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Syria After Assad

December 2025

Project on Middle East Political Science

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The Project on Middle East Political Science

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Syria One Year After Assad

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On November 26, 2024, most observers regarded Syria as a "frozen conflict" in which the 54 years of authoritarian rule by the Assad family was poised to continue into the foreseeable future. The next day, the Islamist rebel group Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) led a coalition of rebels on a lightning speed military offensive that seized town after town as the government's military defenses collapsed. On December 8, Bashar al-Assad fled, Syrians near and far went out in celebratory demonstrations, and HTS assumed power in Damascus.

The year since then has been filled with one milestone after another: the caretaker government gave way to a formal transitional government under President Ahmed al-Sharaa. A National Dialogue Conference in late February sparked both praise for bringing hundreds of Syrians together to discuss the most critical issues facing the country, and criticism for being a rushed one-off rather than a sustained reconciliation process. In March, a presidential-appointed committee put form an interim constitution that set forth a state structure for a five-year transition. Indirect parliamentary elections in October selected two-thirds of a new people's assembly, with another third to be appointed by the president. Nonstop diplomatic work transformed Syria's foreign relations, including opening a new era of cooperation with the United States culminating in a White House visit in November. And amidst these steps establishing the contours of new political institutions and practices, incidents of violence have ignited new fears about whether the new Syria could become a country protecting the security and rights of all of its citizens. Among the most alarming were sectarian massacres in March and July, which together claimed some 3,500 lives.

These and many other developments during the past year have given rise to a host of crucial questions about the future of Syria and the Syrian people.[1] To explore them, the Project on Middle East Political Science (POMEPS) exchanged with the Arab Political Science Network (APSN), launched a call for papers, and selected more than a dozen emerging scholars to participate in an intensive online workshop in mid-September 2025. Based in eight different countries, many of these researchers are Syrian, and most have years of research experience on Syria or Syrian diasporic communities. The papers resulting from the workshop provide fresh insight into a range of critical issues: decentralization and state consolidation, sectarian violence, refugee return, security sector reform, transitional justice, economic reconstruction, and more. This framing introduction summarizes their key contributions and puts their arguments in conversation with each other, organized around some of the most important questions facing Syria today.

How is the new transitional government consolidating authority?

State consolidation is understandably the primary focus of politics for a country emerging from 14 years of multidimensional war and territorial fragmentation followed by the unexpected collapse of the regime that had dominated public life for more than half a century. In this context, the starting place for understanding politics in the new Syria is the new authorities in Damascus. The urgent demands of establishing a new system and legitimate authority inevitably pose the risk of renewing authoritarian patterns of rule or reigniting violence. How is the new regime consolidating power, and with what implications for Syria's transition moving forward?

This question runs through several essays in the collection and is especially pertinent in two. **Ali Hamdan** launches this discussion with an exploration of the fundamental challenge facing the Syrian transitional government: the need to convince society that it is not simply a militia or one of many social groups vying for power, but is a

distinct, autonomous force whose authority deserves compliance from society. In other words, to transform from a rebel formation into a state-building organization, the new government must successfully perform statecraft. Hamdan traces HTS's experiences with this performance from its wartime governance in Idlib province starting in 2017 through its creation of a caretaker government in the wake of the Assad regime's collapse and then in arguably the most profound test of the transitional government's state-like authority to date: the violence that engulfed the southeastern Suweida province in July 2025. Assessing "soft" performances of symbolic actions and strategically deployed language, Hamden traces how the government framed its role in Suweida and assesses its degree of success in reassuring the Syrian public that the country has entered a genuine transition from war to a post-war phase.

Exploring further complications, and even double-edged swords, in the new authorities' efforts to consolidate power, **Haian Dukhan** turns a spotlight on Sunni Arab tribes. He observes that the rupture of the highly centralized security state under Assad has generated space for both local and regional actors to assert themselves. Analysis of the positioning of tribes in the emerging post-Assad order suggests a paradox: On one hand, tribal solidarity has been a resource that the transitional government has employed to extend its influence where state institutions are weak. On the other hand, reliance on tribal networks risks deepening sectarian divisions, reinforcing patronage politics, and even provoking large-scale violence. Upon a brief historical overview providing context for tribal–state relations in Syria, Dukhan also turns to tribal mobilization in the Suweida violence to illustrate this ambivalent duality in tribes' role. As tribes can be simultaneously stabilizers and spoilers, the government should recognize how privileging tribal solidarity risks empowering autonomous local actors in ways that risk igniting sectarian confrontation and undermining central authority.

Both authors – and, indeed, many others in the collection – highlight the inherent tensions involved in state consolidation and the prevailing potential for it to spin out into violence which implicates the new regime in the eyes of many of its citizens. State-builders must tread carefully as they seek to build capacity and legitimacy.

Can decentralization offer better governance?

Given these and other challenges in consolidating authority, not to mention the harrowing example of Assad's personalized rule, is centering power in the government in Damascus even a desirable path forward for Syria? Three essays in the collection make powerful cases for decentralized formulas of political organization, provoking further thought about the costs and benefits of this approach to institutional reform and state-society relations.

On the eve of the regime's collapse, **Sean Lee** argues, Syria was a patchwork of fiefdoms ruled by various factions, the largest of which was the government of Bashar al-Assad. Syria was thus best conceptualized not as a unified centralized state but as "a collection of loosely connected peripheries." HTS's military offensive and assumption of power in late 2024, in turn, can be fruitfully understood as the sudden transformation of one of those peripheral groups into the country's center. Since then, transitional president Ahmed al-Sharaa's vision for a new Syria has arguably sought to reproduce the model of concentrated presidentialism that it replaced. Incidents of violence on the periphery can be read as attempts to reconsolidate power in Damascus — through brutal force of arms, if necessary. This is especially fraught and dangerous given the ways that neglected geographic peripheries overlap with minoritized religious and ethnic communities, intertwining geographic and ethno-sectarian dynamics. In this context, Lee concludes that Syria's best hope to avoid the dangers of either partition or continued massacres is to eschew obsolete models of centralized, authoritarian governance. Rather, it must consider alternative institutional possibilities, and especially varieties of decentralized governance.

Tiina Hyyppä does precisely that. Like Lee, she recognizes that wartime Syria became a patchwork of political orders, with grassroots, fragmented, decentralized, and hybrid

forms of governance emerging in opposition-held spaces. Since Assad's fall, the transitional government has initiated top-down processes to transform local governance. As it does not have sufficient personnel or resources to control local-level affairs, however, Damascus has had to engage intermediaries and thereby generated opportunities for communities to influence how they are governed. Looking forward, she argues, the center can further empower local governance as a way of granting citizens the political agency they were long denied. To do so, however, it must engage in practices that are more democratic than those characterizing its own actions during the war and resist creating patronage networks in which loyalty dictates resource allocation. At the same time, supporters of decentralization might reduce their calls for federalism, lest fears of territorial partition or fragmentation disrupt valuable opportunities for bottom-up governance and rebuilding.

Yasmine Tlass concurs with the benefits of decentralization in governance and argues that decentralization is a beneficial approach to security sector reform, as well. Against those who might think that centralizing control over security forces is necessary for state-building during this transitional phase, she explains how that approach can instead reproduce state fragility. Making the case for an "alternative controlled decentralization model," the paper suggests how locally grounded initiatives offer a path forward for the post-Assad Syria security landscape. It reviews three cases from three areas, each of which represents a distinct modality of decentralized security governance: in Aleppo, supervised co-production between local Kurdish structures and residual state institutions; in Raqqa, institutionalized subsidiarity through bargains between tribal authorities and security forces; and in Suweida, communal self-administration rooted in customary authority. Together, these examples show how decentralization, coupled with mechanisms of oversight and institutional interfaces linking local authority to state frameworks, can harness the already embedded pluralistic reality in Syria to rebuild the security sector on new foundations of inclusion, legitimacy, and accountability.

None of the authors underplays the challenges of decentralization in the Syrian context, the potential violence and injustices emanating from local dynamics, or the potential risks involved. But their warnings about the risks of a return to an overly centralized model of governance pose a sharp challenge to emerging trends and practices as the new regime takes shape.

What is law and justice in the new Syria?

Among the most important issues facing any transition from authoritarianism is establishing the rule of law and determining the extent of transitional justice. Syria's transition involves especially extreme challenges in both areas, as it emerges from long decades of a regime defined by systemic violence and fourteen years of brutal war. The transitional authorities have repeatedly pledged to create a "state of law" to replace the endemic corruption of the prior system. Similarly, a call for accountability is one of the most widespread demands emerging from Syrian citizens and civil society. But progress has been uneven and fundamental questions remain unaddressed. How can a new culture of law be built in general, and how can Syria seek justice for war crimes and other atrocities?

Sarah Bassisseh, Ronja Herrschner, Chonlawit Sirikupt, and Marcia Ponzlet examine challenges and choices entailed in pursuit of transitional justice in Syria. They begin from the premise that post-Assad Syria is neither post-authoritarian nor post-conflict, and thus transitional justice efforts today unfold not after but "during transition." They argue that the starting point for designing and implementing transitional justice mechanisms should be acknowledging and embracing complexity, which they delineate in three core dimensions. First, attention to temporality demands reckoning with the past injustices committed by the Assad regime and all other perpetrators, as well as the present injustices unfolding during the transitional period. Second, attention to spatiality illustrates the need to move away from a state-centered approach towards the space-induced levels of local and also cross-border injustices. Finally, attention to agency and legitimacy warns against

domination by the central state and instead calls for inclusive processes that enable civil society organizations, victims, and families to participate in both the design and the implementation of transitional justice mechanisms, including the establishment of independent bodies and truth commissions.

Salma Daoudi also brings justice claims into sharp focus with an examination of Syria's vast number of war-disabled people – nearly 30% of the population. These persons are too easily forgotten or shunted aside as a humanitarian concern or individual burden. Instead, their demands for accessibility, political participation, and reparative health care should be considered core questions for politics and justice in the post-authoritarian transition. Just as wartime injury is compounded by broader exclusions from health, mobility, representation, and access to decision-making, so must reparation for the war-disabled go beyond material compensation or symbolic gestures, and instead entail inclusive institutional design, structural accessibility, and civic imaginaries that reckon with embodied histories of loss and resistance. Attention to their marginalization challenges us to consider whose suffering is or is not acknowledged, to affirm the agency of those whose bodies were most marked by conflict, and to undertake structural transformation of the political order that enabled mass violence. "To do otherwise," Daoudi writes, "risks reproducing forms of exclusion that have long defined both war and governance in Syria."

In their contribution, **Rifaie Tammas and Marika Sosnowski** center an innovative conversation on the inherent tensions between how the law is codified and practiced under different government constellations and how it is personally experienced by different people. The latter is understood as "legal consciousness" and is examined here in different places: in Syria under Assad, in today's post-Assad period and in diaspora Australia, past and present. To highlight such contrasts and tensions, the authors choose a new experimental form of two columns that visually put the personal and the academic as well as the private and the public next to each other. In this way, Tammas and Sosnowski also attempt to capture the very fluid and transitory nature of the current post-Assad moment, for Syrians in Syria, for Syrians abroad but also for those who study Syrian political transition with a view to legal systems. At the same time, the partial overlaps and connections between the two columns also highlight "the co-constitutive nature of public debates and private musings, how what is legal and what is illegal is not something fixed or stable … but actually constantly in flux and dependent on the government of the day as well as the slippery nature of knowledge and understanding."

All of these essays highlight both the necessity of accountability and impartial rule of law and reasons why the new regime might fail this test. The task of crafting a system of transitional justice, truth, and reconciliation to address the atrocities of the prior regime is formidable. Syrians overwhelmingly seek an accounting for the crimes of the previous regime. Furthermore, the winners of war do not typically prioritize investigating their own crimes or those of their allies, even if that would also help establish credibility with certain constituencies. Recent moves to investigate sectarian massacres are tentative steps in that direction, but the new authorities must go much further to establish a state that will deliver both law and justice to citizens yearning for both.

What are paths forward for Syria's displaced?

No conversation on Syria's transition can proceed without attending to the fact that more than half the population was forcibly displaced during the course of the uprising and war. Another essential issue today is thus the fate of the estimated 14 million Syrians who were forced from their homes, some half of them as internally displaced people and the other half as refugees in countries around the world. Two essays in this collection take on this topic, both of them centering the reflections, aspirations, and lived experiences of refugees themselves.

Rana Khoury explores the question of return through a painful irony: despite its liberatory potential and most

refugees' sheer joy in celebrating Assad's fall, the regime's end also exposes the deep vulnerability of Syrian refugees and the difficulty of the choices that they now face. She traces this newly heightened vulnerability structurally in the loss of solutions to displacement other than return; materially, in the consuming logistical considerations and financial costs entailed in the prospect of returning; and emotionally, in the emergence of existential new questions about identity, home, and belonging. Investigation of how refugees are coping with all three levels of vulnerability reveals how even ostensibly positive political developments can accentuate rather than alleviate the lived hardships of displaced persons.

Sarah al-Saeid also looks at the experience of refugees, challenging both the temporal and spatial conceptions which underly the category of refugee as well as "the pain of "refugehood" under biometric regulation, populist discourse, and state surveillance." Like Khoury, she amplifies the voices of refugees probing the complicated contradictions of their experiences, "one shaped by the ongoing permanence of exile, the other haunted by the possibility of return." In Türkiye, where most Syrian refugees reside, Saied traces the uncertainties and hidden brutalities of life at the "empire-state seam" where "imperial notions of hospitality" clash with the modern state's bureaucratic drive to categorize, contain, and close."

Both authors force us to engage with the lived realities of Syrians displaced by the war, and what experiences, hopes and fears they would bring back with them should they return.

How can Syria obtain economic recovery?

Underpinning these social, political and security challenges — for the Syrian government and its peoples — is economic catastrophe. Without economic recovery, Syria faces risk of renewed violence, and its citizens face a future of continued suffering. Three papers take on different dimensions of Syria's profound and urgent economic crisis, all of them offering recommendations for where policy can go from here.

Erin Snider sets the scene with some sobering figures: the economy has contracted by over 64 percent since 2010; reconstruction needs are estimated at $250 billion; more than 90 percent of the population lives below the poverty line; and some 13 million Syrians lack sufficient food. Snider reviews comparative research that shows that essential for post-conflict recovery and transition is inclusive economic reform. When economic reform during the early years of a post-conflict transition is not inclusive, it can undermine both economic recovery and the success of the transition itself. Whether economic reform in post-Assad Syria is or is not inclusive depends in part on the aid policies of powerful international and regional donors, such as the European Union, Gulf states, the International Monetary Fund, the United Nations, and the United States. Drawing on lessons from transitions elsewhere, Snider sets out a framework that scholars can use to monitor the degree to which Syria is or is not making progress toward building an inclusive economy, with particular attention to the three central areas of aid distribution, institutional rebuilding and reform, and aid coordination and delivery.

Hashem Krayem reminds us that the bedrock of any productive economy is a stable currency. In the Syrian case, war-induced hyperinflation, depleted foreign reserves, and a devastated economy leave the transitional government with both limited options and distinct challenges. These include problems in securing foreign currency that continue from the Assad era, ongoing international scrutiny of commercial banks, and Syria's international debt. While Syria's enormous financial needs persist, some monetary developments since the regime's fall are positive, including the Central Bank of Syria's control over gold reserves, active pursuit of the recovery of Syrian assets frozen abroad, gradual reintegration into global financial networks, proposed unification of currency, and a proposed shift toward a managed float. To boost demand for and trust in the Syrian pound, and achieve durable economic recovery more broadly, the transitional government must act with accountability and transparency, including in its engagement with Assad-era economic actors.

Another dimension of Syria's economic crisis is its infrastructural and resource needs. Taking a deep dive into one key sector, **Ahmed Hajj Asaad** focuses in on water. His analysis shows how the challenge of water scarcity is irreducibly political. The Assad regime subordinated water management to political authority and security imperatives, resulting in severe groundwater depletion, river desiccation, and inequitable or non-binding agreements with neighboring countries on common water resources. The current political transition offers an opportunity to shift from the logic of conflict, dependency, and mistrust to one of regional cooperation, with dividends for economic stability and national reconstruction. The essay presents two pathways for water sharing with neighboring countries: technical-economic collaboration, such as the linking of the Syrian plains with Türkiye's Harran irrigation networks in the Euphrates River Basin; and institutional-legal cooperation, including enhanced regulatory frameworks for the Orontes Basin shared with Lebanon. Both examples provide a blueprint for an integrated economic-social-environmental model that could use equitable sharing of water resources as a springboard for economic recovery, environmental sustainability, and regional stability.

One Year On: Post-Assad, not Post-War

This collection suggests that, one year on, politics in post-Assad Syria continues to generate more questions than answers. Still, the expert analyses in this volume point to some preliminary conclusions.

First, the brutal dictatorship of Bashar al-Assad is over and there is no indication that it will be coming back. There is little sign of any viable Assadist insurgency comparable to what emerged in Iraq after the toppling of Saddam in 2003, which some observers feared would pose an immediate challenge to stability and security. One year on, it is fair to say that Syria is indeed "post-Assad," even if the task of transforming the legacies, mentalities and practices that Assad left behind remain ongoing.

Second, however, it might not yet be fully appropriate to describe Syria as "post-war." The violence in portions of the country, the limits of the reconsolidation of the new government's authority, and the military occupation of Syrian territory by Türkiye and Israel suggest that it might be premature to say that "post-Assad" equals "post-war." Indeed, the authors of this volume take different positions on that question. Furthermore, the degree that "war is over" is felt differently by different Syrians, in part depending on who they are and where they live. For some, violence or the threat thereof very much remains.

Third, the large-scale violence in Suweida in July 2025 can be considered a defining moment in the transitional period, if not the most critical turning point for Syrian politics during the twelve months since Assad's flight. Many Syrians themselves note it as a turning point in their own feelings about the transition process and thoughts about Syria's future prospects. That many of the papers in this volume also comment on this event, and several put it at the center of their analysis, is testimony how no understanding of Syria's domestic politics is complete without reckoning with both its causes and ongoing consequences.

Fourth, Syria's challenges — and likewise the solutions to them — are fundamentally political. Different authors of this volume, among them Hamdan, Dukhan and Lee, highlight the structural issues that the transitional government faces, including those related to capacity, autonomy, sovereignty, and legitimacy. A common policy advice by a number of the contributors, such as Hyyppä, Tlass and Lee, suggest a relative devolution of powers or forms of decentralization from the national state to the regional and subnational levels, in particular in the fields of security sector reform and local governance.

Fifth, many of the millions of those who fled Syria's war are not close to an end of their long years of exile. As Khoury and al-Saeid make clear, many refugees — like many who never left — have only begun to process the meaning of Assad's fall as they balance their hopes and their fears. As

many states around the world increasingly block avenues for asylum or temporary protection, and their societies increasingly call for refugees to go home, displaced Syrians face difficult choices about whether to return to their land of origin or continue building their lives in countries near and far.

Sixth, one of the most resounding calls emerging across the 13 papers is for the need for post-Assad Syria to be built on principles of inclusion. Whether in the realms of socio-economic reform writ large (Snider), more specific currency reforms (Krayem), water governance (Asaad), governmental institutions (Lee; Hyyppä; Tlass), transitional justice (Bassisseh et al.; Tammas and Sosnowski), practices toward war-disabled people (Salma Daoudi), or pursuit of truly durable solutions to displacement (Khoury, al-Saied), policies ought not be made and imposed by just one segment of the Syrian people, including the government in Damascus. Rather, if Syria's transition is to bring about the freedom and dignity for which so many Syrians gave so much, all citizens should see themselves as incorporated in and represented by processes of state decision-making.

The current post-Assad moment is replete with risks and dangers, but it also represents tremendous potential for good for the Syrian people. The papers in this volume point to factors, processes, and players that help us understand the first year after Assad's fall. They also point to questions that will persist into the next phase, as Syrians — both state and society — continue to forge a new political reality. We hope that the contributions to this collection open up space for continuous and rigorous political science engagement with the Syrian transition while always centering the experience and views of Syrians themselves.

Endnotes

[1] For another excellent symposium, see Rana Khoury and Sefa Secen, eds., "Syria in Transition: Reconstructing State, Society and Sovereignty", *APSA MENA Politics* 8, no.2 (2025): 30-63.

The Center Beckons:
Performance, Autonomy, and the "Postwar" State in Syria

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Introduction

In July 2025 a series of violent clashes engulfed Syria's southern province of Suweida. Druze armed actors clashed with militants affiliated to local Bedouin tribes, prompting the emerging Syrian Transitional Government (STG) to intervene in a botched attempt to restore order. The arrival of Public Security forces from the Ministry of Interior inflamed rather than calmed the fighting, as members of Public Security began committing field executions and attacking Druze civilians. In response to the apparent intervention on the side of the Bedouin, Druze Shaykh Hikmat al-Hijri lashed out that "there is no agreement, dialogue, or deference for these armed gangs who falsely call themselves a government."[1]

Hijri's accusation strikes at the heart of what is at stake in this moment: the need to successfully perform the state as an autonomous force acting upon society. Closely associated with the armed group Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, Syria's new government has strong incentives to convince the country's diverse population of two interconnected assertions: that the STG is not simply one more social group competing with the others, but a distinct force which encompasses these; and that their emergence marks an end to the war that had raged for thirteen years. In doing so, the government aims to secure compliance (if not outright consent) from the population amid a fragile moment of interregnum, which Sarah Bassisseh and colleagues fruitfully discuss in their contribution to this volume. Though "the war" against Assad may well be over, war remains a fact of life for many in Syria's peripheries.

In what follows, I examine the emerging government's performance of statecraft, aiming to identify both continuities and moments of improvisation. To do this I look back at the early years of the Syrian Salvation Government (SSG), the efforts of the early Caretaker Government (SCG), before returning briefly to discuss how the STG has framed its role in the wake of the fighting in Suweida in July 2025. By focusing on these kinds of "soft" performances – what we might think of as symbol-rich choreographed actions and deployments of language - we gain insight into how the state works to translate wartime legitimacy into a more durable base of support at a moment of instability and scarcity.

Performance & Autonomy

A common feature of the modern state is its tendency to position itself as an autonomous social force, one separate from the society it governs. If this seems abstract, it has important bearing on how we understand the role played by the state in politics. For Marxists, the relative autonomy of the state is important in weighing whether the state is merely a vehicle for the interests of dominant classes.[2] More Weberian understandings of state autonomy tend to center state capacity: states acquire autonomy from society either by monopolizing the use of legitimate violence, or by wielding what Michael Mann calls "infrastructural power," the logistical influence states wield by controlling access to networked infrastructures and the territorial integration of the state.[3] In postwar contexts like Syria, this latter perspective quite reasonably tends to shape how diplomats, development agencies and international organizations examine the state-building process.

But there are good reasons to examine the "softer" aspects of state-building as well. Postwar state-building projects often confront considerable limits to capacity at the very moment where their claims to authority are most open to contestation. This is especially volatile in situations of rebel

victory, something discussed as well in Tiina Hyyppä's contribution. When rebels defeat state incumbents, those connected to the old guard may view the emerging state as a vehicle for interests or ideology of the rebels; to fend off anticipated exclusion, they may resume fighting.

Critical scholars thus argue for examining the state as the product of a performance of a boundary – between state and society – rather than a coherent institutional actor. Timothy Mitchell, for instance, argues that the state never actually comes into existence as an apparatus standing apart from society, but is actually a mystical, ideological artefact of practices. He dubs this artefact the "state effect."[4] Such performances can be spectacular in the sense described by Wedeen, but arise also in more quotidian, prosaic fashion in the everyday practice and language of bureaucracy, as Joe Painter discusses in his work.[5] In this vein, anthropologists and geographers often study the state through the language of performativity, examining the state effect as a perception "assembled through a host of practices" in need of unpacking.[6] Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson, for instance, study how the neoliberal state in India produces a feeling of "vertical encompassment" through which the state stands "above" and "around" the society it governs through practices of field visits and documentation.[7] Alex Jeffrey demonstrates how such performances unfold in the context of postwar Bosnia, where they take on an "improvised" form.[8] Taken together, performances of statecraft offer a window into how state-building movements, especially in moments of transition, work to cultivate legitimacy and foreclose potential challenges. As Lisa Wedeen notes in Syria, such performances are often creative ways to do so precisely when state capacity is lacking.[9]

The autonomy of the state and not only its capacity thus lies at the core of challenges to reconstruction and reconciliation in Syria. It is clear that the emerging Syrian Transitional Government feels similarly, given the extent to which it has invested in producing the image of a coherent state given the widely-recognized limits to its capacity. In what follows, I will examine three periods in the emerging performances of statecraft of Syria's current postwar state. These are the wartime period (Summer 2016 – Winter 2024), the immediate postwar period (Winter 2024 – Summer 2025) and the period surrounding the Suweida Clashes (July – August 2025). In doing so I argue that a key goal of these performances is to mark the crossing of a threshold from the chaos of wartime to the order of the postwar era.

Beckoning & Co-Presence – 2016-2024

Syria's current government has its origins in the wartime governance efforts of armed group Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS). At the height of the war, a hodgepodge of local and provincial councils, in tandem with various armed groups and aid networks, administered Syria's northwest in loose coordination with one another and the putative exile institutions of the Syrian Opposition Coalition (SOC). The extreme independence of these bodies often meant profound spatial and organizational fragmentation across Syria's Liberated Territories, a situation which HTS viewed as leading to the gradual loss of the war against the Assad regime. To counter this, the group built state-like institutions under the title of the Civil Services Administration (CSA) in summer 2017.[10]

Key to this effort were two interconnected performances, the first of which I will call the mode of "beckoning." From the beginning, the CSA worked to situate itself as a new center for Syria's opposition movement by inviting other social forces to participate in its initiatives, while denying them the opportunity to refuse. Their publications described the initiative as part of "harmonious efforts toward a united civil administration and centralized institutions."[11] Yet the consequences for those rejecting the invitation made clear that the process was hardly harmonious. Circulars were issued to local councils, who were urged to submit their facilities to its new General Directorate for Local Administration, which was "to be considered the sole party authorized to oversee the affairs of the local councils in the Liberated Territories."[12] Objecting councils like the local council of Areeha and Idlib city, or the Idlib Provincial Council, were raided and their resources were confiscated by HTS. Here, violence

was used not arbitrarily, but to enforce the perception that one either accepted the centrality of the CSA, or one left. As a result, the sleepy provincial city of Idlib transformed into a new center for Syria's Liberated Territories.

The relative success of the CSA in displacing the provincial and local councils likely encouraged HTS to launch the Salvation Government (SSG) in winter 2017, which likewise engaged in forms of beckoning. To mark the emergence of this new, state-like body, HTS hosted what it dubbed the Syrian General Convention near the Bab al-Hawa border crossing a few months prior, carefully selecting who could attend yet stressing that the convention spoke to the popular mandate of the emerging civilian government.[13]

This speaks to the second mode through which this emerging state sought to perform its autonomy, what I will call the mode of co-presence. From its very beginnings, the Salvation Government equated legitimacy[14] with sharing space "on the Inside" of Syria's Liberated Territories.[15] The new government distinguished strongly between "other bodies founded abroad and erected with foreign will," and their work on the Inside, which better represented "the confluence of influences among Syrians (especially specialists) with the interests of the most influential forces on the ground in the Liberated Territories."[16] Influence, in this case, meant the military capacity to shut down councils who did not heed their "Notice" to cease operations in 72 hours, "under penalty of liability."[17] When the Syrian Interim Government opposed these demands, the SSG publicly asserted that, among other things, "The public interest requires a single party on the Syrian Inside [*bil-Dakhil al-Souri*] to realize citizens' aspirations and which shares in their daily hopes and tribulations."[18]

Through performances of co-presence and beckoning, HTS worked to produce a civilian "face" (as one outlet later described it) that could cultivate compliance from Syrians across the Liberated Territories. And if we are to measure their success by the durability of their rule, we can say that this was a moderate success. Despite several outbursts of violence in the summer of 2024, the SSG was able to maintain its governance of the Idlib pocket up until the end of the Assad regime in December 2024.

Encompassing New Elements – after 8 December 2024

When the Assad regime fell to Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham's rapid offensive on 8 December 2024, the group was in a strong position to situate the imaginaries of the SSG at the heart of the emerging postwar state. The Caretaker Government (SCG) and subsequent Transitional Government (STG) drew on the tradition of beckoning participants through a series of public, curated events: namely, the January 29 Victory Convention and the March 13 Constitutional Convention. These events were less meaningful consultations than they were performances of the emerging state's legitimacy and authority to draw people together around its agenda. The Victory Convention declares for instance that "to strengthen their role in building a new Syrian state, all military factions, and civil and political revolutionary bodies, are to integrate into the institutions of the state."[19] And indeed, many armed groups stated their intentions to do so, contributing to the sense that a technocratic, centralized bureaucracy was rapidly coalescing in the competent hands of the postwar state.

The new government had to improvise in the face of new challenges as well. Performances of beckoning tended to situate the SSG in a paternalizing relation of care for the "Syrian people," acting to "save" them from the wartime situation. In the postwar era, this formula would need to adapt to pressures for more consultation among a broader, more complex population. The STG tasked a committee with preparing a temporary constitution, one of whose primary functions aimed at delineating relations between the emerging state and this society, the "Syrian people." The first article straightforwardly notes that "The Syrian Arab Republic is an independent state with full sovereignty. It forms an indivisible political and geographic unit, and no piece of this is to be abandoned."[20] The state is also "committed to preserving the unity of Syrian territory, and to criminalizing appeals for partition and separatism or requests for foreign intervention and support."[21] At

the same time, the documents acknowledge that the state is populated by "components" or constitutive elements (*mukawwinat*), reifying the relationship of the emerging state to particular social forces like Christians, Druze, and Kurds (though these are not mentioned by name). The state promises to protect these elements by maintaining personal status laws[22] and by guaranteeing the "cultural diversity the cultural diversity of Syrian society in all of its elements [*mukawwinat*], including the cultural and language rights for all Syrians."[23]

These formulations are at once typical, telling, and troubling. Typical, because they speak to common anxieties mapped onto the "geo-body" of the nation.[24] Telling, because they represent a set of desires rather than a description of an actually-existing state. And troubling, because they betray a core incoherence at the heart of this state which they are imagining into being. On the one hand, the emerging STG asserts that all Syrians are equal in the eyes of the law. On the other hand, the new constitution retains the Baath party's tendency to reify identities, in this case referring to them as "components" of Syrian society and giving them political salience by entrenching "legal pluralism." Likewise, ongoing practices of beckoning signal that the emerging state operates less through democratic consultation and more through careful vetting and patronage of communal elites. Indeed, the carefully staged and scripted meetings of President Ahmed al-Sharaa with various community elders suggest that the state's performance of centrality takes precedence over extending meaningful equality to Syrians across communal lines.

The Performance Falters – Suweida, July 2025

If the emerging performances of the STG were somewhat ambiguous before, the events of July 2025 brought them into greater clarity. In early July 2025, a series of roadside attacks took place in the countryside of Suweida province in Syria's south. It did not take long before observers coded the violence as "Druze" militias clashing with "Bedouin" fighters. Events quickly escalated: Druze fighters associated with the cleric Hikmat al-Hijri were accused of committing brutal reprisals against local Bedouin civilians; Public Security forces from the Ministry of Interior intervened to arrest those responsible, only to commit their own violations against Druze civilians; Bedouin communities in Syria's south and east called for *faz'ah* (mobilization) against al-Hijri's fighters, converging on Suweida city, where they clashed with Druze fighters and looted; and finally, Israeli jets attacked Syrian military sites to signal their readiness to intervene on behalf of the Druze in Suweida.

Other work will dissect the nature of the violence and state response in closer detail, but here it is worth assessing how the postwar state worked to generate a dense set of meanings around what was otherwise an amorphous incident with a variety of possible interpretations. The clashes centered on a set of relationships (between innocent Bedouin communities, "groups outside of the law"[25] (coded as Druze), loyal Druze citizens, and disinterested state security forces) and spaces outside of state reach. In the state's portrayal, the incident emerged as a result of capacity issues. In their words, the clashes arose quite simply from the "absence of relevant state institutions" in Suweida province, despite widely-acknowledged limits to the STG's capacity to enforce order throughout the country.[26]

Yet they also suggest that beyond state capacity, it is more a weakness of national commitment in the periphery that truly explains the events. The Ministry of Interior, which oversaw the security response to the issue, enjoined the parties to "take up their national responsibility. Any disagreement must be addressed via the institutions of state and the judiciary."[27] The ceasefire agreement of July 16 likewise called for the "full integration of Suweida Province into the Syrian state and affirmation of its complete sovereignty over all territory [*aradi*] in the province, including restoring institutions of state and their implementation on the ground."[28] It also called for state presence along the Damascus-Suweida highway.[29] The state also situates itself as the core actor whose presence was necessary for order: the ceasefire came about through "tireless efforts by the government to coordinate with

notables and respected figures [*wujahaa' wa a'yan*] of Suweida."[30]

In this performance of statecraft, the STG beckoned the Druze to contribute to the national whole, inviting their elders and *wujahaa* to demonstrate good faith, but their invitations have been gradually rejected. Speaking a few days later, President Ahmed al-Sharaa ascribed this wariness not to genuine concerns over representation, but to the "narrow interests" and "separatist ambitions" of "particular individuals," all of which "threatens the unity of the country."[31] Tribal networks figure quite differently in his interpretation of the Suweida events, something discussed further in Haian Dukhan's contribution to this volume. For Sharaa, tribal solidarity networks "symbolize[d] noble values and principles, which push them to offer aid and assistance to the oppressed." Sharaa went so far as to thank the tribes for their "heroic positions" but gently chided them that "these actions cannot be an alternative to the role of the state in governing the country and enforcing security."[32]

What is clear from these performances of statecraft is that they are intended to reassure the Syrian public of two notions: that the postwar state is in charge, and that it governs to prevent a return to the chaos of wartime. Only, to many residents of Suweida, it is likely that neither performance is particularly convincing. As alluded to in the introduction, many Druze figures have accused the STG of behaving not like an independent authority, but rather as a partisan force cutting deals with Bedouin tribes. And indeed, there is good reason to believe that the clashes were actually a carefully arranged campaign to isolate and punish Druze leadership in Suweida rather than a spontaneous intervention gone wrong. Mazen Ezzi details a lengthy build-up to the clashes in which the STG gradually isolated Suweida province from state services, excluded young Druze men from enrolling in the Public Security Forces, while then actively enlisting Bedouin fighters from the nearby al-Lajat region.[33]

For those inclined to skepticism of Sharaa's postwar government, the war appears to be alive and well in Suweida province. Looking to the state's violent, often undisciplined campaigns in the Coast and in Syria's Northeast, it is hard to deny that an increasingly visible gap is growing between how the state performs its role in society, and the kind of governance it actually wields. Whether it accidentally inflames tensions, or proactively cultivates them, one thing is clear: the state has done little to turn its vision of itself into a meaningful reality in Syria's peripheries.

Conclusion

For a rebel group aiming to transform itself into a state-building movement, performances of statecraft offer a valuable tool for HTS to transform its relationship to Syrian society. Yet such performances do not always go according to plan. Indeed, under Shaykh Hikmat al-Hijri, many Druze in Suweida are organizing now in demand of self-determination and, in some cases, outright independence from the Syrian government. These demands were not *a priori* projects of this community; they emerged in relation to the faltering postwar performances of the Syrian Transitional Government in Suweida. Measured against this, we might view the performances of STG as having failed. Yet in failing, these performances nonetheless clue us into how such conflicts unfold between social forces and emerging postwar states as clashes over desire, expectation, and ritual rather than pre-existing interests. More importantly, they also offer insights into how such states attempt to prevent renewed fighting under conditions of low state capacity. As scholars we thus do well to take the performances of statecraft seriously, even if Syrians have steadily fewer reasons to do so.

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Between Stability and Violence:
Tribal Authority in Syria's Transitional Order

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Introduction

The collapse of the Assad regime in December 2024 marked the end of more than half a century of authoritarian rule in Syria and ushered in a fragile transitional period. The dismantling of a highly centralized security apparatus created a rupture in authority, leaving space for local and regional actors to assert themselves in new ways. Among these actors, Sunni Arab tribes have not simply "re-emerged" but have reconfigured their authority, drawing on historical legacies while adapting to the realities of the post-Assad order.[1] Their role in shaping Syria's evolving political landscape cannot be reduced to nostalgic survivals of a tribal past, nor to convenient tools of external manipulation.

The central paradox of post-Assad Syria is that tribal mobilisation has been both a resource for authority and a source of instability.[2] On one hand, tribal solidarity has enabled the transitional government of Ahmed al-Sharaa to extend influence into areas where state institutions remain weak.[3] On the other, reliance on tribal networks risks deepening sectarian divisions, reinforcing patronage politics, and even provoking large-scale violence, as seen in the mobilisation in Suweida in July 2025.[4]

This paper argues that understanding Syria's transition requires recognising the dual and ambivalent role of tribes. They are not passive remnants of a pre-modern order but active agents whose mobilisation can sustain governance in some contexts and destabilise it in others. The Suweida mobilisation demonstrates how quickly tribal solidarity can transform local disputes into national confrontations, reshaping both the political conversation and the balance of power.[5] The paper proceeds in four parts: a brief historical overview of tribal–state relations; an in-depth analysis of the Suweida mobilisation as a defining moment in the transitional period; a discussion of the ambivalence of tribal authority; and reflections on the policy and political implications for Syria's fragile post-Assad order.

Historical Background

The relationship between the Syrian state and its tribes has long oscillated between marginalisation, co-optation, and confrontation. During the late Ottoman period, tribes retained a degree of autonomy, exercising control over grazing lands, trade routes, and local security, often beyond the reach of central authority.[6] Under the French Mandate (1920–46), colonial authorities pursued divide-and-rule policies, granting certain tribal sheikhs privileges and autonomy as a counterweight to nationalist movements.[7] This reinforced a pattern in which tribes were simultaneously incorporated into state-building projects and kept at arm's length from centralized authority.

With Syrian independence in 1946, nationalist elites sought to weaken tribal influence, portraying it as regressive and incompatible with modern citizenship.[8] This orientation intensified after the Baath Party seized power in 1963. Yet Hafez al-Assad, after consolidating power in 1970, adopted a pragmatic approach: he publicly championed Arab nationalism and centralisation while privately integrating tribal leaders into patronage networks. Seats in parliament, positions in the army, and access to resources were granted in exchange for loyalty.[9] Tribes thus became both participants in and beneficiaries of authoritarian governance, while still operating as local brokers of influence.

The early 2000s under Bashar al-Assad witnessed the weakening of this arrangement. Economic liberalisation

and prolonged drought devastated rural and tribal areas, forcing migration to urban peripheries and deepening grievances.[10] By the time of the 2011 uprising, many tribal communities were among the first to mobilise, citing both economic marginalisation and solidarity with wider opposition movements.

The war years (2011–24) produced further transformations. Tribal leadership fragmented: some sheikhs aligned with the regime, others joined opposition factions, while younger, militarised figures often displaced traditional leaders.[11] Tribes were also caught up in the rise of new actors such as ISIS and the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). The 2014 massacre of the Sheitat tribe by ISIS in Deir Ezzor was a stark reminder of both the vulnerability of tribal communities and the enduring power of collective identity as a mobilising force.[12]

By the time of Assad's collapse in December 2024, tribal identity had not so much "re-emerged" as it had been continuously reshaped through these decades of change. The post-Assad period thus did not represent a simple revival of tradition but the opening of a new space in which tribes could reconstruct their authority amid institutional atrophy, competing armed actors, and contested visions of Syria's future.[13]

Suweida Mobilisation, July 2025

The confrontation in Suweida in July 2025 began with what seemed to be a local dispute between Druze residents and Bedouin tribes. Tensions escalated at checkpoints manned by local militias, with reports of kidnappings, harassment, and retaliatory acts that quickly inflamed mistrust.[14] What distinguished these clashes from earlier episodes was the speed with which they were framed as communal threats: Druze civilians interpreted the tribal presence as an existential challenge to their security, while Bedouin fighters depicted Druze militias as aggressors aligned with external enemies.[15]

This rapid shift from a neighbourhood quarrel to an inter-communal confrontation is consistent with patterns observed during the Syrian war, where disputes over resources or honour often took on wider identity-based dimensions.[16]

The escalation was transformed into a national crisis through the invocation of the faza'a, the traditional call obliging tribal members to defend kin under attack. In July 2025, this obligation was amplified by digital platforms. Calls for mobilisation spread quickly on social media, including videos in which women urged men to fulfil their duty to protect family and tribe.[17]

The response was unprecedented in scope. Convoys of armed fighters travelled from Deir Ezzor, Aleppo, Homs, and Idlib, documenting their movements online.[18] Within days, thousands of tribesmen had converged on Suweida, their arrival turning a provincial dispute into a national spectacle. The mobilisation blended customary solidarity with new tools of coordination, demonstrating that tribal identity had been reconfigured to operate effectively in a digitised, post-Assad environment. What made the mobilisation even more striking was the limited resistance from state security forces. Armed convoys bypassed checkpoints with relative ease, suggesting either tacit approval or deliberate avoidance by the Sharaa government.[19]

The consequences were severe. Bedouin fighters carried out attacks on Druze villages, leading to killings, looting, and displacement.[2021] In turn, Druze militias executed and expelled Bedouin families from contested areas. Both sides engaged in violations, and fabricated videos circulated online to inflame tensions further.[22] The violence underscored the volatility of tribal mobilisation: the same solidarity that enabled swift defence also facilitated large-scale collective punishment. Far from being a purely stabilising force, tribes in Suweida contributed directly to the escalation of conflict.

Another defining feature of the Suweida mobilisation was the generational shift in leadership. Many of those coordinating the convoys were younger men, often in their twenties and thirties, who had been shaped by years of

conflict. These figures were less constrained by traditional hierarchies and acted with greater independence from state authority. They also proved adept at using social media to broadcast the mobilisation and frame it as a defence of collective honour. By contrast, many older sheikhs, still connected to networks built under the Assad regime, were reluctant to endorse the mobilisation and sought to distance themselves from the escalating violence. This tension revealed a broader transformation: tribal authority was no longer monopolised by hereditary leaders but was increasingly contested by younger, militarised figures whose legitimacy rested on action rather than lineage.

The stance of the transitional government was notably ambiguous. By allowing convoys to move south largely unimpeded, the authorities appeared unwilling or unable to curb tribal mobilisation. In practice, security forces facilitated their passage through checkpoints, signalling a deliberate decision not to obstruct the mobilisation. This calculated inaction suggested that the state preferred to avoid direct confrontation and perhaps even saw advantage in allowing the mobilisation to unfold, whether to channel tribal energies outward or to remind other groups of the costs of defiance.[23]

Alongside the transitional government, other Syrian power centres also sought to shape the course of events. Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), now entrenched as a major authority, attempted to channel the mobilisation for its own purposes, offering logistical support to selected factions and framing the clashes in ways that strengthened its influence.[24] At the same time, external powers became involved. Israel conducted airstrikes against convoys moving toward Suweida, while Arab mediators worked to broker a ceasefire.[25] These interventions underscored that what began as a localised conflict in Suweida had immediate national and regional repercussions.

These dynamics confirmed that tribal mobilisation in Syria cannot be understood solely as a local phenomenon. Rooted in communal obligations, it nonetheless intersects with national politics and regional rivalries, making it both a critical resource and a destabilising force in the transitional order.

The Ambivalence of Tribal Authority

The Suweida mobilisation highlights the complexity of tribal politics in post-Assad Syria. It demonstrated that tribal authority is neither a residue of the past nor a straightforward instrument of the state, but a political resource that can be activated in unpredictable ways. When mobilised, tribal solidarity provided structure and coordination at a time when state institutions struggled to impose order. At the same time, the same networks facilitated violence and mass displacement, undermining stability.

This ambivalence rests on two overlapping dynamics. The first is institutional fragility. In Suweida, the transitional government allowed tribal convoys to move unimpeded through checkpoints, effectively accommodating their mobilisation. Yet once on the ground, many tribal factions acted independently of the state, pursuing their own agendas and escalating violence without direction from Damascus. This fluid relationship, sometimes aligned with the government, at other times operating autonomously exposed the limits of central authority in the transitional period.

The second is generational change. The authority of established sheikhs, many tied to the former Assad regime, is increasingly contested by younger figures whose legitimacy comes from their ability to mobilise fighters and leverage digital platforms. This shift introduced volatility into tribal politics, making them less predictable and harder for the state to manage through the old patterns of patronage and co-optation.

The lesson from Suweida is not simply that tribes are both stabilisers and spoilers, but that they embody both roles at once. Their mobilisation is indispensable for asserting control in a fragmented landscape, yet it also risks perpetuating cycles of communal conflict and undermining central authority. In this sense, the ambivalence of tribal authority is not an obstacle to be overcome but a structural condition that will shape Syria's transitional trajectory.

The Suweida mobilisation exposed the dilemmas confronting the transitional authorities. Rather than resisting tribal mobilisation, President Ahmed al-Sharaa praised the role of tribes, framing them as a vital pillar of national stability. This stance reflects the government's reliance on tribal networks to fill security gaps and extend influence into areas where state institutions remain weak. For the presidency, engaging with tribes is less a matter of necessity than of strategy: tribal mobilisation is presented as complementary to the transitional project.

Yet this reliance carries long-term risks. The same networks that can bolster security in the short term can also ignite sectarian confrontation and undermine central authority, as the events in Suweida revealed. Over time, privileging tribal mobilisation risks empowering autonomous local actors whose interests may diverge from national cohesion.

For regional and international actors, the implications are equally complex. While tribes may appear to be pragmatic intermediaries for stabilisation or aid delivery, treating them as substitutes for state institutions risks reinforcing fragmentation. The challenge for the Sharaa government, and for its external partners, is to find ways of integrating tribal authority into a broader political settlement without allowing it to become a permanent alternative to state institutions.

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Center and Periphery in a post-Assad Syria

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Until the December 2024 push by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and allied forces that unseated the Assad regime from power after more than half a century of rule, Syria had, for all intents and purposes, been partitioned by over a decade of civil war that created a patchwork of fiefdoms ruled by various factions. The government of Bashar al-Assad in Damascus, ostensibly the victor of the long, brutal war, ruled the largest of these patches, but on the ground even territories claimed by Damascus varied in effective control (e.g. Mazur 2025). The other patches, outside of the control of Damascus, differed both in their demographic make-up and forms of governance. In the northeast, the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) were experimenting with autonomous rule, while HTS was reportedly moving away from its Jihadist roots and previous affiliations with Daesh and al-Qaida towards a more pragmatic, technocratic style of governance in Idlib (Drevon and Haenni 2025), and Suweida was continuing to enjoy a sort of local autonomy.

In many ways, Syria on the eve of Assad's fall was a collection of loosely connected peripheries. HTS's Syrian Salvation Government ruling Idlib was but one of these peripheral zones. But when the forces allied with or under the control of HTS's Ahmed al-Sharaa, formerly known by his Islamist *nom de guerre* Abu Mohammad al-Jolani, made their surprising dash to take Aleppo, Hama, and finally Damascus, one of these peripheral groups suddenly became the country's center. In the winter of 2025, the mood seemed hopeful and enthusiastic in Damascus,[1] but it did not last. The spring and summer of this year saw attempts to consolidate and expand the rule of the new regime in Damascus over areas of uneven control, leading to sectarian massacres of Syrians belonging to minoritized[2] communities situated on the country's periphery perpetrated by forces commanded by or allied with Damascus.

By toppling the regime of Bashar al-Assad, the peripheral Idlib has replaced the center. This essay examines how the new order in Syria risks reproducing old patterns of center versus periphery through the lens of violence against minoritized communities on the coast and in the south and the specter of the same in the country's northeast. I then highlight some of the obstacles to finding institutional arrangements that can help a new Syrian state avoid the intertwined dangers of mass violence and partition

Idlib and its Peripheries

In a process familiar to organizations in civil war, HTS[3] rule in Idlib was consolidated through a process combining co-optation and coercion in which the organization centralized civil governance by stripping rival militant organizations of their ability to govern in the province. By 2019 when HTS had militarily defeated Ahrar al-Sham, its primary rival for military dominance and local governance, local councils were integrated into the Syrian Salvation Government through a "combination of co-optation, local agreements, and repression" (Haenni and Drevon 2025, 73). The resultant Syrian Salvation Government was led by civilian technocratic elites but operated under HTS control. One key function that the governing authority prioritized was a monopoly over the justice process, especially police and courts. For instance, in Maarat al-Nu'man, this meant that while the local council was allowed to remain in place, its composition was changed drastically, eliminating altogether women's representation, which had reportedly reached 20%. In short, revolutionary civil society in Idlib was replaced over time by "depoliticized bureaucrats with a strictly managerial approach to governance" (Haenni and Drevon 2025, 75). Less sensitive sectors of governance, like the health and education sectors, however, were subcontracted to international NGOs and their local partners.[4]

The centralizing process was also carried out within the organization itself. The previous organizational structure of Jabhat al-Nusra meant that local "emirs" had wide latitude for governance, but they were over time marginalized through the institutionalization of what was called the Administration of Liberated Areas. Using this body, Sharaa and other cadres installed a layer of single party administrators loyal to HTS leadership to serve as the glue between the organization and the civilian Syrian Salvation Government, replacing the decentralized structure of local jihadi "emirs" who had pledged allegiance to Sharaa.

Longtime observers of HTS Haenni and Drevon (2025) describe the evolution of the organization as being a sort of Thermidorian reaction where, faced with the travails of governing a statelet in Idlib and what they call the "revenge of society," HTS has undergone a process of pragmatic deradicalization. They describe this "revenge of society" as "a positive dynamic of reconnection, shaped by sustained interaction with the movement's local environment" and as an "inertia of the social" which is "how the demands, constraints, and realities of the local context reshaped HTS's nature" (ibid, 5). That social milieu that HTS is that of Idlib, a largely homogenous, rural, and Sunni part of the country, which they describe as "not an incubator for liberal, gender-sensitive, or democratic interpretations of Islam" (ibid, 14).

There are other relevant dimensions of Idlib's distinctive social context. While itself a periphery of Syria, Idlib has its own demographic peripheries in the form of minoritized religious communities, namely Christians and Druzes, both of which communities have suffered religious repression, kidnappings, and property theft.[5] The latter are concentrated in the Jabal al-Summaq[6] area north of Idlib city and west of Aleppo. This is a very old settlement of Druze communities, many of whose members emigrated in the early 19th century to the now much larger Druze communities in Lebanon and southern Syria (Firro 1992, 47-9).

During the war, these Druze villages in Idlib province were isolated from other Druze communities and from Damascus, as first the so-called Islamic State and then Jabhat al-Nusra took over the area. Their general outlook on the conflict was neutral, although these villages took in people displaced from the war. After the Islamic State takeover in late 2013, the Druze villages of the area put out a statement renouncing their faith and professing Sunni Islam (Gartenstein-Ross and al-Tamimi 2015). When Jabhat al-Nusra conquered the area from the Islamic State the following year, the communities were made to reaffirm their conversion to Sunni Islam, build mosques in the villages, destroy "idolatrous" Druze shrines, and enforce the wearing of the hijab for women outside of the home. Allied fighters from Central Asia, including Uzbeks and Uyghurs, were settled in the converted villages, leading to tensions between them and the Druze communities under the boot. These tensions came to a boil in June of 2015 when during a property dispute, the local Nusra forces massacred over 20 Druze in the village of Qalb Lawza.

HTS has attempted to signal that it has changed, for instance through Sharaa's recent visit in the US to representatives of Syrian Jewish communities, but its evolution may be overstated. Much has been made of a 2022 visit by Sharaa to the Druze villages in which he cited Surat al-Baqara telling the residents that there is "no compulsion in religion" (Ibrahim 2023), with some going so far as to claim that he was "implicitly acknowledging the right to retract a conversion, at least when it was undertaken under coercion" (Haenni and Drevon 2025, 167). That may be true, but it should be noted that the Druze of Idlib have not in fact retracted their conversions. Haenni and Drevon argue that HTS has been "transformed by the people," but the social environment of Idlib that has influenced changes in the organization's behavior is very different from the country as a whole, despite the "Umayyad-centered Sunni pride" on display in parts of Damascus (ibid, 284). They describe an organization that has become much more religiously pluralist and accommodating of other varieties of Sunni Islam, rejecting Wahhabi Salafism in favor of a more Shami variety. But all of this remains within the realm of a religious majoritarianism. As HTS's head cleric Abd al-Rahim Atun put it when describing restrictions on Christian religious

practice in Idlib: "We need to differentiate between the practice of religious rituals and the public announcement of these religious rituals. We do not intervene in anything internal, but the public space is a Muslim space" (ibid, 308 fn38).

These patterns suggest limits on the extent to which centralization processes in Idlib had a moderating, or even deradicalizing, effect on HTS. Sharaa and his comrades learned through governing the province that society was not infinitely malleable, even through the concerted action of armed men willing and able to exercise violence. But framing the question in terms of radicalization and moderation has its limits. There are certainly peculiarities concerning governance by rebels with jihadist pedigrees, but there is also an argument for treating such organizations as similar to ideologically very different organizations with similar concerns (Stewart 2021; Thaler 2025). The relevant issue is more to do with pluralism and governance more generally as opposed to something unique to Islamists. Syrian intellectual Yassin Al-Haj Saleh, for instance, has recently compared the new regime, which he describes as "sectarian Sunni rule" with window dressing, with the Assad regime, describing both as the "monopolization of power" by a single communal group.[7] For al-Haj Saleh, Syria cannot deal with the entwined dangers of massacres and partition without pluralistic power sharing (DW 2025).

State-building and Violence on the Peripheries

Coercive state building often forces a choice between local and national identities (Tilly 1992, 107). Syria is no stranger to competing loyalties between would-be centralizers and victims of "economic, social, and/or political peripheralization" (Gelvin 1999, 220). Since at least the 1970s, the Baath regime in Damascus under the Assads has been understood by many of its opponents as one ruled by peripheral religious minorities.[8] The truth has, of course, always been more complicated: while the Assad family's power base was "at its core solidly 'Alawi," this did not translate into privileged circumstances for the majority of 'Alawi communities in Syria (Batatu 1999, 226-30).

That is the historical background for the violence that erupted on the predominantly 'Alawi coastal region of Syria in March 2025. The region had seen sporadic incidents of violence in the form of kidnappings, executions, and revenge killings aimed at members of the 'Alawi community.[9] An operation led by the interim government to arrest so-called "remnants" of the former regime who had not disarmed led to an ambush in which many of the interim government's forces were killed or captured. According to an investigation published by the UN's Independent International Commission of Inquiry, interim government forces and their allies, including foreign jihadists, were mobilized in response to the ambush. This mobilization included explicitly sectarian rhetoric aimed at 'Alawis in general. This led to widespread sectarian violence. According to the UN Commission:

> In the majority of the cases investigated by the Commission, perpetrators consistently asked civilians whether they were Sunni or Alawi, and sometimes also questioned them about whether they had held positions within the former Syrian Armed Forces. Alawi men and boys were then taken away to be executed, often several male relatives within the same families. Multiple survivor accounts indicated that, prior to being executed, victims were subjected to dehumanizing verbal abuse explicitly referencing the Alawi sect, including "Alawi pigs," "kuffar" [infidels], and "dogs." Most victims were men of Alawi background, aged between 20 to 50 years, though women and children as young as one year old were also killed during house raids.

Violence in other parts of the country would soon follow a similar pattern. In Jaramana, Sahnaya, and Ashrafiyat Sahnaya, areas with large Druze populations in the Damascus countryside, the interim government wanted to consolidate power over armed groups that were not under its control.

After a recording insulting the prophet Muhammad falsely attributed to a Druze religious sheikh was circulated online, jihadist and Islamist social media networks stoked anti-Druze sentiment in an attempt to mobilize armed groups against Druze communities. The Ministry of the Interior released a statement saying that the sheikh who had been accused was likely not the author of the recording but promising to bring the culprit to justice in order to receive "the punishment he deserves" while thanking "the honorable citizens for their sincere feelings and religious zeal in defense of the Prophet Muhammad" and warning against being "drawn into any individual or collective acts that may disturb public security."[10] This did not stop clashes from breaking out in the mixed area of Jaramana, which led to film footage of violence used to stoke more sectarian mobilization. Anti-Druze sectarian language was similar to that seen in the violence on the coast, with Druze being called "infidels," "dogs," and "pigs," as well as being accused of being agents of Israel (BBC Monitoring 2025). Ironically, these sectarian tropes mirror language used in 2000 when the Assad regime cracked down on protests in the predominantly Druze area of Suweida (Lee 2024). The interim government forces took advantage of the situation to consolidate their security forces in the areas while disarming the Druze militias that were not under their control (SANA 2025).

July of 2025 saw the most recent iteration of this pattern of violence, which in many ways was an extension of the violence against Druze areas of the Damascus countryside into the southern province of Suweida, where Druze communities have enjoyed a level of local autonomy that Damascus would like to see put to an end.[11] Similar to situations on the coast and later in the Damascus countryside, there had been sporadic violence in Suweida. The tensions, described as pitting the area's Bedouins and Druze against each other, were linked to a checkpoint on the road connecting Suweida to Damascus where security forces loyal to the interim government had attacked a Druze man, leading to retaliatory attacks by armed Druze factions against local Bedouins. As in Jaramana, Damascus seized on the opportunity to present itself as a force of law and order as a way of consolidating the capital's hold on the unruly periphery. Once violence began between Druze militias and the interim government's security forces, sectarian mobilization kicked into gear. Bedouin tribal groups[12] were mobilized across the country against the Druze communities of Suwayda, and sectarian killings ensued, with summary executions and kidnappings accompanied by anti-Druze rhetoric and sectarian humiliations like the forcible shaving of Druze men's moustaches (Amnesty International 2025). One video that circulated widely was of Mounir al-Rajma, a 60-year old unarmed man sitting on the steps of a building while being asked by young armed men whether he was Muslim or Druze. They refuse to accept his answer of Syrian, and ask repeatedly what that means, Muslim or Druze. When he says he is Druze, they immediately execute him without hesitation. The death count is estimated to be over 1,000, and the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs estimates that nearly 200,000 people in Suweida have been displaced (OCHA 2025).

All of these instances of violence on the periphery are examples of an attempt to consolidate and re-centralize power in Damascus through force of arms if need be. The SDF in Syria's northeast fears that what happened to the coast and Suweida are but a prelude to an impending showdown in Jazira.[13]

Institutional Solutions and Some Obstacles

How can Syria avoid these twin dangers? Due to the country's ethno-sectarian geography, the country's biggest minoritized religious and ethnic communities overlap with its neglected geographic peripheries,[14] making it sometimes difficult to disentangle regional and ethno-religious concerns. While Ahmed al-Sharaa has made some diplomatic moves to incorporate the country's peripheries into the state he is trying to (re)build, his vision for a new Syria is in many ways a reproduction of the old, centralized Syria. As noted by the constitutional scholar Zaid al-Ali (2025), Syria's new leadership "has remained incapable of thinking past Syria's old, discredited system of centralized, highly concentrated presidential governance."

Wartime Syria was a laboratory for different types of governance that saw everything from theocratic totalitarianism to local coordination committees and everything in between (Bishara 2013). Groups in Suweida as well as in Jazira, for instance, have been increasingly calling for more local autonomy. So why are the formerly peripheral governors of Idlib so intent on reestablishing a centralized state?

The track record of decentralization and federalism in the region has been mixed (Harb and Atallah 2015; Bâli and Dajani 2023). Besides the colonial legacies of divide and rule that saw, in the case of Syria, a history of constantly changing institutional arrangements devised at least partially to combat Syrian and Arab nationalism (Khoury 1987; Longrigg 1958), there are other factors at play as well, including Israeli attempts to play minoritized communities against the region's capitals (Alpher 2015; Parsons 2000) and the checkered experience of Lebanese fights over federalism.

In the first instance, any discussion of autonomy in Suweida immediately stokes fears in the rest of Syria of further Israeli encroachment. This is compounded by Israeli rhetoric linking its demands for the south of Syria to be demilitarized, its expanding occupation of Syrian territory, and its repeated unprovoked attacks on Syrian military installations to the public announcements of the "protection" of Syrian Druze. Besides the occupation, ethnic cleansing and then annexation of the Golan Heights (Mason et al. 2023), there is also the history of Israeli plans to create a Druze buffer state (Manor 2019; Hazran 2020). The Israeli desire to dismantle neighboring countries into sectarian statelets is often dismissed as Arab nationalist paranoia, but there is real historical precedent for such schemes as well as current high level discussion about "the division of Syria into provincial regions (cantons)" according to Israeli media (Cohen 2025). Without some sort of regional guarantees for Syrian sovereignty, the threat of Israeli belligerence may strangle any dreams of federalism in the cradle, while simultaneously endangering Druze communities in Syria.[15]

Finally, the experience of Lebanon[16] has shaped Syrian views. While federalism and other forms of decentralization are often seen as approaches to conflict settlement (McGarry and O'Leary 2005), its proposal by the Lebanese Forces, then allied with Israel, has left many in the region to feel that it is nothing but a backdoor push for territorial division. The discussions had in the pages of Lebanese newspapers in the 1970s between proponents of a federal system like Moussa Prince and opponents like Antoine Azar[17] could be repeated almost verbatim today in Syria (Ennab Baladi 2025). To allay such fears, supporters of federal arrangements must show that there is more than one way to repair the country's decade plus of de facto partition and that opposing a unitary system does not mean opposing a unified Syria.

As Hyyppä (this volume) shows, there are many varieties of decentralized governance available to Syrians. Ironically, some of the institutional arrangements considered during HTS's consolidation of military power in Idlib were similar to SDF organization in the northeast (Haenni and Drevon 2025, 53). Federalism can rightly be seen as a continuum rather than a dichotomy (Lijphart 2012), and regional boundaries need not reproduce societal ones (Tarlton 1965). The point here is not to exhaustively lay out all of the institutional possibilities for a new Syria but rather to highlight that reproducing previous centralized and authoritarian blueprints is sure to fail.

Back in 2016, Al Jazeera hosted a debate on the question of federalism in Syria. Carnegie's Maha Yahya, argued against federalism, asking rhetorically, "If you go down that road, what do you do with ISIS, for example? Do you say you're going to enter into a federal system with ISIS? What about Jabhat al-Nusra?" Implicitly, the argument against federalism in Syria today is not that groups like HTS are beyond entering into federal arrangements with, but rather that in the new Syria "he who liberates, decides,"[18] and decides for everyone.

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Endnotes

1. Visit to Damascus in January 2025.
2. I prefer *minoritized* to *minority*, as the former implies a dynamic process rather than a social fact. For more on this conceptual history as it relates to Syria see White (2011).
3. For the sake of simplicity and as the risk of anachronism, I will refer to HTS to refer to the organization led by Ahmed al-Sharaa despite technically being a merger of various organizations with its precursors, Jabhat Fatah al-Sham and Jabhat al-Nusra, the latter of which was created by the Islamic State in Iraq. For a history of these organizations, see Hamming (2023).
4. It is important to note though that such decisions were due to a shortage of civil servants and a desire for international donor funds and not any commitment to decentralization. See Hyyppä (this volume) for more on decentralization.
5. According to the United Nations Human Rights Council, HTS's Properties Committee, formerly the "Spoils of War Committee" specifically targeted the property of religious minorities (United Nations 2022, 13).
6. This mountain has also been referred to as Jabal al-A'la.
7. Elsewhere he describes this as "genocracy" or rule by the *genos* instead of the *demos* (al-Haj Saleh and Pearlman 2025).
8. Drysdale (1977: 25) reports hearing the term *hukm al-'adas* (rule of the lentil) in café conversations in Syria in the 1970s: *'adas* is an Arabic acronym for 'Alawi, Druze, and Ismaili. I came across the expression in my fieldwork among Syrians residing in Türkiye and Lebanon between 2012 and 2019.
9. See Mrie (2025) for a rich description of the situation in 'Alawi communities after the fall of Asad.
10. https://x.com/syrianmoi/status/1917019923295178873
11. For a summary of the situation of Suwayda from 2011 until 2023, see Ezzi (2023).
12. For more on Bedouin mobilization, see Dukhan (this volume).
13. Recent clashes between HTS and SDF in areas of Aleppo like Sheikh Maqsoud do not auger well. See Tlass (this volume) for more on the checkpoints in Sheikh Maqsoud.
14. Other minoritized communities like Christians have similar concerns as their Druze, Kurdish, and 'Alawi compatriots, but due to their geographical dispersal or small numbers do not have the same mobilizational capacity as those communities.
15. Nearly 90 years ago already, the geographer of Syria Jacques Weulersse (1936, 38) remarked that the "minority complex" can lead to massacres or exodus and that "protecting [minorities] risks condemning them."
16. Likewise, the sectarian quota system in Iraq imposed after the US invasion is widely seen as a failure.
17. See their exchange in *L'Orient-Le Jour* on February 10 and 12, 1979. See also Salam (1987).
18. This has become a popular slogan [من يحرر يقرر] rationalizing unilateral decision making by Sharaa and his cadres.

Decentralization in post-Assad Syria:
a façade or bottom-up local governance?

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Introduction

Local governance in Syria under the regimes of Hafez and Bashar al-Assad was heavily centralized. During the Syrian uprising and war, governance gained different forms depending on the ruling armed groups and their ideologies. Some saw the conflict as a starting point for a decentralized rule that would empower communities and give political agency to individuals. After Assad's fall, local governance has to be rebuilt and discussions whether a centralized or decentralized system should be adopted are ongoing (Al-Ḍāḥ 2025; Alshoufi 2025). These discussions happen at a time when Syria's new rulers are creating the new state, national identity, and governance structures around an explicitly centralizing agenda. There lies a danger in trying to unite the country by over-centralizing as this could increase demands of federalism from ethnic and religious minorities.

I consider Syria a case of rebel victory, but others – including the new rulers – prefer to view it as "postwar" to distinguish between the 13 years of war and the new beginning. I use the term postwar to analyze statebuilding that is happening in Syria since the fall of Assad despite the fact that the country is not united and different levels of violence are still ongoing. This of course creates an additional layer of variation in how local governance forms. The new rulers are, to borrow from Lisa Wedeen (1999), acting "as if" the war is over and statebuilding can proceed without hindrances, also depicted in this issue by Ali Hamdan's use of the concept of performativity to analyze the post-Assad statebuilding process. Finally, I understand decentralization as "the structural and organisational delegation of state tasks, competencies, and responsibilities from the centre to subnational actors and institutions" (Vollmann et al. 2020, 364).

This paper focuses on the grassroots level of governance and the transformation of local governance through prewar and war times to the postwar and the processes through which local governance is now organized. Mere administrative decentralization does not produce bottom-up, empowered local governance – institutions capable of managing local affairs without "central control and judicial override". Political and fiscal decentralization, political and budgetary independence and the right to collect taxes, is needed to genuinely transform patterns of governance and prevent the restoration of authoritarianism (Hallaj and Masri 2025, 32).

Drawing from dozens of interviews with council members who served during the war and afterwards, conducted both inside and outside Syria, and from observing local governance during the first year of the post-Assad era, this paper argues that bottom-up local governance can support Syrian statebuilding by creating political agency and local forms of power that could push back authoritarian tendencies at the center. This is possible if governance structures do not reproduce Assad-style patronage networks and become a mere façade of decentralization where the center holds real powers. Furthermore, because the new rulers genuinely fear that federalism undermines territorial unity (Hallaj and Masri 2025, 37), decentralization could also reduce calls for federalism and the resulting fears about the fragmentation of the state. The emerging trajectories of local governance could be disrupted, and opportunities lost if the new authorities continue to over-centralize power in Damascus and fail to reach agreements with those holding power in northeast and southern Syria. Thus the rebuilding of local governance is tied to other processes in post-Assad statebuilding.

Making sense of the Syrian context requires understanding how the authoritarian practices of the Assad regimes continued past 2011 and transformed during the war. They were not in place only in regime-held areas but extended to other areas too as wartime order gained hybrid forms. In other parts of the country and in the diaspora, activists and civilians created governance structures, local councils, and humanitarian, advocacy, and other civil society organizations, many of which are now active in Syria. This case highlights how institutions such as local councils, that became more or less insignificant during the war and had to succumb to conflict dynamics, emerge in the postwar as a key form of local governance adopted by the victorious rebels. In this paper I analyze past experiences of local governance and explore how local governance in contemporary Syria has evolved and how it is being rebuilt since Assad's fall. I end by discussing some problems entailed in decentralization, including the risk of empowering illiberal local actors and patronage networks.

Victorious Rebels and Local Governance

Scholarship on rebel victories and their consequences abound. Examples from Zimbabwe and Liberia to Uganda and Nicaragua show how rebel victory does not necessarily appease a country or lead to democracy, but a centralized rule (Thaler 2025) can consolidate authoritarianism (Lyons 2016), pursue top-down development practices (Liu 2022), and even lead to conflict recurrence (Sharif and Joshi 2025). The existing research, however, tends to focus on rebels' postwar policies, because of their coercive power during war and afterwards, while neglecting civil actors and pre-war dynamics that can affect postwar governance.

Rebel group's ideology, manifested in the type of governance institutions the group created during war, is shown to affect postwar statebuilding. When the wartime ideology supports service provision and inclusion of civilians in governance, this is often reflected in postwar policies, as in the case of *Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional* in Nicaragua and National Resistance Movement in Uganda which expanded state reach by creating centralized institutions of local governance after gaining control of the capitals (Thaler 2025). Wartime rebel-civilian relations can affect governing strategies after conflicts have ended. Victorious rebels rely on those populations that reside in areas rebels controlled during war, but will have to coopt and coerce areas neither party or the rivals held in order to consolidate their power more broadly (Liu 2022). Repression by the victorious rebels is shown to lead to civil war recurrence, whereas a negotiated constitutional reform which includes other warring parties can prevent conflicts from starting anew (Sharif and Joshi 2025).

The characteristics and structures of wartime order in Syria are bound to affect statebuilding efforts there as well. The varied experiences that the different areas had during the war, regime-held areas, Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)-led northeastern Syria, and the patchwork of dozens of different forms of wartime order in areas held by the broad, divided opposition, have produced different forms of governance during the first months since Assad's fall. As of now, the government does not control the entire country, with areas in the northeast and south falling outside its effective sovereignty. Thus, it is not only the victorious rebels and their wartime governance that shapes local governance in Syria but also external actors such as Israel and the United States. There are already efforts to put these various modes under a more coherent structure as statebuilding proceeds, with some tolerance of local demands and dynamics. If they remain in place local governance could support statebuilding by creating political agency for local communities over their own affairs and reduce authoritarian tendencies in the center and calls for federalism in the peripheries.

In authoritarian Syria, power was centralized in Damascus and the state provided most public services. Local governance at governorate and municipal levels was a tool, intertwined with religious and tribal leaders and Baath party members, to enforce regime-power across Syria, to create patronage networks that empowered local leaders, and to manage dissent and harvest opportunity. Who was empowered and how depended on local intermediaries' personal networks in their communities; dense networks enabled intermediaries, on one hand, to enforce

compliance towards the state and, on the other, to make claims to the state on behalf of their community (Mazur 2021, 82–87). Such state-society networks, critically, were not identical across the country and obedience did not always lead to material gains from the state. Furthermore, empowering local leaders did not mean decentralization, since power in the end was held closely by the regime in Damascus. Despite new legislation on local administration decreed during the uprising and subsequent war, especially Decree 107/2011 which was meant to decentralize governance (Syrian Parliament 2011), decentralization never materialized. Local administration continued to ensure the regime's reach over citizens.

During the war, governance became localized, fragmented, and decentralized, and hybrid forms of order emerged especially in opposition-held areas. There, the revolutionary activists that rose to topple the regime of Bashar al-Assad in 2011 created local councils to exhibit their political agency and opposition to the regime, and to decentralize power. Former council members explained to me how local councils were to be an alternative to Assad's authoritarian rule – although Baathist laws, such as the Decree 107/2011, were used as basis for their work. On the ground, this system was imperfect, and many councils remained disconnected from each other and the oppositional political leadership. Local councils' main task was to ensure the flow of services once the regime's institutions stopped working in the liberated areas (Hyyppä 2023).

Local councils were by no means the only governance actors. Syrians engaged in humanitarian work and organized already during the early days of the uprising to document human rights violations, distribute goods, and take care of the wounded. Later such initiatives became organizations attached to the international aid industry that worked inside Syria and across the borders and became part of the governance structures in the opposition-held areas (Khoury 2025). Armed groups also created governance, forcing other actors to work under their approval. My interviews with former council members reveal how some, mostly groups with strong local ties and local in their nature, worked side by side with civil local councils, but others, especially non-local Islamist groups, created sharia courts, police forces, and other governance institutions that challenged civil actors (Schwab 2023). Indeed, personal networks with rebels as well as donors eased all civil action. In addition to these dynamics, the Kurdish-dominated SDF in the northeast created their own form of local governance, Democratic Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, that has been in place since 2012.

Thus, a patchwork of civil governance, rebel governance, and civil society organizations emerged as people tried to manage their daily lives in the opposition-held areas and as armed and non-armed actors vied for influence. While some local councils functioned for several years, most of them had to cease their work after the regime or hostile armed groups such as Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) conquered areas. While HTS tolerated some councils, and other governance actors, until it could rule across wider areas in northwest Syria, civil councils had to succumb to its rule after the group had gained a hegemonic position (see Hamdan in this collection). Subsequently, revolutionary activists who could not work under HTS had to flee elsewhere, or out of the country, and power in the opposition-held area, at the time known as the Idlib enclave, home to about four million people, was again centralized under the HTS-affiliated Salvation Government. It was created in late 2017 and consisted of eleven ministries, including one on local administration, and was led by technocrats but existed under the supervision of HTS (Enab Baladi 2017). Some of my interlocutors likened the centralized structure to Assad's rule. Civil local councils remained only in northern Aleppo governorate in areas with Turkish military presence and high Turkish influence.

Local Governance in post-Assad Syria

After Assad's fall, that patchwork of governance needs to be banded together. So far, Damascus has, in the areas it controls, begun top-down processes to transform local governance, but people are also governing their communities on a grassroot level.

The toppling of Assad was a different type of rebel victory than often assumed in the literature (Liu 2022; Sharif and Joshi 2025) because a large segment of the population across Syria celebrated his fall, despite not having participated in ousting him with military means or supporting HTS during the war. Thus, the HTS-led rebel coalition that took power has enjoyed revolutionary legitimacy derived from unseating a feared regime. This has strengthened the rulers' positions and enabled them to renew state institutions, such as the army and constitution, and holding People's Assembly elections. Since taking power, individuals from HTS and the Salvation Government have been given positions as ministers and governors in the new administration. In this centralized administration power lies only with a few people, especially the interim president Ahmed al-Sharaa.

As expected by the literature, the new rulers have applied wartime governance from Idlib to govern the areas they control (Thaler 2025). Still, local governance is based on the Decree 107/2011, stipulated under Assad but which oppositional local councils also adapted. Many council members and others I met in Syria emphasized the transitional nature of this phase: the new People's Assembly still needs to approve the law or legislate a new one so that councils have a legal framework to work with and are able to hold elections. Now, within a system of Regional Administration (*idarat al-mantiqa*), HTS- or Salvation Government-affiliated Sunnis are appointed as district governors (*mudir al-mantiqa*) and liaise between governors, security forces, ministries, and the local level. Mudirs usually work in areas they hail from, except in minority-majority areas (Waters 2025, 8–9). However, the areas the former rebels acquired under their rule are so vast that they simply do not have enough people to appoint all local leaders. Instead, Damascus has had to engage with people who can act as intermediaries, thereby empowering local communities and allowing them to affect how their communities are governed. In the future, patronage networks akin to those under Assad could emerge if governance is not unified and personal networks to the center determine governance processes. At the moment, there is still great variance in local governance.

Moreover, actors above the local level lack the resources to provide basic services. Thus, when the state fails to provide the services it used to provide, ordinary people step in. Many of those who fled Syria have returned and mobilize within their communities again. Some of them have previous experience of local governance before 2011 or during the war. People are organizing under structures and with goals that resemble those of the local councils that activists set up as the Syrian uprising militarized: taking care of people's basic needs through spontaneous, local structures – with the meagre resources available. In eastern Aleppo, neighborhood committees were set up to remove rubbish from the streets and to encourage community members to participate in the work as the city level council does not have enough resources for such work. With the support of civil society, local people started a campaign, 'For Your Eyes, Oh Aleppo', to help rehabilitate the city (Alkhattam 2025). In Daraya, in the Rural Damascus governorate, similar committees were set up already in January to ensure that bread and fuel is available and that the streets are cleaned (Davis 2025). Now there is a local council in place that is funded by the community (Author interview October 2025). Also, in other areas local committees and councils were set up immediately after Assad's fall so that service provision would not be disrupted (Waters 2025, 7).

In former regime-held areas Alawis are reportedly more hesitant to engage in local governance to not attract the attention of the rulers and because of lack of experience of organizing (Waters 2025, 5). Whereas in the opposition-held areas organizing was a must in order to survive, Assad regime never encouraged active citizenship. However, Assad-era structures have not disappeared completely either. For example, in the Qalamoun region, there exist old, regime-era councils and newly elected ones (Waters 2025, 5).

Although sectarian violence has increased since the immediate days after Assad's fall, and Sunnis are employed by Damascus to oversee local governance, on the local levels rebels have not only empowered coethnics, Sunni Arabs (Liu 2022, 8–9), but local dynamics matter and some

councils have minorities, such as Christians, as members. While appointing coethnics eases the resource burden placed on the capital, it also provides a chance for rivals, such as the SDF in the northeast or some of the Druze factions in the south, to capture local powers and challenge Damascus' legitimacy to rule over the whole country.

Decentralization: Dividing the Country and Benefiting Some?

Calls for local governance can be a double-edged sword; they can empower patronage networks or patriarchal structures, or they can be used for political gains. Such calls have been made by Kurds in the northeast, Druze in Suweida, and Alawis on the coast, in the name of federalism or local autonomy where wartime actors would retain their positions. This means that Syria would be territorially divided along ethno-sectarian lines – an outcome which the new government, and most Syrians, oppose.

Repressive tactics, such as Damascus' coercive attempt to take over Suweida governorate in July 2025, are known to facilitate civil war recurrence (Sharif and Joshi 2025). The violence led to local factions uniting under Hikmat al-Hijri, Druze spiritual leader known for his anti-Damascus sentiments, and the Druze calling for self-determination and independence (Enab Baladi 2025) – a dividing issue even within the Druze community. On August 6, 2025, a Supreme Legal Committee was formed to govern the area (Almaktab Al'ilami li Lajna Alqanuni Al'ulya 2025). Calls for autonomy have abridged sentiments among the minorities against the new rulers. Several of the minority groups met in August in Hasakah and demanded more autonomy for Syria's different regions. Soon after, Alawis made similar demands of federalism and formed Political Council for Central and Western Syria (The New Arab 2025). Such plans and de facto creations of alternative self-governance are a way to contest the central rule and its legitimacy (Lyons 2016, 10) but they do not necessarily bring stability or repel authoritarianism. Instead, bids for autonomy or independence could work as a justification to centralize powers. In August 2025, Sharaa reaffirmed that he does not accept federalism or decentralization if they mean partition. According to him, the Decree 107/2011 on local administration already guarantees local governance. (Hamidi August 26, 2025)

It is not given that decentralization will increase local democracy or the agency of ordinary people. Even though the new rulers have technically adopted decentralization, local governance can retain Assad-era functions or remain superficial as has happened after reforms in Jordan and Morocco (Vollmann et al. 2020). Governance institutions, in the Syrian case Baathist modes of governance, are difficult to change (Hallaj and Masri 2025, 42), and if local governance institutions are not given political autonomy and enough state resources to fulfil them, i.e., if political and fiscal decentralization does not happen, they will remain an illusion of decentralization. In addition, foreign donors might be eager to support decentralization as a form of democracy building in Syria as they did during the war (Mukhopadhyay and Howe 2023). If this happens again unevenly across the country and with short, project-based funding, it sustains a weak, disconnected network of local governance. Funding should be organized in a more concerted way by supporting the governance institutions despite of who their members are or where they are located. When personal ties dictate who gets resources, patronage networks emerge and create inter-council competition and regional inequalities.

Furthermore, separating between local legitimacy and local, illiberal practices can be hard. This applies to domains beyond governance, such as to security sector reform or tribal politics (Tlass 2025; Dukhan 2025). Local governance can reenforce the dominance of traditional societal actors, such as religious or tribal leaders. During the war, these groups affected the compositions or directed the work of some councils and sustained patriarchal norms, often preventing women's participation. These trends are hard to change and travel easily to the postwar society. Now, influential families have their say in some council memberships (Waters 2025, 6) and there are signs that local agency might disempower or sideline women. In People's Assembly elections in October 2025 local

notables, powerful families or tribal leaders, could affect electoral college memberships directly influencing voting. Only 3 % of the members electoral colleges elected are women.

Towards Governance with Agency

While the new rulers are building a new Syria and trying to expand the writ of the state over areas they do not control, individuals are already organizing on the local level to govern their communities. Contrary to some other conflicts, where civilians lived only under rebel rule, in the Syrian case, years of experience of civil governance during the war, and the emergence of a vibrant civil society, can help foster a system that is more decentralized, where local people participate in governance and through that could push back authoritarian tendencies. People are already engaging in local governance and clearly want to influence local matters. Assad's fall created an opportunity for the center to empower local governance and give people political agency that was denied to them before. At the same time, people also have to resist the creation of patronage networks and a reward system where loyalty and networks to Damascus dictate resource allocation and to engage in more democratic practices than they did during the war.

The process of building local governance is not separate from reconstruction, transitional justice, or security sector reform. Governance based on consensus could protect Syria from falling in yet another civil war (Sharif and Joshi 2025) and local governance could have a role in achieving inclusive governance and working as a productive link between the central and local levels. Repressive politics or outside interference can divert the country from that path. Rebuilding has to happen with all Syrians, also from the bottom up.

Fieldwork for this research was funded by the Finnish Institute in the Middle East.

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Security Sector Reform in Post-Assad Syria:
Decentralization as a Foundation

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Introduction

The collapse of the Assad regime in December 2024 presents both a historic opportunity and a profound challenge for reimagining state institutions in Syria—none more urgently than the security sector. For decades, security provision in Syria was synonymous with repression, centralization, and institutional opacity, rooted in the dominance of overlapping intelligence services and regime-loyal militias. During the conflict, Syria saw territorial fragmentation, with different armed factions backed by different foreign powers (e.g. the opposition-held northern territories were controlled by different armed groups including HTS and the Kurdish Forces). This also means local populations had different security, social and to an extent legal dynamics depending on the group that had control over them.

Today, as Syria transitions away from authoritarianism, the instinct to centralize control over security forces may appear as a necessary step toward state-building. The state is not the majority provider of justice and security. HTS has repeatedly failed to show a unified response to major crises lately, suggesting a fragmented central state, fragile and bound to fail. Yet this paper argues that such an approach risks reproducing the very dynamics that contributed to state fragility under Assad. Instead, it proposes that decentralization – when channelled through inclusive, locally grounded mechanisms – can be an asset rather than an obstacle to Security Sector Reform.

How can post-Assad Syria rebuild its security landscape to promote legitimacy and accountability? In divided, post-conflict societies like Syria, local security initiatives often enjoy greater legitimacy, responsiveness, and accountability than top-down structures imposed by a fragile transitional authority (Baker, 2009; Luckham & Kirk, 2013). Accordingly, this paper argues that Syria's SSR trajectory should embrace a controlled decentralization model, whereby local security councils, civilian oversight bodies, and hybrid policing arrangements are not viewed as threats to national coherence, but as stepping stones toward sustainable trust-building and institutional reform.

This paper is divided into two parts. First, it engages scholarship on local ownership, hybrid security governance, and plural policing. Second, it maps emergent community-led security practices since late 2024 in Suweida, Raqqa, and Aleppo. These three cases were chosen because they represent three distinct modalities of decentralized security governance in post-Assad Syria. Aleppo illustrates forms of supervised co-production between local Kurdish structures and residual state institutions; Raqqa highlights institutionalised subsidiarity through bargains between tribal authorities and security forces; and Suweida exemplifies communal self-administration rooted in customary authority.

Literature: Legitimizing bottom-up capacities in SSR

There is a consensus in the literature that the SSR paradigm has been largely state-centred, with policy and practice tending to prioritize state-building rather than addressing the real needs of local populations for service delivery and security provision. When interventions engage only state-authorised actors in settings of security pluralism, they tend to channel benefits only to those covered by state protection, inadvertently privileging some groups while leaving the most vulnerable and marginalized underserved (Price & Warren, 2017). From this perspective, effective reform depends less on who should be providing security and justice than on who actually does so in practice –

revealing a persistent tension between governance and effectiveness (Baker & Scheye, 2007).

Recent literature therefore advances a more inclusive, flexible and context-specific approach, framed as locally owned while recognizing the importance of differentiating between (new) regime ownership and national ownership (Goodhand and Sedra, 2007). In this vein, Donais and others argue that reconciling national and local ownership is achieved through a pragmatic process that co-produce security across multiple actors -- rather than by privileging one scale of authority over another (Donais, 2009). This shift suggests a turn to hybrid security governance, and multi-layered strategies that recognize and regulate the different providers of security and justice: the state, civil society, commercial, and informal actors (Baker & Scheye, 2007; Luckham & Kirk, 2013). Second generation SSR thus engages non-state actors while prioritizing accountability and public legitimacy, acknowledging the non-linearity of postconflict transitions (Ansorg & Gordon, 2019; Jackson & Bakrania, 2018; Sedra, 2018). Indeed, supporting non-state systems, or "bottom-up adaptive capacities" may be the best means of realising short-term, sustainable gains, as they are more resilient than state systems, having endured throughout conflicts and fragile environments (Juncos, 2018b).

The normative and policy literature therefore increasingly advances a principle of decentralization for SSR, so that justice and accountability migrate closer to the arenas where security is actually produced, while acknowledging the crucial role and public legitimacy of civil society (Sedra, 2018). Conceptually, this arrangement tackles the governance-effectiveness tension by widening ownership beyond a central state and enabling adaptive responses in non-linear transitions (Jackson & Bakrania, 2018).

Empirical evidence: the cases of Aleppo, Raqqa and Suweida

Since the Assad regime collapsed, Syria has been in a volatile state. The US and western countries want to give it a chance, moving to lift the sanctions and encourage foreign investment opportunities. But the reality is darker. The interim government has repeatedly failed to show unity and control over its own factions. Given the complexities and non-linearity of post conflict dynamics, the solution for SSR lies in a more decentralized model, to avoid a repeat of the devastating incidents of the Sahel[1], and find a solution to the ongoing crisis in Suweida[2] (Maggie Michael, 2025; Reuters, 2025).

By examining early initiatives from Aleppo, Raqqa and Suweida, this paper maps three distinct modalities of decentralized security governance: 1) supervised co-production with state agencies, 2) subsidiarity through formalized bargains between the state and organized local bodies (e.g. councils of elders, tribal sheikhs, religious leaders) and 3) communal self-administration. Each of these models relocates parts of the security function closer to the local population while attempting to preserve the legal link to national authority. Together, these models illuminate what decentralization buys – consent, responsiveness, situational knowledge and perhaps the most important, accountability. Yet, these gains are not without risks: decentralization may inadvertently encourage secessionist tendencies, empower local warlords, or leave communities vulnerable to coercion and external patronage in the absence of strong institutional oversight. What one must consider, then, is how to balance the benefits – enhanced legitimacy, inclusion and local accountability – against the dangers of competing sovereignties and territorial disintegration.

Joint checkpoints and communal agency: Aleppo's hybrid security practices

In Aleppo, neighbourhoods such as Sheikh Maqsoud and Ashrafieh have long had Kurdish majorities. Because of this concentration, when the conflict fragmented Syria, Kurdish political and security structures (known as the Asayish) were able to establish a strong presence in these quarters. Their authority drew not only on militia capacity but also on deep community roots, meaning that residents tended to view Kurdish forces as more familiar and protective than outside actors. Yet rather than entirely supplanting the state, they entered joint structures—such as shared checkpoints with the Interior Ministry—

formalised in a 14-point arrangement (ANF News, 2025; Levant 24, 2025).

These joint actions included documented volunteer night patrols or auxiliaries extending from Damascus to Aleppo and Homs, with residents guarding districts "with support from authorities" (Al Mounes, 2025). In Manbij, a little further north of Aleppo, the civil administration reportedly established volunteer neighbourhood committees from quarters and villages to protect property amidst theft/looting spikes (Focus Aleppo, 2025). The joint checkpoint model blends local force knowledge with public-law mandate, aligning with co-production theory[3] (Baker & Scheye, 2007; Price & Warren, 2017).

These joint actions show how decentralisation in security governance is less a binary alternative to centralisation than a layered process in which multiple logics of authority coexist. In Bosnia, for instance, community policing initiatives evolved from experimental projects into a nationally codified framework that standardised citizen participation while preserving municipal discretion (Juncos, 2018a; Padurariu, 2014). Like Bosnia, Aleppo demonstrates how municipal–state interfaces can be formalised through checkpoints. The lesson is not simply that decentralisation "worked", but that coherence was produced through interfaces between local priority-setting and central oversight. Similarly, in African contexts of hybrid security governance, durable arrangements have often rested on the recognition and regulation of plurality rather than on attempts to eliminate it (Bagayoko et al., 2016; Baker & Scheye, 2007).

Recent events, however, have highlighted the fragility of such a model. During the 6th of October 2025 local elections, violent clashes erupted between Asayish and regime aligned militias in these areas, leaving several civilians dead and disrupting polling stations. It became evident that such arrangements depend less on their institutional design than on the broader political compact that sustains them. What had functioned as a pragmatic model of co-production was quickly undone when electoral competition re-politicised and revived latent power disputes (Al-Arabiya, 2025; Times of Israel, 2025). This volatility stems from the fact that the current government remains institutionally unstable and politically unconsolidated, with a deficient and/or contested legitimacy. As a result, authority within these hybrid arrangements is still negotiated rather than codified, relying on informal bargains. In the absence of clear hierarchies or a legally defined division of competences, power remains contingent—subject to local shifts in allegiance, changes in military and governmental balance, or the instrumentalization of groups by regional powers.

Local legitimacy through institutionalised subsidiarity in Raqqa

Raqqa's post-2024 security landscape has been shaped by its tribal composition and history of contestation between ISIS, Kurdish-led forces, and Arab local councils. Authority here has long been fragmented: tribes and notables retained significant influence in dispute settlement and access to resources, even under ISIS control (Hawar News Agency, 2025a). This meant that, after the regime collapse, any durable security arrangement had to acknowledge these local actors.

Against this backdrop, the iterative coordination between the Internal Security Forces (ISF/Asayish) and tribal notables from January to August 2025 reflects not simply ad hoc cooperation but the institutionalization of subsidiarity—the principle that problems should be resolved at the lowest competent level. Through joint roles in dispute resolution, road reopening, and anti-narcotics campaigns, the notables lent social legitimacy while the ISF provided coercive capacity (Hawar News Agency, 2025b). This corporatist compact effectively converted tribal authority into governable consent for everyday security tasks.

The immediate gain was legitimacy at the point of service delivery, reducing enforcement costs and curbing cycles of revenge through ritualised reconciliation. Indeed, studies suggest that legitimacy emerges less from coercive capacity than from visible responsiveness and routinised security engagement —through public forums, reconciliation channels, feedback loops— with local populations (Arriola et al., 2021; Wisler & Onwudiwe, 2008).

The National Guard Forces: can customary authority be the solution to the ongoing crisis in Suweida?

Suweida's security trajectory after the Assad collapse is inseparable from its Druze communal structures. For decades, the province was only loosely integrated into Damascus's security architecture; local notables and the Men of Dignity movement carved out space for communal autonomy. This history, coupled with longstanding grievances about neglect and marginalisation, meant that when clashes with Bedouin tribes and broader instability intensified in mid-2025, trust in central institutions was minimal and communal authority filled the gap.

In response, notables established a Temporary Executive Office in August 2025 with authority over security, services, and property protection, later complemented by the announcement of a consolidated "National Guard Forces" under Druze leadership (SyriacPress, 2025). These measures sought to convert communal legitimacy into public-service functions, offering immediate crisis management, dispute mediation, and protection against corruption. They exemplify a form of hybrid governance (Bagayoko et al., 2016), where customary authority supplies cohesion while emergent structures attempt to provide functional services. This model demonstrates both the promise and peril of decentralized SSR. On one hand, the Druze leadership's rooted legitimacy gave the initiative unparalleled capacity to stabilize during violence, mediating disputes and managing arms. On the other hand, the risk of parochial capture is acute: without external oversight, licensing, and interoperable standards, a "National Guard" can easily harden sectarian boundaries and entrench patronage networks (Schroeder et al., 2017). The priority, therefore, is for such forces to be institutionalized within a national SSR framework—time-bounded, regulated, and coordinated with state agencies, rather than operating beside or in competition with them.

Patterns of Hybrid Governance in security contexts

Across the three cases, three mechanisms recur.

First, joint structures, such as checkpoints, local committees, or temporary councils, mediate between local authority and state institutions, making everyday security coordination easier (Baker & Scheye, 2007; Donais, 2018).

Second, customary mediation embedded in public procedure, including local reconciliations and justice tracks, absorbs social conflict that formal policing and judiciaries cannot process at scale, reducing revenge dynamics (Bagayoko et al., 2016; Luckham & Kirk, 2013).

Third, performance-based legitimacy – when people see visible protection of property, de-escalation, and service continuity—proves to be more convincing than centralized claims to authority in contexts of fractured trust (Ansorg & Gordon, 2019; Sedra, 2018).

Case	*Initiative*	*Key Mechanism*	*Strengths*	*Risks*
Aleppo	Hybrid co-production with the state (joint checkpoints, volunteer patrols)	Shared security provision between Kurdish Asayish & Interior Ministry	Local familiarity, situational knowledge, trust	Vigilantism, impersonation, weak accountability
Raqqa	Institutionalised subsidiarity with tribal notables	Tribal–ISF bargains in dispute resolution & anti-narcotics	Social legitimacy, reduced revenge cycles	Elite capture, Islamist infiltration, opaque representation
Suweida	Communal self-administration (National Guard Forces under Druze leadership)	Customary authority + Temporary councils	Legitimacy, crisis response, dispute mediation	Sectarian entrenchment, foreign patronage, lack of oversight

Limitations

Decentralized models also face clear dangers. Without licensing, proper training and complaint channels, volunteer patrols can slide into vigilantism (Gordon, 2014). Tribal or religious leadership can drift toward elite capture, patronage network, or ideological infiltration (Hassan, 2021). Foreign powers may also exploit local autonomy to advance their agendas, as seen in Suweida when appeals for Israeli protection sparked regional escalation (Schroeder et al., 2017).

Beyond these localized dynamics, Syria has also become a proxy arena for a new Turkish–Israeli rivalry, now that Iran is weakened. Ankara's expansionism through reconstruction and border security collides with Israel's pre-emptive deterrence strategy in the south. A controlled, decentralized security model could help absorb these pressures by dispersing authority, lowering the strategic value of central capture, and anchoring stability in locally legitimate structures.

But balancing legitimacy and accountability remains the greatest challenge. Customary authorities may be trusted, but without formal oversight, they risk replicating the same exclusionary patterns they were meant to replace (Sedra, 2018; Tiscornia, 2024).

Conclusion: Reconsidering a decentralized trajectory for SSR

This paper asked how security arrangements in post-Assad Syria can contribute to legitimate and accountable Security Sector Reform. The cases of Aleppo, Raqqa, and Suweida demonstrate that decentralization is not simply an alternative but an already-embedded reality in Syria.

Years of conflict and territorial fragmentation have dispersed authority and localized legitimacy, such that attempts at coercive re-centralization would likely reproduce distrust and instability, as we have seen in the Sahel region, Suweida and the Northeast of Syria. At the same time, decentralization on its own is insufficient: without mechanisms of oversight and institutional interfaces linking local authority to state frameworks, local governance risks sliding into fragmentation, or foreign patronage. Legitimacy in Syria is now dispersed and locally rooted. The task of SSR, then, is not to erase this plurality but to ask how a state might be rebuilt upon it.

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Endnotes

[1] Where nearly 1500 Alawites died in a massacre in the beginning of March 2025, dozens went missing, and there were 40 distinct sites of revenge killings, rampages and looting (Reuters, 2025).

[2] The crisis in Suweida Governorate has escalated into calls for full independence by Hikmat al-Hijri, a Druze sheikh, amid a siege affecting food, medicine and movement for civilians and over 600 abductees, with the Syrian Government blamed (Enab Baladi, 2025).

[3] The intentional, rule-bound collaboration through which state security institutions and community actors jointly diagnose problems, set priorities, and deliver everyday safety and dispute-resolution— with the state providing legal authority and rights safeguards, and communities supplying local knowledge, access, and social oversight (Baker & Scheye, 2007; Price & Warren, 2017)

Justice in the Interregnum:
Navigating the Complexity of Transitional Justice in Post-Assad Syria

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> "Justice should serve all victims in Syria, regardless of the perpetrators, and justice should not be biased. Otherwise, it will not be full justice and will not lead to civil peace that will build the future of Syria." (The Syria Campaign, 2025b)

Early Steps Toward Justice

The collapse of the Assad regime in December 2024 brought about a political rupture long hoped for but scarcely believed possible, yielding a contingent opening for transition. Since this historic moment, many Syrians have sought to prioritize accountability and transnational justice on the interim government's agenda. Just two months after the Constitutional Declaration in March 2025, the transitional authorities announced presidential decrees no 19 and 20, establishing the National Commission for the Missing (NCM) and the National Commission for Transitional Justice (NCTJ). The latter promised to "uncover the truth about grave violations caused by the defunct regime" (SJAC, 2025). Many international actors welcomed this as an essential step towards reconciliation and accountability for the vast violations committed over the last decades (EEAS, 2025). Others, however, were more apprehensive about the narrow scope of the NCTJ's mandate, which focuses only on the atrocities of the Assad regime, excluding crimes committed by other actors (OHCHR, 2025).

As Syrians entered the transitional period, various local and international observers have started to cast the country's transitional justice process within the paradigms of 'post-conflict' or 'post-authoritarian' transition. However, it can be argued that such characterizations are premature, given the ongoing human rights violations and persisting territorial divisions (e.g., in the coastal region, Suweida, the Kurdish-controlled territories, and Israel-occupied territories), as well as the absence of a clear new political order. So, *how do the highly complex networks of conflicts and grievances shape our understanding of transitional justice in post-Assad Syria?* Drawing on official reports by human rights organizations, government statements, and first-hand accounts by Syrian activists and civil society actors, we delineate three core dimensions that help disentangle the complexities inherent to the transitional period in post-Assad Syria and map out their effects on TJ: (1) Temporality, (2) Spatiality, and (3) Agency. Our framework contributes to the literature on transitional justice 'during transition' by foregrounding a granular understanding of the dynamics and challenges of transitional justice amid incomplete and contested transitions.

Understanding Transitional Justice amid Syria's Interregnal Period

In its early stages, the term transitional justice (TJ) was used to refer to responses to the legacies of massive and systematic human rights violations in the context of major political transformations. It described "a distinctive conception of justice associated with periods of radical political change following past oppressive rule" (Teitel, 2008, p.1). TJ scholarship traces back to the aftermath of World War II, with the Nuremberg Trials and de-Nazification mechanisms as its first prominent embodiment. Its discourse gained momentum in the post-Cold-War context and the parallel emergence of the third wave of democratization, with the new democracies of Latin America and East and Central Europe seeking redress for the atrocities committed

under previous authoritarian or totalitarian regimes (Arthur, 2009). The third-wave TJ scholarship assumed a "radically discontinuous" paradigm of change, between a distinctly "bad past" and a "good liberal democratic future" (Dyzenhaus, 2012, p. 182).

Recent TJ scholarship, however, has become more critical of the early circumscribed interpretations of TJ, deeming them misleading in accounting for the complexity of transition contexts (Hansen, 2014). Research on TJ has since expanded beyond post-authoritarian and post-conflict to include non-transition contexts, whether in conflicted societies or even consolidated democracies where TJ deals with reconciliation and reparations with past systematic colonial injustices (Balint et al., 2014). This expansion severed TJ's connection to that 'moment' in time that initially defined the field and emphasized the inescapable dimensionality and contextual complexity of TJ processes (Hansen, 2023).

Dwelling in a transitional period where conflict is still ongoing and a political transition has not materialized; post-Assad Syria is neither post-authoritarian nor post-conflict. While the overthrow of Assad marked the beginning of a regime transition, a defined end to this transition – a coherent, consolidated regime form— has not been reached yet. Syria is now in an interregnum, in Gramscian terms – a suspended space in which the old order is dying, and the new one has not yet been born – characterized by simultaneous opportunities and challenges (Hoare & Nowell, 1971), ranging from the restoration of foreign diplomatic relations to fragile political institutions and reignited violence. We use Gramsci's concept of interregnum because it captures the ambiguity and flux inherent to the transitional period in Syria, allowing us to venture beyond a fixed and simplistic time-space-actor continuum when discussing TJ. By anchoring our analysis in said intricacies, this article offers a three-dimensional framework to unpack them: temporality, spatiality, and agency.

Temporality

Inherent to TJ is the notion of temporality, which is detrimental to shaping the narratives of injustices and the scope of TJ redress and accountability (Aboueldahab, 2021). However, it has proven challenging to incorporate a clear theorization of time into the actual processes of TJ. With the TJ scholarship becoming less confined to the linear and fixed ruptures in time, the temporal structures and assumptions come under constant interrogation (Hansen, 2014, 2023). Starting with scrutinizing time, this article unravels the temporal intricacies of Syria's transitional period and their implications for the TJ process through two angles: non-linearity and time politicization.

In Syria's political interregnum, the past, present, and future are not 'distinct periods' but rather fluid and interconnected amid ruptures and continuities. Reckoning with past injustices committed by the Assad regime and all the other perpetrators is essential to TJ. However, it should not be disconnected from the unfolding present injustices during the transitional period. The recent violence and human rights violations committed by many actors, including the interim government, created new victims of injustices and new grievances that also seek redress. The ultimate intertwinement of present grievances with the past ones is unavoidable since the transitional present in Syria—with its structures (weak institutions, corruption), discourses (sectarian and nationalist), and complex network of actors and perpetrators—is inherited from the pre-transition period. This makes it more difficult, if not impossible, to assert a disconnect between the past, present, and future in TJ theory and practice. This temporal "complex web of perpetration, inflicted harms, and grievances" (Aboueldahab, 2021, p. 811) becomes an inescapable reality for TJ processes.

Furthermore, time is not only a defining element in TJ; it is also a political tool of inclusion and exclusion in the narratives of injustice. Expanding the temporal parameters of TJ to account for the past, present, and

future means implicating more perpetrators and widening the accountability scope against more actors (domestic and transnational). Therefore, time becomes politicized, and defining the temporal parameters of injustices becomes a tool for evading accountability and marginalizing specific time periods and their related injustices. Although many members of the interim government—former Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham (HTS), Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (SNA), and other militias—were/are complicit in atrocities against Syrians, they attempt to sever the linkages between past and present in that context, zooming in on a past with an Assad-dominated discourse while zooming out of the present. Through selectively addressing the complex web of perpetration, inflicted harm, and grievances by mainly highlighting the past atrocities of the Assad regime, the interim government avoids a meaningful reckoning with its past and present involvement in crimes against Syrians. The same can be said about other complicit actors like the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), who leave out of their discourse any time periods that incriminate them.

Spatiality

The initial TJ scholarship predominantly focused on the state as the primary spatial unit when discussing TJ process and mechanisms, arguing that a strong successor state is a precursor to the institutions necessary for implementing and overseeing the rule of law (Teitel, 2003, pp. 75-78). Ever since the 2011 revolution, however, the Syrian territory has been held by different factions (domestic and international) at different times. Alongside this divided territorial control, space-connected narratives of justice have been created, offering multiple, interconnected, and sometimes contradictory discourses of victimhood and perpetration. Currently, the interim government still does not hold full control over the entirety of what is commonly considered Syria, with Israel having repeatedly transgressed into Daraa and Quneitra provinces while still occupying the Golan Heights since 1967, and Türkiye occupying parts of northern Syria. Moreover, Suweida province is still run independently from the central government, and the Kurdish forces still control large parts of north and northeastern Syria and have yet to fully realize the agreement of March 2025. The interregnal period has been characterized by new spatial grievances as well as renewed ones, adding to the complexity of justice narratives. Therefore, we argue that understanding TJ prospects in post-Assad Syria necessitates a move away from the state-centered approach towards two space-induced levels: local and cross-border.

Along the shifting lines of territorial control, a complex map of past injustices was created, with each locality incriminating different local perpetrators. The Assad regime and its affiliated militias were the main perpetrators in Syria's heavy legacy of atrocities, producing spatial grievances that spread all over the Syrian territory. While having thrived on stamping out any political opposition throughout the entirety of its rule, the regime's repressive legacy culminated in the infamous Hama massacre in 1982, killing tens of thousands of people. Furthermore, the last 14 years under Bashar al-Assad witnessed the highest scale of crimes against humanity: more than 236,000 people killed (15,000 of whom were killed under torture in detention centers), 160,000 people forcibly disappeared, and more than 13 million displaced (SNHR, 2024). The criminal regime also launched multiple chemical attacks, including the infamous Ghouta attack in 2013, and committed tens of massacres, such as al-Houla in 2012 and Tadamon in 2013. However, other actors were also involved in serious crimes against the Syrian people, which should not be disregarded. This includes, among others, crimes enacted by HTS in the Idlib governorate, parts of Aleppo's western countryside, Latakia's countryside, and northwest of Hama; SNA in northern Aleppo, Raqqa, and Hasaka; Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in Homs, Raqqa, and Deir ez-Zor; and the SDF in most of Hasaka, half of Raqqa, and portions of Deir Ez-Zor and Aleppo (EUAA, 2024, pp. 24-26).

The present clashes between the interim government forces and other local actors are contributing further to the spatiality of grievances. The ongoing conflict with the Kurdish-controlled territories is reproducing the old injustices that incriminate both parties as perpetrators. Similarly, the massacres in the largely Alawite-populated coastal region in March 2025, the mass atrocities in the predominantly Druze-inhabited Suweida in July 2025,

and the ongoing targeted sectarian and gendered violence (Amnesty International, 2025a; Salhani, 2025) have produced new grievances and victims. While multiple perpetrators, like so-called Assad-regime remnants, Druze militant groups, and even ISIS, were called out by state officials and pro-government media, armed groups affiliated with the interim government were also largely incriminated for their documented systematic violations of human rights (Michael, 2025; Amnesty International, 2025b). This labyrinth of space-connected injustices deems many actors as perpetrators, which triggers accountability considerations. This results in politicizing spaces and controlling the parameters of space-connected justice narratives to avoid accountability and marginalize other injustices, thereby impeding territorial unity.

A considerable part of the space-connected injustices in Syria is also of a transnational nature, as the regional dimensions of the conflict have created cross-border perpetration. However, conventional TJ mechanisms "have generally not been designed or utilized to address transboundary or regionalized abuses" and "often address only the crimes committed on the territory of, or by the nationals of, one state" (Ross & Sriram, 2013, pp. 3-5). During the war, for instance, Türkiye has occupied parts of northern Syria in violation of international law. Abductions, arbitrary detentions, torture, sexual violence, expropriation, and expulsion have occurred there at the hands of various actors, including members of the Turkish Armed Forces and Turkish intelligence services (HRW, 2024). However, considered the godfather of the interim government, Türkiye's crimes in Syrian territories remain unaddressed. The involvement of Russia, Iran, Hezbollah, and Israel has also aggravated the spatial complexity of injustices. While the interim government clearly denounced the Iranian role in the killings of Syrians and supporting a criminal regime (Myre & Rizkallah, 2025), it took a more pragmatic position with Russia and Hezbollah (Al-Jazeera, 2025; Enab Baladi, 2025). While these official positions may be for strategic reasons, many Syrian activists and NGOs see this as a screaming disregard for the atrocities committed by both Hezbollah and Russia since 2011 (Youssef, 2025; SNHR, 2025). Similar concerns were raised about what the recent attempts at diplomatic talks with Israel would mean for accountability questions for its crimes and territorial aggression in Syria (Al-Asheq, 2025). Additionally, more questions of trans-border accountability arose in the context of the foreign fighters' involvement in the recent massacres and violence, especially after they were incorporated in the state security apparatus (Strategiecs, 2025).

Agency

Within the fractured landscape of the interregnal period, the distinction between perpetrators and actors of TJ becomes blurred, consciously infused, and even erased. The procedural architecture of the TJ process is mired in conceptual tension as well as confusion over whose interests it serves, and whose version of justice is being legitimized. Being part of the multifaceted network of perpetrators, the interim government's legitimacy as the main upholder of TJ is questioned. At the same time, other actors, such as local communities, the families of the victims, and local and international NGOs, navigate their agency and voice amid the challenges and opportunities of the transitional period.

The interim government not only claims the role of the main upholder of TJ but also controls most of the discourse around it, especially given the crippled judicial system. The NCTJ's exclusive focus on crimes perpetrated by the Assad regime has caused civil society actors to voice concerns about the inclusivity and credibility of the process, as well as the potential risk of selectivity. Additionally, the establishment of both the NCTJ and the NCM reportedly occurred without formal consultation with victims, survivors, or civil society representatives (Bridges of Truth, 2025, p. 2), which highlights the limited agency they have in these processes. Pertaining to the lack of transparency over who is deemed guilty and who is not, some high-ranking former officers have been arrested and imprisoned, while others haven't. At the same time, many former informants and lower-level personnel appear to continue to walk the streets (The Syrian Observer, 2025; Zamanalwsl, 2025).

The large waves of violence that have unfolded since December 2024 cast doubt on the interim government's ability to implement accountability among the patchwork of militias currently controlling parts of the country. They also risk reproducing the logic of the 'victor's justice', especially by ambiguating the perpetrators when they are traced back to the government. For example, the report of the fact-finding committee—appointed by Sharaa—on the coastal region massacres denied any involvement of high government commanders in the violations (Reuters, 2025). This came in stark contrast to the findings of the previously published report by Reuters, which uncovered a chain of command leading to Damascus (Michael, 2025). Moreover, in his speech following the Suweida clashes, Sharaa portrayed the Druze militants as committing "human rights violations" and with "separatist aspirations." However, he used the word "nafeer" (mobilisation) to describe the actions of Bedouin tribes and later thanked them for their "heroic stance" (CNN Arabic, 2025). This contradicted the narratives of some prominent Druze spiritual leaders, like Hikmat al-Hijri, who incriminated the interim government and thanked Israel (Al-Hadath, 2025). Although Sharaa promised to hold "all parties" accountable, there was no direct and clear admission of the crimes committed by the government forces (CNN Arabic, 2025). More recently, the government had to deal with multiple international reports on the systematic kidnapping of Alawite women (Amnesty International, 2025a) by setting up a government-led investigative committee. However, the committee's November report debunked 41 out of 42 investigated abduction cases and denied any systematic sectarian-gendered violence (SANA, 2025). Importantly, the imposed internet blackouts and the big wave of misinformation in many of these waves of violence have contributed to further blurring the truth over who is a perpetrator and who is a legitimate actor.

Despite the interim government dominating TJ narratives, some civil society actors have been trying to produce more participatory and inclusive TJ mechanisms. Besides the efforts of the White Helmets and the Syrian Emergency Task Force in identifying remains of unidentified persons (Sinjab, 2024), a coalition of 48 civil society organizations (CSOs), the victims, and their families held the first TJ conference in February 2025 to make recommendations for Syrian and international partners regarding advancing TJ and accountability efforts (The Syria Campaign, 2025a). Some of these CSOs, such as Badael and The Day After, worked with the ICTJ to hold seven intensive community dialogues in April 2025. They included testimonies of past and ongoing violence, displacement, political retribution, and details of extrajudicial killings perpetrated by the Assad regime and other actors (Bridges of Truth, 2025). Moreover, there have been many protests calling for a real and inclusive TJ process that is based on "the experiences, the demands and the voices of the families that their loved ones have been disappeared by different parties of the conflict, by different actors in Syria, and justice should be served for everyone" (The Syria Campaign, 2025b). Nevertheless, the genuine inclusion of the victims and their families remain limited as the presidential decrees 19 and 20 fail to specify whether or how victims will be genuinely involved in shaping or participating in the commissions' work. Having comprehensive justice means establishing independent bodies and inclusive truth commissions, centralizing their agency not only through recognition but also active and meaningful participation "at the design or implementation stages" (Al-Mashan, 2025).

Conclusion: A Path to Justice Through Complexity

This article posits rethinking TJ through the lens of Syria's interregnal transitional period with its temporal, spatial, and agency complexities. Our three-dimensional analytical framework disentangles the overlapping layers of injustices and grievances connected to past and ongoing violence as well as contested territories, and the competing claims to agency and legitimacy (top-down and bottom-up). This contribution therefore underscores the importance not only of acknowledging but also embracing complexity as a starting point in designing and implementing TJ mechanisms. Disregarding this in post-Assad Syria could hinder inclusive and comprehensive reconciliation and accountability measures and risk further societal divisions over unresolved grievances.

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Disability and the Political Afterlife of Violence:
Reimagining Justice and Statehood in Post-Assad Syria

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Introduction

The fall of the Assad regime in December 2024 constituted a critical historical juncture in Syria's contemporary political trajectory, marking both a rupture with entrenched authoritarian structures and the onset of an uncertain transitional moment that needs to reckon with the death and destruction wrought by years of violence. Among the most tangible and tragic of these legacies is the vast population of Syrians with war-related disabilities, tens of thousands of men, women, and children who survived bombings, chemical attacks, torture, sieges, and battles, but were left with permanent injuries and disabilities. These survivors carry the physical and psychological scars of a decade-long conflict that is estimated by the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (2025) to have caused the direct deaths of close to 657,000 people, while displacing and dispossessing millions. By 2015, at least 1.5 million Syrians had acquired war-related disabilities (Human Rights Watch, 2022), a number that has only grown with continued fighting and compounded injuries. As of 2021, approximately 28% of the Syrian population lived with a disability, a rate substantially higher than the global average of 15% (International Center for Transitional Justice, 2023).

They embody and document records of grave human rights violations, as their bodies remain inscribed with both the violence endured and the aspirations of dignity and freedom that fueled resistance. Yet, as Syria tentatively transitions to a post-Assad era that has yet to fully materialize into a post-conflict order, war-disabled Syrians remain largely marginalized in debates on justice, reconstruction, and national belonging. This paper argues that addressing the rights and needs of Syria's war-disabled is not a peripheral humanitarian issue, but a core political question for a just transition. Reparations in post-conflict Syria must be conceptualized not merely as mechanisms of financial compensation or technical instruments of transitional justice, but as integral to the unfinished project of liberation inaugurated by the popular uprising of 2011. Any framework of redress must remain anchored in these emancipatory claims to honor the sacrifice of multi-scalar and multi-leveled losses, and must extend beyond individualized restitution to encompass collective recognition, memorialization, and the structural transformation of the political order that enabled mass violence, which also requires affirming the agency of those whose bodies were most irrevocably marked by conflict.

Grounded in political sociology, critical disability studies, and transitional justice theory, this analysis critically examines how Syria's war-disabled expose the limitations of dominant post-conflict frameworks. The discussion begins by situating war-inflicted disability as a product of intersecting violence, displacement, and infrastructural collapse, building on overarching themes identified through interviews with war-disabled Syrians, caregivers, and community organizers. It notes that post-conflict institutions often fail to include people with disabilities, reflecting deeper tensions over whose suffering counts in the new political order. The potential social marginalization and political invisibility of disabled Syrians, underscores the shortcomings of technocratic reconstruction plans and selective recognition of victimhood, itself a highly contentious and porous concept.

At the same time, war-disabled Syrians are not merely passive victims; they are emerging as political actors. Through grassroots organizing, mutual aid networks, and advocacy campaigns, they are insisting on accessibility, inclusion, and accountability as foundational principles for Syria's future. In doing so, they challenge binary narratives

that cast them only as heroes or victims, asserting instead their right to shape the society they helped bring into being.

Ultimately, the paper calls for a reconceptualization of "reparation" for Syrians with war-acquired disabilities beyond token compensation, toward inclusive institutional design, structural accessibility, and new civic imaginaries that embrace embodied histories of loss and resistance. If *karama* (dignity) was a central slogan of the 2011 Syrian uprising, then a truly dignified post-authoritarian transition must heed the voices and fulfill the rights of those whose dignity and bodies have been deeply tested by the war. Anything less risks reproducing the patterns of exclusion and injustice that defined both the conflict and the old regime.

War-inflicted disabilities as embodied legacies of violence in Syria

More than a decade of asymmetric warfare and collective punishment mechanisms have left Syria with one of the highest disability rates in the world. Tens of thousands of people have been left with permanent markers of the violence unleashed, whether because of lost limbs from bombing, disfiguration from torture, or crippling disabilities after lack of adequate healthcare. While estimating how many people exactly have been indelibly physically affected by the conflict, whether directly or indirectly, proves to be a delicate endeavor, recent assessments underscore the staggering human cost of the Syrian conflict in terms of disability.

The plurality of the causes of impairment reflects the scale of creative technologies of violence in Syria, that were not merely repetitive brutality, but inventive, adaptive, and constantly recalibrated to break bodies, communities, and morale. This relates to a broader political project of the engineering of death and suffering (Ismail, 2018), a systematic, bureaucratically coordinated, and technologically innovative architecture of killing, harnessing creativity for the optimization of injury and the scaling of death.

There is a scalar continuity from collective and spectacular violence to individualized and routinized harm, wherein the infrastructural production of disability mirrors its carceral miniaturization. Decades of authoritarian rule under both Hafez and Bashar al-Assad institutionalized detention, torture, and enforced disappearance as a means of disciplining dissent and producing fear across society. Prisons like Tadmor and Sednaya, described by al-Haj Saleh (2025) as "factories of power," functioned as laboratories of authoritarian control, where detainees were subjected to hunger, torture, and prolonged isolation, transforming incarceration into both a material and symbolic practice of erasure. Survivors of such spaces not only endured physical violence, but also sustained deep psychological injuries, ranging from post-traumatic stress disorder and depression to long-term difficulties with trust, belonging, and reintegration into social and family life.

Maiming in Syria should be conceptualized not as accidental collateral but as a purposive technique of rule, calibrated to reconfigure the capacities of bodies and the rhythms of social life (Scarry, 1985). Rather than solely indexing sovereign power to mortality, the repertoire of harm in Syria has produced *debilitation* a governable outcome that multiplies dependency and contracts political agency, thus operating within a necropolitical order that dictates who may live and who must die and organizes conditions of living that approximate death. These can be termed "death-worlds," spaces of exposure, enclosure, and attrition in which survival itself becomes precarious and administratively contingent (Mbembe, 2019). The production of injury is sustained by an apparatus that renders harm legible, allocable, and routine. Through disciplinary and biopolitical practices, bodies are sorted into categories of treatability and worth (Foucault, 2003). The result is an infrastructural politics in which spectacular demonstrations of mass violence are superimposed on the quotidian governance of the normalization of injury through its administrative mismanagement due to the lack of adequate healthcare, inclusive infrastructure, and humane living conditions (Weizman, 2011). Crucially, the temporality of maiming

exceeds the event of the strike, as injury accrues as *slow violence* over time (Nixon, 2011). In this sense, inflicted injury functions as an administrative rationality, where survivorship in diminished form becomes instrumentally valuable to domination (Puar, 2017).

On a large scale, the experiences of mass violence and collective punishment led for instance to lost limbs or eyesight from artillery shells, airstrikes, and landmines, spinal injuries from gunshot and shrapnel, neurological damage from chemical attacks, and other debilitating or paralyzing aftereffects[1]. Explosive weapons represent the primary cause of injury in Syria, with an estimated 89% of injured suffering from permanent or temporary impairments fueling high psychological distress and loss of functionality (Handicap International, 2016). Nerve agents, most notably sarin, were used not only to kill, but also to terrorize and disperse communities, emptying cities from perceived enemy demographics. Eyewitness accounts from Eastern Ghouta in 2013 and Khan Shaykhun in 2017 described rapid collapse, choking, foaming at the mouth, and visual pain within minutes, which were found to be symptoms consistent with sarin exposure (OPCW Fact-Finding Mission, 2017).

Beyond immediate fatalities, the harm often extends well beyond the day of attack. Longitudinal studies of sarin survivors document persistent difficulties with attention, memory, mood, sleep, and, for a subset, recurrent seizures and cognitive impairments that constrain schooling, work, and independent living (Hoffman et al., 2007). In Syria's degraded care ecology, marked by attacks on hospitals, staff flight, and disrupted supply chains, these acute crises were more likely to harden into long-term disability, with limited, if not impossible, access to rehabilitation. The lack of immediate, urgent, and specialized adequate care following violent incidents explains the significant proportion of preventable amputations, nerve damages, and long-term complications that ultimately lead to loss of function (Handicap International, 2016), while protracted sieges, the weaponization of starvation, and the strategic destruction of healthcare in conditions of widespread poverty and insalubrity, favored stunted growth amongst children, war-induced malnutrition, and the spreading of preventable diseases and aggravation of pre-existing conditions that resulted in lifelong disabilities. A such, war-related disability in Syria is not merely the outcome of singular violent incidents, but of intersecting and compounding violences that have turned treatable injuries into permanent impairments.

The Syrian conflict transformed recoverable illness and injury into long-term disability by collapsing the conditions of repair. The destruction of facilities and flight of personnel curtailed even basic trauma and infection care, converting treatable wounds into amputations and chronic complications, while assistive technologies such as wheelchairs and prosthetics that make impairment livable were scarce or unaffordable (Human Rights Watch, 2022). In besieged and repeatedly bombarded areas, antibiotics, anesthesia, and post-operative care were intermittently absent, which caused preventable limb loss and avoidable deterioration (Save the Children, 2014). This produced a care economy reordered around permanent improvisation, where the absence of devices and rehabilitation locked families into cycles of physical diminishment, financial dependency, and foregone schooling and work. In the words of an injured young man who has lost the use of his legs, the hardest part is not simply to access an assistive device and learn how to walk again, but to learn where to go.[2] His remark collapses the physical and the political, for it situates recovery as part of a broader restoration of agency and right to inhabit the moral and material landscape of the country.

Additionally, these injuries were not randomly distributed. Often, the most intense violence fell upon communities that resisted the regime or found themselves on frontline fault lines, meaning certain regions such as Homs, Aleppo, Eastern Ghouta, and Idlib, produced disproportionate numbers of war-disabled survivors. Disability in Syria thus maps onto the geography of conflict and resistance.

Mass displacement intensified these dynamics. More than 13 million Syrians have been uprooted across borders or within Syria (UNHCR, 2025), and many people with

disabilities have ended up in informal sites or inaccessible shelters where mobility, hygiene, and follow-up care were structurally constrained, leaving many to feel trapped in conditions of improvised impermanence and limitation.[3] Poverty and displacement became both causes and consequences of disability. Households with more than one member with a disability were already less able to meet basic needs in 2020, and that gap widened as the economy deteriorated by 2022, with many unable to procure or replace broken assistive devices and hence forced to live without rehabilitative support (Human Rights Watch, 2022). These lived experiences underscore that disability in Syria is not just a medical condition, but a social condition produced by violence, displacement, and neglect.

People with disabilities face higher risks of abuse, facing exploitation and even abandonment. Children and adults with disabilities in Syria were disproportionately vulnerable to violence during attacks, unable to flee without help and sometimes even left behind by desperate families (Human Rights Watch, 2022). Extreme coping practices emerged of families resorting to *shackling* children with intellectual disabilities at home due to social stigma and lack of support, reinforcing a broader pattern of social exclusion prompted by worsening living conditions.[4] These same dynamics extend into the politics of memory and redress, as disabled Syrians were routinely omitted from documentation and community programs, leaving their testimonies underrepresented in public reckoning with the war (Syria Justice and Accountability Centre, 2023).

These intertwined micro- and macro-deployments of violence against the body demonstrated that disability is not a contingent medical by-product of war, but rather a technology of governance maintaining governed lives structurally diminished. As Syria transitions, acknowledging and addressing the genealogy of violence requires moving beyond mortality as the only measure of the political economy of harm, to include other forms of the afterlives of injury.

Reimagining reparations as political subjectivity and infrastructural justice

The dominant vocabulary through which disability in conflict is understood remains primarily humanitarian, casting people with disabilities as a vulnerable group in need of aid and as recipients of care instead of rights-holders whose claims are equally constitutive of the political landscape. Existing scholarship and policy discourse tend to treat disability as an individualized condition to be rehabilitated rather than as a social and political relation (Kett & van Ommeren, 2009). Yet the Syrian experience exposes the limits of this approach. The mutilation of bodies and the corrosion of social trust are not separate processes but entwined effects of the same architecture of violence, meaning the destruction of hospitals, the criminalization of care, and the long attrition of welfare and infrastructure. As scholars such as Fassin (2012) and Das (2007) remind us, the afterlives of violence reside as much in institutions and environments as in the body itself.

That is why this paper draws on humanitarian and biomedical readings to approach disability as a political condition that reveals how justice, care, and sovereignty are negotiated in recovery. In this view, reparation is not merely a form of compensation but an entry point into the reorganization of power and infrastructure. Urgent humanitarian assistance has been and remains indispensable, but reducing the issue to charity or medical relief obscures its fundamentally political dimensions. I contend that justice and reparation for Syria's war-disabled must be reframed as a core political question in the post-authoritarian transition, not relegated to the margins as a special-needs or humanitarian sidebar.

Transitional justice theory provides a lens for this reframing. Traditionally, transitional justice refers to the judicial and non-judicial measures implemented by societies emerging from conflict or authoritarianism to address past human rights violations, anchored normatively in acknowledgment of violations and the

restoration of rights (De Greiff, 2006). Strikingly, however, people with disabilities remain at the margins of this field in Syria and beyond, a gap that recent scholarship identifies as both conceptual and operational. Despite growing commitments to participation and inclusion, disability is rarely centered in the design of truth processes, consultations, or reparations architectures (Clark, 2023), as if resulting losses and suffering were private tragedies rather than a matter of public justice. This echoes broader critiques of transitional justice as overly juridical and inattentive to social repair (Lambourne, 2009; Madlingozi, 2010) yet extends them by foregrounding the infrastructural conditions through which justice is materialized.

Critical disability studies problematize this marginalization, by relocating disability as product of the environments, institutions, and norms that govern life. It introduces a key distinction between *impairment*, meaning a person's physical or mental condition, and *disability*, meaning the social disadvantages and exclusions that result from an impairment because socio-political environments fail to accommodate these impairments (Oliver, 2004). To illustrate, children that have lost their legs to bombing, for instance, are impaired, but what *disables* them is an environment that lacks prosthetic services, has buildings with no ramps, and encourages their social exclusion and economic marginalization. Thus, disability is a relational and political condition: it reflects how power structures create barriers or enable participation. Syrians were disabled *by* the violence exercised against them and *by* the state's failure, and unwillingness, to protect and care for them. Their continued exclusion in the transition would represent a political choice to perpetuate inequity. The mother[5] of an amputated child reported watching her daughter living in constant war with life itself, struggling to achieve the most mundane of tasks. She feared this war would never end, regardless of the evolution of the Syrian conflictual dynamics, since the battle she fought was relegated to the personal instead of the public realm. A 30-year-old double amputee[6] who was forcibly displaced echoed these sentiments, arguing that the losses he has incurred financially, emotionally, and physically were sacrifices he made for national liberation, but that he was painfully aware his own liberation from a reduced form of life would never come.

These testimonies anchor the need for recognizing war-inflicted disability as a legitimate harm for which accountability and reparation are due, to include those who were maimed or psychologically traumatized in transitional justice efforts and in the country's subsequent inclusive reconstruction. A transition that does not account for this significant victim group risks entrenching a two-tiered society and leaving wounds of the war to fester.

The infrastructures of care that sustained life through more than a decade of war have persisted into the transition, but in forms that expose underlying asymmetries of the Syrian polity. The concentration of institutional revival of state resources in the center opposes the prolonged humanitarization of care in the periphery. In the political center, transitional administrations inherited remaining health infrastructure and programs while developing new models of social services, but the material provision of assistive care continues to depend on UN and INGO partnerships. In the northern and eastern peripheries, humanitarian and local NGO networks function as de facto welfare regimes, delivering prosthetics, physiotherapy, and psychosocial support through project-based initiatives, operating under conditions of chronic shortage and discontinuity (Handicap International, 2016; UNOCHA, 2025).

If under the former Assad regime disability in Syria has been administered through the coupling of spectacular harm with the mundane (mis)governance of injury, then the object of redress needs to encompass the *apparatus* of structural violence that renders injury so crippling. Reparations can be broadened to also include infrastructural justice, meaning paying attention to the social and material arrangements through which rights are either made operable or withheld. In this register, the "right to a remedy" is not exhausted by individualized awards, but rather indexed to the redesign of health, mobility, and decision-making systems such that the conditions that

previously converted treatable wounds into permanent impairments are no longer reproduced.

Reframed this way, truth and reparation are less concerned with tallying discrete violations than with making disabling harms legible as public wrongs and with situating their afterlives within the evidentiary record. Such an epistemic shift is not merely curatorial. It anchors recognition, redistribution, and representation as mutually constitutive dimensions of justice rather than parallel tracks, an alignment long argued in critical theory but seldom operationalized in post-conflict design (Fraser, 1995). It also resonates with the human-rights model of disability, which treats accessibility, reasonable accommodation, and participation not as dispensations but as enforceable obligations that persist in "situations of risk and humanitarian emergencies" (Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2006, art. 11).

A young activist from Aleppo suffering from irreversible injury reframed justice as visibility rather than nostalgia or mere remembrance, asking for the right to inhabit the city as citizens, not as residuals of conflict.[7] Her demands centred around the inclusive (re)planning of the city in ways that facilitate mobility and improve accessibility, as opposed to the rubbles and ruins that constrain movement in most of the city. This articulates justice as spatial participation, meaning the ability to co-produce the rebuilt environment and, through it, to reconstitute belonging, through an act of inclusion that is not symbolic but sovereign, an insistence that justice must be built, not merely promised.

This analytic does not prescribe a technocratic blueprint. It suggests, rather, a shift in scale and temporality, to move beyond remedy as punctual event to remedy as durable capacity, centering rights-holders, and cementing inclusion and co-participation as institutional norms. In a post-Assad Syria, one of the measures of a just transition will be whether the polity's infrastructures allow for the materialization of equity and shared dignity. That is the sense in which reparations, understood as infrastructural justice, belong at the center of transitional politics rather than at its charitable margins.

Conclusion

This article has argued that disability in post-Assad Syria is neither a peripheral humanitarian concern nor a purely clinical aftermath, but a constitutive terrain upon which the transition can be made or unmade. Read across scales, maiming appears not as collateral but as a technique of rule whose afterlives are administered through infrastructures of repair and refusal. In this register, the war-disabled do not simply index the conflict's destructiveness, they disclose the grammar of governance that converted treatable wounds into permanent impairments and diminished forms of life. To address disability as such is therefore to confront the political economy of harm that outlives the regime change, including the institutions that decide who is rendered legible as a victim, which injuries count as public wrongs, and how rights are made operable, or withheld.

Against dominant post-conflict frameworks that confine disability to the domains of aid delivery and medical relief, the analysis has recentered justice and reparation as questions of membership, recognition, and co-decision. The proposal to construe reparations as infrastructural justice follows directly from the Syrian evidence: if injury has been produced and reproduced by the coupling of spectacular violence with administrative scarcity, then redress must be judged by whether it reconfigures the arrangements through which bodies move, are treated, and can speak. In practice, this includes reductions in waiting for rehabilitation services, the accessibility of rebuilt spaces, the durability of prosthetics and rehabilitation supply chains, and the presence of disabled Syrians in the institutions that design and govern repair. Such a shift is not technocratic; it is constitutional in the deepest sense, because it concerns how the polity understands equality and whose capacities count in the reconstruction of the social.

The contribution is thus twofold. Conceptually, it widens transitional justice beyond adjudication and symbolic recognition to the redesign of infrastructures through which rights are materialized, aligning justice with the social and human-rights models of disability without

dissolving accountability into policy incrementalism. Empirically, it situates Syrian disability within a scalar continuity of violence and governance that explains why humanitarian aftercare, however necessary, will remain insufficient if the architectures that administer debility persist. The implication is not a blueprint but a criterion: a transition is just to the extent that it ceases to govern through injury and begins to institutionalize equal membership as lived practice.

Ultimately, if *karama* has oriented Syrian claims since 2011, its evaluation in the transition belongs less to proclamations of inclusion than to the organization of the ordinary. The relevant tests are institutional. They encompass non-discriminatory access to care, the navigability of public space, including schools and the workplace, and the incorporation of previously excluded testimonies into public archives on equal terms. To center the war-disabled does not constrict the ambit of transition, it clarifies its constitutional content. A polity that can acknowledge the injuries it produced and reconstruct infrastructures so that impaired bodies may act, move, and speak as equal members is one in which dignity is not merely asserted but materially realized.

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Endnotes

1 From several interviews conducted with Syrian doctors and nurses in October 2024, identifying common physical trauma amongst the population.
2 From an anonymized interview conducted in October 2024.
3 Based on several anonymized interviews conducted with displaced Syrians on October 2024.
4 Based on several anonymized interviews conducted with displaced Syrians on October 2024.
5 From an anonymized interview conducted in October 2024.
6 From an anonymized interview conducted in October 2024.
7 From an anonymized interview conducted in October 2024.

Everyday experiences of the law, in Syria and beyond

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Everything important that happens happens inside our minds.
André Dao (2023) *Anam*, Penguin Books, 222.

In this short memo we are interested in grappling with the tension(s) inherent in the academic and personal, the public and private, on concepts in an age of contestation and the difference between language and reality at a time when Syria's rulers, laws and governance are being constantly and hotly dissected and debated both at home and in the diaspora. To do this we put side by side academic theory on how people internalise the law at an everyday level (known in the literature as legal consciousness) and the constitutive nature of violence and the law with reflections from both the authors, Rifaie and Marika, on their everyday experiences of the law, in Syria and beyond. These experiences include living under different systems of governance, at checkpoints, with state bureaucracy and security services and with resettlement processes.

In using a two-column structure we recognise that this may make the piece "creative", "different" or "difficult" to read compared to what is expected in "normal" academic scholarship.[1] This is largely the point. By putting personal conversations next to academic discourse, we attempt to highlight the inherent fluidity, tension and co-constitutive nature of public debates and private musings, how what is legal and what is illegal is not something fixed or stable (as we often think it to be) but actually constantly in flux and dependant on the government of the day as well as the slippery nature of knowledge and understanding. By adopting a two-column format, we invite the reader to choose a reading strategy and acknowledge that the article could be a somewhat frustrating read as the two sides compete for attention in the same way these two dialogues compete for attention inside all of us – as humans, as academics, as Syrians and non-Syrians. However, our hope is that there is also wisdom in this tension. That theory and experience, like our embodied understanding of the law, is a constitutive, necessary and complicated process.

Preface

[RT] I was completely brainwashed by the Baath rhetoric. When Hazef al-Assad died, I cried.

Anything to do with how satisfied you are with life, on a political level, with the laws, with governance, any sense of inequality, was very much self-censored. There was an inner voice inside you saying what was forbidden territory. Do not think about that.

When my dad told me about الاحداث, the events in Hama, he wanted me to know the difference between right and wrong. That this is a corrupt system. It is not how it should be.

[MS] During COVID-19, I was stopped at a police and army run checkpoint just outside of Melbourne in Australia. As my car was forced into a lane with no escape route, awaiting the verification of my legal identity documents by a police or army officer, I thought, this is something that happens "over there" to "others" in places where I travel to do fieldwork, like the Middle East, that I then have the privilege to leave. Checkpoints like this do not, I had felt quite sure up until then, happen "here".

2011-2024

[RT] I was one of those people that was very apprehensive when the protests across the Arab world started. The reason being that it would be much, much worse in Syria. A lot of the other protests, in Tunisia, in Egypt, were met violently and we knew that in Syria it would be worse straight away. It would be met with a deadly response from Day 1.

I tried to talk to a friend about what was going on. He looked at me like, are you trying to get me in trouble, or are you trying to get yourself in trouble and you're too stupid to notice? Either way you're not winning.

Despite joining the protests in the earlier months, I began to worry that I might be stopped and arrested at one of

Legal consciousness

Legal consciousness is an academic term used to describe how our everyday ideas and feelings about the law, what it is and how it operates, are constantly evolving based on our lived experiences.[2] Legal consciousness therefore encompasses modes of governance, formal laws as well as the unspoken rules and values that influence and control our lives in subtle and unconscious ways. This internalised and "everyday" understanding of the law is also always evolving based on new experiences and input.[3] This could include being made aware of "the events" i.e. the massacre of between 10,000 and 40,000 civilians in Hama in 1982 directed by Hafez al-Assad and his brother Rifaat or the unnerving experience of realising how the law can be used by security services at checkpoints in Australia, or Syria.

The law and violence

Scholars such as Salwa Ismail and Yassin al-Haj Saleh have argued that in Syria violence is used as 'a modality of government, ordering and structuring regime-citizen relations.'[4] In such an environment, the 'specification of rules in the form of law is intended to promote an image of procedural fairness and to endow rules with a veneer of rightness.'[5] However, the political needs of the regime are always prioritised. This means that when applied to people's lives, written law can be completely gutted of specificity and meaning. Violence is used legally to make sure people considered disloyal to the regime are detained at checkpoints, arrested at a protest or for posting online under the pretence that they are "terrorists" or a "security risk".

the checkpoints on the way to university in Homs. It was too dangerous to openly join the opposition movement. I remember this as a time of confusion, uncertainty and lots of questions. How long can I wait before I become more active in the revolution? What do I do if I become more active? Do I post online? And if I post online, do I use my real name or a pseudonym? Should I start covering my face when attending a protest? Or not? Why am I continuing to be so careful?

[MS] A group of five of us are supporting a Syrian family to be resettled in Australia. A fundraising event we organised raised a lot of money and there was a great outpouring of generosity from our little, overwhelmingly white, Anglo, low-to-middle-class community. After the event, I cried, and not just a few tears, either. Not to take anything away from the Syrian family we resettled, but I was thinking about all the other Syrians I had seen, met and been welcomed by across the Middle East who are no less deserving than this one family of safety, security and a home. All this generosity mediated by the law and decisions made by the Australian state.

In so-called Western democracies like Australia, if you are not Indigenous or another minority, the violent nature of the law, more often than not, sits just beyond your conscious understanding. This does not mean, however, that it is any less present and necessary. As legal theorist Robert Cover has suggested, '[all] legal interpretation takes place in a field of pain and death … A judge articulates her understanding of a text, and as a result, somebody loses his freedom, his property, his children, even his life.'[6] Put another way, the legalised violence of the law is on display when a state's immigration regime gets to decide which humans are worthy of refugee status and humanitarian resettlement and which are not.

It has now been well-established that violence and the law are inherently linked in all nation states.[7] This is because, 'law rationalises (or even humanises) violence offering legitimacy, and violence establishes law, it gives it meaning and social relevance.'[8] We do not tend to think about the law's deceitful nature very often. Perhaps this is because we have all internalised that the way the law works is necessarily legal and therefore "right".

8 December 2024

[RT] *Alhumdulillah*, *Alhumdulillah*! We see justice in our lifetime, and not after. I can't even… It's crazy. We are dancing around the kitchen. Oh my gosh. In addition to juggling two young babies, it's a workday and I have been doing back-to-back interviews, radio and tv. *Yalla*, it's crazy but I wouldn't have it any other way.

I want to watch what other Syrians are saying just to make sure we are sending a consistent message of hope but also caution. But I haven't had time! Every time I start watching, something else happens, and obviously juggling the kids and the sleep too…

Right now, there's so many emotions it's hard to get started. And then when you read something or hear something, more stuff comes up.

Revolution

While it may seem self-evident that established states are the sole entities with the ability to create and enforce the law, the reality in Syria was that during the civil war, there were numerous entities which existed physically but were not yet, or not fully, recognised as states, which also created and enforced their own version of the law. These included the Syrian Interim Government, ISIS, the Kurdish Autonomous Administration and *Hayat Tahrir al-Sham*.[9]

We tend to assume that states like Syria or Australia rest on robust and permanent legal foundations that are legal and "right". This deceptive suggestion of permanence disguises the contested origin of states. It also does not reckon with the fact that a state's legal foundations have historically been, and will continue to be, challenged and

[MS] Each week at our team meeting, we do a *tour de table* where everyone in our Centre shares what they have been working on. This week, when it comes to my turn, I begin to talk about what happened on 8 December and promptly burst into tears. I mean, it's overwhelming really. I cannot really fathom it. I cry a lot these days (laughs).

July 2025

[RT] When I tried to talk to you last week, and I'm sorry, I completely forgot about the funeral of your friend, I was really struggling to process what was happening in Suweida. I think I have a bit more clarity now, but to be honest I think I just wanted someone to talk to.

I have been thinking about how our feelings shape our analysis and how that, in turn, affects which sources you look at and how you interpret events.

On the one hand, atrocities against civilians should never be normalised or be seen as collateral damage that occurred as a result of the state seeking to restore law and order. Protecting civilian lives should always be at the heart of any political or military decision. I have struggled with some Syrians' denial that atrocities against civilians occurred in Suweida as well as the lack of empathy towards civilian casualties who happen to be from a different sect.

The other thing is that when I tell you things they are real feelings, but my thinking is constantly evolving and, I think, has become a bit more nuanced since we last spoke about this. I am conscious that when I attribute blame to a particular party I might not be being fair to other parties. And because these are such recent events lots of things are constantly coming to the surface, so I am thinking to myself: there are atrocities committed by pro-regime but there are also crimes committed by al-Hijri against civilians.

This is complicated by the fact that I haven't had time to look into the Suweida events in detail. It's hard to keep up with the nuance, reading long reports and detailed accounts.

uprooted.[10] This is the essence of revolution. 'Revolution comes about because martyrs insist in the face of overwhelming force that if there is to be continuing life, it will not be on the terms of the tyrant's law … A legal world is built only to the extent that there are commitments that place bodies on the line.'[11]

Deliberations and justifications

The state – whether it be the regime of Assad, the transitional government of Sharaa or the liberal democracy of Australia – uses the law to justify its own actions and even its own existence. Law cannot be detached from political systems or people's lived experience.

But law is just one of the many competing forces that affect, construct and shape our lifeworlds. Further, law is not always or only about state law and people's worst experiences of it. Nevertheless, our vernacular, embodied ideas about what the law is and how it operates (known in the scholarly literature as "legal consciousness") exist even when law is seemingly absent from conscious articulations or understandings.[12]

Some writing is biased and it takes time to go over these reports and balance it, to get to the root. For example, in the siege of Suweida, I have heard a lot of people saying there is a siege, it is just not a "siege" in the traditional sense, but others are like, no, there's no siege, so getting a clear idea about what's happening is very hard. This means a seemingly "simple" question like 'is there a siege in Suweida right now or not?', is not actually straight-forward.

And then how should we assign blame? To the current regime? I mean to the government. I can't believe I am saying regime (laughs). I don't think it's a regime… yet. Hopefully it won't be. Hopefully I won't be speaking in such terms… but who knows, who knows.

[MS] I take your point about the private nature of your thoughts. On one side it's a methodological question but we also have to be comfortable with what we write. For me, when I do research about what is happening in Syria at the moment, I don't come to any conclusions. I just have more questions and more ambiguity.

Of course, as researchers, what we write today is a reflection of what we think, see and analyse, but in a week or in five years, hopefully that analysis may well be very different… and I think it should be different.

Epilogue

[RT] The law in Australia is more straight-forward but it is very comprehensive and thorough. When I applied for asylum in Australia, the application, the character check, all the previous addresses you've been in, what you've done, the claims you make. It's very extensive. It's stressful. The quantity of work is exhausting and, in some ways, retraumatising.

There was a lot of nitpicking like why did you show your face here, but not here? Why did you use an alias here and not here? You say you wanted to protect your family but here you are showing your face? The problem is that you can't remember why you made those decisions at the time. A lot depended on the dynamics on the ground.

Afterlives

We are not inert recipients of law's contradictions. Who makes and what the law is one day, can change the next – as it did in Syria on 8 December 2024. And yet we have become so intoxicated by law's images and meanings, its doctrines and priorities, that law's ways of ordering our world seem like our own ways of ordering the world. As a consequence, law's demands seem natural and necessary, hardly like demands at all. It is in this way that Austin Sarat and Thomas Kearns have suggested that law has "colonised our souls".[13] And, if law has indeed colonised our souls, gaining enough space between you and it, to see how it functions, its proper form, how it can potentially be undermined, is no easy feat. It is, to use a legal term, *prima facie* revolutionary.

Trying to substantiate some of the things you say in the statements to the government, the topic of dates itself, the exact details, what you did and how it happened, is impossible to recall. There were periods where I was moving from house to house and staying with friends, and all I knew was the name of the city. When we left Qusair, we lost my uncle first, then my dad, then my brother in the space of weeks. Witnessing all this happening before and during that time of flight makes it very blurry to me now. We were leaving through what they called the "Opening of Death".

What helped in my case, and it was a real blessing, was that I had written articles which were extremely useful in verifying dates and times. These articles clearly show that I was an activist. But I would imagine that if I was someone that had just participated in protests, who hadn't published these articles, it would be much harder to prove my asylum claim.

To be honest, the things I did when I went fully into the revolution are some of the proudest moments in my life. My only regret is that I did not do it from day one.

[MS] I have a deep desire to go to Syria, but I am also conscious that I don't want to be a war-tourist. I want to go for a reason. And for some reason it doesn't feel "enough" to go for personal reasons so instead I need to go for an academic reason. And that then brings up lots of feelings about my legitimacy to speak in this space and do work on Syria and with Syrians. It's funny you know, when I think about going to Syria, I think about going through the checkpoint at the Nasib-Jaber or al-Ramtha crossing from Jordan and what would happen there, what kind of conversations would take place with these police who were until recently terrorists? And also, how just a few months earlier, if I had tried to go through this crossing while the regime was still in power, I would most likely be arrested.

This work attempts to speak to the situation we find ourselves in where there is no obvious correspondence, no simple mirroring, between personal conversations and academic debates, between everyday understandings of law and how it is practiced, between left and right columns. The personal and the academic are in tension but also somehow inform each other, producing new knowledge and understanding. As humans and as academics, as Syrians and non-Syrians who are interested in so-called "impact" we have written this piece as a way to acknowledge that we are writing and speaking about Syria at a time of high-stakes, when history and the law is literally being written (although perhaps this is all times?) and that is not an easy or a straight-forward task, nor a task for the faint-hearted.

Endnotes

[1] We have been inspired in this endeavour, and in the format we use here, by Harmonie Toros, 'When is a child a child? Scholarly and Personal Struggles with Expert Language', forthcoming, *Critical Studies on Terrorism*.

[2] Patricia Ewick and Susan Silbey, (1998) *The Common Place of Law: Stories from Everyday Life,* University of Chicago Press.

[3] Kathryne M. Young, "Everyone Knows the Game: Legal Consciousness in the Hawaiian Cockfight," *Law and Society Review* 48, no. 3 (2014): 499–530.

[4] Salwa Ismail (2018) *The Rule of Violence: Subjectivity, Memory and Government in Syria*, Cambridge University Press; Yassin al-Haj Saleh (2017) *The Impossible Revolution: Making Sense of the Syrian Tragedy*, Hurst.

[5] Susan H. Whiting, "Authoritarian 'Rule of Law' and Regime Legitimacy," *Comparative Political Studies* 50, no. 14 (2017): 1913

[6] Robert Cover, "'Violence and the Word,'" *Yale Law Journal* 95, no. 1601 (1985): 733–76.

[7] Austin Sarat, "Law, Violence, and the Possibility of Justice," in *Law, Violence, and the Possibility of Justice* (Princeton University Press, 2002), 1–16.

[8] Ntina Tsouvala, 'Eye in the Sky: drones, the (human) ticking time-bomb scenario and law's inhumanity', *Critical Legal Studies*, 19 April 2016. Available at: https://criticallegalthinking.com/2016/04/19/eye-sky-drones-human-ticking-time-bomb-scenario-laws-inhumanity/

[9] Jerome Drevon (2024) *From Jihad to Politics, From Jihad to Politics*, Cambridge University Press; Thomas McGee, "Implications of Legal Identity Documentation Issued by the Kurdish-Led Self Administration in Northern Syria: Competition and Compromise with the Central State," Citizenship Studies 27, no.7 (2023); Marika Sosnowski, "The Bureaucratic Revolution: The Syrian Opposition's Civil Registry System," *Third World Quarterly* 46, no. 8 (2025): 896–912.

[10] Marika Sosnowski and Bart Klem, "Legal Identity in a Looking-Glass World : Documenting Citizens of Aspirant States," *Citizenship Studies* 27, no. 7 (2023): 761–78.

[11] Robert Cover, 'Violence and the word': 1604, 1605.

[12] Laura Beth Nielsen, "Situating Legal Consciousness : Experiences and Attitudes of Ordinary Citizens about Law and Street Harassment," *Law & Society Review* 34, no. 4 (2009): 1059.

[13] Austin Sarat and Thomas R. Kearns, "Beyond the Great Divide: Forms of Legal Scholarship and Everyday Life," in *Law in Everyday Life*, 1993: 21–62.

The Question of Return

Rana B. Khoury, University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign [1]

For more than a decade, most Syrian refugees have not reached a "durable solution" to their displacement: neither *resettlement* in a third country, nor *local integration* in the first country of asylum, nor return (i.e., *repatriation*) to the country of origin. Instead, the majority that resides in neighboring countries have fallen into "protracted displacement," living in exile for years without achieving permanent rights. Yet durable solutions—especially return—have frequently framed the discourse around Syrian refugees, even before the fall of the Assad regime. That is because through 2024, hostility, nativist politics, and asylee-repulsion mechanisms have increased in host states, while humanitarian aid declined and the conflict in Syria simmered to a stalemate. Amid these highly dynamic developments, Syrian refugees appeared static: their displacement held the potential for reversal, through return. Yet the protracted nature of Syrians' displacement does *not* mean stasis (Khoury, 2025).

Most Syrians did not conceive of return as a viable option before the fall of the regime. Instead, they were managing day-to-day life in displacement in a continuous state of uncertainty. Did they become resilient to difficult conditions due to their cumulated experiences of survival, or did protractedness actually deepen their vulnerability? In this essay, I take the fall of the regime as an opportunity to answer these questions. The regime's persecution and violence had been the primary causes of Syrians' displacement and impediments to their return home. I find that, despite its liberatory potential, the opportunity opened by Assad's fall exposes the deep vulnerability of Syrian refugees in protracted displacement and the difficulty of the choices they face after many years of hardship and displacement.

For this essay, I draw upon two dozen interviews conducted with Syrians in Türkiye, Jordan, and Syria (those in the latter were returnees) in summer 2025, and another three dozen that preceded the fall of the regime which relate to refugees' sense of (un)belonging. I describe their reaction to the aftermath of the fall of the regime in which they sensed joy yet also deep uncertainty about their presents and futures. They also told of experiencing new financial and other livelihood insecurities. I propose that their vulnerability manifests in structural, material, and emotional forms: structurally, the fall of the regime nullifies solutions to displacement other than return; materially, it grounds their day-to-day lives and mental energy in the logistics of surviving; and emotionally, it challenges how they conceive of their home or place in the world. Their ambivalent response reveals a troubling dilemma, as the structural conditions of protracted displacement may be such that even ostensibly positive political developments deepen their vulnerability.

Protracted Displacement in Neighboring Countries

During Syria's civil war, more than 6 million people fled the country, the majority to neighboring countries—namely Türkiye, Lebanon, and Jordan. Türkiye alone hosted 3.6 million, while at the peak of displacement Syrians constituted around a quarter of Lebanon's population and Jordan estimated the actual number of Syrians in the country to be twice the registered refugee population of 650,000. The pace of Syrian displacement was relatively slow in 2011 and 2012, then increased dramatically between 2013 and 2015. In 2015 and 2016, hundreds of thousands sought asylum beyond the neighboring countries; many found refuge in Germany, some elsewhere in Europe. A few hundred thousand also returned to Syia from 2016 to 2024. Yet most, *millions*, remained next door to Syria and entered a decade of displacement.[2] In this essay, I focus mostly on those in Türkiye and Jordan.

Most Syrians in neighboring countries have not formally achieved "local integration," one of three durable solutions

promoted by the international refugee regime that refers to the acquisition of rights and permanent protections—even citizenship—in the first country of asylum. In Türkiye nearly a quarter million Syrians have been naturalized through an exceptional citizenship mechanism—a large number but only about 7 percent of the Syrian refugee population in Türkiye. Jordan has refrained from offering citizenship.[3] Thus, most Syrians in both countries remain under temporary protection status. As one Syrian in Amman put it to me: "I could live in this country for a hundred years and never gain rights."

Nevertheless, forced migration scholarship has recognized that "*de facto* integration and settlement are an inevitable consequence of protracted displacement despite the official, legal, or political tactics designed to prevent this" (Zetter & Long, 2012). Indeed, Syrians in Türkiye and Jordan have integrated in important if incomplete ways over the years. Most rent homes in urban areas, work formally or informally, enroll their children in public schools, participate in community associations, attend local mosques, seek healthcare in local and public clinics and hospitals, receive no or negligible humanitarian assistance, and abide by local norms—including learning the Turkish language in that case. In our conversations, Syrians with school-age children recognized the next generation was particularly integrated in the country of refuge.

These imperfect integration developments have been uneasy. In Türkiye, anti-refugee elite rhetoric and public sentiment are amplified during recurrent electoral cycles. In Jordan, persistent tensions around the economic impact of refugees affect their ability to acquire and retain work permits. Yet both governments have balanced the burden of refugee hosting with large amounts of foreign aid for so doing—aid often directed at host country institutions and development (Arar, 2017; Tsourapas, 2019). More importantly, and despite the insistence on maintaining the "temporary" status of Syrian refugees, with each passing year of what became a protracted displacement, there were diminishing prospects that Syrians refugees would return home or obtain resettlement in a third country. From 2016, Bashar al-Assad's regime had been regaining territory from rebels, and global North countries had been erecting formidable barriers to asylum seekers. Return and resettlement, the other two durable solutions pursued by the international refugee regime, became unlikely and unviable for most before 2025.

Then, on December 8, 2024, the Syrian regime dissolved. President Bashar al-Assad, who in 2000 inherited the country from his father who had ruled since 1970, fled the country in the face of a surprise and decisive rebel offensive that lasted a mere eleven days. Since 2020, the fault lines of the Syrian civil war had been frozen. Imperfect ceasefires had maintained rebel control in the corners of the country, but the regime had seemed to emerge triumphant from a brutal war. Generalized violence and strategic displacement, largely perpetrated by the regime, had created the largest refugee population in the world (Lichtenheld, 2024); the regime's practices of punishment and distrust had kept them out, even when violence decreased (Abboud, 2023).

The fall of the regime signaled the end of more than half a century of the Assad dynasty's authoritarian rule through physical, psychological, structural, and hegemonic coercion and control (Aldoughli, 2024; Ismail, 2018; Munif, 2020; Wedeen, 1999). Two sentiments in particular prevailed among my research participants: shock and joy. Despite this event's positive valence, it did not take long for uncertainty and insecurity to reshape understandings and expectations for ordinary Syrian refugees who were living in a condition of protracted displacement.

Three Forms of Heightened Vulnerability

The fall of the regime, I argue, heightened vulnerability among Syrians in protracted displacement along three lines: through structural closings, material burdens, and existential emotions. Attention to these processes demonstrates how protracted displacement constrains refugees' agency even in a moment of political opportunity. It also illuminates the limits of past framings around durable solutions, including survey research about return

intentions. Previously, humanitarian and scholarly surveys consistently found startingly low return intentions over the short-term, even as they reported far higher proportions over the long run. For example, intentions to return to Syria within one year of the survey have been less than 5% while intentions to return "ever" have been greater than 60% (Alrababah et al., 2023; UNHCR, 2024). The negligible levels of short-term intent and massive gap with long-run aspirations suggest that return was such an unrealistic prospect it was unworthy of serious consideration among survey respondents. Now that refugees are considering it (less than 2% jumped to 27% after the fall of the regime in a UNHCR flash survey (2025)), we may learn that even aspirations are insufficient to overcome vulnerability.

Structural Closings

Despite the shrinking prospects of achieving resettlement in a third country, many Syrians had, through 2024, still been clinging to the idea that their time in a neighboring country was transitory—a temporary stop on the way to a more durable outcome. Since 2023 especially, Syrians in Türkiye had become fearful of deportation and so-called "voluntary" returns and a generally and increasingly hostile environment. This was leading some, particularly young men, to reconsider ways out, including through smuggling routes that had become far more dangerous over the years, or through deeper immersion in informal markets. In Jordan, open hostility to Syrians' presence was limited, but the open-endedness of their temporary status offered little hope for long-run prospects and protection. Through 2024 many families were busy in their efforts to meet the requirements for a U.S. refugee sponsorship program that had been introduced by the Biden administration in 2023 in response to the Ukrainian refugee crisis.

They sought these passages despite knowing that resettlement had become very unlikely. Many expressed regrets for not having gone in the early years of displacement. A man in Türkiye avowed to me he would have survived the Mediterranean passage—he shouldn't have been scared. People scarcely anticipated that the displacement would last as long as it did; some even passed up early resettlement opportunities because they thought home was on the horizon. A woman in Jordan shared with me such an experience:

You know we were among the first people they called to go to America! We weren't thinking to leave; it was impossible to think of then! We didn't think it would go on like this. We thought a year, maybe two at most. We didn't think it'd be like this. Now we are eating our fingers with regret. We are so regretful.

With the fall of the regime, both third country resettlement and local integration became dead ends. Several global North countries moved to end consideration of Syrian asylum applications; some even moved to return Syrians already present in their countries and ended their temporary protection status. Now, neighboring countries were stops on the road back to Syria. The duration of the transit is unclear: Syria needs time to recover, and the host states have taken differing approaches to how quickly or forcefully to push Syrians home. Lebanon has initiated a program in cooperation with the UN Refugee Agency to facilitate regular return convoys. Türkiye has facilitated "go and see" visits to encourage informed return and boasts of the numbers that have already left. And Jordan has gently conveyed that return is, eventually and inevitably, the destination; Syrians have perceived amplified enforcement of employment regulations and are acutely aware of the policy that forbids their re-entry into Jordan once they go to Syria. As of October 2025, about 1 million Syrian refugees have returned overall.

Material Burdens

Refugees, Barbara Harrell-Bond has contended, are not mere victims; they are "survivors of adversity—who often demonstrate unimaginable strength and dignity in the most adverse circumstances" (2002, p. 52). My own research, too, has found that the displaced can be remarkably agential (e.g., Khoury & Siegel, 2024). During the initial escape from violence—and the how, where, and when involved therein—individuals and families make a series of calculated decisions to survive. After arrival in

refuge, the struggle for shelter and sustenance begins anew. But as days turn into months turn into years, the displaced settle into a rhythm of daily life—even if a difficult one. The fall of the regime disrupted this rhythm. After conveying the shock and joy of the fall itself, my interviewees expressed that *thinking* immediately followed.

Prior to December 2024, the idea of return to Syria was hypothetical and aspirational at best. The logistics of what would be entailed with return were not considered. After the fall, these logistics bore down heavily on Syrians. These included repaying debts owed to landlords, employers, and even local shop owners. The costs of return itself—transporting furniture and belongings, paying for the journey of each family member across the border—could amount to hundreds of dollars. Those who have no home to return to face perhaps the most significant material burden of all, as they calculate high rental prices and low job prospects inside.

The protracted nature of displacement shapes these logistical concerns. Basic goods including electricity and water are scarce in Syria, and educational and medical sectors are run down. Refugees have become accustomed to the goods and services associated with functioning governmental systems. As well, family structures have changed. People who left Syria as teenagers or in early adulthood with their parents, for example, now have their own spouses and children—as do their siblings. That is, one family that left Syria may have become three families in refuge. One house to stay in, even if one remains, is insufficient; they need multiple.

These logistical considerations create intense mental pressures. One woman in Amman described to me an anxiety attack experienced by her husband "from all the thinking and thinking!" that landed him in the hospital. Another confided her suicidal ideation as her family just could not figure out how to make the ends meet to return and survive. I apologized and expressed regret for the distress our conversation caused; she assured me that the challenges of return are all she thinks and talks about.

All of this thinking about the material ability to return is altogether distinct from the political cause of displacement—now removed. And yet it is a result of the protracted nature of that displacement. Indeed, my research participants sense that it is their very first-hand knowledge of what it means to lose everything and restart that has led to careful, and even overwhelming, thinking about the logistics of return.

Existential self-assessment

Returning to square one (or to "zero," in the Arabic phrasing), is a sensation not limited to logistics. It is also an emotional experience wherein one questions one's self, place in the world, obligations, and sense of belonging—or lack thereof (Pearlman, 2024). With the initial displacement, a linkage broke with what and who they knew. Atomized and detached in displacement, Syrians continuously long for the large families, owned properties, pace of life, and social relations back home. As refugees, they work long hours, tire out, go home, sleep, and repeat. "We are tired," "we are bored," and "we are exhausted" were common refrains in these conversations.

In the years of protraction, they may have grown more resilient in some ways, but they lost in others—notably in people, including those dying of war-related or natural causes back home, and in displacement as family members dispersed throughout exile. Among them, conservative women may find themselves especially isolated—not even leaving the house to work, study, or shop. Now with the fall of the regime, loved ones are leaving again. Interviewees expressed pain that a close relative could return because they had a house to return to, but they themselves cannot, because they do not.

And yet even return to Syria does not necessarily hold the promise of recreating social relations or "home." Besides that loved ones are lost or themselves displaced, the people who have remained inside have changed. The hometowns from whence people escaped have changed. Some spoke of resentments between returnees and stayees. Others spoke of envies. If one had nothing to return to in Syria, would it

even be a return home? Or would they be refugees in their own homeland?

As well, those in protracted displacement themselves have changed. From deprivation, many have grown their understandings of rights and social contracts. Young adults who became refugees as children noted they had "become conscious" in the country of refuge whereas they barely remember Syria. Parents reflected on how little their children know of Syria at all. Atomized existence enabled some to enjoy certain personal liberties, such as living alone as unmarried adults, divorcing abusive husbands without fear of societal stigma, and taking comfort in the anonymity of an urban setting compared to rural hometowns.

And yet there are clear limits against developing a sense of belonging to the host country. Scholars of forced migration frequently refer to the "liminality" of forced migration, a state of transition, waiting, and in-betweenness. The fall of the regime has amplified the discomfort of permanent liminality. "What should we do?" "Where should we go?" "How does this end?"

Implications

Syrian refugees in neighboring countries today are qualitatively different people than they were when they fled Syria. Even an ostensibly positive political development like the fall of the regime that caused their displacement has laid bare the vulnerabilities of their condition. Despite the desire among most observers to see Syrian refugees achieve a durable solution—particularly return—protracted displacement does not lend itself to simple reversal. As one 35-year-old Syrian woman in Amman put it when recounting the fall of the regime:

We were really happy! So happy! Really it was like nothing else. We said: he should have fallen a long time ago! Not now. Now after he destroyed the country and left nothing. I wished that he would have fallen like a year after we left. It's okay, we can deal with a year. But not now after 14 years! We get a little happy, then we get a little upset. Then we get a little happy, then we get a little upset.

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Endnotes

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[2] https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria
[3] Conditions in Lebanon were even more precarious than in the two cases on which I focus (Janmyr & Mourad, 2018).

Rethinking Refugehood and Time at the Empire-State Seam

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In Türkiye, the governance of Syrians unfolds at what I call the empire–state seam. In this volatile fracture, imperial idioms of hospitality, rooted in notions of ümmet (ummah) and the *ensar–muhacirle*r analogy (ansar–muhajireen), that first began surfacing through the open-door policy, clash with the modern nation-state's bureaucratic drive to categorize, contain, and close. I do not situate this seam in a singular moment of crisis, such as the fall of the Assad regime on December 8, 2024, but as a persistent condition of the state itself, shaping Syrians' lives and their self-understanding within Türkiye. My ethnographic work in Gaziantep, Kilis, Istanbul, İzmir, Ankara, and elsewhere between 2024–2025—including conversations beyond the scope of formal research—reveals an interesting case of cognitive dissonance: Syrians express gratitude for safety and opportunity yet recount, in excruciating detail, the pain of "refugehood" under biometric regulation, populist discourse, and state surveillance. Accordingly, I began tracing this contradiction through the ambivalence referenced above, because if people are unable to articulate whether their experience belongs to safety or suspension, gratitude or fatigue, then it is worth questioning if the state is speaking in two (in)compatible modes of governance at once.[1]

I trace the source of this contradiction to the empire-state seam, a fracture where imperial idioms of hospitality clash with the nation-state's bureaucratic drive. Within this seam, *neo-Ottomanism* functions not as a coherent ideological project, but as a discursive resource sustaining it: a governing rationality that holds together the imperial *long durée* of renewal and civilizational belonging with the nation-state's linear, terminal horizon of "temporary" protection and eventual return. Morgül's (2023) analysis of 382 Erdoğan speeches (2014–2022) demonstrates this simultaneity empirically: Islamist–neo-Ottomanist themes of fraternity and Türkiye as protector of the oppressed remained stable in nearly half the speeches, yet, the discourse of economic utility (such as appeals to integrate Syrians with higher education or financial resources) appears only rarely, and only in reference to a small, selectively valued minority (Morgül, 2023). The dominant register remains moral and civilizational: (1) the fraternity of the ümmet, (2) the protection of the oppressed, and (3) the portrayal of Türkiye as guardian of the downtrodden. It is this co-existence of boundless hospitality and bureaucratic finality—rather than a linear shift from one to the other—that reveals the seam as a lived technology of governance, not a policy contradiction to be resolved.

While Morgül captures the construction of the temporal contradiction, the period following December 2024, however, represents its ultimate stress test. If the imperial idiom promises unending hospitality and the nation-state demands closure, what happens when the primary justification for exile—the Assad regime—is removed? The discourse of "sending our brothers back home" gains a new, potent legitimacy, while the lived reality for many Syrians—whose lives are now deeply embedded in Türkiye—has created a new form of dissonance, one my interlocutors articulate as a wrenching tension between a politically expedient "return" and a socially complex "stay." Accordingly, it is precisely in this recalibration, where "return" becomes newly legitimized while "staying" becomes newly uncertain, that the figure of the refugee is rescripted.

The toppling of the regime did not so much reveal new truths as it created a rupture through which existing evidence could be socially re-evaluated. This recalibration of perception was a common thread in my repeat interviews. Where interlocutors were once seen through a static vocabulary of "weakness and avoidance," the post-Assad horizon allowed graphic detainee accounts, Sednaya survivor narratives, and documentary evidence to circulate

with new force, directly challenging the long-standing trope that their flight was an abdication of duty rather than a flight from state violence. One interlocutor recounted an encounter with a Turkish kebab shop owner who confessed that he had "hated Syrians for years," believing they had "abandoned their country." After learning of the testimonies and documentation emerging in the aftermath of the regime's collapse, he told my interlocutor: "Now I understand you did not run from war, but from oppression." A body then recast as politically injured rather than morally suspect, its flight reframed as survival rather than abandonment.

What this moment reveals is not only a shift in sentiment but a shift in temporal legibility triggered by the post-Assad horizon. For over a decade, Syrians in Türkiye were read through the nation-state's short horizon of closure: temporary with an eventual "return," and their past flattened into an undifferentiated narrative of war. The fall of the regime disrupts this chronology. It forces a recalibration not of Syrians' lives, but of the temporal frame through which those lives are interpreted. Suddenly, the moral idioms of empire—continuity, fraternity, shared oppression—gain new traction, and the Syrian body becomes legible in a way it had not been before. For Syrians after Assad's fall, recognition does not emerge because the facts of exile changed but because the meaning of time itself shifted around the displaced subject. This precarious recognition through pain is the empire-state seam made legible at the level of social chronology. The shift in perception—from "coward" to "oppressed"—is a momentary triumph of the imperial temporality of the *ümmet*, which understands flight (*hijra*) and reception (*ensar*) as a continuous, sacred timeline. However, this expansiveness is immediately checked by the state's linear temporality, which, with the fall of Assad, seizes on a definitive endpoint: return. The Syrian is thus suspended between a clock that re-reads their past to grant belonging and a clock that re-scripts their future to mandate expulsion.

The Overdetermined 'Refugee'

Central to Türkiye's necropolitical order is the refugee—not merely a governed subject, but a mediating figure through which the empire–state continually configures and metamorphoses its own identity. This function was articulated by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in a December 2024 speech: "Frankly, the Syrian issue has become a litmus test that shows who stands where in Türkiye" (Independent Türkçe, 2024). If the state speaks in two incompatible temporalities at once, it is the refugee who must inhabit that contradiction, producing the cognitive dissonance that first animated this paper. Through this mediating role, Türkiye performs its dual aspiration: to revive an imperial civilizational reach while sustaining the administrative discipline of the modern state. It is through the refugee, in other words, that the empire–state seam becomes lived, moralized, and bureaucratized all at once—overdetermining Syrians' existence in protracted displacement (Khoury, 2025) and shaping how they navigate the tension between imperial inclusion and state exclusion.

It is in this sense that I turn to how refugehood is lived and narrated through time. As the title suggests, I do not speak of Syrian "refugees" in Türkiye because the category, while of course not irrelevant, is already overdetermined. Not all Syrians in Türkiye are under Temporary Protection (which signals a de facto form of refugehood, though not de jure refugee status under law). Some hold different forms of residency, others are naturalized citizens, and others live without papers altogether. Yet across these legal distinctions, Syrians are rarely differentiated in public life. In the eyes of mainstream media, political rhetoric, and popular discourse, they are all "refugees."

Academics and researchers reach out to them to speak about "refugees" and to study the "refugee question." Recently, a friend passed my contact to a researcher who said they were working broadly on "Syrians in Türkiye." The researcher then reached out to me directly, assuming from the outset that I was a "Syrian refugee," and even asked if they could also meet my family. The researcher did not know who I was, nor my legal status or connection to Türkiye—and I am not saying they should have—but that is precisely the point. The category of "refugee" is imposed before anything else, before life itself is taken into account. It arrives as the starting frame, and in doing so, it flattens

differences and overdetermines both what kind of subject one is allowed to be and the kinds of questions that can even be asked.

This lexicon collapses lived and legal differences into one figure of otherness. Syrians, aware of this, often adopt "refugee" to describe their position—most strikingly, every single naturalized Turkish citizen I spoke with referred to themselves as refugees, to reflect on their societal positioning (despite formal status and even during post-Assad repeat interviews). Thus, "refugee" is less a legal designation than a condition cutting across categories, a way of being managed that becomes a way of seeing oneself within a displaced community. I speak of Syrians in Türkiye broadly, avoiding "refugee" because it is bound by the secular timekeeping of the international Refugee Regime (read crisis-logic). In research settings, Syrians strategically use it vis-à-vis the researcher, but it rarely appears in everyday conversations. It presumes a linear arc—flight, hardship, resolution—that does not map onto their reality. Türkiye is neither a clean exile nor a permanent home. My interlocutors resist the closure implied by "refugee," even as they inhabit its temporality, creating a paradox: they invoke the term for shared experience (especially in front of the researcher) while recognizing its inadequacy, tied to a secular chronopolitics that misaligns with their lives.

Contested Proximity: A South–South Configuration

Beyond this overdetermination, the seam also marks one of the most revealing South–South configurations of refugehood, in that the afterlives of empire shape how a former imperial center governs subjects from its once-integrated periphery. This does not result in a simple story of solidarity or hostility, but of contested proximity. Ottoman civilizational idioms bleed into Turkish nationhood, while Arabness, once enfolded within a broader imperial imagination, now hovers uneasily between kinship and estrangement, laced with populist discourse that "*the Arabs have stabbed us in the back.*" Syrians, too, navigate this ambivalence, wary of neo-Ottomanization and Turkification in post-Assad Syria, even as many find familiarity in the *ummatic* rhetoric that frames their presence and ties to Türkiye. The seam, in this sense, does not stage a simple power asymmetry but a shared unease, an ongoing negotiation of proximity and difference within the afterlife of empire. When comparing it to the usual North–South grammar of refugee governance, this dynamic complicates it, for it is a South–South encounter structured by post-imperial memory, racialization, and the uneasy translation of empire into nation-state.[2]

Accordingly, the ideas in this paper unfold across two temporal frames, formulated both before and after the fall of the Assad regime. They emerge from two different exercises in world building: one shaped by the ongoing permanence of exile, the other haunted by the possibility of return. I do not claim a presentist authority. I write knowing that history has shifted beneath our feet, while attending to what unfolds through this "transformation without rupture", the process of "untying and retying" existing conditions (Mbembe, 2006, p. 28). Life does not wait for permission to resume, and I have observed this from both proximity and distance—as a family member, as a friend, and as a researcher—and time certainly does not pause in displacement. There is no what-if in the chronology of exile; life reorganizes itself. Work, school, marriage, illness, pain, debt, everything continues, but under a different temporality that refuses the pause implicit in the language of "refuge." The absurdity lies in how the Refugee Regime[3] (with a capital R, precisely to signal its status as an international apparatus of governance rather than a descriptive term), continues to imagine life as suspended, as if the displaced existed outside of time. Its architecture, fragile in nearly every South–North dynamic yet efficient in the Ukrainian case, depends on the fantasy of interruption. The secular belief that displacement is a pause in history rather than a form of life that continues in spite of, and through, crisis.

Necropolitics at the Empire-State Seam: Governing Life and Death from Syria to Türkiye

Thus far, we have established that the seam is both political (clashing sovereignties), and temporal (clashing time orders). Necropolitics is the administrative form through which this tension becomes lived. It is the mode

by which the empire–state contradiction governs life and manages death across bureaucratic, everyday, and symbolic registers. Bureaucracy is the medium through which over-rationalized procedures, biometric verifications,[4] and the language of "voluntary return" convert life into administrative rhythm. Necropolitics, in this sense, is not an excess of violence but the empire–state's way of managing life at the threshold of belonging. For Syrians, this meant a reconfiguration of violence: from the corporeal terror of the Assad regime to the bureaucratic discipline of the Turkish state. This bureaucratic control was intensified by Türkiye's own internal volatility, where managing displacement became a tool for consolidating domestic order (Waldman & Caliskan, 2017). It is the lived expression of the grammar Morgül (2023) identifies from above, where the language of civilizational fraternity seamlessly translates into the bureaucratic imperative of repatriation.

This grammar also reveals what neo-Ottomanism has become under the Justice and Development Party. While the genealogy of this development lies beyond the scope of this paper, neo-Ottomanism is not merely an ideology of nostalgia, as Hristov (2019) suggests. I would go further to argue that it (read empire-state) becomes the rationality of governance that situates Türkiye's power within a reconfigured imperial time. As Hristov observes, Türkiye's political elite had already begun to resist its subordinate role in the international order—its "real economic and military power disproportionate to its negligible rights to decision-making in international conflicts" (2019, p. 146). This disjuncture between capability and recognition gave rise to an aspiration for autonomy that would later find articulation in Ahmet Davutoğlu's *Strategic Depth,* which envisioned Türkiye as a "central state" bridging the Balkans, the Middle East, and the Caucasus. This vision sought to reconcile global alignment (with NATO, the EU, and the United States) with regional civilizational leadership (Hristov, 2019).

In practice, this ambition reached its peak crystallization in the refugee question. Here, the empire-state seam demands a specific kind of legible subject. My interlocutors described a brutal paradox: they became visible to this system not through formal procedure or quiet endurance, but only in moments of public breakdown. This performance of suffering is the point where the imperial idiom, which recognizes kin through a spectacle of shared victimhood, converges with the state's bureaucracy, which requires a manageable, docile victim. The subject who is angry or demanding is a threat; the one who is broken fulfills both scripts. Thus, foreign policy blurs into a necropolitical domestic practice, projecting influence through a humanitarianism that ultimately demands the refugee's unraveling to be seen at all. What Hristov (2019) reads as a Eurocentric anxiety over "imperial ambition," I interpret as the political surface of the temporal contradiction this paper traces: the state's attempt to synchronize the imperial long durée of renewal with the modern nation-state's demand for closure, producing an "ideal refugee" through the very violence of this negotiation.

According to the 2025 Global Appeal Report by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), "The Syria situation remains one of the largest displacement crises in the world, with a 2025 projection of 7.2 million internally displaced people (IDPs), and 6.2 million refugees, primarily hosted in the neighboring countries of Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Türkiye." (UNHCR, 2025, p. 2). These figures are often invoked to frame displacement as a humanitarian crisis, yet they flatten what continues to unfold beneath them. While the fall of the Assad regime in December 2024 reportedly prompted over one million spontaneous returns, UNHCR estimates that "some 437,226 Syrians have crossed back to Syria via neighboring countries since 8 December 2024" (Regional Flash Update #23, 2025, p. 2). From Türkiye alone, the Minister of Interior announced on April 16th, 2025, that between December 9th, 2024, and April 13th, 2025, "175,512 Syrians (33,730 families) have returned from Türkiye to Syria voluntarily" (Regional Flash Update #23, p. 3).[5] These figures do not mark closure; if anything, they clarify how necropolitics materializes through data. The very framing of these numbers as "voluntary return" diffuses responsibility. Not all returns were voluntary.[6]

The veneer of voluntariness, meticulously quantified and archived, epitomizes what Foucault (1977/1975) describes as the subtle mechanisms of modern power—a system so over-rationalized that its violence becomes illegible even to itself. Modern states transform survival into data, converting coercion into statistics and dissent into administrative error. It is the same dynamic that Khoury (2025) observes in this volume, in her analysis of how even liberatory events such as regime change activate mechanisms of vulnerability, including logistical burdens and existential uncertainty, rather than clear-cut resolutions.

This technocratic grammar also mirrors what Ataç (2019) calls the "phantasmagorical empire" of Turkish foreign policy, the oscillation between the Pax Ottomanica imaginary and the security anxieties of the nation-state. If Davutoğlu's *Strategic Depth* sought to restore an Ottoman-like peace to the region through civilizational rhetoric and humanitarian activism, the post-Davutoğlu era, as Ataç (2019) argues, replaced this moral universalism with moral realism through a language that justifies military and bureaucratic intervention in the name of stability. Morgül's (2023) analysis of Erdoğan's speeches captures this transformation empirically, considering how the same discourse that calls Syrians "our brothers" provides the moral scaffolding for sending them "back home."

Return then is not a clean reversal, nor a reentry into a stable past. It is not even a return to a fixed Syria, nor a fixed present. Both the homeland and the conditions of exile have changed, and neither offers solid ground. As Mbembe writes, this is not the restoration of a lost home, but "a reciprocal assimilation of multiple segments of that which lives" (2006, p. 28)—a process in which return itself becomes a site of mutual transformation. Syrians are not simply returning to Syria but being absorbed into a shifting terrain whose contours—social, political, and temporal—are still being formed. This evolving landscape lies beyond the scope of this article, but its instability frames the necessity of these queries. For those who remain in Türkiye, even as the idea of return has become imaginable, their lives remain circumscribed by law, policy, and fatigue. The conditions that govern them have not fundamentally shifted. Though the horizon has changed, their present is still one of suspension, still shaped by the threat of deportation, the weight of bureaucratic uncertainty, and the slow attrition of everyday life. Return may now be technically possible, certainly less violent, but the structure of governance that rendered them precarious to begin with continues.

This contested South–South proximity does not vanish post-Assad; the seam simply recalibrates its terms without closing. For those who remain in Türkiye, the same temporal tension persists. For those who have returned, their return does not annul the seam; it routes through it. And most importantly, for those whose lives now stretch across both polities—work, kinship, obligation, language—refugehood becomes a mode of double address rather than a status, where the subject is claimed by two clocks at once, with neither offering a final resolution. In this sense, Türkiye is not merely a host that recedes as Damascus reconstitutes itself, it is a South–South gate through which post-Assad futures are priced, paced, and made actionable—labor markets, corridors, permissions, and narrations of "normalization" all pass through its timing. The new Arab order is being drawn through this hinge, and the empire-state seam is central to both its recognition and rapprochement as it proceeds, while the category that organized a decade of displacement, revolution, and war—the refugee—is neither dissolved nor redeemed. What is distinctive about the Türkiye–Syria case is precisely this: necropolitical governance is not an exception attached to collapse, it is a byproduct of the seam itself—an ongoing conversion of imperial intimacy into nation-state discipline, and of discipline back into idioms of civilizational belonging. Refugehood sits at the center of that conversion. It is not solved by return, nor exhausted by staying, nor domesticated by paperwork. Months after our conversation in Gaziantep in July 2024, and shortly after the fall of the regime, one of my interlocutors messaged me on WhatsApp:

After I built a life here, raised my children, even got my daughter into university—how can I possibly return now?

My house in Syria is destroyed. I have nothing there. If Türkiye refuses to let us stay, Syria still is not stable. And if they let us stay, the conditions will be harsh. Maybe you should include a section in your writing about that.

The Afterlives of Exile

Time itself is differently configured, sprung from the belief that if you change the clock, the politics will change. From one chronology, the 8th of December 2024 looks like closure: the end of dictatorship, the resolution of exile. From another, it is one more node in a continuum of movement, a re-knotting rather than a return. The life of Syrians in Türkiye, even after Assad, cannot be uprooted overnight. It is folded into two political orders at once. I have tried to avoid easy clichés, such as 'neo-Ottomanism' as a catch-all, because they flatten more than they reveal. Yet something of that imperial idiom remains. It lingers in language, in gestures of *ummah* connection, in the promise of expansiveness. But how far does it really go? How expansive can an idiom be when it collides with the hard limits of the nation-state, with its bureaucratic compulsions to categorize, contain, and close?

One could go further to say that the empire–state seam's legacy is neither civilizational revival nor decline, but something more quietly durable—civilizational management, perhaps, if only because it survives by reconciling what should not be reconciled. It is difficult to call it benevolent or violent, because it is both and neither. Its moral intimacy is, at once, its bureaucratic double. And maybe that is precisely why it works, violently at that. Indeed, many have returned, yes, but the ties remain. Networks of advocacy, reconstruction, and long-distance nationalism are expected to emerge and will shape post-Assad Syria from afar, and will be taken as questions to be researched, while simultaneously unsettling Turkish politics at home. My interlocutors spoke of a doubling of lives: living within and against two systems, being influenced by the futures of both, their experiences revealing the fault lines of political form. Consequently, this paper argues that for both post-conflict Syria and a politically evolving Türkiye, recognizing refugehood as a persistent, transnational condition of affiliation is essential to understanding the future, rather than clinging to the nation-state's fantasy of closure. Türkiye, the ally of tomorrow's Syria, is also the co-author of a new order whose moral idiom and administrative reach are indistinguishable. To name this tension feels almost ungrateful; to ignore it feels complicit. Perhaps that is the most honest place from which to write: from within the contradiction itself.

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Endnotes

1 This paper draws on 2024–2025 qualitative work, including repeat interviews, online conversations, re-interviews, and bureaucratic infrastructure and artifact analysis with interlocutors across TPS, residencies, citizenship, and irregular statuses. It also incorporates fieldwork conducted in Gaziantep, Kilis, and Istanbul in July 2024.

2 This conceptualization of the empire–state seam and contested proximity between Turkish nationhood and Arabness emerged from a conversation with a friend about the persistent Turkish nationalist narrative of "Arab betrayal" and mistrust of Syrians. This was echoed in my discussions with Turkish peers and Syrian interlocutors in Türkiye between 2023–2025, who noted how historical grievances and ummatic solidarity are weaponized against Syrians.

3 I use "Refugee Regime" following Fassin (2007) and Malkki (1995) to denote the global humanitarian apparatus that renders displacement legible through bureaucratic categories and secular temporalities of crisis and resolution.

4 Fieldnotes from Gaziantep, Kilis, and Istanbul (July 2024) include multiple accounts of biometric registration as punitive measure, repeated "data update" summons to the *Göç İdaresi*, and home verification visits. These also include observations on the 2016 Temporary Protection Identification Card's oversized, yellow, non-foldable redesign (and the removal of its barcode), which effectively outs holders and conditions self-surveillance—anticipatory compliance, constant document-carrying—consistent with disciplinary internalization (Foucault 1977 [1975]). Yellow's chromopolitics amplifies legibility (Batchelor 2000), making the card a bureaucratic artifact that produces the public refugee-subject it purports merely to identify (Fassin 2007).

5 UNHCR's Regional Flash Update #23 (17 April 2025) cites 437,226 cross-border returns since 8 December 2024; higher figures circulated in media and government statements. Both the totals and the label of "voluntariness" remain contested, with numerous documented accounts of forced signatures on so-called voluntary return forms.

6 For more detailed account drawn from fieldwork and follow-up correspondence with one interlocutor detained and deported from Gaziantep in 2024, see Al Saeid (2024) "Forcibly Returned: A Syrian's Account of Being Deported from Turkey," (https://www.hurriya.net/post/forcibly-returned-a-syrian-s-account-of-being-deported-from-turkey). The piece documents the everyday mechanics of "voluntary" return, deportation caravans, forged fingerprints, and the routine erasure of legal status, during the heightened climate of the Kayseri attacks in July 2024, when deportations intensified.

Financing Transition:
Aid and the Challenge of Inclusive Economic Recovery in Syria

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Introduction

Since the fall of the Assad regime in 2024, Syria has faced a daunting dual challenge: Reviving an economy that has contracted by over 64 percent since 2010 with an estimated $250 billion in reconstruction needs while also rebuilding state institutions weakened by five decades of authoritarian rule and 14 years of war.[1] Most of the attention in policy and academic circles over the last year has understandably focused on providing immediate humanitarian relief and security stabilization in Syria and on the importance of lifting Assad-era sanctions. But neglecting inclusive economic recovery in the early years of transition may undermine all such efforts.

The trajectory and success of that recovery hinges in no small part on the role of powerful international and regional actors like the EU, Gulf states, the IMF, the United Nations, and the United States, each of which bring resources and influence but have diverging priorities. Research on post-conflict transitions underscores of course that aid is never neutral. How donor funds are distributed, conditioned, and sequenced will shape whether Syria's transition builds inclusive institutions and growth or reconstitutes the patronage networks and extractive economy that fueled its collapse. In the sections that follow, I briefly survey what we know about the current aid landscape in Syria and the efforts of international actors. I then detail why inclusive economic reform is critical to the success of Syria's transition drawing on comparative lessons from transitions elsewhere and set out a framework that scholars might use in order to both monitor and understand how economic recovery and reconstruction efforts may evolve in the coming years.

The Current Landscape of Aid in Syria

Nearly a year after Assad's departure, Syria's humanitarian needs remain vast. The UN identifies food security, access to water and sanitation, restoring medical care, and sustainable reintegration programs for the return of internally displaced Syrians and Syrian refugees as the most critical priorities.[2] The Norwegian Refugee Council estimates that over 90 percent of Syrians live below the poverty line and 13 million lack sufficient food with the country's overall economic decline a primary barrier to recovery.[3] In addition, explosive ordnance incidents have increased significantly over the last year. Landmines, cluster bombs, and other explosive devices remaining from 14 years of war are an enormous obstacle to large-scale reconstruction projects and investment, impairing the progress of Syria's transition.[4]

Progress on tackling all of these areas have been hampered by a lack of funding and poor coordination and information management among international donors. The UN's Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP) for Syria is severely underfunded, with only $939 million received on the ground this year of an estimated $3.19 billion needed to address priority humanitarian needs.[5] The top sources of that funding thus far have come from Türkiye (22%), the European Commission (18.3%), Qatar (9.6%), Saudi Arabia (7.4%) and Canada (7.2%).[6] In March 2025, the EU organized a conference in Brussels to mobilize support for Syria's transition, continuing efforts that began in 2017. Notably, the conference emphasized the importance of supporting a Syrian-owned, Syrian-led inclusive transition that would privilege both humanitarian needs and economic recovery.[7] The EU and its partners collectively pledged $6.3 billion with the EU committing €2.5 billion; Germany €300 million; and the UK up to £160 million.[8]

More than half of those pledges, including Germany's, will bypass Syria's transitional government, going directly to Syrians through NGOs or UN agencies.[9]

While these pledges are ambitious, whether they materialize in practice remains to be seen and even if they do, they still fall far short of meeting Syria's immense humanitarian and socio-economic needs. In 2011, the international community spoke of the Arab uprisings as a historic opportunity to support economic and political transformation in the region. Donors struggled then to marshal domestic support for aid in the wake of the 2008 global financial crisis. Now, despite similar rhetoric about the importance of supporting Syria's historic transition, domestic constituencies in donor countries are arguably even more reticent to back substantial transitional support to Syria from their governments in the wake of conflicts like Ukraine, Gaza, and Sudan. The context for international cooperation has also changed significantly since 2011. Under the Trump administration, the US has retreated significantly from its past leadership role in many international organizations and from multilateral global governance. The administration's recent closing of USAID—the lead US agency managing foreign assistance—suggests that Washington is unlikely to play a substantial role in leading or aiding transition efforts.

Instead, pivotal investments and contributions from Gulf states over the last eight months suggest their influence in shaping Syria's transition. For example, Saudi Arabia and Qatar agreed to pay off Syria's $15.5 million debt to the World Bank, and in doing so, allowed Damascus to take out new loans to fund reconstruction efforts.[10] In September 2025, both countries in cooperation with the UNDP, also pledged to pay $89 million towards funding public sector salaries in Syria for three months—an initiative that would allow essential public services in the country to remain uninterrupted.[11] In July, Saudi Arabia signed nearly $6 billion in investment deals in Syria between the government and private companies covering a variety of sectors including energy, telecommunications, financial, and banking.[12] And in May 2025, a UAE subsidiary company signed an $800 million agreement with Syria's new government to develop the port of Tartus.[13] At a minimum, such investments, particularly in strategic sectors like energy, suggest that Gulf states will have significant leverage over transitional decision making in Syria and ensuring influence through reconstruction and investment, similar to their recent investment strategies in Egypt.

The Primacy of Inclusive Economic Reform

These initial pledges and commitments suggest both opportunities and constraints in Syria's evolving financing landscape. They also highlight a common tension with post-conflict assistance: how to balance short-term humanitarian efforts alongside longer term strategies for economic transformation. Studies of foreign assistance underscore that aid effectiveness is determined less by its scale than the way it is implemented and structured. For Syria, the key challenge is not only how to mobilize aid, but how to channel that assistance in ways that support a more equitable and durable transition process.

This is where the primacy of inclusive economic reform becomes critical. Post-conflict and development scholars have long recognized the importance of inclusive economic reform to post-conflict recovery and transition. Research underscores that economic reform can target and reduce ethnic and regional horizontal inequalities in wealth and political power.[14] Economic reforms can lower the relapse to conflict through strategies that expand jobs, rebuild fiscal capacity, and diversify economies.[15] Evidence from studies on the disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) of combatants and employment-focused programs also show that such reforms can weaken wartime networks and reduce violence by reconnecting ex-combatants and at-risk youth to licit livelihoods.[16] Inclusive economic reforms can also build state legitimacy and strengthen the social contract if citizens see fair benefits from improvements in service delivery and economic gains.[17] Finally, reforms strengthening property rights, financial systems, and fiscal transparency can create conditions for growth by encouraging investment and accelerating recovery. In short, privileging economic

inclusion and reform ensures that post-conflict aid does not simply rebuild the past, but supports a more just and resilient society where the conditions for renewed violence are less likely to take root.

Donors have struggled with how do this in practice. Peacebuilding scholars themselves have been critical about the field's inadequate attention as to how inclusive economic reform can strengthen peacebuilding.[18] This paper seeks to encourage greater engagement, scrutiny, and discussion among scholars, practitioners, and policymakers on this front and about the challenges when we talk about inclusive economic recovery. It takes as a starting point that inclusive economic recovery is a critical dimension of sustainable peacebuilding. Yet, the concept itself has too often been treated as unidimensional with practitioners and policymakers invoking it as a catch-all term rather than a framework with multiple, analytically distinct elements. Moreover, the meaning of inclusivity is contested across different institutional and epistemic communities. For example, international financial institutions like the IMF and the World Bank equate it with macroeconomic stability; organizations like the UN Development Program (UNDP) see it as privileging local ownership and livelihood restoration; and the OECD's Development Assistance Committee see it as country ownership of transition priorities and settlements.[19] As many critical scholars of aid have also noted, 'inclusive economic recovery' has often just become shorthand for 'development as usual models' that solely privilege neoliberal market reforms.[20]

Towards a Framework for Monitoring Inclusive Economic Recovery in Syria

Given such issues with conceptual ambiguity and measurement how should we think about inclusive economic reform and the best ways to support it in Syria? What starting point can we use to more meaningfully and concretely monitor how and whether economic aid to Syria best supports inclusive economic recovery? Lessons from other transitional moments underscores the necessity of moving away from narrow interpretations of inclusivity that privilege macroeconomic stabilization and market liberalization as ends in themselves.

Some of the most trenchant criticisms about donor efforts in places like Tunisia and Bosnia have centered on the dangers of narrow conceptions of economic inclusion and growth informing aid efforts. For example, despite acknowledging the need to redress the economic grievances that fueled Tunisia's 2011 uprising, IMF loan programs required painful subsidy cuts and austerity but came without meaningful social protection along the way, which would later fuel public discontent leading to the country's subsequent backsliding in 2021.[21] In post-Dayton Bosnia, aid efforts by the international community focused disproportionally on privatization and growth (reflective of the ideology at that time) without attention to the high levels of social insecurity generated, which were an impediment to reconciliation and peacebuilding.[22] As Timothy Donais writes, in the context of fragile post-conflict environments like Bosnia and by extension, Syria, "effective peacebuilding requires that a much better balance be struck between the single-minded pursuit of economic growth and the need to provide for a level of social protection to prevent widespread public apathy and disillusionment with the peace process itself."[23]

Recent work by political economists at the Rockefeller Foundation (RF) offers a promising framework for scholars to monitor and use in assessing how reforms might support inclusive economic recovery as donors expand their support for Syria's transition.[24] Authors of the framework define an inclusive economy as one that encompasses five characteristics: equity, participation, growth, sustainability; and stability. To summarize briefly, equitable economies are those in which more opportunities exist to enable upward mobility, especially the poor and those socially disadvantaged. In such economies, citizens have equal access to adequate public goods, services, and infrastructure and inequality is declining. Participatory economies are those in which citizens can fully participate in economic life and transparency around common knowledge of rules and norms allows citizens to start a business, find a job, and engage in markets.[25] Their

definition of a growing economy conceives of growth as more than just improvements in GDP, instead privileging improvements in material well-being with indicators that capture progress in food security, living conditions, and life longevity. Sustainable inclusive economies are those in which social and economic well-being is sustained over time with attention to environmental health and reduced natural resource use with decision-making processes that consider long-term costs. And finally, stable economies are those whose economic systems are resilient to shocks and stresses, especially those disproportionally affecting the most vulnerable.

Each of these characteristics, they note, should be understood as part of an integrated whole; Patterns of inclusiveness or exclusion in one area may reinforce or undermine inclusiveness in another.[26] Each characteristic also includes several sub-categories critical to each with context for categorizing measurable indicators.[27] Indicators that work best are embedded in a theory of change, which this index seems to capture more substantively than previous efforts in a way promising for monitoring and evaluating donor efforts in Syria. One of the strengths of their framework is that it draws on fields like feminist economics, ecological economics, political economy, and theories of social well-being and considers both drivers and outcomes of an inclusive economy. It also reflects a multi-dimensional idea of inclusive development lacking from many of the indicators developed by international organizations and institutions, thus avoiding, "heterodox-tinged, yet essentially orthodox framings of inclusive growth."[28]

Comparative research on post-conflict transitions and foreign assistance suggests three central areas that scholars should monitor to understand how economic recovery and reconstruction are unfolding in Syria: aid distribution; institutional rebuilding and reform; and aid coordination and delivery. In this section, I briefly describe key insights from scholarship on each dynamic. I then describe an example of a current reform issue in Syria relevant in some way to each dynamic and suggest RF informed indicators that scholars could monitor to assess the economic inclusivity of reforms.

Aid Distribution

Insights from scholars studying post-conflict aid in Bosnia and Tunisia underscore the importance of considering distributional equity in program designs. In the wake of the 1995 Dayton Peace Accords, Bosnia received over $5 billion in reconstruction funding.[29] A recent subnational study of aid distribution in Bosnia incorporated geolocated projects of ten bilateral and multilateral donors to examine the spatial distribution of aid and factors associated with its distribution.[30] Results from that work show how foreign aid can contribute to horizontal inequality. The study's authors expected that aid would be directed to favor poorer municipalities in the country. Instead, they found that donors allocated early reconstruction aid to municipalities with higher levels of development, neglecting remote areas—a potentially destabilizing dynamic impacting economic recovery.[31]

As many scholars have noted, long-standing economic grievances, especially those linked to regional inequalities, drove the protests leading to Tunisia's 2011 uprising. Many anticipated that donor strategies to support the transition that followed would prioritize redressing those grievances. International assistance was instrumental in cushioning Tunisia from the impact on economic shocks in the early stages of its political transition. Studies of donor aid to the country, however, showed that coordination issues amongst donors and with consequent governments created unpredictability that hampered economic planning and promises by donors to address regional inequality were largely neglected in development plans.[32] Finally, lessons from the first three years of Iraq's reconstruction starkly illustrate how aid distribution without effective governance or oversight can derail economic recovery. More than $220 billion was spent on reconstruction in Iraq in the decade following the US' invasion in 2003.[33] Studies by the Brookings Institute and the US Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction detail how weak consultations between US reconstruction managers and Iraqi leaders and the failure to establish a governance system of reliable integrity resulted in widespread corruption.[34] As Dhingra and Alshamary note, "the postwar reconstruction funding surge reinforced the perception that aid projects

specifically and public services more broadly could be sources of individual and connection-based profit with little consequence."[35]

Distribution Issues in Syria's Current Context

As one example of the challenges facing Syria, in July 2025 the World Bank warned that Syria's GDP is projected to grow by only one percent, with recovery hinging on inclusive electricity access. The Bank approved a $146 million electricity emergency project to rehabilitate transmission lines and bolster sector governance.[36] UNOCHA's humanitarian response priorities stressed that 16.5 million Syrians remain in need and that inequitable access to services and livelihoods, particularly in northern governorates, is a principal barrier to return.[37]

Areas to Monitor:

- *Service parity (capturing the RF's equitable access):* Electricity hours, water continuity, health clinic functionality disaggregated by governorate and return areas.

- *The distribution of reconstruction contracts (aligning with RF's participatory dimension):* It may be possible to measure the share of reconstruction contracts awarded to local small and medium enterprises (SMEs) compared to foreign firms or regime-aligned enterprises.

Institutional Rebuilding and Reform

The success of economic recovery in transitioning states is intrinsically linked to institutional reforms that strengthen the economic environment in such states by attracting critical foreign investment. In the early years of transition, practitioners and scholars working in the fields of both peacebuilding and democracy assistance emphasize the critical role that reforms to the banking and judicial sectors can play in strengthening the legal system, safeguarding property rights, and enforcing contracts, all of which can reduce uncertainty and restore confidence among domestic and international investors.[38] A preliminary look at country case studies in these areas suggests two important aspects of such reforms that scholars should focus on in monitoring economic recovery in Syria: improvements in institutional capacity and strengthening the ability for institutions to absorb aid effectively. As an umbrella term, improvements to institutional capacity might capture whether governmental and regulatory agencies have the personnel skills to administer regulatory frameworks for business; how soon they are able to provide services; and how much capacity courts have to enforce contracts, among other areas. Strengthening absorptive capacity refers to the extent to which domestic institutions can manage, receive, and deploy aid without becoming destabilized or dependent. When aid exceeds an institution's ability to manage it, it can generate inefficiencies, foster corruption, and undermine state legitimacy.

Donor reforms to these areas though well intentioned can often invertedly create more challenges for capacity building. For example, in an important intervention on donor-supported transitional justice reforms in Tunisia, Mariam Salehi shows how overly expansive notions of such reforms by donors did not align with the capacities of existing domestic institutions. Overly ambitious, expansive, and impractical donor mandates made it difficult for domestic transitional justice workers to achieve progress which created the impression that transitional justice institutions were incapable of delivering on promises to their constituencies.[39] Countless case studies of transitional aid, particularly in Afghanistan, Bosnia, Iraq, and Tunisia, also underscore the point that more aid isn't always a good thing. Aid absorption issues are well-documented by economists and scholars of foreign aid.[40] Significant inflows of aid can encourage rent-seeking and undermine confidence in local governance, especially in the absence of measures to ensure that recipient institutions have the capacity to absorb aid. Feeny and de Silva's research on measures of absorptive capacities in foreign aid suggests ways that donors can avoid absorption issues and better direct their aid.[41] In their work they develop a composite index of absorptive capacity for individual recipient countries towards helping donors best allocate their aid projects –a potentially useful tool for scholars to explore in understanding where aid is directed and by whom in Syria.

Institutional Reform and Rebuilding Issues in Syria's Current Context

In September 2025, President Ahmed al-Sharaa announced the creation of a Syrian Development Fund intended as a comprehensive national strategy to develop and repair the country with funding from both the domestic and international arenas.[42]

Areas to Monitor:

- *Unified project registry and donor coordination (captures RF's equitable access):* Scholars can monitor if the Fund publishes a registry of reconstruction projects that are geo-referenced and donor and sector-tagged. Updates could show evidence of overlap or coverage gaps.

- *Public consultation and inclusion (capturing RF's participatory indicator):* Questions scholars might consider in this area include whether regional consultations are undertaken before major projects and if oversight boards are created by the Development Fund, do they include members from civil society, business associations, or women's groups.

- *Food aid/agriculture (aligning with RF's sustainability measure)*: Scholars may be able to track how food security assistance through the World Food Programme or donor pledges aligns with medium-term investments in agriculture like irrigation and drought resilience.

- *Monitoring dimensions of absorptive capacity (captures RF's equity and participation):* Scholars could use Feeny and de Silva's composite index of absorptive capacity to understand how and where donors are directing aid throughout the country.

Aid Coordination and Delivery

Coordination among donors is critical in shaping the early outcomes and success of economic recovery efforts in transitioning states. It is particularly key in strengthening a transitioning state's capability to manage its economy, polity, society, and public administration—what Pritchett et al. call the four-fold transformation of a state's functional capacity.[43] Given the risks and fragility of transitional periods, Ndikumana underscores that while the volume of donor aid channeled is important, how that aid is delivered, which instruments donors use, which sectors and activities donors choose to support, and the sequencing of aid delivery ultimately matter most to the success of institutional reforms.[44] Effective aid coordination in practice has long been a challenge and scholars have written extensively on the need for donors to work more closely together in designing aid interventions, mobilizing resources, harmonizing aid conditions, coordinating aid locally, and insuring accountability in aid delivery.[45]

Competing priorities among donors have made this difficult to realize. Donors have different priorities and preferences shaped by their political, economic, and strategic interests. Much of the lack of success with donor coordination in transitional settings stems from differing and often contradictory policy goals of international actors.[46] Effective coordination, as Roland Paris notes, ultimately requires "striking a balance between competing imperatives, which are shaped by the characteristics of the environment and the actors to be coordinated."[47] An example from post-Dayton Bosnia illustrates how different donor priorities in the absence of coordination can cripple structural reforms during reconstruction. While mobilizing reconstruction aid in Bosnia was considered successful, major issues with donor cooperation and coordination resulted in, among other areas, duplication of aid efforts and poor management of economic reform.[48] The EU and World Bank shared leadership over Bosnia's aid program. The primary tension between the two was that the EU and the Office of the High Representative (OHR) had political mandates in Bosnia, while the World Bank only had an economic mandate.[49] As Nedic notes, "the OHR sometimes wanted to condition aid on political steps, or design sector programs to achieve political objectives that were beyond the Bank's mandate."[50] This tension resulted in incoherent programs across sectors and created accountability issues. Issues briefly raised here suggest several questions scholars should consider in

monitoring coordination issues with economic recovery in Syria: Are donors working at cross-purposes? Who leads coordination? Is there evidence of overlap or duplication of efforts? Are local institutions and actors engaged in the process or bypassed by donors?

Coordination Issues in Syria's Current Context

In its latest (July 2025) Humanitarian Response Priorities report, UNOCHA emphasizes the importance of both expanding support and coordination from international donors.[51]

Areas to Monitor:

- *Funding and Geographic Coverage (captures RF's equitable dynamic):* Scholars can monitor the percentage planned early-recovery funds that have been disbursed with attention to per-governorate and per-sector allocations and to look over overlaps or gaps in coverage.

- *Inclusion of Syrian CSOs in design and oversight (captures RF's participatory dynamic):* It may be possible to track the share of projects co-designed with local councils/NGOs and the number of CSOs with multiyear vs. short-cycle grants. Examining the percentage of oversight recommendations that have been acted on may also be fruitful.

- *Creating a joint project registry (capturing RF's equity indicator):* A centralized, publicly accessible database listing all donor and government financed recovery project with details such as budget and implementing partners would allow scholars to monitor overlap/gaps as well as understand potential conflicts of interests with political implications that might emerge.

Conclusion

Syria's transition is unfolding amid deep uncertainty. While initial pledges and investments give some indications of the actors and priorities that will shape Syria's economic recovery, greater scrutiny will need to be given in the coming months towards how aid will be distributed, structured, and coordinated in practice. Insights from comparative research on post-conflict transitions underscore the importance of inclusive economic reform to a more equitable and durable transition. This paper does not offer a definitive framework for evaluating such reforms; rather, it outlines preliminary entry points for scholars to monitor as reconstruction efforts unfold in Syria. By focusing on three core dimensions—aid distribution, institutional rebuilding and reform, and aid coordination and delivery—scholars may be able to generate early empirical insights into how external assistance shapes inclusive economic recovery. Monitoring across these dimensions is promising in providing both a foundation for more rigorous future research and for holding both donors and domestic actors accountable to their stated commitments of inclusivity.

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The Pound in the Post-Assad Era:
Currency Stabilization in Syria

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Currency stability is a fundamental prerequisite for international investment and sustainable economic growth. In post-Assad Syria, stabilizing the Syrian Pound presents exceptional challenges. Years of war-induced hyperinflation, depleted foreign reserves, and a devastated economy have left the interim government with limited options for shoring up foreign reserves and restoring monetary credibility. This paper explores current challenges and potential strategies for monetary reconstruction, including access to international assistance, sovereign borrowing and foreign direct investment.

A stable currency is indispensable to productive economic activity, functioning markets, and the conditions necessary for long-term growth. The Syrian Pound, stable in its heyday, has withered drastically under the weight of the civil conflict and the unmistakable toll it has left on the country's economy. Syrian economic production has dwindled to less than half in the years between 2010 and 2021.[1] As of 2018, Syria has officially been re-classified to a low-income country by the World Bank (World Bank 2022). With its population descending majorly into poverty, more than half a million dead, and 13 million displaced, internally or abroad (United Nations 2025), Syria had captured the attention of the International Community as one of the preeminent humanitarian catastrophes of the Arab Spring.

The dire state of post-Assad Syria is shared by its Central Bank reserves. Official statements from the interim government have been scarce, but local and international reports indicate that on December 8th, 2024, the vault of the Central Bank of Syria (CBS) housed a mere $200 million (all figures USD unless otherwise noted) in cash reserves, a tiny fraction of the Bank's 2010 foreign exchange reserves, estimated by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) at $18.5 billion (International Monetary Fund 2010). Fortunately, gold reserves appear to have survived the fall of the regime. Reports indicate that around 26 tons of gold, estimated at $2.2 billion in current market prices had been found inside the CBS vault.

Governors appointed to the CBS after Assad's ouster have attempted to steer away from seigniorage (the printing of money). Maysaa Sabreen, the first woman to preside over the role in the Bank's 70-year history, told the international press that the Bank would avoid printing money as Syrians cannot weather another wave of hyperinflation. Yet, the interim government did accept shipment of Syrian Pounds from Russia, Assad's printing house after EU sanctions severed his ties to the Oesterreichische Banknoten-und Sicherheitsdruck GmbH, a subsidiary of the Austrian central bank. The batch, estimated at hundreds of billions of pounds, equivalent to tens of millions of dollars was reportedly minted for but never delivered to the Assad regime.

Sabreen, before being replaced by Abdulkader Husrieh who was officially appointed a few months into her tenure, also foretold draft amendments to the bank's law to foster its independence and autonomy over monetary decisions (Azhari 2025). Such reforms are yet to be formally announced and implemented. Nonetheless, her ambitious, re-assuring, but so far hollow tone is echoed by Husrieh, who has espoused the aim to "enhance the brand of the country as a financial hub", maintaining, in accordance with the broader government line, the importance of trade and financial liberalization to attract foreign investment. His declared vision of the banking sector is centred around de-regulation of private commercial banks, and priming said banks for international investment by establishing a state institution that guarantees their deposits (Jalabi

2025). Husrieh also vowed to unify the rates for the Syrian Pound, currently still trading at an official and a black-market rate, and to move towards a managed float.

More saliently, the CBS has announced the issuance of new banknotes, removing two zeros in a bid to strengthen public confidence in a diminished pound. The overhaul, beyond being a symbolic break with the Assad era (Bashar and Hafez al Assad appear on the 2,000- and 1,000-pound notes, respectively) also serves to re-establish governmental control over the circulation of currency. Currently, funds circulating outside of Syria's formal financial system are estimated at 40 trillion pounds. The new currency is to be unveiled on December 8th to mark the first anniversary of the fall of the Assad regime. While the revaluation may ease day-to-day transactions—now cumbersome due to successive depreciations and the resulting need to carry, transport, and count large volumes of banknotes—it is unlikely to improve monetary stability if the underlying sources of distrust in the Syrian Pound remain unaddressed. Moreover, a comprehensive currency overhaul could run a bill of hundreds of millions of dollars, placing additional strain on already depleted state coffers. The revaluation is also expected to generate confusion during the transition period, particularly among elderly consumers, and may exacerbate market fragmentation given the interim government's uneven territorial control (Dalatey 2025, Shaar 2025).

Additionally, in an effort to improve regulatory enforcement, the CBS has directed commercial banks to fully provision for losses arising from Lebanon's financial crisis and to propose credible restructuring plans within six months—thereby obliging them to recognize the entirety of their exposure. During the conflict, Syrian banks had relied heavily on Lebanon's financial system—one of the few remaining havens to evade Western sanctions—a strategy that backfired once Lebanon's banking sector imploded following years of mismanaged monetary and fiscal policy. The exposure of Syrian commercial banks, many of which are tied to sister institutions in Lebanon, is estimated at $1.6 billion, a substantial share of their $4.9 billion in total deposits.[2] The accelerated timeline has pushed several banks to explore foreign investment or acquisition as elements of their restructuring plans (Azhari and Dalatey 2025) —prospects that may prove difficult to realize given the continued enforcement of sanctions on Assad-affiliated actors, many of whom remain embedded in the governance structures of commercial banks,[3] even as sanctions have been eased for officials within the interim government.

In keeping with their stated objective of aligning domestic policy with international norms, the CBS has also pursued cooperation with external partners, welcoming technical delegations from the World Bank, the IMF and regional partners, most notably Türkiye. The lifting of sanctions by the United States and the European Union and the clearance of Syria's World Bank arrears by Saudia Arabia and Qatar have signalled re-integration into global financial networks. On 19 June 2025, Husrieh, proudly announced the completion of Syria's first SWIFT transfer since the outbreak of the war. The removal of sanctions has also made the interim government hopeful about retrieving Syrian assets frozen by Western governments, which estimates put at around $400 million (Strohecker, George, Jones, et al. 2025).[4]

Challenges and Prospects

Despite the broad removal of sanctions by the United States and the European Union, the interim government faces a variety of distinct challenges to its currency mandate, that is boosting demand for, and by extension trust in, the Syrian Pound.

Firstly, the challenges faced by the Assad regime in securing foreign currency inflows still persist today. Revenue from the export of crude oil was the regime's main source of foreign income (World Bank 2024). This stream of hard currency remains, to a large extent, under the control of the Kurdish Syrian Democratic Forces in the northeast. The failure to reach a mutually agreeable deal, thus far, only exacerbates this status quo. Secondly, Syrian commercial banks are likely to remain subject to international scrutiny due to the entrenchment of regime-

affiliated economic elites in their governance structures. A recent study of compliance constraints in Syria's private banking sector identified regime-affiliated economic figures in the shareholder registries of a majority of private banks (Shaar 2025). This means that the international re-engagement of Syria's private banking sector will prove more difficult than anticipated. US and EU sanctions remain in place against the ousted regime and its known affiliates (U.S. Department of State 2025). Even when the shares of these individuals are miniscule, their status as a shareholder is likely to trigger additional due diligence, raising compliance costs.[5]

Thirdly, Syria's international debt is a pertinent issue. Among the challenging aspects of Syria's debt is identifying its true volume. Prior to the start of the war, Syria's external public debt stood at $4.3 billion (UNCTAD 2025a)—a level that, in regional comparison, appears relatively moderate.[6] The Assad regime had been able to negotiate successive debt restructuring agreements with Russia and Eastern European creditors (International Monetary Fund 2005).[7] After the eruption of the Syrian revolution, the regime survived mainly through external assistance. The extent of financial support provided by the regime's two greatest allies, Russia and Iran, is unknown.[8] Officials of the interim government have placed it at $20-23 billion (Mazarei 2025), while other estimates have been as high as $30 billion (Dadouch and Jalabi 2025).[9] Either way, it is unclear what means Iran and Russia have at their disposal to pressure the new interim government into compliance. Furthermore, any debt incurred post 2011 by the Assad regime is 'odious', i.e., it was obtained against the interests of the Syrian population; a fact that was apparent to the creditors at the time (Mazarei 2025; Kremer and Jayachandran 2002). The doctrine of 'odious debt' has been raised in episodes of political transition to justify the severance of debt obligations incurred to repress the domestic population. Its status remains contested in international law, however. (Howse 2007).[10] So far, it is unclear whether the interim government plans to raise that argument. The idea has raised popular support,[11] but a unilateral decision by the interim government to sever or reduce debt is likely to scare away potential investors, and signal propensity towards default.

Alternatively, the interim government can seek bilateral agreements with Russia and Iran to restructure Syria's debt. This option might show promise with Russia. Seemingly keen to shield its interests in the Hmeimeim and Tartus naval bases, Russia has opened communication channels and cooperated with the interim government on monetary questions.[12] Notably, Moscow recently hosted the interim president for his first official visit and meeting with President Putin since the fall of Assad. However, international organizations and bilateral donors might be less inclined to loan to Syria, if their funds are utilized, even partially, to service payments of Russian and Iranian debt (Mazarei 2025). A third option would be to pursue internationally mediated negotiations, under the auspices of the United Nations, akin to the treatment of Iraqi debt following the fall of Saddam Hussein (Hinrichsen 2021). Efforts led by the United States produced a United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolution diminishing Iraqi debt, estimated at $160 billion at the time (573% of GDP), by 80% (Mazarei 2025). In the Syrian case, one of the main creditors, Russia, is a permanent, veto-wielding member of the UNSC. Nonetheless, Syria can lean on the UN General Assembly or international organizations such as the World Bank and IMF to set negotiations in motion.[13]

The challenges in attracting foreign currency flows extend to international aid as well. While the interim government has been reluctant to pursue concessional loans,[14] the weight of Syria's reconstruction demands makes them all but inevitable. Looking forward, Syria is now eligible for new loans from the World Bank following the clearance of its arrears by Qatar and Saudi Arabia. Yet, the landscape of international assistance is not particularly hospitable at the moment. The world's largest bilateral provider of Official Development Assistance (ODA), US Aid, closed its doors earlier this year by order of the White House under President Trump. More generally, aid is increasingly shifting away from grants to loan instruments (UNCTAD 2025b). The burden of public debt in developing countries keeps on mounting, and a more diversified creditor base had made debtors vulnerable to private withdrawals (UNCTAD 2025a).[15] In the MENA region, looming debt crises confront Lebanon, Jordan and Egypt where debt levels have become alarmingly high. Sharaa and his interim

government may still harbour expectations of securing substantial financing and concessional arrangements from the oil-rich Gulf states. Yet such prospects appear tenuous, as members of the Gulf Cooperation Council have overhauled their aid strategies, now conditioning support on credible structural reforms designed to enhance the country's appeal to foreign direct investment (Mazarei 2023).

The interim government may still pursue the channelling of its current allocation in Special Drawing Rights (SDRs). SDRs are international reserve assets created by the IMF to stimulate liquidity and supplement official reserves. The value of SDRs is based on a basket of the world's strongest currencies (US dollar, the euro, the Chinese renminbi, the Japanese yen, and the British pound sterling), thereby avoiding volatility stemming from the monetary policy of any individual member. They are allocated to members, in rounds, according to their quota.[16] In 2021, to overcome liquidity shortages during the Covid-19 pandemic, the IMF approved the largest-ever allocation of SDRs to member countries. As of today, Syria has holdings of 563.9 million SDRs,[17] worth approximately $750 million. Note, however, that countries which convert their SDRs into foreign currency incur net charges based on the difference between their cumulative SDR allocations and their actual holdings.[18]

Last but not least, remittances constitute a critical source of foreign income that must not be overlooked. Estimating the volume of remittance flows remains inherently difficult, as these transfers often travel via familial and friendship networks rather than official banking channels. Existing estimates place annual remittance inflows at around $2 billion (Trading Economics 2025). Recent moves by the Central Bank to adjust the exchange rate toward the prevailing black-market rate represent an essential first step toward encouraging the use of official banking channels for personal transfers, reducing fears of exchange losses stemming from artificial currency overvaluation. The interim government could complement this effort by introducing modest taxation on remittances at rates comparable to the fees charged by currency traders.[19] Channeling remittance flows through official banking institutions would provide the interim government with a significant and stable source of foreign income, potentially transforming its taxation base. Nevertheless, capitalizing on this opportunity presupposes strong and stable institutions. The persistence of a parallel economy—spawned by restrictions on formal transfers and currency misalignment—can have lasting repercussions for both the financial sector and political institutions. In this regard, state capacity is a decisive determinant of the developmental implications of remittances.[20]

The Way Forward

The Syrian interim government faces a formidable monetary challenge in the aftermath of Assad's ouster. Popular pressure for currency stabilization remains acute. Yet, the government's available sources of income to strengthen the Syrian pound or meet fiscal obligations are decidedly limited. Taxing domestic economic activity or consumption risks provoking further societal discontent, while promising only modest returns given the devastation of the domestic economy after years of conflict. Against this backdrop, the interim government's cooperation with economic elites formerly aligned with the Assad regime—and their persistent presence within the governance structures of commercial banks—has increasingly served to legitimize and rehabilitate their image. The controversial contributions of some of these actors to recent fundraising campaigns organized by the interim government has only amplified this perception. The choices the interim authorities make in navigating these relationships will have profound implications, both for their legitimacy among domestic constituents and for their credibility with international investors. Many of these economic elites were complicit in the injustices perpetrated during the civil war and remain subject to international sanctions, which in turn constrains the prospects for external investment. For Syria's economic recovery to be durable and inclusive, the path forward must be grounded in accountability and transparency—principles that must also govern the interim government's engagement with Assad-era economic actors.

That being said, several positive monetary developments have occurred since the fall of the Assad regime. The Central Bank of Syria has maintained control over the

country's gold reserves, is actively seeking the recovery of Syrian assets frozen abroad and is gradually being reintegrated into global financial networks. Furthermore, the proposed unification of currency rates and shift toward a managed float would be a welcome advance. Managed floating exchange rates are regarded as suitable in post-conflict scenarios. Elbadawi and Soto (2013) examine a panel of 132 (post-conflict and control) countries between 1970 and 2018 and find the managed regime to "have an edge on some critical areas of economic performance", namely overall GDP and export growth, and to contribute to higher aid effectiveness.

Yet, the core challenge, that of Syria's enormous financial needs, persists. We have pointed out some potential avenues for public revenue, such as the cashing in of Special Drawing Rights, pursuing Syria's foreign assets frozen abroad, or taxing remittances. Beyond that, Ahmed al-Sharaa and his interim government have so far prioritized attracting foreign investment, showing hesitation towards debt. Nevertheless, to enable foreign direct investment that is neither captive nor extractive, i.e., one that is not a drain on the country's labor nor its resources, investment in endogenous growth is necessary. This means promoting, domestically, conditions for growth, such as an educated and healthy workforce, and physical and technical infrastructure. Syria leverages a skilled workforce, notwithstanding that it is scattered across the globe. Attracting diaspora through serious opportunities and re-establishing rigorous domestic education and training is vital. So is reviving the health sector, which has suffered enormously during the war, providing for Syria's energy needs and rebuilding its aching infrastructure. These considerations highlight the inevitability of external aid as a policy recourse, even in the context of a global debt environment marked by increasingly limited concessional terms. Like other countries recovering from civil war, Syria experiences a reduced demand for its national currency due to lower income levels and asset substitution away from the Syrian Pound (Collier 1999). This trend is unlikely to reverse in post-conflict periods. Indeed, if trust in the new government's capacity to stabilize the Pound collapses and the government issues additional money, further episodes of hyperinflation may ensue. In this context, aid facilitates monetary reconstruction by fostering higher income growth (more demand for the Pound) and offering the government an alternative to printing money. Additionally, it promotes confidence by signalling international support and economic stability (Adam et al. 2008).

The Syrian government may persist on its search for investments, sidelining the prospect of debt.[21] This would invite foreign capital in, promote economic activity and provide a push for the Lira. It is doubtful, however, that reliance on investment alone would ever fulfil the financial needs of Syria's reconstruction, estimated at north of $200 billion (Daher 2025).[22] Reliance on private investment is also likely to lower the domestic ownership of assets, and in the case of infrastructural projects, increase dependence on private actors and MNCs in the long run. Alternatively, the interim government might reverse course, prompted by the realization that a meaningful reconstruction will undoubtedly be enormously expensive. Syria's path forward, hence, lies in carefully optimizing the conditions for reconstruction. A constructive engagement with international organizations, a favourable restructuring of debt through multilateral negotiations, and the resolution of shares linked to Assad-affiliates in commercial banks are all critical factors to creating an environment conducive to foreign direct investment and sustainable economic recovery.

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Endnotes

[1] Estimates based on nighttime light data suggest an 83% drop in economic activity, painting a more severe picture of the economic consequences of war (Amnesty International 2015). According to the World Bank, Syria's GDP dropped from $67.54 billion in 2011 to $19.9 billion in 2023. Figures are in current US$ (World Bank 2025).

[2] "Calculated by Reuters based on the 2024 financial reports of all 14 commercial banks in Syria, published by Damascus Stock Exchange" (Azhari and Dalatey 2025).

[3] The implications of this entrenchment for the attraction of foreign investment are addressed in the next section, drawing on Shaar (2025).

[4] According to Switzerland's government, some 99 million Swiss francs ($112 million) worth of frozen Syrian assets are currently in the country (Hirt and Luthi 2024). The Syria Report newsletter estimated in April that £163.2 million ($205.76 million) of frozen assets were in the UK (Shamaa 2024).

[5] The legal benchmark under EU Law is "effective control", which need not necessarily equate to majority ownership. Shaar explains that "[l]egally, an international bank is not automatically prohibited from working with a Syrian bank that has a sanctioned minority shareholder. However, under EU law, entities "effectively controlled" by a designated person, even with less than 50% ownership, are treated as sanctioned. This means that even without an operational role, the shareholder's presence in the ownership structure can trigger enhanced due diligence, slow onboarding, and heightened scrutiny. These factors increase compliance costs and often lead risk-averse institutions to walk away." (Shaar 2025).

[6] Syria recorded its lowest debt to GDP ratio in 2010 at 30.01%. This figure is based on overall government debt, i.e., national and external public debt (Statista 2025; Trading Economics 2021).

[7] In 2005, Russia forgave 80% of Syria's outstanding debt, estimated at $13 billion, while Slovakia, and the Czech Republic agreed to waive their outstanding claims valued US $1.6 billion for a one-time payment of $150 million (U.S. Department of State 2009). Deals with Poland, Romania and Bulgaria followed (The Syria Report 2025).

[8] Some of these flows were made public, such as the $3.6 billion credit line granted by Iran in 2013 (Al-Khalidi 2013) and extended with another $1 billion in 2015 (Westall and Al-Khalidi 2015) or loans by Russia in 2020, valued at $1.7 billion (The Syria Report 2025).

[9] Some put this estimate even higher. Opposition figures in Iran estimated their government's financial commitment to Syria to have run a bill of $50 billion. A spokesman for the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs called these figures exaggerated (Motamedi 2024; The Syria Report 2025).

[10] The 'odious debt' doctrine is not recognized as an international custom, notwithstanding historical precedent potentially indicating *opinio juris* (The Syria Report 2025).

[11] The Syrian National Council has stated that Syria will not be liable for debts incurred by the Assad regime after March 2011 (Mazarei 2025; Cheng and Bento 2013). Sources within the interim government have also indicated that the government intends to sue Iran for war reparations worth $300 billion (Hakamian 2024).

[12] Russia delivered a shipment of Syrian Pounds printed before the ouster of Assad (Reuters 2025). Reports also indicate that the new, revalued, money notes planned by the Central Bank are to be printed by Russian state-owned firm Goznak, which printed the Syrian Pound during the Assad era (Dalatey 2025).

[13] The IMF has allowed Ukraine to reschedule some of its debt owed to Russia, following Russia's invasion of Crimea in 2014 (Mazarei 2025; The Syria Report 2025; Aslund 2015).

[14] CBS governor, Husrieh, has stated to Syrian news agency, SANA, that: "Syria, by order of President Ahmad al-Sharaa, will not resort to external debt, nor will there be any borrowing from the International Monetary Fund or the World Bank" (Alioglu and Abu Shamala 2025).

[15] The greater the reliance on private financing of public debt—that is, the higher the share of private creditors—the more volatile withdrawals tend to be. UNCTAD's 2025 report estimates that private creditor withdrawals accounted for $25 billion in net outflows in 2023, with 51 debtor countries experiencing net debt outflows nearly double those of 2010.

[16] IMF Quotas are assigned to each member upon their entry into the organization. A member's quota reflects standing within the organization and is based on the strength (GDP), openness and volatility of the member's economy, and its official reserves. Quotas determine each member's mandatory resource contribution to the IMF, as well as their voting power and access to financing and Special Drawing Rights.

[17] Up from 282.2 million SDRs in 2020 (International Monetary Fund 2025).

[18] In other words, if a country uses more SDRs than it has in its account, it will pay an interest charge on the difference. As of August 20, the SDR interest rate stands at 0.05 percent.

[19] A range of potential policy innovations could be envisioned to channel remittance flows toward fiscal objectives. One such proposal is the creation of a fiscal remittance instrument, enabling Syrians abroad to allocate an annual remittance to the government—or to consent to a higher remittance tax rate—in exchange for a future pension upon reaching a specified retirement age. This arrangement effectively represents a wager on the country's developmental trajectory. Implemented in cooperation with trusted third-party monitors, such a "generational contract" would enhance the credibility of fiscal management and signal reliability to both domestic constituencies and the international investment community. Beyond its fiscal advantages, this approach would also empower the diaspora to assume a more active political role—potentially contributing to the consolidation of democratization efforts.

[20] Comparative experiences illustrate this point. Egypt, Sudan, and Somalia each followed distinct trajectories in the aftermath of their respective remittance booms. In Egypt, an Islamic finance sector emerged, enabled by the neoliberal tenets of Sadat's infitah policy and supported by the state. In Sudan, commercial networks that had expanded through remittance inflows consolidated their power, ultimately overthrowing state patrons and ushering in the Islamic authoritarian regime of Omar al-Bashir. In Somalia, by contrast, the expansion of the parallel economy reinforced clan-based structures, contributing to the fragmentation of the social fabric and escalating conflict with the state—beginning with the Isaaq uprising, whose members had been among the principal beneficiaries of remittance flows (Medani 2022).

[21] I avoid discussing Security, to focus on monetary challenges and opportunities. Needless to say, the prospect of investment mandates stable security conditions, and confidence in the positive conclusion of tension between armed factions, strengthened by a monopoly on the use of force through a professional military.

[22] Some estimates are as high as $ 400 billion (Daher 2025).

Hydropolitics and Peacebuilding in Syria's Reconstruction:
Towards a New Economic–Environmental Model of Regional Water Sharing

Ahmed Haj Assad, Geo Expertise

Water scarcity represents a central challenge to Syria's reconstruction, resulting from decades of overexploitation, weak governance, and war-related destruction—now compounded by climate change. With more than 85% of its water consumed by agriculture and a heavy dependence on transboundary rivers such as the Euphrates and the Orontes, Syria's water security is deeply intertwined with regional dynamics.

Under the Assad regime, water management was subordinated to political authority and security imperatives, leading to severe groundwater depletion, river desiccation, and inequitable or non-binding agreements with neighboring countries. These policies reinforced dependency and mistrust rather than sustainability.

The recent political transition offers a critical opportunity to redefine water governance as a cornerstone of national reconstruction and regional cooperation. This study proposes two complementary pathways for water sharing with neighboring countries: Technical–economic collaboration, such as linking Syrian plains with Türkiye's Harran irrigation networks in the Euphrates River Basin; and Institutional–legal cooperation, including enhanced regulatory frameworks for the Orontes Basin shared with Lebanon.

Together, these approaches illustrate how shared water basins can evolve from sources of tension into platforms for regional integration. By embedding cooperation within both infrastructure and governance frameworks, Syria and its neighbors can strengthen agricultural productivity, ensure water and food security, and promote regional stability.

Ultimately, water governance must become a foundation of Syria's reconstruction strategy. Beyond addressing urgent domestic scarcity, equitable transboundary cooperation can transform water from a source of vulnerability into a driver of peace, integration, and sustainable development across the MENA region.

Introduction

Securing sufficient water for Syria's population and economic activities constitutes a major priority for achieving sustainable reconstruction in the post-Assad era. During Assad's rule, the country's water resources deteriorated severely as a result of overexploitation, the degradation of water infrastructure, and weak local governance. These structural weaknesses have been further aggravated by the protracted conflict and its devastating consequences. Climate change has added yet another layer of complexity—altering the quantity and timing of precipitation, increasing temperatures, and intensifying drought frequency—all of which have disrupted the hydrological balance and, in turn, heightened the instability of agricultural production and broader socio-economic conditions.

These domestic challenges are compounded by the geopolitical dimension of water resources and their distribution across borders. Syria is heavily dependent on transboundary surface waters, particularly the Euphrates and the Orontes rivers. While bilateral agreements and non-binding understandings exist with neighbouring states (Türkiye, Iraq, Lebanon, and Jordan), the mechanisms for sharing these resources remain opaque and lack a robust institutional framework capable of ensuring transparent and sustainable governance. In practice, such arrangements have often been driven more by short-term geopolitical interests than by a shared commitment to the equitable and sustainable management of common resources.

In this context, there is an urgent need to reconceptualise of shared water management and sharing as a central pillar of Syria's reconstruction strategy, while acknowledging the inherently regional nature of the issue. A fundamental question arises: to what extent will Syria's post-Assad governance structures be prepared and able to develop a new approach to regional water governance? Is it possible to design an economic model rooted in regional cooperation—one that transcends immediate political and military considerations and fosters relations with neighbouring states based on economic justice, sustainability, and mutual benefit?

This study examines both the opportunities and the constraints of rebuilding transboundary water-sharing relations between Syria and its neighbours in the framework of post-conflict reconstruction. It further explores the potential for developing an economic model about transboundary water sharing that would serve not as a source of conflict or dependency, but rather as a catalyst for regional cooperation and integration.

Since March 2011, Syria has undergone profound political transformations. What began with popular uprisings against a regime that had monopolised power for decades culminated on 8 December 2024 with the fall of the Assad regime following the entry of opposition forces into Damascus. The collapse of the former regime has produced a new political reality, centred on an administration tasked with reconstruction in a highly complex context shaped by overlapping political, economic, and social challenges. Unlike its predecessor, this administration appears inclined to establish relations based on economic and security cooperation with neighbouring states. Within this framework, it is crucial to emphasize cooperation in the governance and equitable sharing of water resources, as such cooperation is inevitable to address the declining quantity and quality of water resulting from the combined effects of war, mismanagement, and climate changes. Water must be ensured not only as a fundamental resource for life, but also as a central driver of socio-economic development. Such cooperation is essential for advancing reconstruction and development, with the ultimate aim of strengthening water security, food security, and regional peace.

Water Distribution: A Climatic–Geographical Perspective

National planning under Hafez al-Assad, particularly concerning the geographical allocation of economic investments and the administrative–military distribution of power, appears to have deliberately encouraged rural exodus toward urban centers as a means of consolidating political control—without regard for the natural distribution of water resources. This strategy generated profound spatial imbalances and contributed to the intensification of water shortages in major cities such as Damascus, Aleppo, Homs, and Hama. The effects of this disparity are especially pronounced within Syria's highly variable climatic context, where annual rainfall ranges from over 1500 mm in the northwestern regions to less than 200 mm in the southeastern areas (Figure 1).

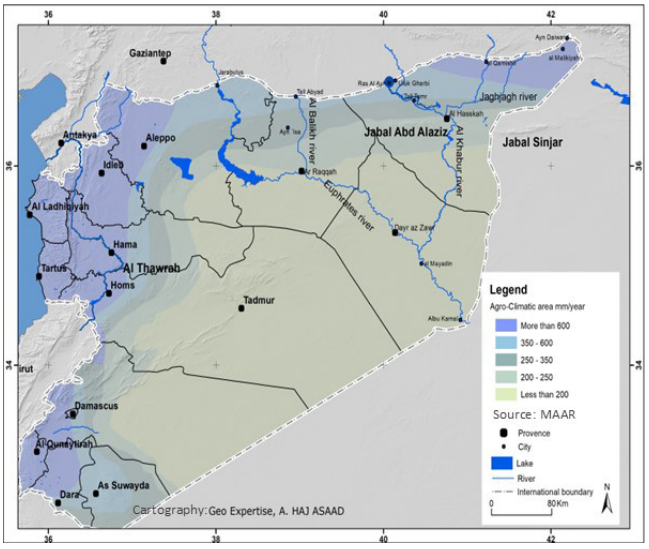

Figure 1: Rainfall distribution areas

The management of water resources has been central to Syrian societies for millennia. From the second half of the twentieth century onward, water development policies accelerated with the aim of expanding irrigated agriculture and meeting rising domestic demand. These efforts included the drainage of the al-Ghab swamps and

the construction of approximately 160 dams of varying capacities and functions (MAAR 2010). Since the mid-1980s, groundwater extraction has intensified under policies designed to achieve food self-sufficiency, resulting in the drilling of more than 160,000 wells (MAAR 2010). Agriculture today accounts for more than 85% of total water consumption (FAO 2021), with irrigated land representing roughly 30% of all farmland—about 60% of which depends on groundwater (Figure 2; MAAR 2010).

Under Assad's rule, water management in Syria became deeply politicized. Decision-making was dominated by political calculations aimed at preserving regime stability and consolidating its rural support base. Political authority consistently overrode scientific evidence and technical expertise (Haj Asaad, 2024). Rather than relying on data and analyses produced by specialized institutions such as the Ministry of Water Resources (formerly the Ministry of Irrigation), successive governments instrumentalized water allocation as a mechanism to reinforce political legitimacy and project state credibility. In this process, environmental considerations concerning both the quantity and quality of water were largely ignored (Haj Asaad, 2024).

This politicized approach led to the widespread depletion of Syria's water resources. In the 2007 hydrological year alone, the country recorded a water deficit of approximately three billion cubic meters (Haj Asaad, 2024). Many springs—such as those of Ras al-Ain—dried up completely (Zwahlen et al. 2014). Entire rivers and tributaries, including the Khabur, disappeared, while pollution levels in both surface and groundwater increased dramatically, deepening Syria's environmental and hydrological crisis.

In response to river contamination, the drying of key springs, and rapid urban expansion, authorities increasingly resorted to transferring water from supply-rich regions—often connected to transboundary rivers—to meet urban demand. For instance, Aleppo became dependent on Euphrates water conveyed through large-scale infrastructure (Figure 3). Climate change has further exacerbated water insecurity by amplifying precipitation variability and intensifying the frequency and duration of droughts, thereby compounding the challenge of managing already overstressed hydrological systems. Collectively, these measures and evolving conditions have increased Syria's dependence on transboundary water resources.

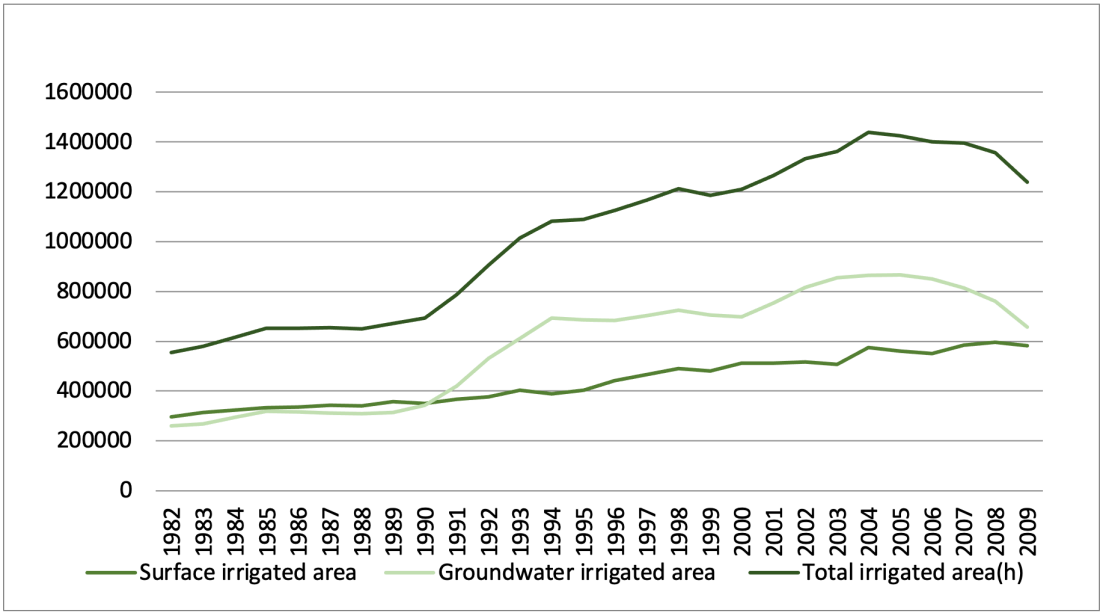

Figure 2; Evolution of water use for agriculture

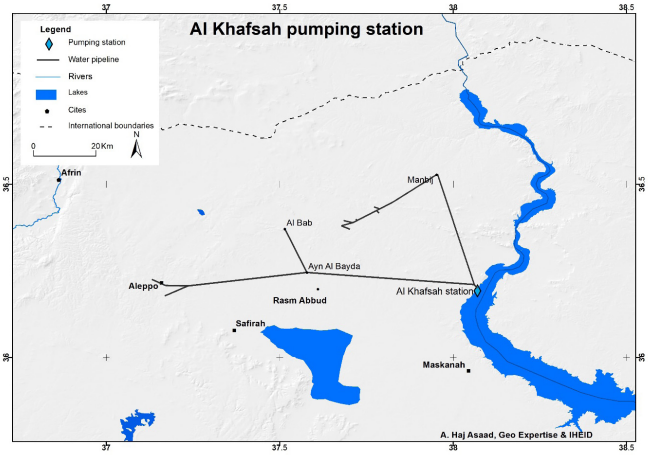

Figure 3: Khafsah pumping station

Regional Interference and the Neglect of Transboundary Water Governance and water sharing

During the presidency of Assad, Syria has systematically sought to consolidate its regional influence vis-à-vis neighbouring states through both direct and indirect military and political interventions. This strategic orientation has profoundly shaped its relations with Lebanon and Türkiye, relegating the question of water-sharing of Orontes and Euphrates to a secondary priority.

In Türkiye, concern with the inflow of the Orontes is relatively limited, given the abundance of local water resources from springs and rivers, as well as apprehensions regarding the risk of flooding and the inundation of agricultural lands. By contrast, in Syria and Lebanon, the Orontes constitutes a strategic and vital water resource. Although a bilateral water-sharing agreement was signed in 1994—supplemented by additional protocols in 1997 and 2002—Syrian political and military interference in Lebanon during the regimes of Hafez al-Assad and Bashar al-Assad undermined the effectiveness of joint water governance. Policies of lax border control contributed to the overexploitation of groundwater on both sides, particularly in Syria (Figure 4), thereby rendering the river's springs and flow increasingly vulnerable to depletion and drought.

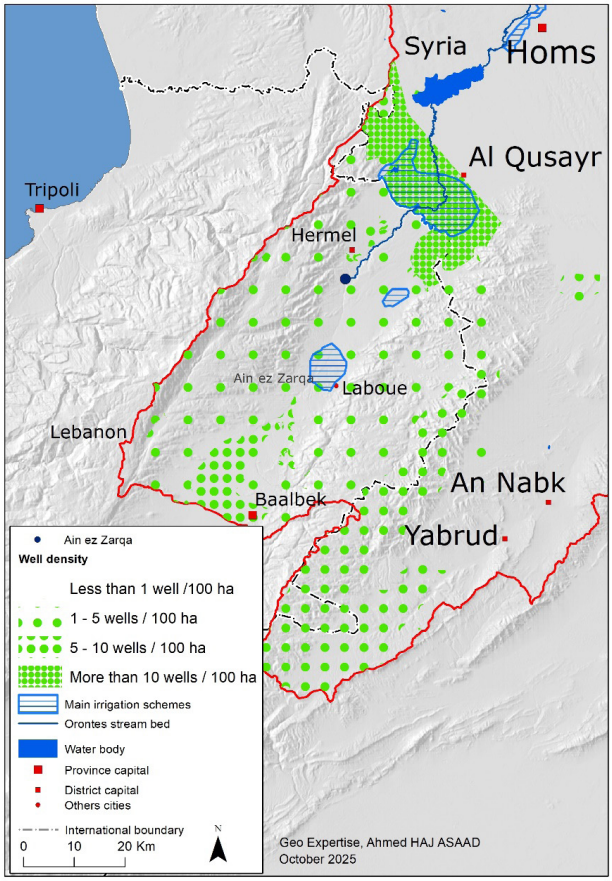

Figure 4: Orontes rivers, Region of Opportunity for regional Water Governance

The agreement was concluded in 1994, at a time when Syria exercised near-total control over Lebanese institutions and decision-making mechanisms through its military and intelligence presence. According to Lebanese politicians and scholars, the agreement—which allocated Lebanon only 80 million cubic metres of water per year—was widely regarded as inequitable (Zwahlen et al. 2014). This outcome was made possible largely by Syria's dominance over Lebanese political life during that period. In 1997, the agreement was revised through an attached protocol that increased Lebanon's quota to 96 million cubic metres per year by excluding closed-basin waters, such as those of Yammouneh, …, amounting to roughly 16 million cubic metres (Peterson 2022). A further amendment in 2002 granted Lebanon the right to construct a pumping station and a dam in Hermel to irrigate approximately

7,000 hectares. This provision was consistent with the principles of the 1997 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Non-Navigational Uses of International Watercourses.

These favourable changes in the agreements for Lebanon coincided with the parallel rise of Hezbollah as a decisive actor in Lebanese politics. The evolution of the Orontes agreements thus underscores how shifts in regional hegemony, rather than hydrological considerations or international legal norms, shaped the terms of water governance. The changing balance of power between Syria and Lebanon illustrates the extent to which water-sharing arrangements were contingent upon political dominance rather than principles of equity. The Orontes agreements of 1994–2002 exemplify this dynamic particularly clearly. Initially, the 1994 accord strongly reflected Syria's dominance over Lebanese political institutions, but subsequent revisions, culminating in the 2002 agreement, revealed Lebanon's growing capacity to negotiate more favourable terms.

The Euphrates River Basin case between Türkiye and Syria, by contrast, illustrates two dynamics: first, how water issues have been systematically overshadowed by security concerns; and second, how water has been instrumentalised to facilitate political rapprochement. Syria's support for the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), although not directly related to water negotiations, relegated discussions on water to a marginal level, confined to a Tripartite Technical Committee that yielded no tangible results. On April 1992, Turkish Interior Minister began addressing the PKK issue directly with the Syrian political authorities and his counterpart (Beschorner 1992). Water negotiations, in this context, were reduced to the margins. The tripartite meetings between Türkiye, Syria, and Iraq produced no binding agreements, only Türkiye's non-binding "moral pledge" to release 500 cubic metres per second of Euphrates flow, of which Iraq's share was to be 58% (UNESCWA & BGR 2013). Türkiye dependent on water absolute sovereignty principal (Bazin & De Tapia 2015). This weak commitment highlights how the Syrian strategy of leveraging security alliances failed to translate into enforceable hydro political gains.

The Syrian government never recognised Hatay (Liwa Iskenderun) as part of Turkish territory. Nevertheless, in 2011, Syria signed an agreement with Türkiye to construct the 'Friendship Dam' on the Syrian–Turkish border, precisely in an area over which it did not recognise Turkish sovereignty. The dam's approval was widely interpreted as a diplomatic gesture aimed at easing Syria's regional isolation following the assassination of Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri in 2005 an operation for which the Syrian regime was accused of responsibility. Economically, the project offered limited benefits for Syria while posing risks to the Ain al-Zarqa spring, potentially depriving Idlib and the al-Ruj plain of essential drinking and irrigation water. Despite technical experts' insistence on relocating the dam, the foreign ministry prioritised political expediency over hydrological concerns. This contrast underscores how water governance was subordinated to short-term strategies of political survival.

Taken together, these cases demonstrate the structural shortcomings of Syria's regional water sharing strategy during the Assad regime. By privileging hegemonic control, support for non-state armed groups, and the instrumentalization of water policy for political legitimacy, Syria not only failed to secure durable water-sharing agreements but also entrenched mistrust and hostility with neighbouring states. This outcome underscores a broader pattern: rather than enhancing water security, Syria's reliance on coercive and security-driven strategies produced dependency, vulnerability, and long-term hydropolitical fragility.

Possibilities for Regional Cooperation

The new administration must reassess the regional relationships inherited from the Assad regime and replace them with policies that prioritize equitable water sharing. Such a shift is essential to securing a fair allocation of transboundary water resources and addressing the dual challenges of water scarcity and climate change within the broader framework of national reconstruction.

This objective can be achieved through cooperative approaches grounded in shared interests, aimed at

promoting sustainable development and strengthening water security. In particular, creating bilateral cooperation projects—such as joint initiatives in the Euphrates Basin between Türkiye and Syria and the coordinated management of the Orontes Basin between Lebanon and Syria—could reduce tensions over water allocation and protection. These projects have the potential to transform water from a source of competition into a catalyst for regional integration and peace.

In this context, the strategic importance of water for all three countries underscores both the risks of unilateral policies and the opportunities offered by cooperative solutions. The convergence of economic needs, ecological vulnerabilities, and security imperatives highlights the urgency of developing cross-border projects based on mutual benefit. Regional cooperation in water governance could not only mitigate environmental degradation but also generate shared economic gains, reinforce food and water security, and contribute to broader regional stability.

In the case of the Euphrates River, cooperation could involve expanding irrigated areas by connecting Syrian plains to Türkiye's irrigation networks in the Harran Plain (Figure 5), which are currently supplied from the Atatürk Dam through two tunnels. Together, these tunnels convey an average flow of 328 m^3/s, enabling the irrigation of approximately 463,105 hectares in the Şanlıurfa and Mardin Plains through gravity irrigation (Tosun 2007). The adoption of modern irrigation technologies would make it possible to allocate sufficient water for Syria, thereby facilitating the irrigation of the Tal Abyad region. Through bilateral economic and environmental cooperation, Syria could leverage this advanced hydraulic infrastructure to implement joint agricultural and irrigation projects that capitalize on the geographical and demographic linkages between Tell Abyad and the Harran region (HAJ Asaad 2025)—transforming shared water resources into a foundation for regional peace (Figure 6).

Figure 5: Harran plain, photo Ahmed Haj Asaad, 30.06.2023

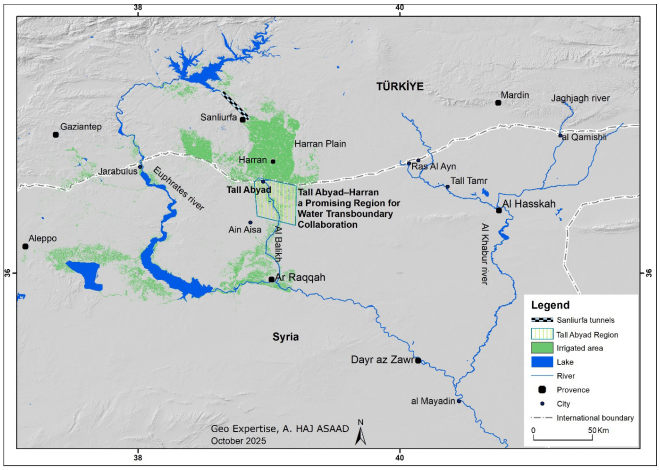

Figure 6: Water Cooperation in Tell Abyad–Harran: Path to Peace and Prosperity

In the Orontes Basin, cooperation would primarily take an institutional and legal form. This would entail strengthening regulatory frameworks in both Lebanon and Syria and advancing the completion of the Hermel Dam project, designed to irrigate approximately 7,000 hectares while securing water supplies and preventing farmers from drilling wells around the Ain al-Zarqa and Dafash springs. Enhanced legal monitoring mechanisms would also improve the protection of these springs from overexploitation and depletion.

Taken together, the cases of the Euphrates and Orontes illustrate two complementary pathways for managing shared water basins between Syria and its neighbors: a technical–economic pathway, focused on leveraging

existing hydraulic infrastructure for joint productive projects—as in the Tell Abyad–Harran example—and an institutional–legal pathway, centered on establishing regulatory frameworks to control overexploitation and safeguard shared resources, as exemplified by the Orontes Basin. Moving from a logic of conflict to one of cooperation thus requires a multidimensional approach that integrates economic development, environmental protection, and political trust-building, ensuring water security while strengthening long-term regional stability.

The current political transformations present a timely opportunity to develop an integrated economic–social–environmental model grounded in mutual benefit, cross-border solidarity, and environmental sustainability. Such a model would mark a qualitative shift in regional water governance—moving beyond narrow questions of sovereignty while respecting existing political boundaries. It could transform border regions, long characterized by militia activity, illicit agriculture, and smuggling under Assad's rule, into spaces of cooperative engagement built around the equitable sharing of water resources. This approach would enhance agricultural productivity, reinforce economic stability, foster local peace, and contribute to regional resilience through a shared governance framework capable of confronting the challenges of climate change.

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