

# Syria in Transition



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

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## Reconstruction-lite

UN introduces Early Recovery Trust Fund

After a long wait, the UN has finally unveiled to donors and partners its Early Recovery Strategy 2024–28 document, calling for the creation of an Early Recovery Trust Fund (ERTF). This new fund will be based in Damascus and will operate under the direct leadership of the UN Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator (RC.) Key features, it is claimed, will be greater “operational flexibility” and “longer timeframes.”

ERTF's creation started with one man: Martin Griffiths. As head of OCHA, he seized on last year's earthquake to reach out to Bashar Assad and convince him of the need for a genuine give-and-take process. According to informed sources, early recovery was much discussed. Griffiths is said to have suggested that a new fund would attract Gulf money as it would have fewer red lines than the Syria Humanitarian Fund (SHF) and the Syria Cross-border Humanitarian Fund (SCHF) that support activities in line with the UN's Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP.)

Efforts to empower the Damascus-based RCs over control of early recovery assistance actually date back to 2016/17. They've been consistently pushed by the UN country team (CT) ever since. In 2019, the UN system underwent reforms that separated the positions of RC and UNDP country representative. This stripped the RCs of significant leverage as they no longer held sway over UNDP funds. Adam Abdelmoula, however, who was appointed RC in May 2023, is a strong advocate of introducing a more developmental model to early recovery, which chimes with the ERTF's formula.

Former UNDP colleague Abdallah al-Dardari, meanwhile, was appointed in March 2023 as UNDP's Assistant Secretary-General, Assistant Administrator, and Director of the Regional Bureau for Arab States. Sourced

es say that Dardari plans to expand the early recovery budget to \$500 million – a 500 per cent increase on funding currently provided in the 2023 HRP budget. This would turn early recovery into *the* defining feature of the humanitarian response in Syria.

### Structural flaws

The UN's plans to turbo charge early recovery in Syria are ambitious but flawed. They are not as humanitarian as the marketing claims. The UN's Syria country team (CT) continuously pushes the boundaries of what falls under early recovery assistance. Insisting that the ERTF is purely humanitarian allows the CT – at least in the short and medium terms – to resist subjecting UN funds to political negotiations and conditionalities. More importantly, it allows the CT to bypass US and European sanctions while reassuring sceptical donors who say that development and reconstruction money is inherently political. The ERTF introduces electricity as the “cross-cutting enabler of early recovery across all core priority areas,” making it an effective vehicle for activities that go beyond even generous definitions of what constitutes “humanitarian assistance.” The Early Recovery Strategy 2024–28 includes not only rehabilitation but the “expansion” of water supply facilities, suggesting potential major infrastructure projects worth hundreds of millions of euros.

Structurally, the CT attempts to centralise power in the Damascus-based Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator (RC.) The ERTF will be spearheaded by UN agencies overseen by the RC who are meant to lead a “Whole of Syria Approach” from offices in Damascus. This risks sidelining the nuanced needs and perspectives of areas outside the Assad regime's control – a not inconsiderable 40 per cent of Syria. Also missing in the strategy paper is reference to UNSCR 2254 or consideration of the crucial political dimensions of early recovery assistance, thorough political context and risk analysis are thus absent.

A further problem are plans to put the ERTF's Risk Management Unit under the authority of the RC, undermining the independence it needs to function correctly. The ERTF's steering committee, co-chaired by the RC and the Regional Humanitarian Coordinator (HC), comprises UN agencies, INGOs, and donors. Described as consensus-based, the ultimate decision-making authority lies with the RC and HC, allowing them to override donor concerns. This should worry donor capitals who expect a meaningful say in how their tax-payer's euros and dollars are spent.

### Blurred lines

Early recovery is a useful framework for projects that bring much-needed medium- and -long-term relief to Syrian civilians. To check the ‘Do No Harm’ box, however, early recovery must be implemented independently and equitably in all parts of Syria. With that in mind, the UN's justification for creating a cost-intensive new fund is not convincing. A five-year funding period and more integrated area-based activities – the ERTF's unique selling points – could feature within the existing HRP framework, under which the definition and limits of early recovery assistance in Syria are more clearly spelt out. Setting up parallel structures suggests that Gulf countries might be the target donors for the ERTF. In its current form, the ERTF risks contributing to a two-tier humanitarian response: a premium version for Assad regime areas and a basic one for the rest of Syria.

In seeking to avoid clear demarcation on where early recovery programming ends and reconstruction begins, the UN risks damaging core humanitarian principles. The formula of “we only rehabilitate, we do not rebuild” is not practical in the Syrian context given the scale of destruction.

Defining a limit to coordination and cooperation with Syrian authorities is sensible; but the ERTF is not at all clear on this issue. The Early Recovery Strategy 2024–28 briefly mentions partnership and cooperation with municipalities; but the reality today is that project applications submitted at the municipality level are discussed by the High Relief Committee, which is headed by the Ministry of Local Administration and Environment and the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor (both positions are targeted by EU sanctions) and includes Asma Assad's Syria Trust for Development (STD) and the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC). Additional direct engagement with ministries is not obligatory to obtain approvals but is certainly “helpful”, practitioners say. The plans for early recovery activities outlined by the UN country team require a degree of centralised governance that local communities and civil society organisations (CSOs) alone cannot provide, even if the regime allowed it. In this light, it is unsurprising that the Early Recovery Strategy 2024–28 pays lip service to local empowerment; but the ERTF does not provide any modalities to fund local partners directly, instead prioritising funding through UN-partnered INGOs.

The comprehensive recovery that the ERTF aims to achieve entails coordination and cooperation with Syrian authorities in a way that, intended or not, legitimises them. It's not just about inherent political recognition, but the ability to provide services: a major source of power in the Syrian conflict. The ERTF project requires a clear definition of scope, distinct from reconstruction; and must be subject to political understandings, arising from negotiation and consensus, that early recovery funds will be distributed equitably in all areas of Syria.

Over the last decade the Assad regime has been able to exert tremendous pressure on the UN country team. Any new humanitarian architecture must shield the UN from further bullying and manipulation. Donors who overlook whether the UN's case for creating a new fund is credible, should at least insist on improving its structure in terms of truly independent assessments, safeguards, and checks and balances regarding decision-making, vetting, and monitoring. The goal should be to avoid the kind of aid diversion and politicisation that has damaged the credibility of the UN's humanitarian aid response and discouraged donors. In principle, the ERTF has potential; but its design risks a repetition of too many mistakes – and on a much larger and more damaging scale.

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## What Trump will do in the Middle East

A conversation with Joel Rayburn

To learn more about the Assad Regime Anti-Normalisation Act and what sort of Middle East policy can be expected from the next US administration should Donald Trump win, *Syria in Transition* spoke with Joel Rayburn. Mr Rayburn is a retired US Army officer and historian who served as US Special Envoy for Syria from 2018–21.

**The Assad Regime Anti-Normalisation Act is expected to pass the Senate this year or next. Is there a risk that it could end up as a tool that nobody uses?**

Rayburn: Right now, the US government is authorised to use pressure tools against the Assad regime –

but it is not obligated. The Anti-Normalisation Act will change that. The simple fact that the Act passed the Foreign Affairs Committee and the House of Representatives with overwhelming support has clarified that the Congress wants a pressure approach towards the Assad regime. I can't think of any other foreign policy issues where you can get so many members of Congress to agree on a particular foreign policy approach. Hence I don't think it is likely that a future US administration will choose to take a position that is at variance with Congress on this question.

**In the event of a passive approach from the White House, what means does Congress have to pressure the administration?**

Rayburn: Congress can issue explicit instructions and specific guidelines. What the Anti-Normalisation Act essentially does is prohibit the US executive branch from using any resources to establish normal relations with the Assad regime until certain conditions are met. Congress controls the government's budget and can thus determine what policy the US executive branch is able to carry out. This is pretty absolute.

**Does that mean that we can expect that the Caesar Act will be fully unleashed soon?**

Rayburn: Unfortunately the current administration has chosen not to enforce the Caesar Act and other sanction authorities that Congress gave it to pressure the Assad regime, the Iranian regime, Hezbollah, and to some extent the Houthis. A foreign policy that is so far out of step with the vast majority of members of Congress is not going to survive the current administration.

**Comparing a new administration under Donald Trump to one under Joe Biden, what differences in approach to Syria policy are likely to emerge?**

Rayburn: The Obama administration refrained from using all of its available pressure tools against the Assad regime in the 2013–16 period. That was done in the interest of striking a nuclear deal with Iran. In 2021, the Biden administration from the first days in office chose to go back to that approach even though it is absolutely ineffective and has made the situation in the region worse. What the current administration would call deescalation or détente, many in Congress and beyond would call counter-productive appeasement.

From 2017–21, the Trump administration pursued a policy of pressure that was in line with Congressional intent. The Trump administration's priori-

ty was to apply pressure through an economic-political approach, including strict enforcement of US sanctions along with hard work to deepen the Assad regime's political isolation. US military pressure on the Assad regime was only indirect, except for the cases in which the US, once on its own and once in a coalition, responded with force to Assad's use of chemical weapons. A new Trump administration can be expected to continue where it left off, because President Trump's pressure approach was working well until the Biden administration made the misguided decision to halt it in early 2021.

**How do you see the Arab normalisation with Assad going forward?**

Rayburn: The Arab countries' normalisation outreach to Assad has already failed. None of the conditions that the Arab countries said they wanted to achieve has been met. It has even been counterproductive because the Assad regime actually doubled down on narcotrafficking and all sorts of smuggling. Jordan is now in a frontier war with gangs, militias, and the Assad regime itself. The Assad regime has abused the good faith gesture of Arab countries and continues to take steps designed to destabilise them. It is pretty clear that this failed normalisation outreach will not continue.

**Nevertheless, in February 2024 Jordan announced the establishment of a new committee to coordinate efforts against narcotrafficking with Iraq, Lebanon, Egypt, and the Assad regime. Does that mean that lessons have not been learned?**

Rayburn: I don't think the Jordanians or any other Arab country is under illusions about what they are dealing with in the Assad regime. The whole normalisation outreach initiative was done out of desperation in the absence of US leadership from 2021 onward. Before 2021, the major Arab and European countries had fully bought into the pressure approach President Trump had taken. When the Biden administration signalled that it was downgrading its involvement in Syria, the rest of the Arab countries began weighing options. I always thought the normalisation outreach was an exercise in futility, but I couldn't disagree with their complaints about a lack of US leadership under the Biden administration.

**How has the Gaza war influenced Iran's regional posture, and can a Trump administration be expected to go back to a pressure approach on Iran, too?**

Rayburn: For the Trump administration, the pressure

approaches toward the Assad regime and Iran were complementary. The Trump administration correctly viewed the militant presence and local conflicts in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, the Palestinian Territories, and Yemen as a manifestation of the Iranian regime's deliberate strategy to create new threats against regional states and US allies in particular. Hence the starting point for the Trump administration was to restore deterrence against the Iranian regime – and I think a new administration will go back to this. For example, it is crazy to me that US Central Command is essentially at war with Iranian proxies but the rest of the Biden administration is not enforcing sanctions on Iranian oil sales.

The Iranian regime created the Axis of Resistance for the purpose of absorbing pressure from the US and others so that the Iranian regime does not have to suffer the consequences of its actions. The current administration apparently wants to rule out US military confrontation with Iranian forces but it is also ruling out US actions against the Iranian regime's cash flow.

When you take those two decisions in tandem, it means that the Iranian regime – quite correctly – perceives that the Biden administration does not intend to reestablish deterrence toward Tehran. That choice has implications for other conflicts too, such as the war in Ukraine. The Biden administration does not follow a deterrence strategy, and we are seeing the consequences today. The Red Sea is basically closed to international shipping, the global economy suffers, the entire Middle East is on fire, and the Iranian regime is intervening in a European war without significant consequences.

**What is your response to those who argue that the US would be best advised to withdraw from the Middle East entirely?**

Rayburn: I think that is fantasy land. The great power competitors, China and Russia, are heavily involved in the Middle East. While the US needs to do everything possible to prevent a hostile Chinese Communist Party from becoming a hegemon in the Indo-Pacific region, it does not make sense to abandon the rest of the geopolitical chessboard to the Chinese and Russians. China, Russia and Iran are in a strategic military alliance that attempts to exert creeping global control at the expense of the US and its allies. This global competition demands global responses.

If the US were to abandon the Middle East, it would fall under the control of China, Russia, and Iran. Allowing that to happen would be geopolitically incoherent.

You have to be able to walk and chew at the same time as a global power. If you send a signal that you are not prepared to defend your interests in a geopolitically vital region like the Middle East, then there is no point in defending them anywhere. It is possible to have a very effective theatre strategy in the Middle East and in other regions without incurring enormous costs.

#### **How would such a strategy look like in the Middle East?**

Rayburn: The US should strengthen alliances with the traditional pillar states of the region, namely Israel, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Egypt. It should then act in concert with those allies to pressure US adversaries, first and foremost the Iranian regime and its Axis of Resistance, Russia, and China. That is a pretty clear approach. The Obama and Biden administrations adopted the opposite approach, allowing our traditional alliances with those four pillar states to really deteriorate. Naturally, those four allies often have conflicting interests with one another. It is the US role to try to bring them into as close an alignment as possible, and keep them oriented in the same strategic direction to the greatest extent possible.

#### **What would refocusing on the alliance with Turkey mean for the US support for the YPG-led Syrian Democratic Forces?**

Rayburn: First, you need to have a coherent approach towards the Iranian regime and its destabilising behaviour towards the entire region, Turkey included. Second, you need to address the longstanding Turkey-PKK conflict and the need to bring it to a close. If you are addressing these broader issues, then there is room for resolving the Turkey-YPG question through peaceful means.

As long as the Iranian regime is able to reach into regional local conflicts, it will burn down all roadmaps towards peace. Having dealt with the Syrian question and Iraq issues firsthand over many years, I believe that they can be solved peacefully through diplomacy if the Iranian regime can be forced to exit those conflicts. And I believe such an Iranian exit can be achieved without war if the proper tools are used, because the Iranian regime is very vulnerable to non-military pressure if it is applied in a coherent way. For that to happen, a US-led international coalition is needed.

#### **Are there specific flaws in the European Syria strategy that you would like to highlight?**

Rayburn: UNSCR 2254 is the right roadmap to get-

ting to resolve the Syrian conflict, but the only thing that will make it happen is concerted pressure on the Assad regime and that is what is absent right now. Without coordinated US, European, and Arab pressure, attempts to make progress on the Syrian conflict are hopeless. We were on a very constructive trajectory at the end of 2020. The economic and political pressure on Assad and his allies was mounting, and neither Assad nor his Russian and Iranian patrons had any answer for it. Unfortunately, the Biden administration allowed that to dissipate. Had we continued the path we were on with respect not only to Syria but the entire region, the world would be in a very different place right now. There was every chance of getting the implementation of UNSCR 2254 done. Fortunately, the extreme weakness of the Assad regime means we still have an opportunity to achieve our goals in Syria if we return to the pressure policy that President Trump was employing.

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## New acts at the ostracisation arena

### Norwegian chargé d'affaires and DRC in Damascus

The scale of atrocities committed in Syria means that a return to normal relations with the Assad regime is out of the question. The only acceptable way forward is a genuine political process that ends the regime's violence. This has been the stance of Western and Arab countries since early in the conflict. From the start, however, ostracisation of the regime was fragile because while "the regime" was considered an enemy, "the state" was not. When the regime has kidnapped the state and holds it hostage, it is close to impossible to ostracise one and enable the other. Practical necessities stemming from humanitarian commitments meant that working with state institutions like ministries and local authorities could not be avoided. The West found itself in a paradoxical position of being the main driver for ostracisation but also the main provider of humanitarian assistance. Ironically, it is Western humanitarian assistance that enables the regime via "the state" to provide a minimum of services, which is the enabling condition that underpins



its rule. That is not an argument against humanitarian assistance, but a reminder of a constant tension in the West's Syria response.

As ostracisation consumed so much diplomatic and bureaucratic capacity, time was not on its side. The most visible cracks have been major developments such as the regime's US-approved return to the Arab League. Such major events, however, are the cumulative result of countless smaller developments. Ostracisation bars officials from engaging at the ministerial and presidential levels, and the EU Council Conclusion from 2018 clearly states that EU assistance "must benefit the population of Syria and avoid benefits accruing to the Syrian regime that would legitimise its national and local governance." Ostracisation is therefore about both normalisation and legitimisation, including at the local level. However, much of the day-to-day engagement remains at the discretion of politicians, diplomats, think tanks, civil society actors, and humanitarians. The result is an "ostracisation arena", a public space where the terms of non-normalisation and non-legitimation are continuously negotiated by protagonists who define performatively what they mean in practice.

#### Meeting at the ministry

One of those countless smaller developments that shape the policy environment was the January meeting of the Danish Refugee Council's Country Director, Sachitra Chitrakar, with the Syrian Minister of Local Administration and Environment, Lamia Shakour. Shakour was appointed in December 2023 and is expected to be sanctioned once EU bureaucracy catches up. SANA, the official Syrian news agency, released a photograph of the meeting showing Chitrakar and Shakour seated under a portrait of Bashar Assad and flanked by regime flags. The news agency said that DRC engaged the ministry to support its good faith efforts to facilitate the return of the displaced. The regime is adept at pushing boundaries, and routinely pressures INGOs to participate in PR opportunities. For humanitarians, setting ground rules on publicity is not always the priority when the goal is securing access. Lack of preparation or misreading of political dynamics by overworked Western officials may also contribute to a *laissez-faire* attitude.

Another example of a small development that contributes to the wider negotiation of the terms of non-normalisation and legitimisation is a speech by the Norwegian chargé d'affaires, Yngvild Berggrav, at the Syr-

ian Ministry of Foreign Affairs' Diplomatic Institute in January, while standing under a portrait of Assad and flanked by regime flags. Syrian news websites were quick to publish pictures of the event. Possibly Berggrav discussed publicity beforehand, and agreed to the publication, which would beg the question why the Norwegian government thought that the chance of the speech sensitising regime diplomats (low) outweighed the risk of being instrumentalised (high); or no ground-rules were discussed at all, which would be a due diligence oversight. A third possibility is that ground-rules were discussed but the regime simply ignored them.

The Berggrav speech and the DRC meeting are new acts in the ostracisation arena that blur political red lines. The *modus operandi* of "only" publicly engaging with municipalities or the Syrian Arab Red Crescent to get approvals was always an illusion as everyone knew that actual decision-making was taken much higher up the regime's strict hierarchy. With humanitarians eyeing more comprehensive early recovery programming at the area-level, the regime demands "higher quality" engagement. Development assistance and reconstruction is carried out in cooperation with governments and therefore pushes boundaries on what ostracisation means in practice. Normalisation is still a red line for Denmark and the European Union; and while Norway maintains a more open policy on Syria, it has traditionally avoided publicity.

Ostracisation is not a petty or high-handed move from the West but a recognition that one of the greatest state-organised crimes of humanity against its own population of this century cannot be swept under the rug. There is, however, another measure that could alter dynamics in the ostracisation arena: the Assad Regime Anti-Normalisation Act, likely to pass the US Senate this year. The question of engagement modalities could soon become unprecedentedly topical in legal and political circles.

## Rise and decline of Tayy

One tribe's fortunes reveals much about northeast Syria

The tribe of Tayy has a long and illustrious past. In the early 7th Century, they supplanted the Lakhmids as rulers of al-Hira (in Iraq's present-day Najaf province), and with the arrival of Islam they joined in the Arab conquest of Persia. The tribe even produced Hatim al-Tayi, a poet renowned in Arabic literature for his chivalry and generosity.

Today, the Tayy are found in Qamishli and its environs, living from agriculture and animal husbandry. Under the Assads, their chiefs were granted privileges: land and loans from state-run banks, and seats in the Peasants' Union and the People's Assembly (parliament). This was standard Ba'ath Party operating procedure when it came to co-opting tribal elites.

### Auxiliaries for Assad

The Tayy's fortunes took an upturn with the March 2004 "Kurdish intifada" in Qamishli. A football riot between Arabs from Deir Ezzor who chanted pro-Saddam slogans in the stadium, infuriating local Kurdish supporters of the home team, developed into a full-scale revolt. The local Ba'ath Party headquarters was burnt to the ground and the statue of Hafiz Assad torn down, much as Saddam's in Baghdad had been a year before. The regime responded swiftly: a detachment from Maher Assad's 4th Division was flown in and took charge of the security response, and the Tayy were recruited into the paramilitary Ba'ath Battalions where they served as auxiliary troops. The crackdown left at least 30 Kurds dead and 160 wounded.

The Tayy deny that they had any hand in the killing, claiming that their role was confined to beating up Kurds and looting their shops. They also say that Kurdish snipers shot dead several police and army officers. What is certain is that the Tayy were rewarded for their actions by being given an extra seat in the 2008 People's Assembly election. The two headmen that represented the Tayy at the national level were veteran parliamentarian Mohammad al-Faris and newcomer Hussein al-Haji. That translates into two patronage networks instead of just one.

Times were good for the Tayy – at least until the 2011 Syrian uprising upended power dynamics in the

northeast. Feeling the pressure from the Free Syrian Army (FSA) in its western heartlands, the Assad regime in 2012 handed over to the Kurdish YPG militia large parts of Hasakah governorate (including Kurdish-majority districts of Qamishli) in return for not joining forces with the FSA. Given their role in the 2004 crackdown, the Tayy sensed danger and rallied behind a newly-established pro-regime militia: the National Defence Forces (NDF), of which they formed the majority.

### Moscow rules

Qamishli city was divided up between the NDF and the YPG, but co-existence was not easy. The NDF's penchant for warlordism meant that kidnapping civilians and dealing drugs were acceptable side hustles, and taking pot shots at Kurdish *asayish* checkpoints was considered a smart way to maintain relevance to Damascus.

Everything changed in 2015 when the YPG formed the nucleus for the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), and Russia joined the war and established a presence at Qamishli airport. The NDF faced a double whammy: overt US support for the SDF umbrella organisation, and covert Russian support for the YPG core.

For the Tayy, Russian influence in northeast Syria was particularly pernicious. Despite being part of the US-allied SDF, the YPG also maintained close coordination with the Russian military. This helped somewhat to shield it (and the SDF) from regime and Turkish attacks, while drawing the Kurds closer to the Russian orbit. As part of Russia-sponsored coordination efforts between the regime and the YPG, a permanent liaison room was established at Qamishli airport to arbitrate disputes. Instead of advocating for the regime interest, however, Russian generals tended always to rule in favour of the YPG. This diminished the regime and gave rise to a faction within the YPG that is pro-Russia and anti-NDF.

Not helping the Tayy's relations with Moscow were the NDF's clandestine links with Tehran. It was long suspected that the Tayy were deliberately agitating against the YPG in Qamishli on orders from the IRGC in order to provoke a US-Russia clash. Being a paramilitary force with a poor reputation, the NDF made a useful sacrificial lamb in Moscow's northeastern power plays. In April 2021, the YPG was given a green light to move against the NDF. Five days of clashes later, the

Russian military police mediated a truce that saw the NDF evacuate the city for good. The Tayy lost their fight with the Kurds and were dangerously exposed.

### Iran's embrace

With the regime forced to throw the NDF under the bus, most ordinary Tayy reconciled themselves to life under the Autonomous Administration. Some pro-opposition figures within the tribe took the offer of US security guarantees to return to Qamishli in 2023 after having been banished by the regime and the YPG. The old Tayy elite – the chief and his inner circle – remained staunchly pro-regime but they were under no illusions. “The Syrian government today is just a pawn moved by Russia and Iran,” was how one Tayy notable put it. For lack of alternatives, the elite went for broke and threw in its lot with Iran.

Ten kilometres southeast of Qamishli along the M4 highway is a sprawling Hezbollah base that is home to an estimated 1,000 Tayy fighters, almost all ex-NDF. They are now trained and equipped by the Lebanese group as well as by Saraya al-Khorasani of the Iraqi Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF.) The base is one of several operated by Hezbollah in the northeast that US Special Forces patrols routinely drive past several times a week. Tolerating Iran's presence in the northeast is a price the US must pay for maintaining calm there; while for Russia, having Iranian-backed anti-US forces is convenient, as long as any violence occurs well away from Qamishli. The Tayy fighters' area of military operations has meanwhile shifted much further south: to Deir Ezzor province, where the IRGC faces off against the US/SDF and Islamic State. The Tayy never favoured fighting away from home, but hard times call for compromise.

The Tayy leadership also underwent changes. Dari, the pro-Iran son of Mohammad al-Faris, succeeded his father as chief in 2021. With other chiefs, like Mahmoud al-Hasnawi of the Jubour, he formed an anti-SDF tribal council to liaise with tribes across the border in Iraq. The aim is to work towards opening a northern logistical route between the two countries to ease pressure on an Iran-controlled border crossing further south, at Bukamal, scene of repeated US and Israeli air strikes on IRGC arms shipments. Iran also figures that in the event of a US military withdrawal from northeast Syria, the Tayy would be useful assets to take on the YPG/SDF and help counter any possible Turkish incursion.

It is said that Iran's co-option of Tayy fighters is ideologically predicated on the tribe having strongly supported Ali against the Umayyads in the first Muslim civil war of 656–661. A Tayy notable suggests the reality might be more mundane: “With a monthly salary of 1.8 million SYP (\$140), a young man can buy a motor-bike, a phone, and drugs.”

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## Must try harder

### How Syrian think tanks can up their game

For Arabs, the think tank has become familiar thanks to the TV news media. The sheer volume of televised punditry by “political analysts” and “strategic experts” introduced the *markaz dirasat* as the go-to for non-official commentary on the news. In Syria, the emergence of the homegrown think tank is one of few favourable outcomes of the conflict. Prior to 2011, there was only the Damascus-based Sharq Centre that was considered reputable. Now there are at least six: The Day After, Etana, Harmoon, Jusoor, Omran, and the Syrian Center for Policy Research. This growth has largely been the work of opposition-leaning Syrians who identified a Western need for information and “safe” interlocutors and catered for it by setting up NGOs that issue research on political, military, and economic matters, and hold regular workshops and seminars.

Syrian think tanks, supported by Western donors as a branch of civil society, have developed in a manner similar to those in Iraq, modelling themselves on the likes of Brookings, Carnegie, and Chatham House. Aspirations to Western standards – and Western funding – can of course be a driver for improving quality; but whether this is happening is open to question.

On the upside, a promising generation of Syrian researchers incubated in the think tank ecosystem is now emerging. They are generating much new data; some are finding their way into the media, politics, and academia. Commentary on TV channels provided by this new crop of think tankers tends to be calmer and more “scientific” than the usual TV demagoguery. Additionally, important conferences in Europe and the



US are enriched by the presence of Syrian researchers. Indeed, think tank workshops are one of the very few safe spaces for rational debate between pro- and anti-regime Syrians. Syrian think tanks, moreover, have become knowledge generators in their own right, with an access advantage that has enticed Western think tanks to partner with them. These are all encouraging signs in a sector that is barely a decade old.

On the downside, the quality of published reports is hit-and-miss. Too often, the approach is descriptive rather than analytical, and lacking in the unique insights sought by seasoned Syria watchers. The tendency is to repeat known facts and talking points rather than to develop original perspectives. Take for example this paragraph from a recently published Syrian think tank report:

*The Syrian revolt has highlighted the complicated network of geopolitical variables that determine the actions of Arab governments. The Arab League's fluctuating posture, the impact of Terrorism and migrants, and the worldwide implications all testify to the intricacies of this multilayered situation. Syria's fate is entwined with the larger Middle Eastern landscape. Therefore, the route forward remains to be discovered. A comprehensive approach is required for any adequate settlement that tackles current obstacles while also digging into the fundamental causes of the conflict, regional rivalries, and more significant geopolitical issues. Only via such a comprehensive strategy will Syria be transformed from a source of instability to a source of stability and optimism in the Arab world.*

Compounding this problem is the lack of recommendations in such reports – strange, given that the primary role of think tanks is to provide fresh policy ideas, or at least to challenge predominant approaches. There is a preoccupation with scenario-building exercises, which are only useful if they come with recommendations on how best to engineer particular outcomes and mitigate associated risks. In large part, such shortcomings reflect a lack of experience in commissioning and editing complex research of this type.

#### **Think tanks without a country**

One of the key reasons why Syrian think tank research sometimes lacks “edge” may be ambiguity over the target audience. Traditionally, think tanks serve as adjuncts to foreign ministries and are anchored in the

policy establishments of state actors. In addition to serving as a bridge between academia and policy, and as a place for recruitment of and retirement for diplomats and officials, they help shape government policy by generating evidence-based research and offering recommendations. In Syria, there is no legitimate government that can serve as a focal point. Syrian think tanks therefore find themselves unanchored to any specific state or quasi-state interest and instead attach themselves only to a broad commitment to “change.” Some have even attempted to become political actors in their own right, hosting conferences designed to overturn leadership dynamics within the opposition. All the reputable think tanks, meanwhile, are based outside Syria and are reliant on the goodwill of host governments. This enhances further the ambiguity regarding the core audience and the interests served.

The West is certainly one audience. Unfortunately, this has encouraged a tendency to avoid taking firm positions on the most contentious topics so as not to upset anyone and to appear to be “objective.” In the presence of Western officials, many Syrian think tankers become reticent and prefer to limit their comments to what they think they are expected to say.

The domestic Syrian audience is arguably the most important; but so convoluted and jargon-ridden are most think tank reports that they fail to attract the public's attention. Short, media-friendly reports geared towards public outreach and education would likely be a better way forward. Also needed are fluff-free policy papers that are easily digestible. Catering to the needs of the formal Syrian opposition bodies is another area that could usefully be developed, especially as these entities govern territory and engage in talks at the Track I level. Although there has been some recent movement in that direction, it has been donor-driven rather than organic, and the relationship between think tanks and the opposition remains undefined and awkward, notwithstanding the occasional joint workshop.

On a more structural level, Syrian think tanks suffer from the same short funding cycles and lack of strategic vision as civil society NGOs. A pooled fund could be established to invest in long-term growth and mentoring, ideally supported by the Syrian private sector that already funds many excellent educational initiatives. Western think tanks could also play a role by developing their Syrian counterparts' institutional and

research capacities and not using them only to hoover up data.

Another positive step towards improved quality of output and reaching audiences worldwide would be for the think tanks to become truly bilingual. This would not entail only the translation of reports from Arabic to English. It would also involve accessing English-language sources of knowledge and encouraging more sophisticated writing styles and presentation of ideas.

Money alone will not resolve the challenges faced by Syrian think tanks. Above all, they need to move beyond a vague allegiance to “change” and anchor themselves to a real-world political project.