Syria in Transition

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Welcome to the April 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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Exit without departure

What's left of Iran's influence in Syria?

Assad's fall has stripped Iran of most of its assets in Syria, but networks remain and could be leveraged to open a new front.

Prior to December 2024, Iranian influence in Syria primarily took three main forms. The first was military: Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) officers and Hezbollah officers helped recruit, train and command auxiliary 'Local Defence Forces' (LDF) units composed of Syrian fighters, as well as leading a myriad of IRGC-affiliated Shia armed groups from Iraq, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. The second was cultural: the IRGC sought to foster ideological support for the 'axis of resistance', most notably through the 'Aleppo Defenders Legion' that produced literature and organised cultural events, as well as scholarships to study in Iran. The third was religious, primarily a targeting of the country's Twelver Shia community, encouraging them to follow Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamene'i as their *marja'* – a religious authority who dispenses guidance.

These layers of influence often overlapped. Some members of the Twelver Shia community, for example, also enlisted in LDF units. With the regime's collapse, however, Iranians and their foreign allies from Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq and Lebanon swiftly withdrew from Syria.

LDF no more

Most of those who worked with the LDF were not Shia but members of the country's Sunni majority, with some units built around Sunni tribes. Members of the Bekara tribe, for example, formed the Baqir Brigade. The Berri clan in Aleppo fielded the Martyr Ali Zayn

al-Abidin Berri Brigade. As the regime fell, these Sunni groups either turned against Iran or simply stood down. Their networks have since aligned with the new government or kept a low profile.

A contact linked to the Martyr Ali Zayn al-Abidin Berri Brigade told *Syria in Transition* that, as Aleppo began to fall, Haj Khalid of the Baqir Brigade informed the brigade's leadership that he was coordinating with Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS). The group initially planned to withdraw toward Homs and then Damascus, but as Homs fell, it instead chose to defect and headed back to Aleppo. There is currently no indication that either group, or what remains of their networks, is secretly coordinating with Iran.

Endurance at the religious level

Among the country's Twelver Shia community, the picture is more complex. With the regime's fall, many Iranian institutions were forced to close, including branches of Iran's al-Mustafa University in Sayyida Zaynab and the Shia town of Nubl in Aleppo province. A cleric from Nubl told *Syria in Transition* that local religious figures now face increasing financial difficulties as they no longer receive payments from Khamanei's office. Outwardly, the Shia community's leadership has moved to accommodate with the new authorities. In the 'martyr' cemeteries of Nubl and neighbouring al-Zahra', images of Khamane'i, Qasem Soleimani and Hezbollah symbols have recently been removed from graves and public displays.

At the level of religious practice, however, ties to Iran persist. Many within the community continue to follow Khamanei as their *marja'*, a position that now extends to his son Mojtaba who succeeded him as Supreme Leader. This was visible during Eid al-Fitr. While Syria officially announced Friday 20 March as the first day of the holiday this year, many residents of Nubl continued fasting in accordance with the directives of Khamanei's office and other prominent regional Shia clerics such as Ayatollah Sistani.

There is also clear sympathy with Iran in its ongoing war with the US and Israel, even if this is rarely expressed openly. There have been instances where IRGC officers who were in contact with residents of Nubl and al-Zahara' have tried to recruit them as informants. However, such efforts are unlikely to bear any meaningful fruit for Iran apart from enabling it to keep a tab on the Shia community's precarious situation.

Alawite insurgents as Iranian proxies?

Outward expressions of support for Iran and the 'axis of resistance' are now largely confined to social media, particularly among groups that declare themselves to be in opposition to the new government. One such is the 'Islamic Resistance Front in Syria – Awali al-Ba's' – which is a moniker claimed by two separate entities. The leader of one of those groups, known as 'Abu Mujahid', told *Syria in Transition* that his group does not receive support from "the resistance axis or the brothers in Iran, but it has some friends who provide assistance." The group claims to carry out operations targeting Israel and the United States, including a purported strike in early March against the "American al-Shaddadi base" in Hasaka, from which U.S. troops had already withdrawn. While such claims may well be dubious, they point to the continued presence of small networks and individuals who retain an ideological affinity with the 'axis of resistance'.

Another network expressing support for Iran and the 'axis of resistance' online is 'Coastal Shield', probably the best-known brand of Alawite insurgent groups opposing the new government – although not all Alawite insurgents share this alignment. Mudar Ali, a former Republican Guard member from Jableh and leader of 'The Alawite Resistance', admitted to initially coordinating with Coastal Shield during the March 2025 uprising that culminated in the coastal massacres. Yet he identified Coastal Shield's alignment with Iran – whose "farcical expansionist projects" he says he rejects – as a key point of disagreement. In his view, Coastal Shield received Iranian support prior to the uprising, though he could not confirm whether such backing continued. Those declaring alignment with 'Coastal Shield' do not openly acknowledge receiving such backing although their ideological affinity with Iran and the 'axis of resistance' is unmistakeable.

Hezbollah no more?

Ongoing security operations by Damascus indicate a continued presence of cells linked to Hezbollah, either operating as insurgents against the government or facilitating weapons smuggling. In July last year, the government announced the dismantling of an Alawite insurgent cell in Latakia led by Maher Hussein Ali, who, according to investigations, had received logistical support from Hezbollah. The same announcement declared the arrest of al-Wadah Suhayl Isma'il, leader of Fawj al-Makzun – an Alawite insurgent group linked to the same network and affiliated with Suhail al-Hasan, former commander of the Russian-backed

Tiger Forces. The Fawj al-Makzun group ceased activity on social media that same month.

There is also evidence that some anti-government insurgents use territory in Lebanon under Hezbollah influence as a safe haven. Abu Ali Sumer, leader of the Alawite insurgent group Fawj Azra'il al-Jabal, in November 2025 told *Syria in Transition* that he opposed "Iran's project" and criticised Tehran for failing to support Alawites during the coastal massacres, even stating he would accept Israeli support if it could genuinely help the Alawites. Despite his stated disdain for Iran, he was reportedly killed in an Israeli strike in Lebanon in March.

Overall, Hezbollah's hard power in Syria appears largely degraded. But many Syrian Shia from Homs, some of them affiliated with Hezbollah, are now displaced in Lebanon. And there is at least one confirmed case of a Syrian killed while fighting for the group in Lebanon. It appears that these networks may not have disappeared but have shifted geographic focus.

Tactical depth

Claims by former Iranian diplomat Amir Mousavi that "armed groups affiliated with al-Jolani" are now facilitating greater Iranian support to Hezbollah than during Assad's rule are best read as rhetorical bluster. But that does not mean Iranian influence has vanished. If the war on Iran evolves into a prolonged regional confrontation, including Lebanon, Tehran can no longer rely on the strategic depth it once had in Syria. What remains, however, is a thinner but more adaptable form of influence: ideological alignment and networks built over years through overlapping ties of crime, religion, family and patronage – networks that tend to endure, and can be reactivated when conditions allow.

Let's talk about aid

Western aid is a crucial power factor in Syria

Constrained Gulf budgets in the wake of the Iran war are worsening Syria's already bleak prospects of moving beyond aid dependency. Donors, the UN and Damascus have a lot to discuss.

As President Ahmad al-Sharaa emphasised in a speech after Eid prayer, Syria is on a path of development and reconstruction. Like most things, this is a matter of perspective. The utterly bankrupt Assad regime set a very low bar, and despite some progress, more than 16 million Syrians remain dependent on aid – according to UN figures – and are likely to remain so for years to come. It is Western donors who will take centre stage in footing the bill.

The bulk of Western aid is delivered through the United Nations, which effectively functions as an aid middleman – or rather a collection of competing ones. As long as the Assad regime was the recognised government, humanitarian principles meant that engagement with the state was to be kept to a minimum. The UN would conduct needs assessments, set priorities and coordinate response plans, while implementation was largely undertaken through NGOs. This arrangement was undermined by the Assad regime, which forced implementers to "partner" with the Syrian Arab Red Crescent or the Syria Trust for Development, both run by its cronies. It was also undermined by parts of the humanitarian community, which – for the sake of business or access, depending on definitions – engaged with the government more than necessary; and by some donor governments that flirted with normalisation and encouraged cooperation to create humanitarian facts that could later be translated into political assets.

Now, with Assad toppled and a new government in place, the discussion has quickly shifted from life-saving aid and NGO-led early recovery towards development and reconstruction within a state-led framework. One reason is the reframing of Syria as a post-conflict setting, which the new authorities in Damascus are keen to promote as it reinforces their claim to legitimacy. Another is that development and reconstruction naturally place the government in the driver's

seat. After years in which the Assad regime hijacked the aid architecture – and in which the UN allowed itself to be hijacked – the new government is deeply sceptical of the UN and has kept it at arm's length. As is becoming increasingly clear, however, they need each other: UN agencies want business and relevance while the government needs international support.

'Statement of Recovery Priorities for International Cooperation'

Enter the Syrian government's "Statement of Recovery Priorities for International Cooperation", finalised in March. This sets out what aid should focus on and how it should be delivered, and the government expects the framework to be reflected clearly in the strategies, workplans and funding proposals of international partners. Interventions are to align with four priority areas: restoring critical infrastructure, resuming basic service delivery, building social and economic resilience and supporting "core systems" – i.e. state institutions and public administration. The message is explicit: aid must strengthen the state.

When drafting the plan, the new authorities in Damascus may have been inspired by a familiar UN practice in Syria: blurring the lines between humanitarian and development assistance to avoid constraining mandates. Framed as "recovery" and as a "transitional phase toward sustainable development", the plan folds the two into one – despite the very different political contexts in which they operate and the distinct rules meant to govern them. In practice, this risks subordinating humanitarian principles to the objective of strengthening the state, as defined by Damascus. If a state fully embraces those principles, including their human rights focus and commitment to needs-based programming, there is no issue; but humanitarian principles were designed precisely because such alignment is rare.

Aid is power

While the government plan is unsurprisingly state-led, it portrays a state that does not yet exist. Syria remains fragmented. State institutions are still works in progress, and the government lacks electoral legitimacy. International assistance, both humanitarian and developmental, remains a key resource in an ongoing process of power consolidation. Whether donors are ready to give up independent assessments and delivery modalities in such a context remains an open question.

The plan also establishes the International Cooperation Department within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates as the sole national platform for coordinating all forms of international assistance. While this centralisation fits a state-led model, humanitarian actors typically coordinate with state authorities while maintaining operational independence, often through structures such as the UN Country Team or other, non-UN, funding mechanisms such as the Aid Fund for Syria (AFS). Sources in Damascus say that Foreign Minister As'ad Shaibani is centralising control over aid in order to consolidate his position within the HTS-led power structure. The Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour, headed by Hind Kabawat, is reportedly not happy about this concentration of authority and donor access and the friction is said to be one reason why she may be on her way out.

The good old HDP Nexus

Fortunately, all actors have formally committed to the Humanitarian–Development–Peace Nexus (HDP Nexus). The government framework highlights it, as do UN strategies and donor documents. The European Union, for example, has launched a Nexus Response Mechanism, implemented by UN Office for Project Services (UNOPS). The four-year, €31.5 million programme aims to "reduce vulnerabilities and strengthen community resilience" through socio-economic recovery, local governance, capacity development and infrastructure. Partnership with Syrian authorities is built into the design; but what this partnership will look like in practice remains unclear. UNOPS habitually respects donor priorities. Will the programme include salary payments to government employees? Will it be guided by political risk and conflict analysis?

"There is, frankly, a near-total lack of coordination among UN agencies," a UN official told *Syria in Transition*. "Initiatives by UNOPS and others are not part of a coherent, unified strategy."

Unfortunately, the HDP Nexus continues to suffer from familiar problems. It sounds good, it ticks boxes in strategy documents, but there is little agreement on how it should actually be implemented. Its "peace" pillar has been reduced to vague notions about local stabilisation, resilience and service delivery. It ignores core political questions: how aid reshapes power relations; how it reinforces formal and informal elites; who it legitimises, and who it excludes. In short: what it means for Syria's transition.

Deputy Special Envoy Claudio Cordone (the UN has not appointed a new Special Envoy to replace Geir Pedersen since he left office in October 2025) told *Syria in Transition* that, from the perspective of the Office of the Special Envoy (OSE), "the peace pillar of the HDP Nexus in Syria extends beyond local stabilisation efforts or service delivery. It encompasses resource sharing and in general the broader conditions necessary to reduce or prevent conflicts, promote social cohesion and support a sustainable political settlement." He added that, "the efforts of the UN country team and of the OSE are complementary and share the same goals: that of a successful transition that will benefit all Syrians."

These are commendable ambitions, but moving them from rhetoric to action requires serious political risk and conflict analysis, risk management mechanisms and clearly defined objectives, as well as the will to act. Under Assad, the reference point was UNSCR 2254, with its emphasis on an inclusive transition, UN-supervised elections, human rights and countering terrorism. Donors now need to clarify whether these principles still guide their engagement, whether they align with official Syrian policy and whether they are ready to place this issue on the Security Council's agenda. It may be tempting to postpone that conversation. But even if the HDP Nexus is understood in its most minimal sense – as improved coordination between agencies – it still requires a political framework that clarifies goals, roles and red lines. Without that, the UN in Syria would be little more than a competitive pool of middlemen with a concerning track record on coordination, use of resources and independence.

OSE to the rescue?

Under UNSCR 2254, the OSE has an important role to play in moving the HDP Nexus and related discussions forward. On 17 March, however, Claudio Cordone briefed the Security Council in a tone that, had a mischievous intern replaced the UN logo with that of the Syrian Foreign Ministry, might have gone largely unnoticed. The language and substance differed markedly from previous briefings by Najat Rochdi and Geir Pedersen, despite the UN's own Commission of Inquiry reporting ongoing serious violations across multiple parts of Syria, including extrajudicial killings, arbitrary arrests, sexual violence and property seizures. Yet in Cordone's briefing these were flattened into a polite formulation: "persistent concerns" alongside "positive steps."

It may be understandable that Cordone is seeking to build a positive working relationship with Damascus while the office is trying to secure a relocation to the Syrian capital. The mood is certainly one of "let's move on," and that creates a gravitational pull toward optimism. But the job of the UN's political pillar is not to be optimistic. It is supposed to be a credible referee. If UN member states prefer an OSE that smoothes rough edges rather than engaging in conflict analysis and difficult diplomacy – including on aid – they may as well shut down the office and save its annual budget of roughly $15 million.

Unused potential

Global aid budgets are shrinking, and many donors are increasingly explicit that aid should serve their national interests. If aid is moving from being an implicit to an explicit tool of diplomacy, that is a strong argument for reforming the aid architecture. As things stand, there is little method in the madness; and a great deal of unused Western leverage that could be deployed to safeguard principled, life-saving operations while aligning them with more strategically-driven development efforts.

Importantly, the new authorities are not newcomers to the aid system. Years of governance in Idlib have produced a cadre of officials with hands-on experience managing aid and dealing with international actors – often from the receiving end. That experience cuts both ways. It equips the current administration to shape the system to its advantage. At the same time, however, it could provide a basis for a more constructive partnership. Which path prevails will depend on incentives, and on whether donors are willing to use their potent leverage.

Gulf War III

The Iran-Iraq war offers useful lessons for the beleaguered Gulf states

The Gulf states are now the frontline of a regional war. As deterrence fails and Iranian attacks mount, they face a choice: remain collateral damage, or change the rules of engagement.

During the Iran-Iraq war, US military experts would occasionally share strategic assessments with their Iraqi counterparts. Washington favoured an all-out effort by the Iraqi air force to gain aerial superiority and threaten Iran's oil infrastructure. It was calculated that if Iran was crippled economically (or under credible threat of same), its fanatical leadership would see sense and give in. But wiser analysts insisted that a belligerent petrodollar state, especially one positioned along a vital maritime chokepoint, was unlikely to absorb economic pressure passively, and would seek to retaliate by disrupting enemy shipping and weaponising global oil prices.

So it proved. Iraq did indeed use its air force – though, crucially, not in an all-out effort – to disrupt Iran's oil trade, prompting Iran to respond in kind in what became known as the 'tanker war.' Ship owners, naturally, refused to sail up the Gulf to load at Iran's main terminal on Kharg Island. Instead, Iranian tankers were forced to ferry oil at their own risk to a hastily constructed facility further south, at Larak Island in the Strait of Hormuz.

This led to one of the longest strike missions of the war: on 25 November 1986 a pair of Iraqi Mirage F1s struck tankers docked at Larak's Wal-Fajr II terminal, destroying several. Saddam Hussein's aim was not merely to deprive Iran of revenue, but also to drive up global oil prices and draw the United States into the conflict against Iran, which at the time appeared to be gaining the upper hand. Iraq by this point had withdrawn from Iranian territory and its objective was simply a face-saving ceasefire.

What US Air Force Major Reginald E. Berqquist described in *The Role of Airpower in the Iran-Iraq War* as a "mutual face-slapping exercise, foolish and irritating but hardly decisive", went on for eight years.

In the end, it was a brief American intervention that shifted the balance. Iraq's purchase of advanced weaponry was financed by the Gulf states, and their oil had become a target for IRGC mines and Katyusha-armed speedboats. On 18 April 1988 the US Navy carried out Operation Preying Mantis, a one-sided engagement that destroyed two Iranian frigates, two oil terminals used for military surveillance and many speedboats.

Within months, an exhausted Iran relented. In July 1988 Ayatollah Khomeini "drank the poisoned chalice" and accepted UNSCR 598, bringing the war to an end. For the Gulf states, there followed a long period in which their oil trade faced no comparable threat. Iraq, on the other hand, was straddled with a war debt of $100 billion, $37 billion of which was owed to Gulf states.

It was largely the dispute between Iraq and its Gulf creditors, mainly Kuwait, that caused Gulf War I in 1990-91.

Frontline states

What distinguishes the Iran–Iraq war from the latest effort by a regional power (Israel) to weaken – or even topple – the Iranian regime is the extent of direct American involvement. Yet for all their technological sophistication and firepower, America and Israel face much the same strategic challenge as Iraq once did: Iran's capacity to respond to economic warfare; and to absorb human losses and replenish them, even at the level of senior command.

Perhaps the most striking difference, from a regional perspective, between the Iran-Iraq war and the present conflict is the frontline role now assumed by the Gulf states. For decades their strategy rested on two pillars: reliance on American protection, and the financing of anti-Iran actors in more distant theatres – north or south – so that any fighting remained 'over there' rather than at home.

The consequence was that Iraq in 1980-88, and again post-2003 invasion (Gulf War II) with the Sunni insurgency, Syria post-2012 and Yemen post-2014 became war zones. Half a million soldiers died in Iraq's war with Iran; Syria and Yemen suffered similar losses in their civil wars. Now with the war aims of Israel seemingly nothing short of regime change, the battleground has naturally shifted to the Gulf, domination of which has always been the Holy Grail for Iran's rulers, Shahs and Ayatollahs alike.

Knowing this, the Gulf states have generally sought amicable relations with Iran while also buying security. In the prelude to the latest escalation, they played a visible role in pursuing a diplomatic resolution. That, however, didn't stop Iran from targeting energy infrastructure, military assets, and the tourism sector in the UAE, Qatar, Kuwait, Bahrain and Saudi Arabia. According to Al-Arabiya TV, 85 per cent of Iranian missiles and drones targeted the Gulf states rather than Israel, with 48 per cent targeting the UAE alone.

Collateral damage

Iran's cynical and callous attacks against Gulf states is undoubtedly a blatant breach of international law and constitute an act of war; and the Gulf states have a legal and moral right to self-defence.

It is also part of the long legacy of the 'tanker war' and the wider Iran-Iraq conflict, which in many ways established the unwritten rules governing how the Gulf serves the world's energy needs. The first was set by the US: it would act as the ultimate guarantor of maritime security. The second was set by Iran: if one party cannot use the Gulf, then no one can.

With American and Israeli forces now enjoying air superiority, attention is once again turning to Iran's oil and gas – exactly as US generals had proposed to Iraq in the 1980s. Yet threatening Iran's energy infrastructure is only credible if the energy infrastructure of America's regional allies can be protected in turn. In an era of Shahed drones, that assurance is far from certain. Even with interception rates of up to 96 per cent in some cases, the drone will get through.

Given this, the Gulf Arab strategy based on avoidance is becoming harder to sustain. The US will almost always prioritise Israeli interests over Arab ones; the Iran-Israel war – "Gulf War III" – and the resultant difficulties the Gulf states now find themselves in is the direct result of that misguided policy.

MAED

Opponents of a robust Gulf response to Iranian aggression will point to the possibility of mutually assured energy destruction (MAED). This is the point at which Iran goes after everybody else's energy and other crucial infrastructure in the full knowledge that its own will also be destroyed. But if the lesson of the Iran-Iraq war is anything to go by, such a suicidal eventuality appears unlikely.

Despite the wide publicity that attacks on oil tankers received in the 1980s, the use of air power to attack energy infrastructure (as opposed to ships at sea) remained highly selective and restrained. At no point in the war was Iran or Iraq not able to extract, process and export oil. Major Berqquist explains:

Both sides [Iraq and Iran] have strategic assets which they do not want destroyed, that is oil. But their oil cannot be defended adequately since it lies so close to the enemy and since it is a very soft target. Refineries and storage areas can be heavily damaged by strafing, and tanker captains are loath to risk their ships if there is a serious prospect they may be attacked. Since neither side can defend its strategic assets, both must deter the other from striking them. Both the [Iraqi] IQAF and the [Iranian] IIAF serve primarily as a deterrent to the other's ability to strike at strategic targets.

Iran is targeting Gulf energy infrastructure because deterrence has failed: it calculates (correctly) that Donald Trump will not risk soaring fuel prices and a global recession merely to avenge the Gulf states. Israel, for its part, may be willing to stoke the conflict but is unlikely to come to the Gulf state's aid. The wider Arab world, exhausted by its own Iran-related wars, is in no position to help even if it wanted to.

Peace through strength

For peace to return, the Gulf states need to establish their own deterrence, and that means greater confidence and self-reliance in defence.

The Gulf states already have air forces and navies – and in the case of Saudi, also ballistic missiles – far superior to anything Saddam possessed. The UAE has a capable military that could re-assert claims to the islands of Greater Tunb, Lesser Tunb and Abu Musa, occupied by Iran since 1971, as a proportionate response to attacks on its cities by thousands of missiles and drones.

The question for the Gulf states is whether they remain collateral damage, or demonstrate that they are not to be trifled with. It's a confrontation they never wanted, and there will undoubtedly be a cost, but in the long-run establishing deterrence will reap its own rewards, whoever ends up ruling a future Iran.

Popularity contest

The government's strategic communication campaign was once brilliant. It's now failing.

The sophisticated media campaign that once made HTS's ascent appear disciplined, pragmatic and even socially palatable is now showing signs of fatigue – and, increasingly, of disconnect from the realities on the ground.

One of the more unexpected developments in the immediate aftermath of Bashar al-Assad's fall was the speed and sophistication with which Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and its leader, Ahmad al-Sharaa, managed their public image. Media coverage frequently highlighted carefully curated scenes: HTS fighters from Idlib – bearded, young, visibly tough – taking selfies with unveiled women in jeans on the streets of Damascus. The contrast helped to portray HTS's victory as something socially acceptable, even "cool". At the centre of this media campaign was Sharaa himself, whose media appearances at that time included many spontaneous strolls in public settings mobbed by adoring crowds.

For almost a year, HTS demonstrated an ability to control narrative and perception. That is ending. Partly it is because of the deepening cost-of-living crisis and broader economic strains; but it also stems from an over-reliance on shallow social media influencers; and from increasingly unfavourable perceptions of HTS personnel.

First cracks

The first serious cracks in the government's strategic communication campaign appeared in July 2025, with the outbreak of violence in Suwayda. For the first time, Sharaa seemed uncertain and reactive, perhaps not fully in control. There was also a clear policy miscalculation that the government initially sought to gloss over, but which Foreign Minister As'ad al-Shaibani later acknowledged, admitting to reporters that "we had fallen into a trap." Unlike the coastal clashes, where Assadist remnants were decisively crushed, the confrontation with the Druze proved messier and more protracted, and the government's authority was more openly contested.

For many, however, it would take more than a massacre or two to discredit the government. That was accomplished mainly by HTS's own promoters and members.

Influence peddling

From the outset, HTS relied heavily on a network of social media influencers to shape the domestic narrative. The influencers were given access to the HTS leadership in return for positive talking points and tips on upcoming government announcements. "It's about connecting with the Gen-Zs who are less likely to question HTS," says a Syrian journalist.

Their style – like that of influencers worldwide – was provocative, not particularly thoughtful, and usually in poor taste. The strategy proved effective at first in mobilising support (if only in an ironic way) and drowning out criticism; but over time it became tedious and increasingly grating, at times resembling a localised version of Andrew Tate.

Repeated vignettes reinforced this perception. When successful businessman and ex-news anchor Musa al-Omar filmed himself atop Mount Qasioun in June 2025 to announce a new five-star hotel development, many Damascenes questioned how he had obtained the building permit so quickly. When Jamil al-Hasan, a gym bro vlogger, broadcast an emotional video from the Kaaba during the hajj, the display struck some viewers as performative. If they question the messenger, they'll question the message.

Then there is the increasingly synchronised messaging. A loose and expanding cohort of influencers – now estimated at around 40 – appears to move in lockstep. One week, the focus is the police force's new 'visual identity'; the next, it is the resounding victory in the northeast; the week after, a government-announced pay rise. The effect is to bombard the public with a series of pre-prepared talking points that have become both unconvincing and patronising.

More importantly, the influencers have drifted away from reality: showcasing investment conferences and talking about billions just around the corner while ordinary Syrians struggle to make ends meet. As economic conditions deteriorated towards the end of 2025 and living costs rose sharply, the constant reassurance that everything was improving, that the leadership knew what it was doing and that patience would be rewarded, rang hollow.

A derisive nickname, *mutabileen* ("drum beaters") has been given to the influencers, who have also become a rich source of memes.

Conduct unbecoming

The conduct of HTS members themselves did not help. Many were diligent and serious; too many, however, appeared to enjoy the privileges of power rather too openly. The convoys of black Cadillac Escalades quickly became a source of irritation. So, too, did the growing visibility of officials engaging in private business while in office. The dark suits, oversized watches, Lacoste manbags and fondness for conspicuous dining in pricy restaurants attracted jealousy and disdain in equal measure.

The disciplined, austere image that had accompanied HTS's rise began to fade, replaced by a perception of officials as arrogant, on-the-make, and more interested in putting on a show than getting things done. It did not apply to all, but it applied to enough to shape public perception. As one Damascene woman in her early forties put it: "The clever one is whoever fills his pockets in the end – some of it openly, some of it hidden – but always cloaked in religion, slogans, and morality."

The problem did not go unnoticed at the top. In November 2025 President Sharaa reportedly rebuked his officials over what he described as growing "suspicions of corruption", warning that this risked eroding public trust. He urged them to show restraint in their consumption – having smaller motorcades, for example. He also promised a renewed crackdown on public-sector corruption, estimated to cost Syria some $2bn annually. And he began with his brother, Jamal, whose office was closed down after rumours of shady business deals. The intervention was important: an implicit admission that the behaviour of parts of the ruling class had begun to undermine the government's image.

Doom scrolling

At its heart, the problem with the government's strategic communication campaign is structural. Syrian state and quasi-state media remain geared towards producing *i'lamiyeen* – media personalities – rather than practising *sahafa* (journalism) in any meaningful sense. Creating celebrities and generating viral clips on TikTok and Facebook may be entertaining; but it's not trustworthy.

Without reliable, professional interlocutors – experienced journalists, editors and presenters – audiences have little reason to believe what they hear from influencers or the state-run media that serves as their vessel. Even President Sharaa's statements and decrees appear to carry less weight than before as people begin to tune out.

Media reset

The government's image has been tarnished by the shallowness and sleaze of a coterie of social media influencers and elements of the HTS apparatchik class. This sits uneasily with Sharaa's tangible achievements, including the lifting of US sanctions, the merger deal with the SDF, and a cautious avoidance of entanglement in the Iran-Israel war.

While good taste cannot be legislated, and combating corruption is a long and arduous task, credibility and seriousness can be rebuilt reasonably quickly through more professional journalism. That means the government granting its media outlets – *Al-Ikhbariya* TV, *Al-Thawra* newspaper, and SANA news agency – genuine independence to investigate, question and report without self-censorship, and without having constantly to praise and glorify, Assad-era style.

The credibility of government

Communications can be greatly enhanced through consistent, fact-based reporting, and there is no shortage of talent. As one retired Syrian newspaper editor put it: "Syria is a country full of journalists, with no journalism." What Syria lacks is media institutions: newsrooms that function as schools of journalism, capable of training reporters and enforcing standards. As trust in such journalism grew, it would greatly encourage a broader restoration of confidence in the government itself.

Perfect storm

The fallout of the Iran war threatens Syria's economic survival

Syria is ill-prepared for any disruption to its already narrow regional space for trade and investment. The fragile political relevance that has sustained it thus far risks eroding as the region shifts once again.

One of the first line one encounters in Syrian geography textbooks is the assertion that Syria "enjoys" a strategic location. For decades, Syrian dark humour has poked fun at that choice of verb. Strategic, certainly; but enjoyable is another matter. Since independence in 1946 Syria's location has more often exposed it to the ambitions and anxieties of others than delivered consistent economic advantage.

That paradox is once again coming into sharp relief. The fallout from a war involving Iran should be understood through this geographic lens. Its consequences for Syria will not be confined to the familiar macroeconomic pressures – rising prices, renewed inflationary strain and the chilling of already tentative investment flows. These are real and painful, but they are only the surface symptoms of a deeper structural vulnerability.

Inflation rises, investment slows

2025 imports are estimated to have been at least eight times larger than exports, At the same time, the government's recovery approach relies heavily on externally financed investment. So far, Gulf countries have been the main source of MoUs and contracts, with notable agreements including USD 7 billion for the electricity sector and USD 4 billion for the development of Damascus airport. This dual dependency – on external markets for goods and external partners for investment – makes Syria highly vulnerable to external shocks.

It is estimated that the Iran war could result in a 30 percent rise in import costs, reflecting higher oil prices, freight costs and insurance costs. Based on evidence from other countries that each 10 percent increase in import prices raises consumer price index (CPI) by about 3 percent, this would add roughly 9 percent to inflation, with the strongest impact on food, energy and basic consumption goods.

In parallel, investment is expected to slow. Gulf countries are likely to prioritise domestic stability and reduce exposure to high-risk environments. A one-year delay within a five-year investment cycle would translate into an approximate 20 percent reduction in expected FDI inflows into Syria. This year alone, the combined impact of rising import costs, higher inflation and declining investment could reduce Syria's GDP growth by around 5 percent, assuming other factors remained constant.

The fiscal position is also set to deteriorate. Lower consumption and reduced investment will directly weaken tax and fee collection. Evidence from the World Bank and IMF suggests that a 10 percent decline in consumption leads to a 2 – 3 percent drop in tax revenues. Under these combined pressures, Syria could see real public revenues fall by 5 – 10 percent, even as its expenditure needs increase.

Who will step in?

What will define whether Syria can survive the severe impacts of the conflict is not only the scale of the shock itself, but who remains willing to rescue the country. Can Syria still secure the substantial investments promised by GCC countries? If so, can it actually channel them in ways that benefit economic stability and the welfare of its people? If not, are there alternative sources of investment? And if Iran were to emerge from the war open for business, would Syria still be relevant for investors, even frontier investors who look for high risk, high return markets? Or will they send their money to Iran instead?

Such questions are far from rhetorical. Beyond undervalued state assets, major concessions and extractive opportunities, it is not clear what Syria currently offers to investors. This is not only because of sanctions, politics, or insecurity, but the lack of progress by the government in restoring the productive industrial base and strengthening the rule of law.

Similar questions apply to trade. Will Syria import inflation from Turkey, its largest source of imports, at a time when Turkey itself is expected to be hit hard economically and is already struggling to stabilise the lira amid rising inflation and higher oil prices?

Lebanon presents a similar concern. Syria and Lebanon have many problems and their economies are deeply entangled. A striking illustration of their inter-dependence has been the Lebanese economic

and financial crisis that started in 2019 which contributed to the collapse of the Syrian pound and has had catastrophic wider impacts on the Syrian economy.

Iraq, one of Syria's most important export destinations, is no less exposed. Security tensions between Baghdad and Tehran are escalating rapidly, carrying the risk of broader disruption.

According to Syria's Central Bureau of Statistics, Lebanon, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia were the largest destinations for Syrian exports in 2023, at USD 237.2 million, USD 232.7 million, and USD 183.1 million respectively, together accounting for more than 35 percent of total exports. Syria's export map is heavily concentrated, leaving the country highly exposed to regional disorder.

Geopolitical shifts can also create openings, but…

Major geopolitical changes have not affected Syria in uniform ways. At times, they have created severe pressure; at others, they have opened space. In the aftermath of the first Gulf War (1990-91), GCC countries provided significant financial support at a time when Syria was under extreme stress as a result of its involvement in Lebanon's civil war and international sanctions. The collapse of the Soviet Union, then Syria's main trade partner, was far more disruptive, dealing a heavy blow to parts of Syria's industry. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, however, the opening of alternative markets in Europe and, to a lesser extent, the US created new opportunities. The beneficiaries included opposition politician Riad Seif, who produced "made in Syria" Adidas sportswear for European markets.

The problem today is that Syria enters this regional crisis without having rebuilt enough of its productive base to benefit from any new openings. Syria needs stronger domestic production to reduce import dependency and narrow the trade deficit, more diversified sources of foreign investment and stronger domestic value chains. More robust local production could reduce inflation. Building strategic reserves of essential goods such as food and fuel could also help mitigate the impact of future external shocks.

Without all that, a perfect storm is brewing.

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

Berlin Calling

A conversation with Clemens Hach

Ahmad al-Sharaa's first stop on his European tour was Berlin. Home to the third-largest Syrian diaspora, Germany plays a central role in shaping relations between the European Union and the emerging new Syrian state. To learn more about Germany's position on key matters such as elections, refugee returns, and aid, *Syria in Transition* spoke with Clemens Hach, Germany's Chargé d'Affaires in Damascus.

Ahmad al-Sharaa just visited Berlin. What stood out to you?

Hach: President Ahmad Al Sharaa visited Berlin on Monday, 30 March, on the invitation of Federal Chancellor Friedrich Merz. This was one of the first official visits of Al Sharaa to Europe and therefore a testament to the strong bonds that have always existed between Germany and Syria and that have become even stronger thanks to the large Syrian community in Germany. He was received by Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier and by Chancellor Merz and participated in a large business round-table held at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs with three German and four Syrian Ministers in attendance, as well as about hundred representatives of the German business sector. He also visited the Siemens Energy factory in Berlin, to witness the production of the state-of-the-art megaturbines that shall be installed in Syria as part of Qatar's investment in the Syrian energy sector.

The scope of the visit was to highlight the partnership between our countries, discuss our shared expectations for the future of Syria as an inclusive and free society in fulfilment of the aspirations of the Syrian people, as well as Syria's strategic development vision as a geopolitical centrepiece in the region. Germany stands ready to support the Syrian transition as a trusted and reliable partner to Syria and its people.

The transitional government published a 'Statement of Recovery Priorities for International Cooperation' in March, which international partners are expected to adhere to. The document does not appear to envision continued independent needs assessments and does not differentiate between humanitarian and development mandates. Is that compatible with humanitarian principles in general and German principles in particular?

Hach: The priority of the Syrian government is recovery and reconstruction of the country, based on investment and prioritising the transition from humanitarian assistance to development cooperation. The government also wants to avoid any kind of donor dependency.

The "Recovery Priorities for International Cooperation" of the government are a mirror of the needs assessments and priorities as they have been defined over the past year since the liberation of Syria from the Assad-regime by the Government and with the support of the UN and other donors. The German cooperation priorities are aligned with these priorities, e.g. by prioritising the reconstruction of basic infrastructure, schools and the medical sector, as well as engaging in the justice sector, water governance, property rights and economic reactivation.

When it comes to humanitarian needs, we will continue to generously provide humanitarian assistance, based on independent needs assessments and humanitarian principles.

If UNSCR 2254 continues to be a legally binding resolution, does that mean that free and fair elections that the resolution stipulates are obligatory for the transitional government to realise?
Hach: The transitional declaration foresees free and fair elections in a timeframe of up to five years. For the transitional period, the Syrian government is completing a limited electoral process that is aimed at producing a representative National Assembly for the country that will fill an institutional vacuum in the legislative process. The National Assembly will play a key role as a forum for national debates and most importantly to fill the legislative vacuum that is slowing down economic recovery.

Regarding UNSCR 2254, the Syrian Government is discussing the future of this resolution with the UN and Security Council members, as well as a possible follow-up resolution that would reflect the fundamental changes that happened since 8 December, 2024 and focus on how the international community shall support the transition towards a peaceful, inclusive and prosperous Syria that lives at peace with itself and its neighbours.

Does Germany expect large-scale refugee returns from Germany to Syria in the future and is it willing to enforce them? Many Syrians, especially the 200,000-300,000 holding subsidiary protection are concerned about their future. Given that the majority of Syrians currently in Germany have been living there for quite some time and have built lives, what is the German strategy in general?
Hach: In a context where we do not see political prosecution or war in Syria anymore, many Syrians are looking forward to returning and thousands have already come back from Germany to contribute to the reconstruction of their home country. But it is clear that voluntary return is inherently linked to the availability of basic services and the restoration of infrastructure in areas of return. Germany is generously supporting the Syrian reconstruction effort and has already contributed to the return of hundreds of thousands of refugees from neighbouring countries.

You have worked on and in the region for many years in various roles. How do you make sense of where things stand today? Are we seeing the end of the Iranian regime, or the entrenchment of conflict as a permanent condition? Do you see signs of progress, or a pattern of setbacks? What are the key thoughts you find yourself returning to at the moment?
Hach: The region has indeed been going through a very difficult period since the terrorist attacks of Hamas against Israel on 7 October 2023 and the ensuing wars. Looking at the consequences, we have very positive developments in Syria. We still have a very difficult situation in Lebanon, but with a growing national consensus that Hezbollah should not continue to be allowed unilaterally to pull Lebanon into wars. And we have a terribly difficult situation in Gaza and the occupied Palestinian Territories in the West Bank. Much will depend on the outcome of the current campaign against Iran and whether the Iranian leadership will accept to refrain from foreign interference in the future and stop exporting their vision of political Islam.