

Syria in Transition



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Welcome to Syria in Transition (SiT), a monthly delve into policy-relevant developments concerning the Syrian conflict. Crafted by practitioners with a decade-long experience in the field, SiT offers informed perspectives tailored for diplomats and decision makers. SiT goes straight to the point and shuns unnecessary verbiage – just as we would prefer as avid readers ourselves.

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Dodging politics

OCHA finalises Early Recovery Strategy and Trust Fund

After multiple delays, on 23 October OCHA announced to the Security Council the finalisation of its Early Recovery Strategy (2024-28) and the accompanying Early Recovery Trust Fund (ERTF.) Since the start of their development in June 2023, both the Strategy and ERTF – a key mechanism for implementing the Strategy – have been a political flashpoint. While donors have largely taken a wait-and-see approach, the Syrian political opposition, humanitarian NGOs and broader civil society have become increasingly frustrated with what they see as a concerning step towards normalisation imposed by a Damascus-based UN Country Team that is regarded as unduly influenced by the Assad regime.

The Early Recovery debate is charged because it connects to four major political issues that will shape not only the future of humanitarian efforts but also the broader dynamics of the Syrian conflict. First is the question of normalisation. Early Recovery requires increased levels of coordination – and in some cases, cooperation – with *de facto* authorities, an arena in which the Assad regime is especially adept. Second is the issue of the longstanding red line on reconstruction without progress in the political process. Boundaries of Early Recovery have increasingly been blurred by comprehensive projects planned by the UN. Third, sanctions relief is at play: the Western position tying reconstruction to political concessions from Damascus risks being eroded by the ERTF, which provides Gulf and other donors a channel to bypass sanctions. Finally comes the issue of parity: the Syrian opposition is concerned that operations administered from Damascus, reinforced by the UN's reliance on the regime's consent to access non-regime areas, will perpetuate the regime's ability to weaponise aid and strengthen its carefully fabricated image as the legitimate representative of the Syrian state.

Flaws remain

The finalised version of the UN Early Recovery Strategy and ERTF sidesteps political language, avoiding terms that might reflect its broader implications. Notably it makes no mention of “conflict”, let alone of UNSCR 2254, using only the humanitarian term “crisis.” This marks a shift from previous norms: OCHA would routinely use “conflict” to characterise Syria’s situation. The intentional softening of language aligns with the Assad regime and Russia’s lobbying efforts and is evident throughout the documents, which refer to the regime as the “government” while mentioning the opposition only once as “non-state armed groups.” Proper conflict analysis has been substituted by superficial contextual analysis. The Strategy claims, for example, that the security concerns of returnees (enabling returns being a key selling point for the UN’s Strategy) will be addressed, but refers only to “concurrent efforts” to address these concerns without further detail or context.

Additionally, the ERTF’s governance body has been stripped of its potential as a forum for inclusive dialogue. In a July interview with *Syria in Transition*, RC/HC Adam Abdelmoula suggested that the ERTF would have an inclusive governing body “fully vested with the power to make all funding allocation decisions,” with decisions determined by a simple majority or higher threshold. In the final version, however, there is no voting mechanism, and in cases of disagreement, the RC/HC and RHC retain ultimate decision-making power. The identity of the “partners” Abdelmoula cited as having introduced this governance change is still unknown.

Syrians protest

The civil society collective Madaniya initiated a position paper in October opposing the UN’s Early Recovery Strategy and ERTF as a violation of the UN’s own core principles of Early Recovery, particularly the principles of Do-No-Harm and national ownership. The document attracted the support of more than 40 organisations, criticises the lack of inclusiveness in the drafting process, and alleges that OCHA disregards feedback from Syrian and international NGOs represented in the Strategic Steering Group (SSG) – a consultative group of seven (I)NGOs created by OCHA in 2013. The paper calls for a genuinely inclusive redrafting process aimed at ensuring that Early Recovery contributes to stabilisation and the emergence of a peaceful, unified Syria, rather than entrenching divisions and reinforcing *de facto* powers.

Without donor backing, however, Syrian protest alone may achieve little. Donors remain cautious about both criticising and supporting the ERTF. The UN claims that certain traditional donors are ready and willing to invest in the ERTF and that the outreach to Gulf donors is underway. If these “traditional donors” are the likes of Italy and Japan, the ERTF is likely to remain significantly underfunded, possibly to the extent of being unable to justify its operating costs. Major donors, including the US, the EU, Germany, France, and the UK acknowledge the need for expanded Early Recovery efforts; but they are also painfully aware of the disappointing results of over a decade of humanitarian aid in Syria. Facing shrinking budgets, they are wary of further setbacks – especially given the high stakes of Early Recovery. In short, these donors seek greater value and accountability for their investments and recognise that the success of Early Recovery hinges on a stable political and security environment.

Gaza vs Syria

The resulting situation is paradoxical. Large segments of Syrian society are calling for rigorous political risk analysis and safeguards, while OCHA insists on the “humanitarian character” of Early Recovery and that it must remain unpoliticised. This approach is unique to the UN Country Team in Syria. In September this year the Palestinian Territories UN Country Team published its Early Recovery Approach and Action Plan for Gaza, and politics was at its forefront. The document clearly states that “any viable early recovery must be firmly rooted in a broader political and security framework” that seeks to “re-establish a political horizon” and must be “designed and implemented with the objective of contributing to a political process.”

The UN’s approach in Gaza underlines that humanitarian assistance, including Early Recovery, should intersect with goodwill political engagement. This is nothing new to the UN or to donors: the UN’s Triple Nexus stresses the interconnection of humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding activities. The EU and its members support the Triple Nexus, and the Global Strategy for the European Union’s Foreign and Security Policy (2019) emphasises that humanitarian aid and development cooperation are instruments with which to address conflict. Germany’s recently updated Strategy for Humanitarian Assistance Abroad dedicates two pages to the Triple Nexus.

A serious political dialogue on Early Recovery is overdue, and with a new European Commission, the impending appointment of an EU Special Envoy to Syria, and a new US administration, there is a window for fresh approaches. It may be time for the UN Special Envoy to step forward, engage, and help guide this process.

Man without a mission

EU plans to appoint a Syria
Envoy stir speculation

The European Commission's plan to appoint a Syria Envoy has stirred speculation and potential misunderstandings. The proposal emerged in response to a July initiative led by Italy that called for reassessing the EU's Syria strategy, higher-level diplomatic engagement with the Assad regime, expanded early recovery assistance, and sanctions relief – though without providing political risk analysis or detailing conditions. It soon became clear that the initiative would not alter European foreign policy significantly. Amid heightened domestic pressure over migration – which, concerning, is being conflated with the issue of refugees – the move to appoint an envoy can be seen primarily as being motivated by internal PR.

The front runner for the role is Christian Berger, a seasoned Austrian diplomat with experience as MENA director at the European External Action Service (EEAS) and as head of EU delegations in Turkey and Egypt. Berger is regarded as a steadfast advocate of the EU's principled stance on Syria. As a Commission appointee, Berger would liaise with Michael Ohnmacht, the EU's Beirut-based Chargé d'Affaires, appointed by the EEAS. This would offer a chance for improved coordination between the Commission and the EEAS, and both Berger and Ohnmacht appear well-suited to this task.

Better coordination of EU positions, particularly after the schism that was led by Italy, would certainly be welcome. *Syria in Transition* has meanwhile learned from diplomatic sources that the envoy won't be based in Damascus. The appointment of an Envoy should therefore not be interpreted categorically as a step

toward normalisation with the Assad regime. Its actual significance will become clear from the nature of any engagement with regime officials. This in turn will depend in part on broader political dynamics, including the question of how much the Europeans will be tempted to succumb to the Assad regime's empty promises to curb migration and enable lawful refugee returns. Italy and likeminded EU members can be expected to push for the Envoy's mandate to expand to minister level coordination with Damascus.

In the US, news of an EU envoy for Syria didn't resonate well. Just 48 hours after Donald Trump's election victory, Republican Congressman Michael McCaul, Chairman of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, posted on X expressing his "deep disappointment." He argued that the envoy's appointment would be part of "creeping normalisation" with the Assad regime, a move he deemed both a "strategic error and a moral stain", urging the EU to reconsider.

McCaul's statement is a first sign that a Trump administration won't disengage from Syria the way the US did under Biden. This could present an opportunity for the EU, whose goals in Syria depend on strong political pressure – which it continues to rely on the US to help exert. If such criticism persists, the EU might consider dropping the plan for a Special Envoy unless the position is clearly politically mandated to support a political solution in line with UNSCR 2254. The key question is whether friction with the incoming US administration over what is essentially a matter of domestic messaging is a risk worth taking. In any event, close consultations with Trump's team will be essential to prevent misunderstandings and to allow aligned policies based on the many shared interests.

Safe zone reloaded

Turkish plans would see
Aleppo city encircled

Since Turkey's last ground incursion into Syria in 2019 the threat of additional operations has become a major tool in Ankara's policy kit on Syria. Recently, there's been talk of a sweeping operation that could reset the strategic balance of power. With Trump's election win, the conditions for such a step may now be more favourable.

Sources in Ankara say that Turkey is looking to cooperate with the US to establish an expansive "safe zone" spanning much of Syria's north and east. The zone would ring Syria's borders with Turkey and Iraq, stretching from the town of Al-Busayra in Deir Ezzor governorate, up the Khabour River to Al Hasakeh, then west along the M4 Highway to Manbij and Maskana and on to Ma'arat Misrin in Idlib governorate. "If you draw a straight line from Maskana to Ma'arat Misrin, you'll understand the size of this safe zone," one source explained.

Importantly, it would include the city of Aleppo, although Turkey may not attempt to storm it, instead gaining control by securing key highways into the city. This could pave the way for deals with Russia and Assad on Aleppo's future administration. Key goals for Ankara include facilitating safe and dignified refugee return to Aleppo and winning lucrative reconstruction contracts for Turkish companies.

An expanded safe zone would also address Ankara's concerns over Syria's oil: it is claimed that the SDF is using some of the estimated \$500m a year of oil sales to fund the PKK. Placing the oil under a US-Turkish-Syrian administration, with proceeds funding humanitarian aid and stabilisation, might then be on the cards.

Grand bargains

Turkey's vision for a broad safe zone has long been hampered by US and Russian opposition. Trump's return, however, brings a potential for grand bargains. His administration's "maximum pressure" policy on Iran suggests a continued low-cost US military presence in Syria that obstructs Iran's logistics. With Marco Rubio and Mike Waltz holding top positions in the new administration, the SDF will have strong advo-

cates for continued (albeit scaled back) US presence in Syria. Recent signalling from Israel, which will play a considerable role in determining US policy in the region, also suggests that it will support the Kurds as regional allies in its confrontation with Iran and its proxies. Israel may also wish to create its own "safe zone" in southern Syria.

Given that Trump does not want to see US forces caught between Turkey and the SDF, it would be a natural move for him to support the peace talks that Turkey appears to be exploring with PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan. These could bring an understanding between Turkey and the Kurds on a safe zone in which the SDF would continue to exist as a military force under US tutelage, but not as the armed wing of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES). Informed sources say that US-brokered talks between Ankara and the SDF are at an advanced stage.

The Russian factor

Russia's stance will be critical. To enable such a safe zone to take shape, Moscow would need to pull back its forces from north and northeastern Syria. While this would not be ideal for Russia, it might do so if it meant securing a favourable deal on Ukraine. Former Trump advisor Bryan Lanza recently noted that President Zelensky may need "realistic" visions for peace, indicating that the Trump administration will push for a cessation of hostilities even if it means accepting temporary territorial losses. While not official policy yet, this approach would offer a beleaguered Zelensky an off-ramp from maximalist demands.

For Russia, a weakened NATO at its western flank is potentially worth more than keeping troops in Syria's northeast. Nevertheless, a US/Turkey-backed safe zone would give Ankara and Washington significant leverage over its client Assad and would significantly weaken its ally Iran. It would also strengthen the opposition's negotiating hand. Despite Moscow pressing for an Erdogan-Assad rapprochement, the two sides so far have not been able to meet on terms. "Turkey wants to see the [Syrian] regime and the opposition create a political framework on which they can agree," said Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan recently. "It is very important that the regime provides a safe and stable environment for the people, including the opposition."

If Russia nudged Assad to drop his preconditions on negotiations with Turkey, pragmatic steps on estab-

lishing a durable ceasefire and a safe, calm, and neutral environment (SCNE) could follow. Cross-line trade, energy cooperation and civilian travel could begin in parallel. Progress towards implementing a political transition per the Geneva Communiqué and UNSCR 2254 would then become less of a pipedream.

From Belfast to Damascus

What Syrians can learn from the Northern Ireland peace process

At first glance Syria and Northern Ireland seem distant in culture, politics, and history. Yet, a deeper look reveals shared experiences – primarily the drive for self-determination and the challenges posed by deeply rooted sectarian divides. In both the now (largely) resolved Northern Irish conflict and the continuing strife in Syria political issues have intertwined with societal and religious dynamics that added multiple layers of complexity to the peace process in Northern Ireland, and could well do the same in any peaceful resolution in Syria.

Northern Ireland as a model

The 1998 Belfast Agreement, otherwise known as the Good Friday Agreement, ended Northern Ireland's decades of violent conflict. It laid out a framework for peace based on disarmament of non-state actors, reforms including devolution of power, and fair representation within state institutions, especially the police. The transformation of Northern Ireland's police force offers an especially valuable lesson for Syria, where reforming state institutions to reflect societal diversity is paramount for peace.

The Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC), once seen as biased to the Protestant cause, was replaced by the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI), which was designed to be more inclusive and diverse. This transformation included increasing Catholic representation from a mere 8 per cent in the RUC to a target of 50 per cent in the PSNI. Although currently only 32 per cent of PSNI personnel are Catholic, this is still a significant improvement.

The parallel in Syria lies within its military and security institutions. Alawites comprise 10 per cent of Syria's population yet occupy almost all the senior and mid-level military and security leadership positions. Although the uprising against Bashar Assad was driven by diverse grievances – political, economic, and societal – the regime's response, marked by brutal repression, contributed to the framing of the conflict as one between competing sects. By releasing radical Islamist prisoners in 2011, Assad further intensified the sectarian feeling within the opposition that drowned out more liberal calls for reform.

Regional pressures for change

The regime is currently attempting to implement gradual reforms within the army aimed at addressing some of the deficiencies identified during the past decade of war. Most notably, there is a new emphasis on elite forces and on the development of an all-volunteer professional army. However, given that these reforms are aimed principally at strengthening the regime, rather than at any national reconciliation, serious problems of representation and loyalty will likely persist.

The continuing sectarian imbalance indicates the Assad regime's reluctance to engage in genuine reform or to create institutions representative of Syria's diverse population; and it raises serious questions about the army's ability to act as a unifying institution in any future political settlement.

Regional actors, notably Saudi Arabia, have called for restructuring of the Fourth Division led by Maher Assad, due to its close ties with Iran and Hezbollah and its involvement in drug trafficking to the Gulf. In response, in an apparent show of defiance, early in 2024 Maher Assad deployed forces to destabilise Jordan, engaging in direct confrontations with the Jordanian army. Despite the ongoing war in Gaza and Lebanon, Captagon smuggling has persisted.

Amid Turkey's cautious exploration of normalisation with Assad, Ankara reportedly urged Moscow, via the Astana process, to pressure the regime for 50 per cent Sunni representation in Syria's future army officer corps. Moscow's counter offer was 15 per cent, which is almost the current percentage. In mid-2024 Alawites comprised 88.5 per cent of the top 40 leadership positions in the Syrian army, and Sunnis only 11.5 per cent. Officers from Latakia, Homs, Tartus, and Hama – Alawite-heavy areas – account for some 84 per cent of

the total number of officers. Within intelligence agencies, Alawites hold 65 per cent of leadership positions, compared with 23 per cent for Sunnis, while Christians, Druze, and Shiites make up the remaining 12 per cent. Recent remarks by the Turkish defence minister about the Free Syrian Army (meaning the Syrian National Army) being “the army of the future Syrian republic” hint at the possibility of ongoing dialogue between Turkey and Russia on this issue.

New army as a unifying institution

Syria’s national identity has long been contested. Under Hafez and Bashar Assad, patriotism and loyalty to the constitution morphed into personality cults. The result is a military and security sector heavily dominated by Alawites, while Sunnis and other groups have limited, often token, representation. Political oppression, meanwhile, remains a reality faced by Syrians of all backgrounds.

These dynamics have driven Syrians to enhance their alignment with sub-national identities. In a context where national identity lacks depth, cohesion, and even meaning, regional, sectarian, and ethnic affiliations offer solidarity and protection. Corruption is another factor that has sapped national feeling from institutions that would normally be considered paragons of patriotism. Army officers now routinely require recruits to perform personal services for them and their families – a key reason why Syrians seek to avoid conscription by means of bribery or emigration. Any sustainable resolution of the Syrian conflict must address the core political and institutional imbalances that caused it. A conversation on the sectarian imbalance in the armed forces and security agencies is essential, however difficult it may sometimes be. What occurred in Northern Ireland could serve as a useful model. However, any quota system in Syria, if not embedded in a broad political settlement with genuine public support, risks deepening divisions rather than fostering unity.

Syria’s institutional imbalances stem from historical political divides and the power struggles of the 1950s and 60s, which culminated in Hafez Assad’s victory. Over decades, the Assads have included enough Sunnis to be able to appoint loyal officers for cosmetics. Today, with Syria’s *de facto* division, institutional representation is as much about the different areas of control and their political identities as it is about sectarian balance. However, a truly inclusive security sector reform depends on all parties’ willingness

to pursue diplomacy over military escalation, which depends largely on what the respective regional and international backers tell their Syrian clients.

For now, those seeking to leverage security sector reform as an entry point for diplomacy should focus on security matters between the areas of control. Cross-line trade, aid, and civilian movement are already increasing and require effective security and oversight, which could be gradually achieved through security committees made up of personnel from opposing sides. Such a “Whole of Syria” approach would amount to genuine confidence-building both among Syrians and between Syrians and international partners, and could be the right entry point to a new, less politicised and more representative Syrian army.

Order out of chaos

A conversation with Abdulrahman Mustafa

Opposition areas in Syria fall under one of two jurisdictions: the Syrian Opposition Coalition’s Syrian Interim Government (SIG) that is based in Azaz, and Hayat Tahrir al-Sham’ Syrian Salvation Government (SSG) that is based in Idlib. To understand more about the challenges of governing northern Syria, and what plans exist to overcome them, *Syria in Transition* spoke with Abdulrahman Mustafa, Prime Minister of the Syrian Interim Government.

There has been speculation recently about an expanded safe zone in northern Syria overseen by Turkey that could even include the city of Aleppo. Is this something you are aware of?

Mustafa: We are constantly discussing any issues related to political and military affairs with the Turkish side. An expanded safe zone that includes the city of Aleppo requires appropriate international support, including a common understanding on technical and political issues. Liberating areas from the control of the Assad regime or the SDF contributes to improving the lives of Syrians, but such efforts need to be part of serious engagement by the international community on advancing a political transition in Syria in accordance with international law and UNSCR 2254.

You mentioned that the Syrian Interim Government is working to consolidate governance in northern Syria. Can you give examples of success stories and major obstacles?

Mustafa: The obstacles are obviously manifold. The Assad regime and the SDF are continuously attempting to destabilise northern Syria through air strikes, shelling, ground infiltrations, and even car bombs that blow up in civilian areas. Our efforts to improve governance are limited by capacity which is a result of limited resources. That includes infrastructure. Northern Syria is a mostly rural area whose infrastructure has been largely destroyed by the war. This area is now home to nearly three million people. You can imagine how that stretches our resources.

Contributing to the destabilisation are well-connected criminals who are involved in all kinds of malign activities, including the trafficking of drugs from regime and SDF areas. Our judicial institutions and the civil and military police have made great progress in professionalisation to confront these threats. Our efforts to strengthen the rule of law include cooperation with human rights organisations such as the UN's Commission of Inquiry. The institutional capacity we have gained over the past years has also allowed us to facilitate the return of properties that were seized by outlaws.

Despite all the challenges, the Syrian Interim Government has achieved remarkable success in maintaining security and stability, with a particular focus on health, education, energy, agriculture, and investment. Economic development is high on our agenda, and what we see today is a dynamic and growing private sector that will make the liberated areas more self-sustaining, and that will support the economic recovery of all of Syria in the future.

Would you describe the Syrian Interim Government as simply a local governance actor, or do you see it actively engaged in diplomacy to promote the implementation of UNSCR 2254?

Mustafa: The Syrian Interim Government is proud of its presence on the ground, and our aspiration is to represent all Syrians who call for freedom and dignity – wherever they are. This is admittedly an ambitious aspiration given the diversity of Syrian society and that Syrians have been scattered throughout the world. This is why we, in addition to local governance, participate in national, regional and international efforts to advance a political solution in Syria that will allow free and fair elections.

Factional rivalries within the SNA remain a problem and have enabled HTS to advance into SIG-controlled areas. The SIG has been promising for years to reform the SNA and create a unified command that would eliminate factionalism. Why has this been so difficult to achieve?

Mustafa: Through our Ministry of Defence, we have been indeed working for years to restructure and integrate the factions into a unified military institution. I want to emphasise that one cannot see the issue of military professionalism detached from overall governance capacity and the political situation of the country. This means that progress can only be gradual and in parallel to the development of other fields such as the judiciary and the economy, and that any consolidation efforts are challenging in times of war that is unfortunately imposed on us.

Nevertheless, with the Military College, the Military Court, and Military and Civilian Police, we have established and strengthened key institutions to increase accountability and deter violations from perpetrators within the SNA. We have also signed an agreement with the UN to prevent the use and recruitment of children. There is no doubt that challenges remain, but there should also be no doubt that we are committed to overcome them.

One of the main criticisms of the Syrian Interim Government is that it has limited powers, and many believe that Ankara makes the decisions. How do you respond?

Mustafa: The Turkish state has provided and continues to provide vital support to northern Syria ranging from security to institutions and infrastructure. With millions of Syrians being hosted by Turkey, and millions more having been displaced to the border areas, our two countries naturally grew closer together. We view the sisterly Turkish state as a partner in building the future of Syria, and we appreciate the coordination and cooperation with the Turkish side. At the same time, we maintain relations with various countries and we constantly call for expanding cooperation.

In 2019, the Europeans launched a project to support the governance of the Syrian Interim Government in the northwest. From what we know, the results were disappointing. Since then, no direct support from Europe has been received. What were the main issues facing the 2019 project?

Mustafa: The project indeed faced several major challenges. 2019 saw a peak in armed hostilities, especially in northern Syria, which complicated governance sig-

nificantly. In addition to that, the Syrian Interim Government at that time relied almost entirely on partner organisations to implement the project without having an active and influential role. This was a structural hurdle that we have solved by now. Since the 2019 formation of the current cabinet, we have developed capacity to lead and implement projects in northern Syria in coordination with international partners. Part of that is increased accountability for which we have established a monitoring and liaison mechanism.

It is thanks to these improvements that we are currently discussing with the European Union the activation of civil and service partnerships and the strengthening of programs that support human rights and governance, with a focus on the empowerment of women and the protection of children. Northern Syria has a lot of potential for development, and today we are seeing more and more results of our past years' work. For example, we are proud of entirely new industrial zones that provide jobs, structural growth, and sustainable development that will help to reduce the dependence on foreign assistance. But we are not there yet, and while we are deeply grateful for the support provided by the EU and Arab and international partners, the decline in support since Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the outbreak of armed conflict in other parts of the world concerns us.

US and European donors have taken a different approach to areas under the control of the Syrian Interim Government, such as Afrin and the Peace Spring area, which are considered off-limits for anything but the most essential humanitarian support. How do you feel about this, and have you tried to overcome this Western veto?

Mustafa: This issue is indeed polarised and unfortunately suffers from misinformation. The areas of Afrin, Ras al-Ain and Tal Abyad – the areas of Operation Olive Branch and the areas of Peace Spring – were under the control of the SDF militia, which works to impose the agenda of the PKK, which is for good reasons designated as a terrorist organisation in both Europe and the US. The track record of violence of the SDF against civilians, specifically the core group of the most ideologised PKK supporters, is significant and concerning. We monitor their violations and provide international bodies with periodic reporting.

Since we regained the above mentioned territories, the SDF has been trying, through affiliated parties, to spread lies aimed at tarnishing the reputation

of the SNA by wrongfully attributing violations to it to gain international sympathy for its cause. Unfortunately, there are some that have taken a negative stance based on those false reports and have subsequently cut off support to those areas. Over the last years, we have worked hard through the Ministry of Defence to enforce compliance with International Humanitarian Law. The primary mission of our Military Police, which has developed into a professional force, is to hold individual transgressors accountable and refer them to the judiciary. We affirm that we consider Arabs, Kurds, Turkmen, and Syrians, and all other minorities as equal Syrians and we deal with everyone without any discrimination based on race, religion, or otherwise.

We also affirm our full readiness to cooperate with all relevant parties to enhance the rule of law and ensure the achievement of justice. Northern Syria has been subjected to the control of different groups in few years, including the regime, ISIS, and the SDF. The fighting has displaced millions of people, and every single story of displacement is one of injustice. We need to be careful to document everything to make sure that justice can be achieved based on transparency and facts, which is why we are in constant contact with the UN's Commission of Inquiry and other human rights bodies. Issues of Housing, Land, and Property Rights are highly relevant and of major complexity given that half of the Syrian people have been displaced, often multiple times.

The Peacemakers

The *Peacemakers* is a satirical novel by Malik al-Abdeh and Lars Hauch about a fictional peace NGO founded by ex-UN diplomat Gerald Baynes. With grand plans before he retires and writes his memoirs, Gerald takes on an assignment that changes the trajectory of the Syria conflict. Any similarities to real persons or events are, of course, purely coincidental.

The novel will be serialised in *Syria in Transition*. To read more visit www.syriaintransition.com/peacemakers

Part I

1.4 Hotel Lobby

Audio diary entry – Istanbul, 18/09/2014

My suite on the 18th floor of the Imperial Hotel is absurdly magnificent. It's bigger than some of the apartments I've lived in – marble floors, silk drapes, chandeliers, the whole grand vizier treatment. Ottoman revival is in full swing here, and apparently not just in the décor. I'm meeting my old pal Dr. Orhan Demir for drinks later, and he's convinced that Erdogan's trying to piece the Empire back together, starting with Syria. I just hope it doesn't throw a wrench in my own little mission.

Speaking of which, the flight to Istanbul got off to a disappointing start when no one from the team agreed to wear the "Mission: Possible" t-shirts I had printed especially for the occasion. That aside, Turkish Airlines Business Class didn't disappoint: a kebab dish "first served at the court of Suleiman the Magnificent" washed down with endless glasses of a local red that wasn't half bad. Meanwhile, back in cattle class things got interesting when a certain someone decided to draw a moustache on a sleeping Pieter. I'm filing that under 'team-building.'

I tried to get some sleep myself on the flight, but every time I closed my eyes, I had nightmares of Adil Shah grinning like a Cheshire cat, telling me that I don't have what it takes to be in the A-league of private diplomacy. Honestly, how hard can it be to convince a Syrian peasant warlord to let a few aid trucks through to some poor starving civilians in Aleppo? I mean, Lawrence managed to talk that Anthony Quinn chap into attacking Aqaba, for heaven's sake. I'm just after a

corridor! If I can't pull that off, I may as well head home and start penning my memoir, *Not Talking to Terrorists*.

Still, I can't become complacent. Tripping up at the first hurdle would mean professional disgrace and likely banishment to a Gulf think tank for the rest of my days.

Right, time for a stroll through the hotel's Topkapi-themed gardens before I hit the bar. Must channel my inner Gerald of Arabia.

Gerald emerged from the lift with an air of optimism, the kind that comes from being twenty-four hours away from a possible triumph with everything still feeling like it's going according to plan. He strode across the lobby in his beige linen suit and loafers making straight for the gardens, but then something – or rather, someone – caught his eye.

No.

It couldn't be.

But it was.

Seated on a golden armchair with his shiny bald patch gleaming like a familiar warning sign was none other than Adil Shah. Gerald watched in disbelief as Adil chatted up the eye rolling blonde Turkish reporter from CNN Türk who was interviewing him, casually handing her his business card while smiling and saying something about a "large portfolio."

A thousand thoughts raced through Gerald's mind, each more paranoid than the last. Was Adil here to spy on him? To sabotage his meeting with Abu Faisal? Had he been set up? Or had Adil guessed his email password again?

Gerald's instincts took over, and, as they often did in moments of stress, they led him in the only direction that made sense: a hasty retreat to the toilets.

He stood before the mirror, leaning on the sink, staring at his reflection. His usually well-composed face looked panicked. But then suddenly, in one of the cubicles, someone was singing Nelly Furtado's *Maneater* in an unmistakable Liverpudlian accent.

"Matt, Matt Bannister? Is that you?"

"No señor," came the reply in poorly imitated Spanish.

"Come out, Matt!"

A flush later, the cubicle door swung open, and out stepped the 6'2 ex-SAS man, cool as ever, smoothing down his shiny lilac shirt.

"You alright?" Matt greeted Gerald, grinning as he wandered over to the sinks. "Didn't expect to see you here, but then again, you and your little bathroom retreats are becoming a bit of a trademark, eh?" He gave Gerald a friendly pat on the back before leaning into the mirror, fixing his hair with a dab of gel.

Matt Bannister had been Gerald's security man at the UN, where he earned a reputation for being hard as nails but also a hopeless romantic. It was his discovery of Abu Nuwas' poetry while on tour in Iraq that proved life-changing. It sparked a passionate attachment to the Orient, which blossomed into an unexpected side gig: the anonymous webmaster of an online guide to gay hammams in the Middle East. It was a "hobby" he perhaps took a little too seriously; and one that was not without its dramas. In 2010 Matt had been so heartbroken after getting stood up in Erbil that Gerald had had to delay his flight to comfort him with ice cream and a rewatch of *Dirty Dancing*, which, even though none of them spoke the language, Matt insisted on watching in French.

Matt's physique and skillset nevertheless made him the ideal choice to even the odds against Abu Faisal's 15-strong rebel entourage arriving the following day. Gerald had summoned him to Istanbul for just this reason. Now, seeing him in the flesh, he drew new confidence.

"Matt," Gerald began, "I know you're on the pull tonight, but I'm going to need your backup. Right now."

Gerald and Matt marched across the hotel lobby, the latter the very picture of "looking well 'ard."

Adil Shah was still seated on the golden armchair, swirling a G&T, as the TV crew were packing away the cameras. When he spotted Gerald, a knowing smirk spread across his lips. He raised his glass in a lazy salute.

"Gerald Baynes, as I live and breathe," he drawled.

"Fancy seeing you here, Shah. What's your business?"

"Well, Turkish evening news asked for an interview about happenings in one of the stans, you know the game."

"Sure, sure," said Gerald, whose last TV interview was four years ago and still had a pitiful 48 clicks on YouTube. "And you're staying at the Imperial by sheer coincidence, I assume?"

"Well, it's lovely, isn't it? The view from the 19th floor is gorgeous. Besides, Crisis Task Force is making great strides. I just got in from D.C.; now I've got a slew of high-level meetings lined up. Wish there were more than 24 hours in a day. Remind me, what's the Peacebuilders working on again?"

"It's the Peacemakers. And we're discreet about what we do. It's on page 2 of the Track II manual if you care to check."

Adil appeared completely uninterested in what Gerald was saying, casually disregarding Matt's staredown as well.

"I was just in Berlin last week to talk to the Foreign Office about a new strategy for integrating the Taliban into peace talks. They love what we're doing. Same goes for the French and Norwegians..."

"Sounds like you've been quite the busy bee, fluttering around with your little Task Force."

Adil took another sip of his G&T and leaned back with a sly smile. "Not sure if you're keeping up with Syria, but Aleppo looks bleak."

A brief pause followed, during which Matt stopped glaring at Adil and glanced toward his visibly flustered boss.

Gerald snapped. "Cut the crap, Shah! I know what yo—"

"Mr. Baynes is late for a meeting," Matt interrupted expertly, "we really must be getting on. Enjoy your gin Mr. Shah."

Read the next instalment in the December issue.