



Syria in Transition

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Welcome to the July 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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What Syrians *really* think

Lessons from 2,700 interviews about fear, disillusionment and public opinion after Assad

Polling in Syria is, to quote Forrest Gump, like a box of chocolates: “You never know what you’re gonna get.” It can be amusing, when a grandfather approached by a pollster raised his hand and, in a strangely democratic manner, called over all his friends to approach the survey as a group vote. It can be heartening, when people are visibly excited to express their political views openly after decades of no one caring what they thought. It can also be frightening, when a shootout suddenly erupts in the street – and curious, when the interviewee casually, and apparently unfazed, nevertheless continues answering the questionnaire.

In Assad’s Syria, where public adherence to prescribed opinions was an expected performance of loyalty, genuinely capturing and publishing public opinion was a cardinal sin. Syria Poll, launched in February 2026, is the first attempt to establish a regular public opinion survey for a broad audience that captures Syrians’ views on politics, society and economics. It is possible only because Assad has fallen. But the wall of fear his regime created is still there. Many Syrians continue to fear the proverbial ears in the walls despite the dismantling of the mukhabarat. Sometimes it is very obvious, for example when people immediately walk away once political questions are asked. Sometimes it is more complex and potentially more damaging to the authenticity of the results, for example when respondents switch into telling interviewers what they think they are expected to say. And sometimes political or

sectarian loyalty shapes responses quite consciously. A person may be fiercely critical of the authorities before the interview begins, only to start praising them once the questionnaire starts because, as some openly explain, they “do not want to give Assad supporters any ammunition.” It is an authoritarian legacy that will take time – and new experiences of trust and safety – to overcome.

Behind the numbers

Running a regular poll during this transitional period is a research project in its own right. The process of polling people on the street tells much about political and social life in Syria, particularly on how opinion is formed, expressed and concealed in conflict and post-conflict environments. There are various established polling methods designed to reduce the effects of fear and self-censorship, for example, by asking sensitive questions indirectly or allowing respondents to conceal their individual answers while still enabling identification of broader patterns in public opinion. Ultimately, however, they all depend on a basic degree of trust: that the interviewer is not an informant, that no one is listening in and that engaging with a pollster will not have negative consequences. Many Syrians, understandably, do not have that trust. Social scientists are well aware of the limitations of survey research, but polling also appears to offer something the social sciences usually don’t produce: clean numbers. For disciplines that sometimes suffer from a bit of an inferiority complex toward the natural sciences – the “real sciences” that produce hard data rather than competing perspectives – polling results can be particularly seductive.

Polling results are particularly attractive because they transform complex attitudes into apparently precise

numbers. Outside academic research, polling data is generated and used by government administrators, political campaigns, advocacy organisations and businesses. Both clients and audiences usually want clear answers. The numbers, however, can hide as much as they reveal: it can often be uncertain whether respondents understood a question as intended, why they chose one answer over another, and whether they felt comfortable saying what they really thought. Even with careful methodology and good intentions, producing representative and interpretable survey data is difficult. This is why Syria Poll complements its surveys with regular focus group discussions.

In the June wave, one question asked whether Syrian schools should teach democratic values. Many respondents were unfamiliar with the term “democracy” or had very different associations with it. One woman immediately asked, somewhat indignant, whether this would mean that her son would start disobeying his parents at home. In the same wave, we asked whether the government had handled SDF integration well, offering “yes”, “no” and “don’t know” as response options. Both the face-to-face interviews and a focus group made clear that many people understood “don’t know” to mean that they lacked sufficient information about what was happening in the northeast, rather than that they knew what was happening but had not formed an opinion. Discussing such details in focus groups helps us improve the way we ask questions and, just as importantly, interpret the answers.

Limited bandwidth

Notably, the lack of information about developments in the northeast did not seem to bother people much. That has much to do with the limited bandwidth people have for politics that does not feel immediately relevant to their acute economic circumstances. During the first wave of Syria Poll in February, optimism about the government and the country’s trajectory was high – 63 per cent said the country was moving in the right direction. Salaries had just been increased, the currency was stabilising, and many expected Syria’s new leadership to transform the country into “the Switzerland of the Arab world” within months. People were excited to talk. By the April and June waves, however, the atmosphere had changed. Electricity prices had increased dramatically, a gas shortage had spread across the country, and confidence in the government’s commitment to transitional justice had begun to erode after Assad family-linked business magnate Mohammad Hamsho and abusive former mili-

tia commander Fadi Saqr appeared to avoid accountability. Mounting frustration and economic pressures decreased interviewees’ and focus group participants’ willingness to engage on political questions. The earlier excitement about being able to talk openly about politics increasingly gave way to cynicism, a well-established coping mechanism.

Disillusionment is particularly pronounced amongst respondents aged 18 to 24. Many said they wanted to emigrate, and showed little interest in political questions, focusing instead on finding a future beyond what they increasingly regard as a lost cause at home. Amid economic hardship, people’s political horizons tend to shrink toward the immediate questions of electricity, fuel, jobs and basic services. Politically, this is concerning. If basic service delivery becomes the principal standard against which governments are judged, those in power have greater room to push questions of human rights, accountability and political participation off the agenda. When we asked respondents in June about the People’s Assembly – Syria’s parliament – many were not even aware that it existed. Only 10 per cent believed it would actually influence government decisions.

Yet demands for dignity and justice that underpin political questions cannot be silenced completely. During one focus group, a young man living in poverty said that he did not want electricity, but progress on transitional justice so that he could finally have a grave at which to mourn relatives who remained missing. Another said “People today may be able to endure issues like gas and water... but they cannot endure their pain being ignored.”

Three takeaways

After three waves of Syria Poll, three findings stand out. First, Syrians have become increasingly critical of the country’s trajectory, with 46 per cent expressing a negative assessment in June. “The country is like a bomb; once the fuse is lit, it will explode,” a woman warned in a focus group. Government approval ratings have fallen in parallel, to just 20 per cent. Second, there is a striking gap between high- and low-income areas in assessments of government performance, public services, safety and the rule of law. “Syria has become two classes: one very high, and one under the ground,” another woman said. In the June wave, fewer than 10 per cent of respondents in low-income areas reported feeling safe or experiencing a meaningful presence of the rule of law – dramatically lower than the equivalent proportion in high-income areas.

as. In June, 56 per cent of respondents said they had difficulty covering basic living expenses at least once a month, while 23 per cent experienced such difficulties weekly or daily. The third major finding is that confidence in surrounding transitional justice is fragile. In February, 56 per cent of respondents said they trusted the government to achieve transitional justice. By June, only 28 per cent said that the trial of former security chief Atef Najib – the first of its kind against a senior Assad regime figure – had increased their trust in the justice process.

Syria Poll has only just begun. Future waves will expand geographical coverage and increase the sample size from the present 900 respondents per wave. The growing body of data will allow us to track changes in public opinion over time, and to understand better how citizens are experiencing Syria in transition. *Syria in Transition* will, as ever, cover the story.



Palmyran wisdom

How one city is turning anger over Assad cronies into a local experiment in transitional justice

On 15 June the ancient city of Palmyra took to the streets. Residents who had returned to battle-scarred neighbourhoods wanted those they call “*shabiha*” (Assad cronies) held to account, and some measure of justice after years of displacement and financial ruin. The first chant in the protest was blunt: “Palmyra is free, the *shabiha* must leave.”

During fierce fighting between the Syrian army and ISIS in 2014-16, most of the city’s residents fled. Some went to the opposition-controlled north, and from there to Turkey; others less fortunate ended up in

the miserable Rukban desert camp. Returning in large numbers after the fall of Assad, these refugees found their homes and businesses looted, destroyed or occupied by someone else.

A small, mostly well-off class, did not flee Palmyra. These were the ones who cooperated with the regime’s security apparatus, informing on fellow Palmyrans to win influence and favour. Some made fortunes by paying off regime security officials to allow them to exploit land and property belonging to the absent refugees. They thought they would never come back.

City on fire

The returnees had ample reason to be angry; but the seeming impunity enjoyed by *shabiha* tipped them over the edge. Frustration was sharpened by accounts circulating in the city that wealthy former regime collaborators had for months been paying “fines” to

security bosses to stay out of jail. For many returnees, it seemed that those who had benefited under the old regime could once again buy their way out, while those who had been displaced and now had to start from scratch had to fend for themselves.

On 14 June anti-*shabiha* protests and violence erupted in Idlib, Aleppo, and Damascus governorates. While speculation abounded over who coordinated the simultaneous protests and to what end, the following day the Palmyran returnees staged their own copy-cat protest. The goal was “to make the voice of the revolutionary street heard”, according to one participant. The actual demand, chanted and openly discussed, was for a tribal form of punishment: the exile of *shabiha* families from the city.

As the marching crowd drew close to the home of one of these families, the Furaihs, things turned violent. Insults turned into stone-throwing, and then the inevitable “exchange of gunfire.” Two members of the Furaih family were later arrested and their assault rifles seized. That a reputed pro-Assad family would dare fire upon returnees and challenge their righteous calls for justice, was considered a major act of provocation. “The protest was needed,” said one returnee. “The *shabiha* were getting too brazen. They needed a *rassa*,” a roughing-up.

Also present at the demonstration were less justice-minded actors. The *mukawy’een*, or U-turners, routinely use such events to whitewash their former support for the old regime through exaggerated displays of loyalty to the new one. Others, according to local accounts and observers, were Islamic State elements that saw any disorder as an opportunity to embarrass the new authorities.

The protest spread: a household goods store belonging to the Furaihs was put to the flame. A rest house belonging to a business partner of an Assad-era intelligence chief was attacked. A car belonging to another alleged crony from the Masharfa clan was burned. Security forces struggled to contain the mob, which by now no longer comprised entitled veterans and middle-aged returnees, but mostly young men not old enough to have witnessed the revolution directly and with no record of anti-Assad activism. Social media was filled with claims, counter-claims and bluster. At one point, the Busaray clan of Deir Ezzor used Facebook to threaten to march on the city in hundreds of SUVs should a business in the city that is half-owned by one of its members be torched.

Breaking the law

Palmyra had already shown itself capable of something quite rare: genuine local consensus. It was in fact the only election district in the country where the entire electoral college agreed unanimously to elect one candidate to represent the city in the People’s Assembly: Mahmoud al-Madoun. Being a respected lawyer from a well-educated family certainly helped; but so did having on his side an active and influential voice in civil society, perhaps the most influential: the *wujaha*, or ‘notables.’ These were uncles and fathers: the guardians of local custom.

What happened on the night of 15 June threatened to violate one important custom: that neither revenge nor compensation should be sought directly from the person responsible for an offence. Traditionally, the proper course was to approach his clan or family elders and present the case before them. They would then summon the accused and either defend him against the allegations or, more commonly, mediate a settlement under which he was spared physical harm. Because the grievance over profiteering and other nefarious wartime activities had not been raised formally with the relevant clan authorities, those who attacked the property of the reputed *shabiha* on the night of 15 June had broken with custom. Due process had not been followed. A violent tribal tit-for-tat looked likely, with malevolent actors like Islamic State taking advantage. Chaos threatened.

On 18 June the *wujaha* convened an urgent meeting at the Palmyra Museum with the principal security authorities, Internal Security (aka General Security), and the Syrian army’s 42nd Division (the local unit), to seek a lasting solution. Naturally, exile was high on the agenda. The initial suggestion was for the expulsion of ten *shabiha*, together with their families. The proposal, however, quickly unravelled once its practical consequences were considered: who would choose the ten names? Why them and not others? What about those who had amassed money and influence, then left the city? What about women and children? Would Palmyra accept exiling its own families, then reject families exiled elsewhere if they were sent to Palmyra?

A committee is born

The matter could not be solved in one sitting. The meeting gave rise to a ten-man committee of notables, security men and soldiers charged with finding a workable solution.

To explain the committee to a WhatsApp group of concerned citizens, one elder wrote:

“Under the supervision of the Internal Security office, the ten-member committee, including a representative of the 42nd Division, will examine the cases of shabiha and those accused of supporting the former regime, according to defined rules and procedures.”

The emphasis of the committee’s meetings quickly shifted towards fines and financial settlements imposed on those who had accumulated wealth through *shabiha* activity: not unlike what happened to business magnate Mohammad Hamsho.

The committee elder laid out the argument thus:

“The state already appears to follow a policy of making use of the wealth accumulated by the regime’s financial shabiha. Those who plundered the country’s resources should be fined, with the proceeds invested in public services. This would help revive the devastated city, where the state, in its present condition, is unable to finance any projects. A financial fund linked to the committee will be established to help improve the city’s dire conditions. This is a highly promising initiative, unprecedented elsewhere in the country, and could bring considerable benefits.”

Redistributive justice

Comprehensive individual compensation is almost impossible in a place like Palmyra where property claims overlap and the damage is huge. Putting fines into a local fund for services and infrastructure turns at least some of the money accumulated during the war into public benefit. The thinking goes that those who sided with Assad and enriched themselves at the city’s expense should help pay for its repair; and they would be left alone once they had settled their dues transparently and through the proper channels. Such arrangements, however, apply only to those accused of profiteering and of non-violent support for the Assad regime. It did not cover murder, torture, rape or informing that led to someone’s detention, abuse or death.

The committee resolved that those with blood on their hands would be referred to a newly-established “special office” within Internal Security. An investigation would be opened only when presented with a specific complaint and supporting evidence. This could lead

to legal action. Yet families and clans are often reluctant to accuse one another formally, fearing that matters could escalate into violent feud. Legal proceedings, meanwhile, also impose costs on both sides and risk becoming a battle lasting years.

What Palmyrans are saying is: if the state cannot deliver on transitional justice through the courts, the returnees and veterans will find other ways. Most would prefer a financial settlement reached through customary mediation overseen by competent state authorities (Interior and Defence), than a cumbersome legal process of uncertain outcome involving Assad-era judges.

Way to go?

As of 12 July, the Palmyra committee consisted of notables Mohammed al-Qash’am, Abu Bilal Qanbar, Nader al-Shu’aail and Jumaa al-Madiha. Four other notables had yet to be announced. Omar Juma’a, chief of staff of the First Brigade, was the 42nd Division’s representative on the committee. Sufian Abu Jaber, Palmyra’s Director of Internal Security, was expected to appoint his own representative as the committee’s tenth member. “A meeting is expected to take place in the coming days with the Internal Security chief to discuss the committee’s structure, finalise its membership and establish formal working procedures,” said a returnee veteran.

Some residents say Internal Security has been slow and bureaucratic in its dealings with the committee, seeing this as an attempt to “placate the street and delay a definitive resolution”, in the words of one cynical returnee. But perhaps the caution is warranted. The initiative requires coordination with government institutions and, crucially, a workable definition of who qualifies as a “*shabiha*”. There are killers, informants, thieves and financiers. But there are also former state employees, traders who adapted to those in power, and relatives who protected members of their own families. Leaving such distinctions to the street and the social media mob would produce retribution rather than justice.

The Palmyra committee offers an alternative, however imperfect. It brings together local notables and veterans – in effect, civil society – with representatives of the security forces and the army to create a local transitional justice mechanism with at least basic procedures and mutual oversight. In a country where the formal transitional justice process remains slow and its credibility uncertain, such improvised arrange-

ments may help keep social tensions in check and allow some form of reconciliation to take place.

But the experiment also exposes a fundamental dilemma. Reliance on customary mediation and financial settlements favours those with enough money to buy their way out of meaningful accountability. It may also weaken the official National Commission for Transitional Justice, whose seriousness and effectiveness remain open questions.

Palmyrans, however, cannot wait indefinitely for those questions to be resolved. Faced with anger among returnees, the threat of communal violence and a state justice system unable to provide timely answers, they are constructing a transitional justice process of their own – with the participation of state security and military institutions. In doing so, Damascus is not merely tolerating an improvised local solution that sidelines legal institutions; it may even be testing an approach to transitional justice that could be rolled out elsewhere.



After the war

Syria's Kurds and Turkmens are finding common cause in Damascus as they seek greater influence, representation and rights

A friendly meeting between Kurdish and Turkmen commanders Sipan Hemo and Fehim Issa would have been unthinkable not long ago. The two men were enemies who spent years fighting on opposite sides of Syria's war. Yet in April, they sat down together, marking a broader rapprochement between two of Syria's minorities. The shift remains poorly understood among ordinary Kurds and Turkmens, even as political and military elites from both communities cautiously pursue it.

They fought one another for years. Today, they serve as deputy defence ministers in the same Syrian government. Fehim Issa represents Syria's Turkmens

within the armed forces and is responsible for the Arab-majority north. Sipan Hemo represents Syria's Kurds and oversees the Arab-majority east. Their meeting in April marked a striking change in relations between two communities that spent much of the Syrian conflict on opposing sides.

The convergence is also visible at the local level. Kurdish civilians recently protested against the government's use of the official name Ayn al-Arab for the town they call Kobane. During the same week, Syrian Turkmen objected to the use of the official name Tel Hammam for the Turkmen town of Hammam Turkman. After years of mutual hostility, the two communities now find themselves making similar demands of Damascus.

Abdurrahman Mustafa, head of the Syrian Turkmen Assembly and a member of Syria's new parliament, told *Syria in Transition*: "We want to ally with the Kurds as we have overlapping interests in 80 percent

of our agenda. The 20 per cent difference was in separatist ambitions, but now that difference is waning with the shift in Syrian Kurdish politics.”

Past grievances

Fehim Issa and Sipan Hemo followed very different paths to the same position in government.

Issa, a Turkmen from Aleppo, was among the first rebel commanders to take up arms against the Assad regime. He formed the Sultan Murad faction under the banner of the Free Syrian Army. After Assad fell, Issa was amongst the rebel coalition that appointed Ahmad al-Sharaa president of Syria.

Hemo, a Kurd from Aleppo, was a senior figure in the YPG, the Syrian branch of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party, or PKK. He rose through the ranks of the YPG-led Syrian Democratic Forces. Following the integration agreement between Damascus and the SDF, Hemo was appointed deputy defence minister.

Their meeting in April was remarkable because the two men had spent years fighting on opposite sides in some of northern Syria’s fiercest battles. In 2016 Hemo’s forces, supported by Russian air power, cut the principal supply route used by Issa and other rebel factions into Aleppo. Two years later Issa was among the leading rebel commanders who captured Afrin with Turkish support, while Hemo oversaw the area’s defence. Issa described Hemo as a terrorist. Hemo called Issa a mercenary.

Their personal hostility reflected deeper conflicts between the communities they represented.

Syrian Turkmen generally viewed themselves as natural allies of Turkey. They were also the only ethnic minority whose principal political and military organisations supported the Syrian opposition throughout the uprising. Turkmen played an important role in both the political and armed struggle against Assad and paid a heavy price. Turkmen-populated areas of northern Latakia, particularly the Turkmen Mountains, were emptied by regime forces, Iranian-backed militias and Russian air strikes.

When Turkey intervened militarily in northern Syria against Islamic State and the YPG in 2016, many Turkmen fighters joined the operation as a matter of course. They also participated in Turkish-backed campaigns against the Kurdish-led SDF in 2018 and 2019. Over time, their influence within the armed opposition grew. By the

time Assad was overthrown, Syrian Turkmen commanded the Sultan Murad Division, the Sultan Mehmed Fatih Division, the Jabal Islam Battalion, the Hamza Division, the Vakkas Brigade, the Second Coastal Division, the Muntassir Billah Division and the Malek Shah Division.

Syrian Kurds meanwhile followed several different political and military paths. Some joined rebel groups such as the Levant Front, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham and Ahrar al-Sham. Others formed the Roj Peshmerga, which remained largely exiled in Iraqi Kurdistan. The largest Kurdish military force was the YPG, which Turkey and many Syrian opposition groups regarded as the Syrian branch of the PKK.

Some Kurds fought alongside Turkmen and Arab rebels against both Assad and the YPG. Yet the principal Kurdish armed force remained one of the Turkmen factions main enemies, second only to the Assad regime.

The divide extended into opposition politics. When Turkey supported the inclusion of Syrian Kurdish parties close to the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) in Iraqi Kurdistan within the Syrian National Coalition, Turkmen representatives opposed the move. Even after the Kurdish National Council (KNC) joined the coalition, Turkmen politicians continued to accuse it of seeking autonomy in Syria. The KNC, for its part, distrusted the Turkmen representatives and regarded them as proxies for a foreign agenda rather than independent Syrian actors.

Dawn of a new era

In June 2026, the Syrian Turkmen Assembly organised a conference in Damascus to discuss minority rights and the political demands of Syria’s different communities. Representatives of the Kurdish, Syriac, Assyrian, Circassian, Ismaili and Christian communities were invited and seated in the front row.

The Kurdish delegation included Ibrahim Biro of the KNC and, more surprisingly, Dr Abdulsalam al-Ahmad from the Democratic Union Party, or PYD. An encounter between senior Kurds and Turkmen that would once have appeared inconceivable passed largely unnoticed.

This rapprochement has emerged from the political realities created by Assad’s fall; and Syrian Kurds and Turkmen now face several similar challenges in their dealings with Damascus.

Both communities have demanded the appointment of local officials drawn from their own populations. Turkmens, for example, protested against the appointment of an Arab administrator to the predominantly Turkmen town of al-Rai. In that case, Damascus relented; but worries about Arab domination persist. Both Turkmens and Kurds, speak mother tongues other than Arabic and seek representation in the state bureaucracy as well as guarantees for their cultural and linguistic rights.

Kurds secured formal recognition of their cultural and linguistic rights through a presidential decree issued in January 2026. Turkmens have received no equivalent measure. Both communities nevertheless want their rights to be protected in the new constitution. They also support changing the country's official name from the Syrian Arab Republic to the Syrian Republic.

Demography poses a further challenge. Turkmens are dispersed across several parts of Syria and hold only seven seats in the new 210-member parliament. Kurds are concentrated in a smaller number of regions and hold ten seats. Neither group, by itself, has enough representation to exert significant influence over the drafting of Syria's constitution. A parliamentary alliance among minority representatives could give them greater leverage.

Similar calculations are taking shape within the armed forces. Sunni Arabs form the dominant bloc in the new Syrian army. Sunni Turkmens and Sunni Kurds are the only minority communities represented in significant numbers.

According to a Turkmen commander serving in the Syrian army, who spoke on condition of anonymity, SDF commanders undergoing integration have begun reaching out to Turkmen officers. Their aim is to create a counterweight to Arab dominance within the military establishment.

A new alliance?

Kurds and Turkmens carry a long history of mutual grievances. Perceived Kurdish separatism and the PKK's influence in Syria that runs counter to Turkey's interests and those of its allies have always been the key sources of disagreement. The integration agreement between Damascus and the SDF, together with the PKK disarmament process in Turkey, has begun to alter those calculations. Kurdish figures who once favoured separation are gradually scaling back their

ambitions. Turkmen leaders, in turn, are becoming more willing to engage with Kurdish actors they previously dismissed as terrorists.

The direction of this emerging relationship remains uncertain. Resistance within both communities could slow the rapprochement. External developments, including the possible collapse of the PKK disarmament as part of the wider peace process, could bring it to an abrupt end.

For now, Syrian Turkmen leaders are presenting the Kurds and other minorities with a clear proposition: to combine their shared interests and establish a stronger political bloc in Damascus to stand collectively against Arab domination.

The Turkmens believe they are well placed to lead such an alliance. Their factions played a prominent role in the uprising and developed close relationships with the new ruling elite. They also enjoy the support of Turkey, which retains considerable influence in Syria.

The Kurds bring a different set of assets to the table. Their position is strengthened by the SDF integration agreement, Ahmad al-Sharaa's presidential decree on Kurdish rights and their longstanding relationships with Western capitals.

During the war, Syria's Turkmens and Kurds were on opposite sides. The struggle to secure influence, representation and constitutional protection in the new Syria is now drawing their elites towards each other.



Follow the money

Hassan Akkad's arrest and Syria's new red lines

The arrest of prominent British-Syrian journalist Hassan Akkad sparked public outcry and a broader debate about the limits of free speech in Syria's emerging political order. His subsequent release shows that public pressure still carries weight in today's Syria. But the broader debate over the limits of free expression – that Western democracies, too, continue to wrestle with – has only just begun.

In the months after the fall of the Assad regime, Syria's transitional government promised a country where free speech was protected, going as far as to enshrine it in Article 13 of its constitutional declaration. Syria's Ministry of Information actively celebrated the country's increase in the Reporters Sans Frontiers World Press Freedom rankings and produced glossy videos about the ease of access to Syria compared with the Assad era. Despite some alarming signs, like foreign journalists being prohibited from accessing the coast during the massacres of March 2025, it was widely agreed that the country was witnessing an unprecedented opening for free expression. A common concern among journalists, media figures and ordinary Syrians alike, however, was that nobody knew where red lines, if any, actually lay.

The arrest of British-Syrian journalist Hassan Akkad on 17 May seems to have provided an answer, at least partly. Widely hailed as "Syria's Tourist Minister" in the early days of his fame, Akkad's tongue-in-cheek

videos about the idiosyncrasies of Syrian society won the hearts of netizens. Over time, his content veered more towards overt activism. On February 24, he posted a video as part of his new series, "English With Hassan", using war profiteers including Mohammed Hamsho to explain the phrase 'transactional justice'.

"You would think those three men should be in prison, but they're not. They paid some money, let go of some assets, and now they can work in Syria as free men," he says as he wraps up. He was referring to Hamsho's January 2026 financial settlement with the Syrian transitional government, under which assets reportedly worth around \$800 million were confiscated in exchange for reconciliation.

Mohammed Hamsho was known as the 'rubble king' for his theft of iron from houses in destroyed neighbourhoods. He was also known to be a key economic frontman for Maher al-Assad's Fourth Division. To-date, he remains sanctioned by the US government and European Union.

"Give us the money that you owe"

With the launch of his campaign "Give us the money that you owe," Akkad satirically called out public figures who were yet to pay donations they had pledged in flashy fundraising campaigns held a few months prior. Among those he targeted was Minister of Social Affairs and Labour Hind Kabawat and Fouad Sayed Issa, advisor to the Minister of Sports and Youth Affairs. Both welcomed the initiative and paid their dues.

According to Akkad's team, a turning point came when the campaign began explicitly targeting Mohammed Hamsho and companies affiliated with him. Ham-

sho's status was settled with the new government as part of a 'Voluntary Disclosure Program' under a newly established Committee to Combat Illicit Gains. Though economic settlements are common during political transitions – Colombia provides one example – the line blurs when it appears that those implicated in crimes have the opportunity to buy their way out of accountability. The illicit gains committee has been criticised for a lack of transparency. The speed with which Hamsho's case was resolved, together with the limited public information about the assets seized from him, invited the ire of Syrians who view Hamsho as an economic pillar that held up the Assad regime.

From the very start, Akkad called out Ahmed and Amr Hamsho, Mohammed Hamsho's sons, for not fulfilling their pledge of \$1 million towards reconstruction after their family settled their status and began to polish their image in public. Akkad's last video before announcing that he had been summoned by the Cybercrime Department and the Ministry of Information celebrated the withdrawal of the Chinese technology company Oppo from a deal with Itsal, a Syrian company owned by the Hamsho family. Earlier, he had also urged consumers to boycott the German soft drinks company Sinalco, whose Syrian operations are owned by the Hamshos.

The apparent connection between Akkad's criticism and the circumstances of his arrest raises the question of how far criticism is tolerated in the new Syria when it is directed at the powerful, not primarily political figures, but those who are financially well-off. Notably, Akkad's videos had previously criticised Syrian President Ahmed al-Sharaa himself for not paying the money he had publicly pledged, without facing repercussions. His case therefore illustrates the complex interplay between wealth, political influence and perceived loyalties in post-Assad Syria. It brings into the spotlight the opacity of the government's reconstruction and reconciliation policies at a time when public demands for transparency are growing.

To-date, the only known complaint against Akkad was filed by Mousa al-Omar, a businessman and media figure close to Syria's leadership. Yet, from the very day the complaint was filed, Akkad had noticed Hamsho's legal team monitoring his online activity. When he was summoned to the Cybercrime Department in Damascus, his legal team says they found themselves facing a lawyer representing United Industrial Investment Company – another name for Sinalco's Syrian operator. This followed informal settlement offers

from individuals who identified themselves as representatives for Mohammed Hamsho; all of which Akkad declined, refusing to meet anyone affiliated with the businessman. On 23 June his team publicly clarified that they were seeking \$2.1 million with regard to pledges made by Hamsho's sons and Yafour Hotel and Resort, another company linked to the family.

Akkad had also posted a [clip](#) of a meeting he had with the CEO of Sinalco, raising fears about a potential cancellation of their contract with Hamsho too. According to the team, the complaint against Akkad was processed 'unusually fast' – in just a couple of days when the process usually takes about two weeks. In an interview with SyriaTV, Akkad's lawyer, Amjad Sawan, explained that there were two complaints before the Cybercrime Department, although he declined to identify the complainants. According to Akkad's team, both originated from companies affiliated with Hamsho: United Industrial Investment and Retjenu Joint Stock Company.

Following his release, Akkad said that the Public Prosecution Office had explicitly refused to issue him with a criminal record certificate, telling him simply: "Because you are Hassan Akkad." If accurate, this suggests that he was treated as an exceptional case because of his public profile and his willingness to challenge authority. *Syria in Transition* has also learned that social media influencers, who constitute an important part of Syria's media landscape, were instructed not to comment publicly on Akkad's case.

Syria's 2022 cybercrime law

In a video statement, Hossam Khattab, the Attorney General of Syria, explained that Akkad was accused by al-Omar of defamation and online slander. He was detained under a 2012 Assad-era cybercrime law that had long been used to crush dissent and curtail freedom of speech online. The law was expanded in 2022, extending its scope to comments on social media pages and introducing harsher penalties for offenses such as defamation or undermining the state's prestige.

It is striking how – in a country scarred by years of war, with a litany of outstanding transitional justice cases – the authorities chose to expedite and prioritise Hassan Al-Akkad's case over others. During the same week, Syria witnessed riots and mob violence driven by frustration over the paucity of transitional justice. Although it is arguable that such cases fall under the jurisdiction of the transitional justice courts, the hate speech and online sectarian campaigns that accompanied those events would, under strict interpretations

of the cybercrime law, also constitute violations. Yet little action was taken.

Furthermore, as explained by the Attorney General himself, the case was referred to the Cybercrime Unit, which is tasked with tackling allegations that require technical or forensic analysis. Akkad's videos did not fit this description. According to a lawyer consulted by *Syria in Transition*, the case echoes a familiar practice under the Assad regime: restricting dissent while insisting that freedom of expression exists, provided it remains "within the limits of the law."

Akkad's case is not isolated. Other activists have also faced defamation complaints. On 2 June Yasser Abbas and Ibrahim Sheikh al-Shabab, who had campaigned for the repeal of Decree 66 – another Assad-era law – were arrested following a complaint by the Governor of Damascus alleging defamation. Increasingly, legal provisions once used by the Assad regime are being deployed by the new authorities against activists and critics.

In December 2025 American journalist Bilal Abdul Kareem, who spent most of the civil war in Idlib, was arrested after his coverage grew increasingly critical of President Ahmed al-Sharaa engaging with the United States. To-date, there are no updates on his arrest and he has effectively been forcibly disappeared. The contrast between the international outcry over Akkad's arrest and the relative silence surrounding Kareem's detention is revealing. It reflects the emergence of a new, internationally connected Syrian public sphere that was largely absent under the Salvation Government in Idlib. Many journalists, activists and civil society figures now maintain close links with international media, governments and advocacy organisations, making quiet arrests significantly more costly than they once were.

Re-examination of the law

Following Akkad's release, the Ministry of Justice announced the formation of committees to review a number of laws, including the cybercrime legislation, affirming its commitment to protecting public freedoms. The announcement was widely welcomed as a sign that the government was responsive to legitimate public concerns. By the end of June the Ministry had also announced procedural changes to the handling of cybercrime complaints, providing that most cases would be dealt with directly by the courts rather than the police, and that search warrants and pre-trial detention would be used more sparingly.

This, however, does not negate a broader pattern of expanding state control over freedom of expression and association. Following demonstrations in Damascus calling for the rule of law in early June, the Ministry of Interior introduced new regulations requiring prior authorisation for public protests: a committee of at least three organisers now needs to file an application for a permit that can take up to five days to be processed, which effectively bans spontaneous demonstrations.

In October 2025 the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour instructed NGOs to continue complying with Law 93, another Assad-era statute requiring government approval before receiving foreign funding. Most recently, the Ministry of Information announced six new restrictions on publishing and the media, including prohibitions on material deemed harmful to public morals or to the national economy. Taken together, these laws, regulations and administrative directives point towards an increasingly restrictive environment for journalists, activists and civil society organisations alike. At the same time, Akkad's release demonstrates that public pressure still carries weight in today's Syria. The emerging political order appears neither willing nor, perhaps, fully able, to suppress dissent in the manner of the Assad regime. Whether that reflects political choice or political constraint remains an open question.

The question of where legitimate free expression ends and unlawful incitement begins is, of course, not unique to Syria. Western democracies, too, continue to wrestle with prosecutions over offensive online speech. But in Syria, where debates over accountability, truth-seeking and reconciliation remain central to the transition, defining those boundaries will have especially profound consequences. That debate needs to deepen. For it to do so, a critical mass of Syrians must be willing to rally behind freedom of expression as a foundational principle, regardless of whose speech is at stake.



Who should hold Syria's evidence?

Why the IIIM should mediate the transfer of conflict documentation to national institutions

The way evidence relating to the fate of Rania al-Abbasi and her family reached Syria's National Commission for Missing Persons has sparked a broader debate about the responsibilities of civil society organisations holding conflict documentation. What Syria needs is a structured mechanism that enables processed documentation to reach national institutions while preserving fiduciary safeguards and evidentiary integrity. The IIIM is best placed to serve as the institutional intermediary between civil society organisations and Syrian authorities. Here is how that could work.

In late May 2026, Syria's National Commission for Missing Persons announced that it had reached corroborated conclusions, with a high degree of professional certainty, regarding the deaths of the six children of Rania al-Abbasi, who had been forcibly disappeared alongside their parents since March 2013. The Commission's findings rested on material that reached it through an *ad hoc* bilateral arrangement: 29 video clips stored on a USB drive, transferred in Brussels by a Syrian human rights organisation and subjected to more than two weeks of forensic analysis in coordination with relevant Syrian authorities.

The route those materials took may appear unusual. In reality, however, no established mechanism exists. Large amounts of evidence essential to truth and accountability remain in the custody of civil soci-

ety organisations outside Syria and reach Syrian institutions via arrangements negotiated case by case. No common framework governs the transfer of such material, defines the conditions under which it may be disclosed or regulates the necessary safeguards. The consequences can be dire when, for example, source-identifying information reaches state authorities without adequate redaction, or when breaks in the chain of custody undermine the evidentiary value of material in future judicial proceedings. What the al-Abbasi case brought into focus is the demand of families to learn about the fate of their relatives and the informal – and ultimately arbitrary – way in which evidence is handled.

Who owns the documentation?

Neither international nor Syrian law provide general rules allocating proprietary title over conflict documentation held by civil society organisations. Ownership can therefore only be discussed as a moral or ethical question. Legally, the relevant issues concern custody and how it is exercised: confidentiality, consent, data protection, chain of custody, and the conditions under which disclosure is lawful. The majority of civil society organisations appear to understand their role as that of custodians acting under obligations toward sources, victims and future accountability processes. What's missing is a shared custodial framework capable of replacing *ad hoc* arrangements with common principles. In the absence of those, duties that are widely recognised in principle are currently exercised through improvised bilateral arrangements. What worked in the case of the al-Abbasi disclosure is no suitable model for the tens of thousands of unresolved disappearances that lack comparable public attention.

Towards a custodial framework

What could a proper custodial framework look like? First of all, it must specify how responsibilities are allocated across the three institutional actors that currently make up Syria's documentation landscape: civil society organisations, the International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism for Syria (IIIM), and the institutions of the Syrian transitional state.

Any custodial framework has to reconcile four distinct interests. First is the right of victims and their families to truth, remedy, and reparation, reflected in UN General Assembly Resolution 60/147 (2005), the Basic Principles and Guidelines on the Right to a Remedy and Reparation. Although these obligations primarily bind states, they also weigh against the indefinite withholding of relevant information by any actor exercising custodial functions. Second is the fiduciary responsibility of organisations that collected documentation under commitments of confidentiality and source protection. Those obligations cannot simply be discharged through unconditional transfer to state authorities. Third is the broader public interest in preserving a coherent historical record of the conflict. Fourth is the need to safeguard evidentiary integrity for future judicial proceedings, including ongoing universal-jurisdiction cases in several European jurisdictions, where breaks in the chain of custody may affect admissibility.

These interests are complementary but not identical. None overrides the others, and none creates a unilateral entitlement to determine how documentation should be handled. A custodial framework must therefore be designed to balance them. Custodial responsibility differs from functional control because it is defined by duties rather than powers. Those exercising it must protect sources, preserve evidentiary integrity, respect confidentiality and facilitate lawful disclosure where this can be done safely. The IIIM's dual-consent mechanism is the closest existing institutional expression of this requirement. Before material is disclosed, both the holding organisation and, where applicable, the original source must consent. Properly understood, this mechanism is a safeguard for the fiduciary duties attached to custody. A future custodial framework should build on that principle. Organisations should refuse disclosure only where doing so is necessary to fulfil their fiduciary responsibilities – for example, to protect sources or preserve evidentiary integrity. Such decisions should be reasoned, documented, and, where appropriate, subject to independent review, while source consent and witness protec-

tion remain decisive wherever disclosure would create foreseeable risks.

The need for such a framework is illustrated by the al-Abbasi disclosure itself. The material reached Syrian authorities through a direct bilateral arrangement between a civil society organisation and the National Commission rather than through any structured institutional pathway that could provide independent assurance that fiduciary duties had been properly discharged. The framework outlined here seeks to fill that gap.

Staged implementation

The model proposed here is deliberately staged. In the short term, the most workable architecture would build on an expanded NGO-IIIM framework, with the IIIM acting as an intermediary between civil society organisations and Syrian national institutions – a role it does not currently perform despite its legitimacy. Established by the UN General Assembly in 2016 after the Security Council failed to refer Syria to the International Criminal Court, it was mandated to collect, consolidate, preserve and analyse evidence and to prepare files for future criminal proceedings. Since then, it has become the principal international repository and coordinator for evidence relating to crimes committed in Syria. Organisations would continue to transfer sensitive documentation to the IIIM under existing protective cooperation arrangements. In consultation with the originating organisation, the IIIM would then determine which processed, aggregated, or de-identified material could safely be shared with Syrian authorities for truth-seeking purposes, while retaining the original documentation for future prosecutorial use.

In the longer term, however, the framework should evolve toward direct Syrian custodial capacity. That transition cannot be rushed. The safe receipt and management of sensitive conflict-era documentation requires legal, institutional and technical safeguards that do not yet exist, and transferring material prematurely undermines the very accountability processes these institutions are intended to support. As of now, Syria lacks a national witness-protection framework consistent with its obligations under the Convention against Torture and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Secure infrastructure for receiving and storing sensitive documentation still needs to be developed. Whistleblower protections should be extended to conflict-era materials. Finally, judicial independence is still lacking, mak-

ing independent oversight of a domestic custodial system essential, potentially drawing on the field presence of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights and anchoring the framework's core safeguards in international standards, with Syrian legislation serving as the implementing layer rather than the primary guarantee.

Accountability as a feature

The IIIM's intermediary role would require institutional precision. Its mandate under General Assembly Resolution 71/248 is to collect, consolidate, preserve and analyse evidence and prepare files for fair and independent criminal proceedings before competent jurisdictions. Since its first visit to Syria in December 2024, it has begun engaging directly with Syrian authorities, but it does not yet have a permanent operational presence or an established role comparable to the framework proposed here. Some forms of structured disclosure to Syrian institutions may already be compatible with the existing mandate, provided consent, confidentiality and fair-trial guarantees are respected. A more formal intermediary role, however, would require host-state consent, institutional arrangements with Syrian authorities, additional resources and sustained political backing from UN member states. Formalising the IIIM's role in Syria would also provide an important accountability function. An intermediary that records what material is transferred, to whom and for what purpose, creates an institutional trail against which selective disclosure or selective prosecution becomes visible.

Clear obligations

A workable custodial framework would clarify the obligations of each actor. Civil society organisations cannot discharge their fiduciary responsibilities by retaining documentation indefinitely. Syrian institutions have a legitimate public mandate to investigate, preserve historical records and provide answers to families – a mandate that does not depend on electoral legitimacy in the same way as the exercise of criminal jurisdiction. But a public mandate does not, by itself, create safe custodial capacity, and demanding the transfer of sensitive documentation before such capacity exists is not a serious institutional position. International mechanisms, meanwhile, cannot substitute for national accountability; but they can provide the institutional bridge over which documentation moves safely toward judicial proceedings, truth-seeking processes, families and the historical record while national capacities are being built.

Ultimately, the success of any custodial architecture will be measured by routine institutional practice. The transfer of documentation such as the al-Abbasi file should become a matter of established protocol rather than improvised bilateral arrangements. Only then will the families of Syria's missing and forcibly disappeared have a predictable pathway to truth instead of depending on the visibility of individual cases or the discretion of particular organisations.



Integration blues

As opaque negotiations on SDF integration grind on, the city of Qamishli lives with parallel authorities, shrinking subsidies and growing uncertainty over who will govern next

How is the SDF integration process going? On the streets of Qamishli many people say they just don't know. Government forces, at least, are nowhere to be seen. A journey through the remnants of the Autonomous Administration shows just how long and bumpy the road to integration remains – and how the YPG and YPJ have retained their prestige even as the political project they fought for is slowly eroding.

Five months into the Damascus – SDF agreement signed on 29 January, on the streets of Qamishli the government is nowhere to be seen. A small contingent of Internal Security Forces (a.k.a. General Security) is now deployed to the city and is barracked inside a larger Asayish (Kurdish security forces) compound in what was formerly the Assad regime's "Security Square." From the street, only the blue banners of the Asayish fly above a US-supplied Humvee parked at the gate.

The absence of visible integration by the SDF into the central state now controlled by the former jihadists of HTS is accompanied by widespread uncertainty over how negotiations between the two parties are progressing. The 29 January agreement on general terms of integration was reached by President al-Sharaa and the small circle around him, on the one hand, and the secretive leading cadres – PKK veterans – of the SDF

on the other. The opacity and slow pace of the ongoing negotiations may protect both sides from popular dissent for now. Many people on the streets of Qamishli say they have no clue how integration is proceeding. The uncertainty is hardly confined to the north-east. In the [June wave](#) of Syria Poll, nearly two thirds of respondents in western Syria said they did not even know how to assess the government's handling of SDF integration. Eventually, however, the band-aid will have to come off: full implementation will require clarity over who governs Qamishli, who controls its security forces and where ultimate authority lies.

Bringing forces into the fold

While integration is not visible on the streets of Qamishli, some discernible progress has been made since January. For obvious reasons, the military file has been given priority. Four senior SDF cadres now hold leadership positions within the Syrian Ministry of Defense. These include Sipan Hemo, Assistant Minister for the Eastern Region, as well as Chiya Kobani, Luqman Khalil and Mahmoud Kobani, who now hold command positions within the army's 60th Division. The division is to include four new brigades of 1,300 SDF fighters each. The units formed so far remain garrisoned in areas under SDF control, divided between Qamishli, Hasakah, Derik/Malikiyah and Kobani. They are being sent one by one to Nabk close to the border with Lebanon for Ministry of Defense retraining. The Qamishli brigade has already completed the course, while the Derik brigade is currently undergoing it. The integration of around 10,000 Asayish members into the Ministry of Interior is at an earlier stage, with the latest reports indicating that Damascus is still vetting nominated candidates. On the ground, the Asayish police force continues to operate largely as before,

although its members are now also deployed alongside government security forces at joint checkpoints on the edges of areas still controlled by the SDF. The atmosphere at these checkpoints appears calm and cordial.

According to statements by Mazloun Abdi and other officials, the SDF, Asayish and civilian administration will not formally disband until the integration process reaches its final stage. Disputes remain over how many SDF and Asayish members will ultimately be absorbed into state institutions. Damascus wants to limit their number, while the SDF is demanding government employment for those who remain on its rolls. Beyond the roughly 6,000 fighters expected to join the 60th Division, SDF officials say another 7,000 remain outside the integration framework, not including the all-female YPJ, which Damascus continues to refuse to integrate into the Ministry of Defense, insisting that it could be integrated into the Ministry of Interior's established female police units. A further 9,000 Asayish members are likewise not currently included; and across the board, negotiations continue over whether higher ups will receive local leadership positions.

Righting past wrongs

Arguably the most consequential developments accompanying the integration process have been the naturalisation process initiated by Damascus to grant citizenship to stateless Kurds. Also important is the Ministry of Education's recent decision to recognise diplomas awarded by Autonomous Administration schools. The first stems from Presidential Decree No. 13, unilaterally declared on 16 January 2026, rather than from the integration agreement itself. If successfully implemented, however, it would address one of the Syrian Kurdish movement's longest-standing grievances: the consequences of the 1962 special census in Hasakah, which stripped tens of thousands of Kurds of citizenship and left hundreds of thousands of their descendants stateless.

The enduring dilemma of education under the Autonomous Administration also needed a solution. The Assad regime's curriculum was available only in schools located inside the regime-controlled security squares of Qamishli and Hasakah, while the alternative curriculum offered by the Autonomous Administration for more than a decade remained unaccredited. The latter has been allowed to continue for the next academic year (2026-27) while a new nationwide curriculum is being developed, with the SDF pushing

for a full Kurdish language curriculum to be retained. It remains to be seen whether the Ministry of Higher Education will similarly recognise degrees awarded by universities operated by the Autonomous Administration – and, if so, what reputation those degrees and institutions will have in the long term.

Parallel governance

The local face of the integration process is Hasakah Governor Nour al-Din Ahmad, nominated by the SDF and approved by Damascus. Ahmad, a Kurd from the prominent Xanika family of Qamishli, is an engineer by training who worked in the provincial bureaucracy before being dismissed in 2012 for anti-regime activity. He joined the YPG only afterwards. His background stands in marked contrast to that of the PKK cadres now serving in the Syrian Ministry of Defense. Some of those interviewed by *Syria in Transition* in Qamishli say that Ahmad was chosen because he had good relations with local Arab and other non-Kurdish communities. Others claim that it was because he was seen by Damascus and the SDF as a “soft touch” and the opposite of a confrontationalist, lacking an independent power base of his own.

Despite serving as governor for the past five months, Ahmad has yet to make public visits to parts of the province outside SDF control. Several provincial directorates, including Education and Health, operate headquarters in Hasakah city near his office. *Syria in Transition* was told, however, that the real weight of administrative power in the province has shifted south to Shaddadi, the largest city under Damascus's control in Hasakah province. There, authority rests with Damascus-appointed Deputy Governor Ahmad al-Hilali, a native of Qamishli from the mixed Arab and Kurdish Muhallami tribe, who was once affiliated with the Islamist group Ahrar al-Sham.

The arrangement is said to be temporary, pending further integration. For now, however, Ahmad symbolically presides over a province whose day-to-day administration is conducted either from a city he does not visit or by the remaining institutions of the Autonomous Administration. None of the provincial directorates operate offices inside Qamishli, and daily life continues to be governed largely as it was before January 2026. Yet uncertainty over the future of institutional integration has brought parts of the Autonomous Administration's work to a halt, particularly anything involving registration of companies. People ask whether a new business permit issued by the local administration will still be valid six months from now?

Approaching Qamishli from the west, one passes dozens of well-drilling trucks, some operating in fields and others parked along the main road. According to press reports, the Autonomous Administration has, unlike in previous years, allowed unregulated well drilling. This has been attributed partly to the heavy rainfall Syria experienced this winter and spring, but also coincides with permitting and regulatory bodies slowing down or suspending their work in anticipation of administrative reorganisation and integration.

A local analyst told *Syria in Transition* that “from the [Autonomous Administration] staff side they don’t really take their job seriously anymore because they are not sure if the [Damascus government] will keep them in these jobs... [and] on the people’s end, they find that the [Autonomous Administration] authorities are not ‘official’ anymore and that they need to be integrated [into the central state] to be legitimate, so they take advantage of this gap.”

The same institutional uncertainty is affecting the Autonomous Administration’s commune system, involving participatory councils from the neighbourhood to the provincial level. Established and overseen by PKK cadres, the communes have partially ceased to function. While they were criticised for lacking autonomous decision-making power and suffered from low participation, they nevertheless provided a mechanism for communal feedback and coordination and helped communicate local service needs.

To an outsider, Qamishli feels normal enough and much like the rest of Syria, aside from the different flags and security forces, as well as central Qamishli’s many pedestrian-only areas, including the old souqs; and the partially barricaded streets around church entrances. As in western Syria, conversations quickly turn to the poor economic situation and lack of work, though in recent months the deterioration has arguably been felt more acutely in the north east. Integration is not only about military forces and government offices. It also means incorporating the north east into Damascus’s economic model, replacing the substantial subsidies provided by the Autonomous Administration with the ideologically market-friendly policies of President Ahmad al-Sharaa.

Feeling the pinch

Consumer goods prices continues to rise in areas still under SDF control. Since officially taking over the Semalka crossing to Iraqi Kurdistan, Damascus has standardised customs duties to bring them in line with those imposed at Syria’s other border crossings.

For many goods, the new duties are significantly higher than those previously imposed by the Autonomous Administration, reflecting the transitional government’s heavy reliance on customs revenues.

Most significantly, gasoline has become sharply more expensive and simultaneously scarcer. Throughout June protests erupted in Qamishli after the Autonomous Administration cut subsidies to bring gasoline prices in line with those elsewhere in Syria – currently around \$1 – and ended fuel allocations previously provided to various service providers. The effects were immediate. Numerous minibuses stopped running, water-delivery trucks suspended operations and neighbourhood generators shut down. Residents have been forced to reduce their electricity subscriptions to keep the lights on, with 24-hour access to one ampere now costing \$25 a month.

Alongside the price increases, the gasoline market has experienced significant supply shortages, which in recent weeks have also affected government-controlled parts of eastern Syria. In Qamishli, several explanations are offered. One is that production from local oil fields has been diverted to other parts of Syria. Representatives of the state-owned Syrian Petroleum Company are now present at some of these fields, while seven were recently taken over by the US-based company HKN. Another explanation is that subsidised gasoline was being purchased in SDF-controlled areas and resold in government-held territory, where prices were considerably higher.

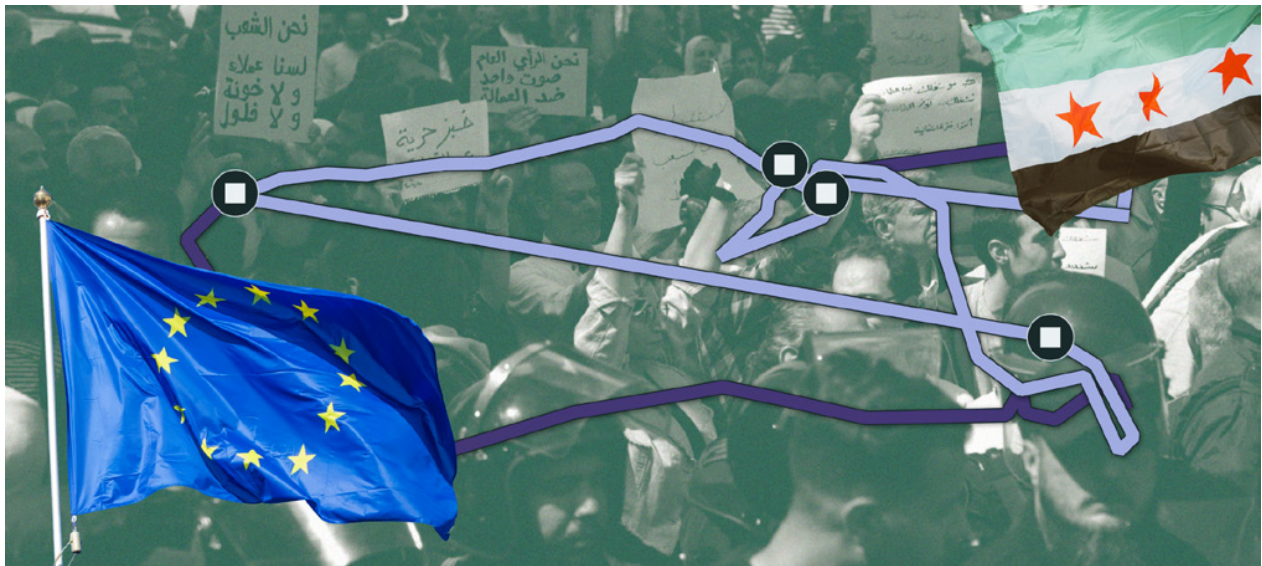
The long road to integration

Beyond these immediate material concerns, many locals have serious misgivings about integration and the prospect of coming under the full control of Damascus. While some have travelled to and from western Syria over the past year and a half, many have not and, rightly or wrongly, continue to view the transitional government as largely run by cut-throat jihadists, as evidenced by last year’s massacres on the coast and in Suwayda. When arriving in Qamishli from Damascus, one is frequently asked what life is like under the transitional government. At the same time, few people want a return to war or the north east’s current limbo to continue indefinitely. Attitudes towards Damascus range from begrudging acceptance to outright hostility. Measures to grant citizenship to stateless Kurds and recognise Autonomous Administration diplomas are naturally welcomed, but they’re widely regarded as a necessary baseline for government behaviour. Trust sufficient to outweigh concerns has not yet been built.

Contrary to the frequent conflation of “the Kurds” with the SDF and its political project, Qamishli offers no single Kurdish view of the key actors. The SDF, now largely reduced to its Kurdish YPG and YPJ core, is regarded by many as a force that protected the Kurdish community and remains a source of nationalist pride. The Autonomous Administration, by contrast, is widely criticised for poor service provision – with both Kurds and Arabs in the north east each accusing it, interestingly, of favouring the other in the distribution of investment. The PYD, the local PKK affiliate at the centre of the political system, remains deeply polarising. Without reliable survey data, its actual level of support is impossible to measure, although it appears to be the most popular individual party in the

Kurdish political landscape. Its rivals remain divided, despite many of them being formally allied within the Kurdish National Council.

Yet even some who favour the PYD question how much the party itself now matters. The decisive negotiations with Damascus are not being conducted by party leaders, local councils or the public, but by Mazloum Abdi and the small circle around the SDF leadership. Political parties and the population at large remain firmly in the back seat of the integration process, left to speculate about the terms of an agreement negotiated above their heads while they watch bodies that had governed their lives for over a decade slowly losing authority.



Roadmap to where?

The EU reconfigures its relationship to Syrian civil society

The European Union's new Roadmap for Civil Society Engagement marks a break in how Brussels approaches Syrian civil society: away from viewing it as a social movement and political force shaping state formation; and towards framing it as a local stabilisation actor that serves as a feedback loop between communities and state authorities.

The EU's treatment of Syrian civil society has always been ambiguous. During the war, Brussels portrayed

civil society as the precious core of Syrian public life that required and deserved support so that something healthy might survive – and flourish – despite the devastation wrought by the Assad regime. At the same time, however, the EU and its member states continued to recognise Assad as the representative of the Syrian state, thereby granting his regime the political recognition and status it desperately needed.

The updated Roadmap breaks with the EU's special relationship with Syrian civil society as a force challenging government legitimacy. Since Brussels now embraces friendly relations with the government of President Ahmad al-Sharaa, European activities in Syria are to be framed as strictly “complementary” – a nod to state sovereignty and a condition for access. The roadmap's stated objective is to provide action-

able recommendations to the EU, other donors and Syrian civil society on how the latter can become more effective and how external support can be better aligned to that end.

Scaling back ambitions

In its contextual analysis, the new roadmap notes that Syrian civil society organisations (CSOs) often limit their activities to service delivery, and have few opportunities to influence policy or represent community priorities. It consequently argues that “recognising CSOs as governance actors are [sic] therefore critical to more inclusive and responsive decision-making processes.” That sounds like good news for EU-aligned civil society actors and for the localisation agendas championed by donors and the United Nations, through which much of the EU’s support is channelled. It also appears consistent with existing EU notions concerning civil society, which describe it as contributing to “more open and deeper democracies” and that require supported organisations to commit themselves to freedom and equal rights.

The 2023 roadmap had identified “Deliberative Democracy” as a key priority, describing civil society as a force to push for democratisation, promote a “peace and justice agenda”, and organise “across political divides” in order to become a collective social and political actor. That is now gone.

The new roadmap applies a much narrower understanding of what it means to be a “governance actor”, reducing the role pretty much to acting as a local-to-institutional feedback loop. There is little consistency, however, in how governance and decision-making are understood throughout the document. One impact statement speaks of “shared decision-making”, implying some degree of shared authority over policy or programming. Yet an adjacent ‘outputs’ section describes something considerably weaker: community input reaching decision-makers. The roadmap leaves open whether “shared decision-making” refers to CSO networks, local councils, municipalities, ministries, donors, or all of these.

The bottom line is nevertheless clear. The EU’s previously articulated vision of Syrian civil society as a social movement and constituent actor in state formation has given way to one of local stabilisation and consultation that lay “the foundation for future democratic reform.”

Technical responses to political constraints

It is their role of intermediary between state authorities and local communities that the roadmap presents as a defining strength of Syrian civil society. The document describes CSOs as “active, adaptive, and locally legitimate”. Yet the qualitative and quantitative data collected for the roadmap only partially supports this claim. Only 18 per cent of community members rated CSO responsiveness as strong, while 43 per cent described it as weak. Just 39 per cent said they felt their voices were being relayed – relayed, not necessarily considered – in decision-making processes (without any clarity as to the identities of those decision-makers). Respondents further described CSO feedback mechanisms as “ink on paper”. Community members and surveyed INGOs pointed to “tokenism in dialogue forums”, a preference for photo ops, marginalisation of women and youth, and a broader perception that CSOs are not “credible spaces for shared decision-making”. Public authorities, meanwhile, are portrayed as engaging only for appearances’ sake.

The local legitimacy that the roadmap attributes to civil society appears to derive primarily from its service-delivery role. This stands in contrast to the self-perception of surveyed CSO leaders, who describe their organisations as vehicles for representation, civic agency and collective expression. The data thus points to a significant gap between how civil society organisations understand their own role and how they are perceived by the communities they claim to represent. In reality, respondents do not necessarily see CSOs as vehicles for the “transparent and accountable governance” and civic empowerment that EU definitions of civil society emphasise. On the contrary, the roadmap itself quotes interviewees describing civic action as tolerated only so long as it does not cross certain lines related to rights, accountability and political participation. It further notes a “pervasive sense of fear and self-censorship”.

Given how much the findings point to substantial political constraints on civic action, it is surprising that the roadmap concludes that “the core challenge is not a lack of civic action, but the fragility of the systems needed to sustain it, shaped by fragmentation, donor-driven competition, and weak long-term sustainability.” The roadmap correctly observes that the problems facing Syrian civil society are “systemic, not technical”. Yet its recommendations remain technical in nature and aligned with related dimensions of localisation agendas: improving funding modalities, strengthening coordination mechanisms and

increasing local participation in programme design and implementation. Such measures may be useful, but they do little to address the systemic political conditions that the roadmap itself identifies as limiting civic agency.

Civic actors continue to operate without a clear legal framework defining their rights and obligations, within a political system that lacks democratic legitimacy, whose future trajectory remains uncertain, and in which many organisations already describe marginalisation, fear and self-censorship. If the al-Sharaa government ultimately delivers a transition that provides freedom and rights, then the broad alignment between the government and the EU-supported civil society ecosystem to which the roadmap relates may prove workable. If, however, Syria moved in a more authoritarian direction that no longer aligned either with the aspirations of a critical mass of civil society organisations or with the EU's own normative commitments, civil society would once again become an adversary of the state. The roadmap does not consider this possibility.

The politics of civil society

Another of the roadmap's limitations is its superficial treatment of who and what actually constitutes Syrian civil society. Most of the study is based on networks linked to Search for Common Ground, one of the organisations commissioned to produce the roadmap. It is therefore reasonable to assume that the organisations surveyed broadly belong to the internationally connected segment of Syrian civil society. This leaves unclear the position of organisations that do not present themselves in liberal terms, but nonetheless represent significant social constituencies. Some may hold positions that are incompatible with EU guidelines and funding criteria, but they remain part of Syria's civic landscape. This matters because donor support is never politically neutral. Donors must decide which actors receive funding and which do not, thereby influencing local power relations. Such decisions require formulated political goals, which the roadmap lacks.

The roadmap also avoids the sensitive but very relevant question of power. A closer examination of Syrian organisations that control significant flows of aid and assistance would reveal that they are deeply embedded in the country's most important structures of social organisation: families, clans, and tribes. Rather than viewing civil society organisations primarily through the lens of idealised grassroots mobilisation,

analysis should also recognise them as economic and political instruments operating within these broader social orders. That would certainly help explain many phenomena identified elsewhere in the roadmap: gatekeeping, corruption, internal power imbalances and the gap between how communities and CSO leaders perceive civil society organisations. The recommendations section perhaps suggests some understanding of this issue when it says that "power asymmetries within networks" need to be addressed; and that its evidence base is "insufficient to fully capture complex dynamics", including power relations and perceived legitimacy. Yet this raises the question of whether a meaningful roadmap can be submitted without such crucial information.

Unclear destination

The roadmap's teleological assumption is that Syria is moving toward a liberal-pluralist political order and that civil society's role is to support that trajectory. That framing, and the roadmap's avoidance of questions of power, may be part of the game of securing access in today's Syria; but the history of external engagement should serve as a warning. Political questions that are central to freedom, rights and dignity have systematically been pushed aside once development-champions became dominant voices. With that in mind, the roadmap's designation of economic recovery as the primary entry point for civil society engagement raises familiar concerns. It doubles down on the service-delivery role of CSOs, and past experience suggests that once funding starts flowing, the more headache-producing political ambitions tend to be put on ice. Worryingly, the roadmap does not identify the reduction of political constraints on civil society as a central strategic objective, despite itself documenting many of those constraints.

The EU's past relationship with Syrian civil society had a clear normative-political basis. It combined the role of CSOs in delivering life-saving assistance and acting as stabilisation actors with a political role in advancing human rights and democratic change, at both the local and national level. The new roadmap retreats from that ambitious, and perhaps unrealistic, vision without offering a coherent alternative. Its unspoken destination appears to be simpler and more modest: stability today, democracy perhaps tomorrow. Whether those two objectives ultimately reinforce one another is left unexplored.



Who fears the autonomous citizen?

The political struggle over Syria's classrooms

The Syrian government has committed to turning schools into places where children not only learn maths and history, but also that they are entitled to human rights. How seriously educational reform is implemented will be a sharp indicator of where the country is heading. What degree of change can be expected?

In the first two parts of this series, we showed how education under the Assad regime was designed to narrow the mental horizons of young Syrians to fit the regime's dogma, and how schools functioned as boot camps for life in Assadist Syria's corrupt social order. Through their reach into everyday life, they reproduced authoritarianism at the micro level.

In post-Assad Syria, the transitional authorities have stripped away the outer varnish of Assadism from schools. As we have shown, however, authoritarian structures deeply institutionalised over decades – both within schools and across Syrian society – have a way of enduring. Schools are among the smallest everyday units through which the state becomes tangible. The degree to which the new authorities genuinely address these authoritarian structures is therefore one of the sharpest indicators both of the current state of Syria's transition and of the kind of country they intend to build. The Syrian desire for change is real: in the June wave of [Syria Poll](#), we asked whether

Syrian schools should teach democratic values. A clear majority of 68 per cent supported the idea, while only 18 per cent opposed it.

Merits of reform

An educational culture that strengthens students' tolerance of ambiguity, their capacity for criticism and their ability to engage in reasoned disagreement is critical to the emergence of a generation of more autonomous citizens equipped with the tools for independent judgement. There is certainly an economic rationale that can be described in neoliberal terms. Syria needs human capital capable of driving the urgently needed modernisation of both the state and the economy. An education system built on humiliation and the rehearsal of dogma is poorly suited to preparing young Syrians to assess complex situations and develop innovative solutions. There is also a rationale rooted in reconciliation and broader post-conflict stabilisation. A more balanced engagement with history and politics would challenge the reductive patterns of victimhood, the resulting sense of entitlement to domination and the authoritarian temptations that continue to plague Syria. This is not to suggest that education alone can heal the wounds of war or overcome the intergenerational trauma it has produced. It can, however, help prevent that trauma from reproducing itself by exposing students to multiple perspectives and ways of interpreting conflict beyond sectarian and political one-sidedness.

Healthy authority

Closely related to stabilisation and development is the reinvention of authority itself. The experience of Assadist rule makes clear that enforcing obedience and social advancement through violence did lit-

tle to persuade people to participate willingly in the political order, accept its rules as legitimate, or build a socially, economically and politically sustainable country. In effect, the system carried its own expiration date, since school was one of the everyday institutional sites through which the Assad regime steadily discredited itself. Research in developmental psychology suggests that authority is durable when it is perceived as legitimate rather than merely coercive. “People are likely to accept authority when they feel they belong to a community that respects their dignity, applies rules equally and offers fair procedures for resolving disagreement,” a psychologist told *Syria in Transition*, stressing that the human drive for social belonging is a fundamentally positive resource.

Yet authority is not exercised by the state alone. “The flesh is yours, the bones are ours” was what many parents told teachers when handing over responsibility for disciplining their children. The phrase captures how coercion was delegated to schools as preparation for life under authoritarianism. This raises the broader question of how far political authoritarianism was reproduced through patriarchal social structures. Rethinking authority therefore concerns not only the state, but also the family. That can be a tough nut to crack. As one teacher told *Syria in Transition*: “Convincing fathers that the way they raise their children belongs to a different era is like trying to convince someone to fish in the Sinai desert.”

Neither families nor schools, however, can sustainably cultivate healthy authority if the wider political order rewards the opposite. Healthy authority can only emerge within a political order whose laws apply to everyone and whose rules can be shaped through transparent and participatory processes. Raising students who are prepared to demand, defend and practice those values would be a tremendous asset to state- and nation-building. If not, there is an inherent conflict of interest. A government unwilling to tolerate freedom of opinion, freedom of expression and genuine political participation has little incentive to educate generations of autonomous citizens capable of questioning authority.

Paper and reality

The Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour, under Hind Kabawat, published Syria’s “National Early Childhood Development Strategy” together with UNICEF in May 2026. On paper, the document is ambitious. It states that education “plays a pivotal role in introducing individuals to their other rights” and is the “stage where

children acquire the values and skills, and establish the standards that shape their personality and future identity.” It commits to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, both grounded in liberal conceptions of individual rights. The UN Country Team in Syria told *Syria in Transition* that its work supports key competencies such as critical thinking and is guided by the “best interests of children.”

That all sounds reassuring, but scepticism is warranted. Across the world, authoritarian governments from China to Saudi Arabia have adopted education strategies aligned with UNICEF and UNESCO frameworks, including the Sustainable Development Goals, that emphasise critical thinking, creativity and human rights. In practice, however, critical thinking tends to be reduced to a cognitive skill that enables engineers to solve technical problems rather than a civic virtue that encourages citizens to question political authority or challenge official historical narratives. Authoritarian governments want human capital without human emancipation.

This pattern could well repeat itself in Syria. Official commitments to emancipatory education allow the government to appeal to the donors on whom it materially depends. They also help further normalise the new authorities internationally, while allowing UN agencies to secure funding and continue their competitive, prestigious and, ultimately, lucrative business models. Meanwhile, monitoring remains notoriously incomplete and accountability limited. Syria’s precarious situation also makes it easy to argue that the emancipatory dimensions of education simply require more time – and more funding – because the country is still recovering. The importance of those dimensions for a peaceful recovery and a sustainable future is evident. Yet it is equally understandable that, for everyone involved – from donors and implementing organisations to students and their parents – the immediate priority is simply to fill classrooms again, while the deeper questions of how, by whom and to what end children are educated are postponed. That priority, however, must not become a knockout argument against those who point to the profound social and political dimensions of education. The way the educational ecosystem is framed politically and managed technically tells a great deal about the power structures behind the institutions that will shape generation after generation of Syrians.

Cloudy forecast

A cautious forecast would be that donors are likely to continue funding the sector with a primary focus on stabilisation, while avoiding political conflict over the nature of education itself – a subject the government in Damascus is likely to treat as one of national sovereignty. For most Syrians, meanwhile, simply getting children into school and enabling them to obtain a diploma will remain the understandable priority, regardless of the content – visible and hidden – of the curriculum.

A further challenge, crucially relevant for social stability, is posed by the trauma suffered by children during the civil war. Many Syrian children return to school after being exposed to violence, displacement, and years of interrupted learning. A teacher may encounter a child who has lost a father and spent years collecting scrap for money instead of carrying a school bag. Beyond better training and higher pay, the profession needs trauma-sensitive pedagogic skills. This does not mean turning teachers into therapists. It means equipping them to recognise distress, respond without retraumatising students, and help provide a social space in which a child can experience a few hours of stability, orientation and reliability.

“What is crucial is that teachers recognise the different symptoms of post-traumatic stress and understand them as expressions of experiences that a child has been unable to process,” a trauma therapist told *Syria in Transition*. “At their core, these symptoms are a cry for help. Teachers need to understand that rather than simply trying to correct individual behaviours. Ideally, they can help children find words for what they have experienced. Movement and creative activities also provide forms of expression. This does not require elaborate therapeutic programmes and can begin with simple activities in the classroom.”

Beyond these immediate educational concerns, maintaining a “business as usual” approach will alienate those within revolutionary circles who, in the earliest phase of the uprising, regarded the freedom to learn, debate and think openly as one of the revolution’s central aspirations. Many practised that freedom in discussion circles before the war escalated and they were killed, displaced or forced into mere survival. It is also likely to alienate many Syrians in the diaspora, particularly in Europe, who have experienced different educational cultures and are unlikely to want anything less for their own children. History suggests that profound educational reform rarely comes from

above. More often, it begins from below, in opposition to established authorities, as people create spaces in which different ways of learning and teaching can be practised – from Poland’s Flying University in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to the American civil rights movement. In Syria, the rapidly expanding private school sector may become one such space. Although formally part of the education system, many private schools already cater to political and economic elites – including the children of ministers – and face growing demand from parents seeking more European-style education.

One can only hope, however, that Syria’s different currents, with their competing visions of educational reform, will eventually also be able to carry those debates into formal politics, organising in parties and contesting their ideas peacefully once Syria permits such political life to exist.