and should not be obscured by the scale of what remains undone.

But the transition's progress, significant as it is, now demands a shift from restoration to consolidation. Syria has succeeded in reconstituting state authority; the harder challenge lies in anchoring that authority in institutional legitimacy rather than factional allegiance. Trust in inclusive governance, while growing, remains fragile. Outstanding legal liabilities risk diverting resources from reconstruction, and civil society organizations continue to navigate laws inherited from a regime that sought to constrain rather than empower them. These are not insurmountable obstacles. They are structural challenges that, if addressed strategically, can be transformed into opportunities to build a more resilient state.

The central argument of this report is that security and legitimacy reinforce one another — and must advance together. A Syrian state that consolidates order while deepening trust across its diverse communities can achieve durable stability. The coastal violence in March 2025 and the Suwayda unrest in July of the same year demonstrated what happens when security mechanisms lack sufficient national accountability structures. These incidents were

not failures of the transition itself, but signals of where institutional development must now focus.

Some of the recommendations in this report-- such as removing the State Sponsor of Terrorism designation, appointing key diplomatic and reconstruction envoys, and replacing commanders who carry international sanctions--require political decisions more than resources, and can be implemented quickly. Others--public financial management reform (encompassing, inter alia, centralizing military payroll systems), restoring civil registry operations, and formalizing disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration programs — require sustained institutional effort. A few, particularly building genuinely inclusive constitutional frameworks and ensuring equitable reconstruction, will require years of effort and coordinated international support.

What these recommendations share is mutual reinforcement. Progress on any one creates momentum for others. Together, they form a coherent strategy rather than a list of isolated interventions. This is not a problem requiring separate fixes, but an integrated challenge requiring coordinated action across multiple fronts.

Syria's transition will be measured not only by whether a government remains in place in Damascus, but by whether the state being built is one that represents and serves all Syrians. That outcome is within reach — and the steps outlined in this report chart a feasible, albeit certainly arduous, path toward it.

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CHARTING SYRIA'S FUTURE: A Strategic Framework for Recovery and Renewal

The fall of the Assad regime ended more than six decades of authoritarian rule in Syria and opened an era of remarkable renewal. Today, the country has achieved what many thought impossible: a functioning state, ministries and courts back in operation, embassies reopened, and billions in investment pledged. A nation once designated a State Sponsor of Terrorism has joined the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS, acceded to the Global IHL Initiative, and pledged to destroy its remaining chemical weapons. *Charting Syria's Future* examines this historic moment, showing how a country many feared would relapse into civil war has instead laid the foundations for durable stability.

But the work is not done. Syria, together with its international partners, must now build on hard-won gains before complacency or renewed violence foreclosures the options this moment has opened. Written for policymakers and all those invested in Syria's renewal, this book pioneers a coherent path toward a future the Syrian people want and deserve.

Spanning eight policy domains critical to Syria's stabilization—promoting security sector reform and minority protection, designing a disability justice framework, strengthening Syrian civil society, reintegrating refugees and IDPs, rebuilding digital public infrastructure, engaging external stakeholders through diplomacy, and leveraging the removal of sanctions—*Charting Syria's Future* presents an achievable strategic framework for Syria's recovery and renewal.

Dr. Salam Fayyad is an economist and former prime minister of the Palestinian Authority. With the International Monetary Fund (IMF) from 1987 to 2001, his tenure included serving as IMF resident representative in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. He then served as manager of the Arab Bank in Palestine. Currently, Dr. Fayyad is a Daniella Lipper Coules '95 Distinguished Visitor in Foreign Affairs at the School of Public and International Affairs at Princeton University. He is also a Distinguished Statesman with the Atlantic Council's Brent Scowcroft Center on International Security and a Distinguished Fellow at the Brookings Institution.

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