Syria in Transition

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Welcome to the May issue of *Syria in Transition*, a monthly magazine on Syrian politics and society that cuts through the noise. SiT goes straight to the point and shuns unnecessary verbiage – just as we would prefer as avid readers ourselves.

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Performance legitimacy

Polling shows growing public anger with high prices and poor services. Privatisation of healthcare might make things worse

It was former British Prime Minister Harold Wilson who coined the phrase "a week is a long time in politics." It may have referred to the economic crisis of 1964, but it applies just as much to Syria in 2026, where only a few weeks have separated a mood of cautious optimism to one of growing economic frustration.

In early February our public opinion polling in Damascus, Rural Damascus and Homs suggested that the new authorities still enjoyed goodwill. Nearly two-thirds of respondents – 63 per cent – said Syria was heading in the right direction. Support for the government was robust across income groups, reaching 90 per cent among self-described high-income respondents and 65 per cent among lower-income respondents. Trust in the government to deliver transitional justice stood at 56 per cent.

Even public services, despite years of war and neglect, received more favourable than unfavourable assessments: 49 per cent said they were satisfied, compared with only 16 per cent dissatisfied. Perceptions of safety were similarly encouraging, with 76 per cent in Damascus, 62 per cent in Homs and 61 per cent in Rural Damascus saying they felt safe.

Yet by April the mood had changed. The most serious deterioration was in attitudes toward the economy and the state's capacity to manage it. Only 13 per cent of respondents now believed the government was doing enough to tackle soaring energy and food prices, while 66 per cent said its efforts were insufficient.

Financial anxiety appears to be rampant. 62 per cent of respondents said they had faced difficulty covering living expenses either daily, weekly or monthly over the past year. Just 10 per cent said they had not experienced such hardship at all.

Satisfaction with public services also collapsed, from 49 per cent in February to just 25 per cent in April; while dissatisfaction nearly doubled, from 16 per cent to 31 per cent. The neutral bloc also grew, suggesting perhaps a creeping uncertainty about whether improvement is coming at all.

Perceptions of personal safety – one of the government's strongest assets in February – worsened markedly. The share of respondents who said they felt safe fell from 67 per cent to 38 per cent, while those who said they felt unsafe rose from 8 per cent to 26 per cent. The class divide was stark: in higher-income areas 69 per cent still reported feeling safe, compared with only 12 per cent in lower-income neighbourhoods.

Explaining the numbers

A note of caution should, however, be sounded. It may be that public sentiment did not in fact change nearly as much in two months as the figures imply, but that respondents in February were still too cautious to express their true views openly. The threat posed by the Syrian Democratic Forces – viewed by many Sunni Arabs as an existential challenge – had not entirely receded, the integration agreement having only been signed on 29 January. By mid-April, as that deal advanced, some of that hesitation, and the linked tendency to see the authorities as a protective force and give them the benefit of the doubt, may have ebbed. Additionally, growing awareness of economic distress – and of scattered protests and sit-ins circulating on social media – may have convinced people that their frustrations were widely shared, giving them greater confidence to speak their mind.

Also possible is that enumerators in Homs and Damascus had, by the second round, become more skilled at eliciting franker answers from respondents. At any rate, the polls covered only three provinces, with 900 respondents in each wave, and are not nationally representative.

It is probably safe to conclude from the data, however, that many ordinary Syrians are dissatisfied, largely for economic reasons. Steep rise in electricity tariffs were effected in January but only started to bite at scale after the February poll had been completed. The Syrian pound has meanwhile suffered a renewed slide, weakening from roughly SYP10,000 (old denominations) to the dollar in February to around SYP13,000.

The resultant erosion in purchasing power has been severe; families that could once buy fruit and vegetables by the box-load have been reduced to purchasing them piece by piece. The financial strain is compounded by a loss of social status, a grievance likely to sting as much as the hardship itself. Such pressures are liable to worsen perceptions of the government across a range of measures, whatever the underlying performance data may show.

Privatisation drive

Public dissatisfaction and government policy may soon collide head on over the future of state-funded healthcare in Syria. Concern over the future of 71 hospitals intensified after Talal al-Hilali, head of the Syrian Investment Authority (SIA), said on 8 April that they would be transferred to "operators from the private sector" to run for profit, albeit "in partnership with the state". For many Syrians, the remarks raised the prospect that one of the few remaining universal public services could be opened to market forces. According to our polling, 88 per cent of Syrians oppose the privatisation of the health sector.

The issue appears to be controversial within the government itself. Health minister Mus'ab al-Ali struck a more cautious tone in an interview on state television on 14 April, insisting that public provision would remain central to the system. Sources in Damascus suggest that the conflict between his defence of state ownership and the SYDF's privatisation agenda might result in his replacement in an upcoming cabinet reshuffle by someone decidedly more neo-liberal.

More generally, with violence nationwide at a record low, popular attention is re-focusing on bread-and-butter issues. The government's problem is that people are no longer assessing the quality of present-day services against the power shortages and insecurity of a year ago, but against what they believe services should look like in "normal" times: namely, the standards of pre-2011 Syria under Assad.

What's the deal?

The legitimacy of the current government rests on two pillars: its having led the armed revolution to vic-

tory (which appeals to the 25-30 per cent of Syrians who participated in it in one way or another), and its promise of a more prosperous future (everyone else.) The formula currently being pursued to achieve prosperity, however, borrows heavily from the venture capital and private equity manuals, which have brought very mixed results elsewhere. This approach may still work, but it will need transparent national debate and consensus.

The HTS-led government in Damascus doesn't enjoy the luxury that Assad had of being able to disregard the views of the people. The 'dignity revolution' was meant to bring with it respect for the ordinary citizen. Even Assad's rule rested on more than fear. There was an implicit social contract: political obedience in exchange for subsidised essentials and a social safety net.

With subsidies all but gone and privatisation high on the agenda, many now wonder what kind of social contract is in the offing.

Guided freedom

How foreign journalists can – or cannot – work in Syria

As Damascus celebrates a jump in its World Press Freedom Index ranking, foreign journalists describe an accreditation system that remains opaque and quietly encourages self-censorship.

On the ground in Syria, there is generally a tangible sense of freedom that did not exist under the Assad regime. The disappearance of the notorious intelligence agencies and the cult of personality have made locals more willing to speak with candour to outsiders. Foreign journalists are no longer routinely accompanied by government minders or forced to worry about hotel rooms being bugged or devices being tampered with.

But this new freedom is fragile – as evidenced by the procedures through which foreign journalists obtain permits to enter and operate in Syria. In some respects, these procedures echo practices from the previous era.

Access as a filter

The process of entering Syria still hinges on a distinction inherited from the Assad era: entering as a visitor versus entering as a journalist. Officially, the latter requires the foreign journalist to obtain permission from the Ministry of Information's Foreign Media Directorate prior to entering the country. Presently, applications are submitted via an online portal of this directorate and are deemed valid only if submitted from outside Syria. In practice, this means journalists cannot enter on a visitor visa and then seek accreditation when there.

The application itself is complex. Journalists must provide personal details, professional affiliations, commissioning outlets and samples of previous work on Syria. They are also asked to outline where they intend to travel, what topics they plan to cover, and even whom they may interview and what questions they might ask. A local reference – such as a fixer, driver or translator – is also requested.

Some of the entries are mandatory while others are not. One journalist who has entered Syria multiple times without difficulty noted that he routinely leaves

sections blank, including those specifying travel plans and interview questions, without consequence. More recently, he reported a brief exchange with the ministry over his refusal to name potential interviewees on ethical grounds – a point that the ministry ultimately conceded.

Approval as judgement

What determines whether an application is successful? As explained by ministry officials to *Syria in Transition*, outlets or journalists seen as being linked to Israel or Iran are automatically rejected. This is understandable given that Israel and Iran, despite their mutual animosity, are the only two countries that are actively hostile towards the new government.

This criterion of exclusion aside, the initial decision is essentially a question of whether the ministry likes your work and/or the outlet you are working for – in fact, the same primary criterion that was employed by the old regime, which would frequently issue denials of permits to foreign journalists on the grounds of 'lack of objectivity' (i.e. coverage deemed too critical of the regime).

Some outlets are effectively blacklisted. Publications seen as having been sympathetic to Assad or connected to the former regime face particular scrutiny. A *Le Figaro* journalist, Georges Malbrunot, who interviewed Assad in 2013, was able to obtain a limited five-day permit following an initial rejection that was overturned through personal intervention. He has since been unable to return and considers himself effectively banned.

Freedom with boundaries

If an application is accepted, journalists must report to the ministry upon arrival to obtain their permit. The building, in the Mezzah area of Damascus, was dark and run-down in the time of the former regime but has been considerably renovated.

The permit typically is valid for one month. It does not, however, grant unrestricted access across the country. To report in certain provinces or work in what are considered "sensitive" areas – often those inhabited by minority communities – or to interview security or military officials, journalists may need additional approvals from provincial directorates. These can be limited in scope and length of validity, sometimes covering only a few days for a specific assignment.

Areas such as the Golan border region or al-Suwayda province are especially tightly controlled. As one journalist observed: "I wouldn't say there is no press freedom. But you feel guided in certain directions and kept away from places they would rather not see covered." In short, there is a form of managed access: journalists are free to report, but not necessarily free to choose where or how.

Calculated Self-censorship

Once a permit expires, journalists must leave the country. Renewal applications must be made from abroad and must include samples of work produced during the previous stay. In practice, this work becomes the key factor in determining whether access is granted again, much as it did under the former regime. The difficulty lies in the lack of clear red lines. In some cases, the link between a piece of reporting and the ministry's displeasure is explicit. In others, applications are simply ignored or rejected without explanation. It is often left to journalists to infer the boundaries of acceptable reporting.

Coverage of sensitive events appears to carry particular risk. Some journalists who reported on the coastal massacres or events in al-Suwayda have struggled to renew permits. Others have managed to maintain access despite critical reporting, suggesting that enforcement is inconsistent. At times, access can be negotiated. Several journalists pointed to information minister Hamza al-Mustafa, the former director general of Syria TV, as a useful point of contact for resolving delays or apparent rejections.

Certain topics seem especially sensitive. These include reporting on foreign fighters (*muhajirin*) who joined the rebellion against Assad, and the role in the economy of figures close to the presidency. Journalists noted that reporting by Reuters on the coastal massacres and on economic networks involving Hazem al-Sharaa and Abu Mariam al-Australi drew negative attention from the ministry. Some journalists recalled a Spanish writer receiving a severe reprimand for reporting on transgender people in Syria and their alleged harassment by security forces.

The result is not outright censorship, but something more ambiguous. The absence of formal bans or clear rules makes it difficult to demonstrate explicit violations of press freedom, while encouraging journalists to calibrate their reporting to avoid jeopardising future access.

For those based in Syria, the stakes are higher. As one journalist put it, losing accreditation can mean losing one's base, one's work and the possibility to stay. Some are already considering publishing under pseudonyms to manage that risk.

Despite the ambiguity, there is a shift from the blunt approach of the former regime. Unlike under Assad, journalists can at least reach out to officials, question decisions, and in some cases negotiate outcomes. Access is controlled, but it is also discussed. For journalists, however, maintaining that access requires constant judgement, about what to report, how to report it and when to hold back.

Classroom revolution?

What education reveals about the state of Syria's transition

For decades, Syria's schools quietly sustained authoritarian rule, instilling habits of obedience. Today, as the country embarks on a political transition, the classroom offers a revealing test: not just of what has changed in the curriculum, but of how much of the old system still endures beneath the surface.

When we think about why dictatorships endure, we usually look to prisons, intelligence agencies, patronage networks or foreign backers. Much less attention is paid to a quieter, but equally powerful institution: the school.

For more than five decades, Syria's education system was not just a place where children learned mathematics or grammar. It functioned as ideological infrastructure, shaping habits of obedience and defining the limits of what could be said and done. Education in Assad's Syria produced a particular kind of subject: cautious, conformist, suspicious and accustomed to moral hierarchies flowing downward from a single source of power. If Syria is serious about transition, education deserves far greater attention as it is both an indicator of political will for change and a major lever for allowing a new political culture to take root.

School as training ground for obedience

Hafez al-Assad liked to repeat Mussolini's maxim: whoever controls the youth controls the future. Whether or not apocryphal, the logic was unmistakable. In Assad's schools, classroom life was organised to train deference as a habit and to situate students within a patriarchal hierarchy in which authority flowed from the top and defined what it meant to be a "proper" citizen. Corporal punishment was officially banned during Bashar al-Assad's presidency, but the prohibition was unevenly enforced and in many schools physical discipline remained a routine tool of authority and brutalisation, often encouraged by parents. As one teacher from Damascus told *Syria in Transition*: "When we called parents in, many would say, 'The flesh is yours, the bones are ours. Do what you want and raise them.'"

Loyalty was rehearsed through routine rituals: regular flag salutes and recitations that portrayed Hafez as the 'Eternal Leader'; and a narrative of Bashar as

an "exceptional" figure required in times of crisis. Indoctrination did not end with the school year. After completing the tenth grade, students were required to attend a compulsory month-long summer "camp," usually held in local school buildings, where party ideology was taught alongside basic military-style drills. Top down leadership was presented as an indispensable political necessity; and as the organising premise of social life itself.

Indoctrination as method

The internalisation of hierarchy was also central to the everyday mechanics of teaching. Much of the current debate about post-Assad education is limited to material questions – repairing schools, finding staff, paying salaries – or to curriculum content. While these matter, they are peripheral to the actual didactics.

Central to authoritarian schooling is the way in which knowledge is constructed and evaluated. 'National Education' was a mandatory subject so repetitive that students joked one only had to learn it in the first year because the content never changed until graduation. It served as a pedagogical extension of the Assadist personality cult. Memorisation and guided reproduction dominated classroom practice. Discussions took place within tightly policed boundaries: the Syrian nation, led by its Dear Leader, was cast as besieged by the external forces of Zionism and Western imperialism. Alternative perspectives to this worldview were treated as a cardinal sin, while loyalty to its dogma was framed as a civic virtue.

Students were asked to rehearse the regime's enemy-centred worldview. One National Education exercise bluntly instructed pupils to explain why "homelands are facts that do not allow differing viewpoints." The same lesson cited Bashar al-Assad as noting that differing opinions among Syrians were natural and normal, "but only until questions of national security arose." The constant threat of hybrid warfare and terrorism that enemy countries allegedly perpetrated against the homeland meant, of course, that anything and anyone could be a national security concern. Disagreement was indicative of potential involvement in a foreign plot. No wonder that suspicion became a civic reflex and conspiracy theories could pose as insights.

This interpretive lens permeated the teaching of history. The past was not explored for its complexity, but mobilised to explain the regime's version of the present. Students were encouraged to identify with a lineage of anti-colonial martyrs so that defending the state was understood as a moral duty transcending generations. As Hafez al-Assad asserted: "A martyr is the great human being who made a pledge and remained true to it; when the homeland called, he hastened; when he fought, he showed exceptional courage; when he confronted the enemy, he excelled; and for the sake of the nation's victory, he chose martyrdom."

This does not mean that every class was identical, or that every teacher complied. Even within the most tightly controlled systems, there can be cracks. Some teachers quietly introduced alternative perspectives, encouraged questions, or taught 'between the lines'. "There was a history teacher in middle school who told us that in order to pass exams, we had to learn what was written in the textbooks. But in the classroom, he taught and discussed real history with us. He was killed at the beginning of the revolution," a woman from Damascus who later became a journalist told *Syria in Transition*.

Liberation without transformation?

Since the regime's collapse, teachers describe a palpable psychological shift. Daily loyalty rituals have disappeared. Portraits have been removed from classrooms. The atmosphere, many say, feels lighter. Yet conversations with teachers in recent months suggest that the deeper structure of schooling remains largely unchanged. National Education as a formal subject has been abolished – a move that almost all teachers *Syria in Transition* spoke to welcomed. But reforms have mostly focused on content adjustments: removing praise of the Assad family, toning down antisemitic formulations, adding references to the revolution.

A closer look at current teaching materials raises uncomfortable questions. Political indoctrination has not disappeared. Under Assad, history textbooks placed the ruler at the centre of the national story. Presidential speeches functioned as milestones and 'primary sources', while figures from the wider anti-colonial pantheon were framed, along with the regime, as guardians of Arab resistance and, more recently, of the 'Axis of Resistance'. In post-Assad materials, the Assads disappear as heroic drivers of history, and agency is instead attributed to collective subjects such as 'the Syrian people', 'the Algerian people', or the 'the Libyan people'; and the 2011 uprising is presented as a popular revolution rather than a conspiracy.

This revisionism, however, goes only so far. 'The people' remains an abstract yet authoritative category, and guided questions still steer students toward a sanctioned moral lesson. Enemy-centred narratives remain powerful. Zionism and imperialism continue to appear as historically constant forces behind regional crises. The language may be less explicitly sectarian, but the notion of a unified external enemy persists. This is not to deny the legitimacy of critically examining colonial domination or Israeli policies within the context of national and regional history. The problem is the construction of a single omnipotent antagonist to which social and political failures can be endlessly attributed. Such framing provides elites with a perfect scapegoat, and sustains a political culture built on antagonism instead of responsibility.

Also not fundamentally unchanged is the didactic model itself. Assignments still prioritise predefined answers, and memorisation remains central. Teachers meanwhile report a growing emphasis on religious instruction. New forms of ideological indoctrination may be replacing older patterns. If, as activist Raed Fares once put it, the regime planted a 'little Assad' inside every Syrian, then education is where that internalisation must be addressed.

From indoctrination to autonomous citizenry

All this may appear abstract in a country where many schools lie in ruins and teachers are undertrained and underpaid. Yet postponing didactic transformation risks entrenching old patterns for another generation – and not only among students. Parents, too, learn from their children. Classrooms shape households.

Experience from other societies emerging from authoritarian rule, from Argentina to the former German Democratic Republic, shows that education can become a powerful resource for political liberalisation. But this does not happen automatically, and replacing ideological content is not enough by itself. What matters is transforming the way knowledge is produced, debated, and legitimised in the classroom. Where schooling encourages critical reasoning, plural interpretation, source analysis and reflexive judgement, it contributes critically to the formation of autonomous citizens. The way a country reforms its classroom practice is a reliable indicator of how seriously it intends to move on from dictatorship .

If Syria's transition is to be more than a change of rulers, education must move from producing obedience to cultivating autonomy. Schools must nurture the ability to engage with plurality, tolerate ambiguity, recognise contingency and accept shared responsibility – the essential attributes of a democratic culture.

Part II of this research will be published next month. Drawing on interviews with Syrian teachers and education experts, it shifts from the classroom to the school itself, examining how discipline, surveillance and corruption shaped everyday school life under the old regime, and what has changed since.

Growth on paper

Syria's 2026 budget promises recovery but puts pressure on the business sector

Heavy spending on security contrasts with limited public investment. Fiscal reforms create a self-undermining dynamic: the system relies on imports and consumption, even as rising costs and weak demand erode both – leaving consumers and MSMEs under strain.

Many Syrians imagine economic recovery in simple, visible terms. They picture busy downtowns filled with recognisable brands and thriving shops, industrial zones alive with factories, workers, and trucks moving goods around the clock, and border crossings receiving tourists and sending exports to regional markets. That image draws on both memory – how Syria functioned before the war – and observation, shaped by life in Turkey and Europe or by what relatives abroad share through screens. Recovery, in that imagination, looks like movement, commerce, and normal economic life returning.

Syria today, however, is not moving in that direction – at least not yet. One way to see this more clearly is through the public budgets for 2025 and 2026. Actually public spending in 2025 was reported at about USD 3.447 Billion, while the 2026 Citizen's Budget projects expenditure of about USD 10.516 Billion. Both have been criticized on many grounds, including credibility, transparency, and the realism of their assumptions. This article sets those debates aside and examines the 2026 budget from a narrower angle: what it suggests about the government's economic priorities, and what those priorities imply for business, investment and the private sector.

A central starting point is public investment – i.e. government spending on rebuilding infrastructure, public facilities and other capital projects. Beyond its importance for people's access to services and for basic living conditions, it is also critical for business because it shapes the context in which firms operate, invest and grow. It helps provide the shared infrastructure and services businesses depend on, generates demand across supply chains and – ideally – reduces the costs and risks of private investment.

Investment on paper

In 2025public investment remained extremely limited, at around 7% of the total budget, or approximately USD 250 million. For a country emerging from more than fourteen years of conflict, that was far too small to support meaningful recovery or significantly improve the business environment.

The 2026 budget appears to mark a shift. Public investment rises to around 27% of total spending, or approximately USD 2.8 billion, more than eleven times the 2025 level. On paper, this suggests a more serious recognition of the role public spending must play in recovery. Yet even this increase warrants caution. Relative to the scale of Syria's reconstruction needs, it remains limited. This is particularly concerning given that around one-third of total expenditure is allocated to the security and military sector, effectively diverting resources away from critical development priorities. In many developing and post-conflict contexts, such spending tends to be associated with low transparency and weak accountability, raising further concerns about efficiency and the opportunity cost for the business sector and broader economic recovery.

There is also a credibility problem. Public investment can support business recovery only if it translates into actual projects, contracts and visible improvements in the operating environment. The lack of clarity on sectoral allocations and implementation mechanisms, together with the absence of visible major public investment projects several months into 2026, raise doubts about whether the planned spending will be fully realised.

Lower taxes, higher costs

The structure of public revenues has direct implications for the business sector. The government has announced a significant reduction in direct taxes on businesses in 2026, alongside tax exemptions for agriculture and production. In principle, this is a business-friendly signal. If effectively implemented, it could reduce the formal tax burden on firms, strengthen investment incentives, and support productive sectors.

This shift, however, must be assessed within the broader revenue framework, and this suggests that the overall fiscal burden is not being reduced, but reallocated. The 2026 budget projects a sharp increase in revenues from taxes, fees and customs, reaching approximately USD 4.4 billion – nearly double the 2025 level.

Given the reduction in direct taxation, this points to a heavier reliance on indirect taxes and fees. In practice, the burden shifts from profits to consumption and transactions.

For businesses, this creates a structural contradiction. Lower direct taxes are offset by rising costs through customs duties and administrative fees. These costs are then passed on to consumers, weakening purchasing power and demand. Businesses are therefore squeezed from both sides: higher operating costs and shrinking market. This particularly threatens micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) that form the majority of Syrian businesses and have limited capacity to absorb or pass on these pressures.

The reliance on customs revenues meanwhile reinforces a structural bias toward an import-driven economy. A significant share of revenues is tied to imports, with car imports alone estimated at around USD 5 billion in 2025. While this may support short-term fiscal needs, it also raises the cost of imported inputs and exposes local firms to external competition. Combined with weakening demand, this creates a self-undermining cycle: the fiscal system depends on imports and consumption, yet its own mechanisms gradually erode both. Ultimately, despite the positive signal of reduced direct taxation, the overall revenue structure continues to place pressure on the business sector and limits the prospects for sustainable recovery.

Reform as a cost shock

The budget also reflects a sharp reduction in subsidies, particularly on energy and essential goods, with direct consequences for production costs. With the liberalisation of electricity and fuel prices, subsidies have been effectively eliminated and replaced by a system that generates fiscal savings – and potentially revenue – amounting to an estimated 12% of the budget in 2025.

For producers, especially in energy-intensive sectors such as industry and agriculture, this has translated into a substantial increase in input costs. Higher fuel and electricity prices raise the cost of transportation, manufacturing and processing, reducing profit margins and competitiveness. This cost shock further limits the ability of Syrian firms – who already face financing constraints and weak infrastructure – to operate, expand, or invest. Smaller and less resilient firms are affected disproportionally.

The removal of subsidies has also eroded household purchasing power, with direct consequences for business demand. Price liberalisation, combined with weak social protection and declining real incomes, has increased inflationary pressures and reduced domestic demand. While the government has introduced salary increases in 2025 and 2026, these are likely to be offset by rising prices, limiting their real effect. The result is a difficult environment for firms: even as nominal incomes rise, real consumption remains weak, constraining sales across retail, services and local production.

Change is possible

If Syria's budgets are to support business recovery in a way that benefits the wider economy, a larger share of spending needs to go to infrastructure and public investment that directly affects firms, especially in the areas of energy, transport, and industrial zones. That also requires clear, transparent, and accountable implementation so that businesses can respond to actual demand and actual improvements, not just announced allocations.

Maintaining reductions in direct taxes on businesses is a positive step, but it will have limited effect if the fiscal burden continues to shift through indirect taxes, fees, and customs. Easing these pressures, particularly on productive inputs, and providing targeted relief for MSMEs would help reduce costs and sustain domestic demand. Given the sharp increase in energy and input prices, temporary measures such as targeted energy subsidies, subsidised credit, or tax rebates linked to production, exports, and employment could help firms maintain operations during the transition.

Defense and security is clearly a priority, but successful outcomes cannot be achieved through spending on guns, police and soldiers alone. They also depend on addressing the economic and political conditions that drive instability. Growth and development can solve problems that spending on means of coercion cannot. A recovery strategy that prioritises security expenditure at the expense of infrastructure, production and livelihoods may ultimately reinforce the very pressures it seeks to contain.

This analysis was provided exclusively by Syrian Ventures Alliance, an investment and economic advisory platform.

The Truth Guardians

A conversation with Farouq Habib

When the White Helmets' emergency response service was integrated into the newly established Ministry of Emergency and Disaster Management, remaining structures were reorganised into a new entity: Truth Guardians. The organisation benefits from the White Helmets' longstanding donor relationships and credibility amongst Syrians. Truth Guardians aims to play an influential role in Syria's transitional justice process. To learn more, *Syria in Transition* spoke with Farouq Habib, a founding member of the White Helmets and Executive Director of Truth Guardians.

For readers unfamiliar with Truth Guardians, could you briefly explain the organisation's goals and how it has evolved in terms of structure, staffing and funding?
Habib: Truth Guardians is a Syrian-led, internationally supported organisation working at the intersection of transitional justice, accountability and recovery. Our core objective is to contribute to a credible, inclusive and sustainable transitional justice process in Syria – one that addresses past violations, supports affected communities and helps prevent recurrence.

The organisation builds on more than a decade of experience from the White Helmets, particularly in areas such as documentation, forensic response, rehabilitation and community engagement. Following the transition of emergency response functions to state structures, it became necessary to ensure continuity for non-emergency portfolios – especially those related to justice, missing persons and cultural heritage. Truth Guardians was established as a dedicated entity to carry this work forward.

Structurally, we operate across four main programmatic pillars: transitional justice; missing persons, cultural heritage protection; and community resilience and social cohesion. Our footprint spans Syria and Europe, with programme management and support offices in Damascus and The Hague.

In terms of staffing, we have a diverse team of around 70 experienced professionals – primarily Syrians, alongside international colleagues from nine nationalities – many of whom have worked in highly complex environments over the years. This hybrid model allows us to combine local legitimacy and operational agility with technical rigour and international quality standards.

Funding remains primarily project-based, supported by a range of international governmental and non-governmental donors who have supported the White Helmets over the past years. At the same time, we are engaging with partners on more flexible and longer-term funding modalities, including pooled funding arrangements. Transitional justice, missing persons work and institutional capacity-building require continuity. These are not areas where impact can be delivered sustainably through short and fragmented project cycles alone.

On 22 April Truth Guardians signed a memorandum of understanding with the National Commission for Transitional Justice, establishing a framework for cooperation. The Commission's mandate is limited to crimes committed by the Assad regime. Does your work extend beyond that scope? For example, do you document violations by all parties, including ongoing violations by the government?
Habib: It is important first to be precise about the mandate of the National Commission for Transitional Justice (NCTJ). The Commission's mandate relates to serious crimes **caused** by the Assad regime. This formulation is significant, as it can be interpreted more broadly than crimes directly committed by the regime alone. Many Syrians consider that multiple layers of violence and abuse by different actors emerged as a consequence of the regime's original and systematic crimes.

That said, Truth Guardians is an independent civil society organisation. Our position is clear, principled and impartial: justice and accountability must apply regardless of the identity of the perpetrator or the identity of the victims. The credibility of any transitional justice process depends on the consistent application of standards, without selectivity or political convenience.

Our cooperation with the NCTJ should be understood within this framework. We view the establishment of the Commission as an important institutional step, and we are prepared to support it constructively where our experience can add value. This includes technical assistance, documentation and archiving systems, institutional capacity-building and support for the management of international funding.

At the same time, cooperation with a national institution does not mean that Truth Guardians becomes a substitute for that institution, nor does it imply any compromise of our independence. We are a bridge, not a substitute. Our role is to support the development of credible national mechanisms where appropriate, while preserving the integrity and independence of our work.

In practice, our mandate remains broader than any single institutional partnership. We support justice for all victims, and we believe that Syria's long-term stability depends on a process that is credible, inclusive, and not perceived as selective. This is why civil society remains essential. State institutions have a central role to play, but independent organisations are critical to ensuring that victims' voices, technical standards and public trust remain at the centre of the process.

The idea that "caused by" could be read more broadly is an interesting interpretation of the Commission's mandate. Wouldn't that create a hierarchy of responsibility that could dilute accountability for other actors before formal legal processes have kicked-off? In your discussions with government or Commission officials, have you seen openness to this broader interpretation?
Habib: The concern is valid. Any interpretation that creates a hierarchy of responsibility risks undermining the principle of equal accountability, especially if it is not clearly grounded in law.

In our discussions, senior officials at the NCTJ have informally shared a broader reading of "caused by," which suggests some openness at the conceptual level. However, informal interpretations are not sufficient in a process of this sensitivity.

This is why, in January, we – together with other Syrian civil society organisations – submitted written recommendations on the draft Transitional Justice Law. We cautioned against embedding political characterisations within legal definitions, as this could undermine individual criminal responsibility, expose the law to challenges on impartiality and create interpretive ambiguity.

Our recommendation was to preserve the historical context in explanatory texts, while ensuring that legal accountability is clearly attributed to natural or legal persons, regardless of affiliation, and grounded in international legal standards.

Ultimately, the issue is not whether the scope is broad or narrow, but whether it is coherent, impartial, and credible. Without that, there is a real risk of undermining trust in the process.

You have promoted a Build-Operate-Transfer model that positions Truth Guardians as a bridge between civil society and the state: strengthening institutions before eventually handing over ownership. From a donor perspective, this approach seems to have an attractive appeal of "state-building played safe." What criteria determine when such a transfer is appropriate? The decision formally to integrate the emergency response structure was taken rather quickly. Are matters of transitional justice considered more political and therefore not ready to transfer yet?
Habib: The Build-Operate-Transfer (BOT) model is derived from the successful experience of transferring the Syria Civil Defence to the Ministry of Emergency and Disaster Management. However, it is not a shortcut to state-building that can be applied universally, nor is it a mechanism for civil society to withdraw from its responsibilities. It is a practical sequencing model designed for specific functions in a transitional context – where institutions are emerging, needs are urgent, and specialised civil society capacity already exists.

The concept is straightforward. Where a public-interest function is needed, but the relevant national institution is not yet ready to absorb it, Truth Guardians, within specific areas, can help build and operate that function temporarily, in close coordination with the institution, until conditions allow for a responsible transfer. The success of this approach depends on transparency, inclusivity and mutual commitment. We work with the receiving institution throughout the project cycle – sharing knowledge, systems and operational experience – while also engaging other civil society actors to ensure that the institution benefits from broader expertise. Ultimately, transfer depends on readiness: the institution needs to meet agreed legal, technical and financial standards to ensure sustainability. At that stage, we step back into a supporting role.

A current example is the Documentation and Archiving Team (DAT), which builds on years of White Helmets documentation work and manages highly sensitive material related to truth, accountability and memory. Our approach is to anchor this capacity in Syria, support the development of a comprehensive system

within the NCTJ and, in coordination with partners, train and operate it until it can be responsibly transferred under appropriate safeguards.

The integration of emergency response functions was fundamentally different. Emergency response is operational by nature and requires unified command and national service delivery. The Syria Civil Defence (of the White Helmets) was already a fully developed system and became the backbone of the new ministry, making the transition both feasible and necessary. Transitional justice operates under different conditions. There is no fully developed national system ready to absorb these functions, and the work itself is more sensitive. It involves responsibility, victims' rights, institutional reform and public trust, and requires a sustained role for independent civil society. As a result, not everything should be transferred – and certainly not prematurely.

From a donor perspective, the appeal of the BOT model is understandable. It supports institution-building while reducing the risks of premature transfer. However, the objective is to avoid dependency while enabling institutions. This requires long-term, flexible and coordinated support. Short-term and fragmented funding approaches are not well suited to such institutional transitions.

You highlight the need for close coordination with Syrian institutions and mutual commitment. We've heard of recent tensions with the NCTJ over a contract awarded by a Western government to Truth Guardians – with the NCTJ preferring direct funding and viewing Truth Guardians' role as intrusive and unnecessary. Is this kind of conflict over resources inherent, and does it undermine effective coordination?
Habib: I am not aware of such tensions with the NCTJ. On the contrary, our relationship with the Commission has been transparent and constructive.

It is important to clarify that Truth Guardians is not the only channel through which international support is provided. Different donors use different modalities: some work through Truth Guardians, others through INGOs, UN agencies or specialised stabilisation and technical partners. This is a normal feature of international assistance, particularly while national institutions are still developing their administrative and financial systems.

As far as I know, no donor is currently in a position to provide direct funding to the NCTJ. Donors therefore rely on eligible partners to channel and manage support, and Truth Guardians is one of those partners – not a bottleneck.

We would welcome direct donor support to the NCTJ whenever donors and the Commission consider it appropriate and feasible. Our role is not to compete for institutional space or resources, but to contribute where we add value. We intervene where our technical capacity, operational experience and civil society role can make a meaningful difference.

With regard to transitional justice – how the new authorities are approaching it, how Syrians you speak with perceive it – what has surprised you the most?
Habib: What has surprised me most is the coexistence of urgency and caution among Syrians. There is a strong and widespread demand for justice. Syrians are seeking truth, recognition, accountability and answers about the missing. They want acknowledgment of their suffering and credible guarantees that past violations will not be repeated. This demand is deeply personal and widely shared. At the same time, there is a clear sense of caution. Many Syrians have experienced institutional failure and are concerned about selectivity, politicization or processes that remain symbolic without leading to meaningful change. There is hope, but it is accompanied by a firm expectation of credibility.

Another important aspect is the diversity of perspectives across Syrian society. Transitional justice is not a single narrative: different communities have different experiences and priorities. Managing this diversity in an inclusive manner will be one of the defining challenges of the process. From an institutional standpoint, there are positive early signals, including the establishment of new bodies and engagement with civil society. At the same time, there is a tension between urgency and the need to build credible systems. Moving too quickly risks undermining trust. Moving too slowly risks losing momentum.

Ultimately, transitional justice is not a single event – it is a long-term process. It requires patience, consistency, and a balance between strengthening institutions, protecting civic space and sustaining international support. The future of transitional justice in Syria will not be determined by one commission, one organisation or one donor. It will depend on whether Syri-

ans can build a process that is Syrian-led and internationally supported, principled, inclusive, and resilient enough to withstand political pressure. This is a complex task, but it remains achievable if approached with discipline and care.