STUDY

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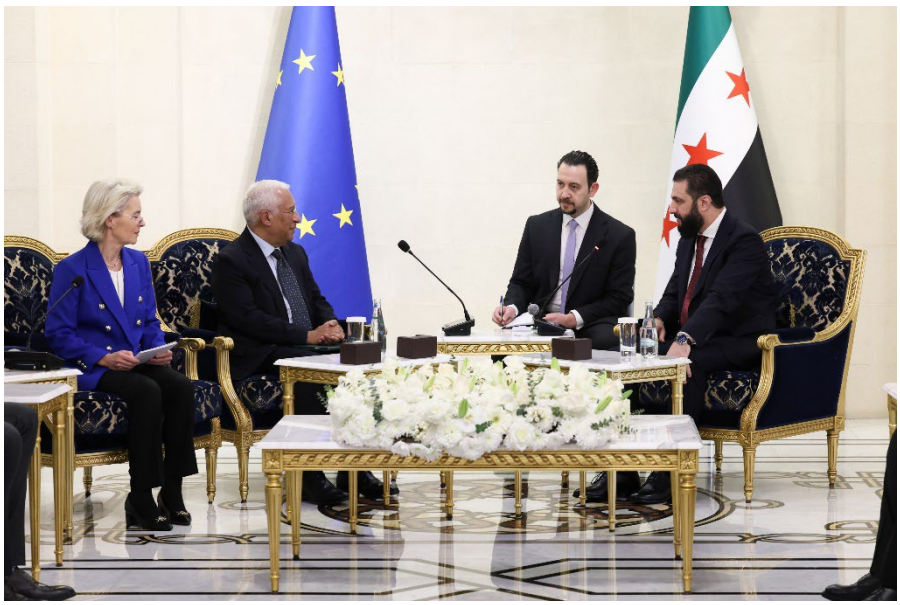
European Parliament

The impact of the fall of the Assad regime on Syria and the wider region



Authors:

Dr Jan DANIEL, Anna FILIPIOVÁ and Dr Clément STEUER

European Parliament coordinator:

External Policies Analysis and Support Unit

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European Parliament

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The impact of the fall of the Assad regime on Syria and the wider region

ABSTRACT

The fall of Bashar al-Assad's regime in December 2024, after more than five decades of Ba'athist rule, has reconfigured Syria's political order and foreign relations. By the end of summer 2026, the transitional government under Ahmed al-Sharaa had secured rapid international rehabilitation – including the lifting of United Nations sanctions and partial removal from European and American sanctions regimes. Yet, domestic consolidation remains incomplete, with structural economic issues, sectarian violence, controversies over minority protection and limited accountability exposing the new order's fragility and authoritarian tendencies. Drawing on interviews, fieldwork and policy analysis, this paper examines Syria's emerging political, security and economic dynamics, the repositioning of regional and international actors, as well as the leverage available to the European Union. It identifies three pathways for Syrian development over the next 12 to 24 months: state consolidation, authoritarian stabilisation or fragmentation. Which of these prevails will depend on the combination of external pressure and al-Sharaa's capacity to deliver inclusive domestic governance and manage the economic challenges. For the European Parliament, its central challenge is to translate the European Union's financial support into political leverage at a time when other actors have already moved decisively to occupy the economic and diplomatic space.

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External Policies Analysis and Support Unit, Directorate-General for External Policies

AUTHORS

Dr Jan DANIEL, Senior researcher, Institute of International Relations, Prague

Anna FILIPIOVÁ, M.A., PhD candidate, Department of Middle Eastern Studies, Faculty of Arts, Charles University, Prague

Dr Clément STEUER, Senior researcher, Institute of International Relations, Prague

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CONTRIBUTORS / RESEARCH ASSISTANCE / LANGUAGUE EDITING

Dr Filip SOMMER, Director of the Prague Centre for Middle Eastern Relations at Cevro University, contributed field research, interviews and the drafting of parts of the paper.

Tomma FIEDLER, Project Assistant, Trans European Policy Studies Association, contributed to the editing of references and proofreading of the text.

CONTRACTOR

Trans European Policy Studies Association (TEPSA) (Coordinator: Mathilde CHIGNESSE, TEPSA, Belgium)

CONTACTS IN THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT

Coordination: Maciek JASTRZEBIEC-PYSZYNSKI

Editorial assistance: Inge BRYS, Balázs REISS

To give feedback or obtain copies, please write to exas@europarl.europa.eu

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List of abbreviations

AFET	European Parliament Committee on Foreign Affairs
EEAS	European External Action Service
EU	European Union
GCC	Gulf Cooperation Council
GoS	Government of Syria
HTS	Hayat Tahrir al-Sham
IS	Islamic State
KSA	Kingdom of Saudi Arabia
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
NDICI-GE	Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument – Global Europe
PKK	Kurdistan Workers' Party (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê)
SAF	Syrian Armed Forces
SDF	Syrian Democratic Forces
SNA	Syrian National Army
UAE	United Arab Emirates
UN	United Nations
UNSC	United Nations Security Council
USA	United States of America

Executive summary

The fall of Bashar al-Assad's regime on 8 December 2024, ending over five decades of Ba'athist rule and more than a decade of civil war, has fundamentally reconfigured Syria's political landscape and the broader regional order. Under transitional President Ahmed al-Sharaa, Syria now confronts the dual imperatives of reunifying a fragmented state and rebuilding institutions hollowed out by authoritarian governance and years of conflict. The country must simultaneously navigate competing external influences from Türkiye, the Gulf states, Russia, Iran, Israel, the United States of America and European actors. The transitional authorities have achieved a remarkable degree of international recognition in their first year and a half in power. Yet, domestic consolidation remains incomplete, with numerous economic challenges, pressing humanitarian needs, sectarian violence and a lack of accountability from the new authorities for crimes during and following Assad's regime, all combining to expose this new order's fragility.

However, ongoing development of the government of Syria and state-society relations also presents an opportunity to shape this nascent political order. The European Union (EU) retains significant leverage in shaping Syria's trajectory. It is an important player in early recovery and reconstruction, provides a major share of humanitarian assistance, supports local non-governmental and civil society organisations and remains a diplomatic power with a significant presence in international organisations. This leverage is, though, constrained by interrelated factors: the absence of direct security or political instruments comparable to those wielded by regional powers, persistent divisions among Member States regarding the pace and conditionality of the engagement, along with the speed at which Gulf and Turkish actors have moved to establish themselves as Syria's primary economic and political partners in the post-Assad period.

Three principal pathways emerge from this analysis. The first envisages state consolidation under accountable governance, with meaningful integration of religious and ethnic minorities, credible transitional justice mechanisms as well as economic recovery anchored in sustained international engagement. The second projects authoritarian stabilisation, in which al-Sharaa's faction centralises power and delivers a degree of order at the cost of pluralism, civic freedoms and substantive accountability. The third anticipates renewed territorial fragmentation, characterised by persistent zones of foreign influence, recurring sectarian violence, together with the de facto entrenchment of Kurdish, Druze and Alawi enclaves outside Damascus's effective control. Which trajectory prevails will depend less on external pressure in isolation than on al-Sharaa's capacity to balance and react to Gulf, Turkish and Western expectations while developing a tangible level of domestic legitimacy through inclusive governance and accountability for past and present human rights violations.

This paper analyses the implications for EU policy and proposes specific recommendations for the European Parliament, which in turn could exercise its legislative, budgetary and oversight powers to ensure that EU engagement in Syria advances institutional resilience, inclusive governance and sustainable development rather than entrenching authoritarian consolidation or enabling fragmentation. It could thus: (1) prioritise inclusive funding for Syrian civil society and the humanitarian response; (2) focus EU capacity-building programmes on strengthening institutions; (3) allocate dedicated resources to material civic infrastructure; (4) explore legal frameworks allowing Syrian refugees to return temporarily without forfeiting protection status; (5) support inclusive participation in EU-funded projects to enhance social cohesion and involvement in political processes; (6) rigorously enforce anti-corruption conditionality on all economic investments and (7) leverage European Parliament delegations and interparliamentary regional frameworks to ensure regional coordination. The European Parliament's approach must remain adaptive across three potential Syrian pathways – state consolidation, authoritarian stabilisation and fragmentation – calibrating its tools from constructive partnership to rigorous oversight to humanitarian crisis management.

1 Introduction: Scope, structure and European Union context

This paper examines the implications of the fall of the Assad regime in December 2024 for Syria's domestic transition, regional stability and European Union (EU) policy interests. More than a year and a half after the regime's collapse, Syria's trajectory remains contested: transitional authorities under President Ahmed al-Sharaa are attempting to consolidate central control while managing acute sectarian tensions, competing external interventions and reconstruction needs estimated to be in the lower hundreds of billions USD[1]. The EU invested heavily in sanctions architecture and humanitarian assistance during the conflict and continues to host the largest population of Syrian refugees outside the immediate neighbourhood[2]. Hence, this transition presents both an opportunity for European engagement in the country and a set of risks. On the one hand, the nature of the new political order, which has yet to settle, and the new Syrian government's responsiveness to external demands represent an opportunity for active involvement and the steering of future development. On the other hand, regional instability, increased autocratisation and repression within Syria, coupled with the entrenchment of rival external actors, directly affect European security and the EU's ability to manage migration pressures, thereby shaping both its policy options and the environment in which any future EU-Syria framework will operate.

The trajectory of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and its political offshoots since the fall of Damascus represents one of the most striking diplomatic transformations in recent regional history. A movement designated as a terrorist organisation by the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), the United States of America (USA), the EU and most regional governments as the November 2024 offensive started, has within a year secured the lifting of United Nations (UN) sanctions on its leadership, partial removal from EU and US sanctions regimes, formal recognition by Gulf states and Türkiye as well as direct engagement from European foreign ministries[3]. Al-Sharaa's reception in Riyadh, his participation in regional summits and his diplomatic contacts with Western capitals have combined to underscore a rapid rehabilitation. Yet this remarkable diplomatic success has been coupled with profound domestic challenges: outbreaks of sectarian violence in the coastal Alawi heartland during March 2025[4] and in Druze-majority Suwayda during July 2025[5]; tensions with the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)[6] together with the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria; an economy in deep contraction with limited short-term prospects for recovery as well as persistent doubts within Syrian society and among external partners alike about pluralism, inclusivity and the emerging post-Assad order's durability. The gap between international rehabilitation and domestic consolidation defines this paper's analytical scope.

This paper contributes to ongoing European Parliament deliberations on the Union's engagement with the transitional Syrian authorities. It is situated within a fast-moving policy environment shaped by the Council's lifting of economic sanctions in May 2025, the resumption of the EU-Syria Cooperation Agreement framework and the High Level Political Dialogue held between the representatives of the EU and the Government of Syria (GoS), both in May 2026, and successive European Parliament resolutions calling for conditional engagement tied to human rights, transitional justice and governance benchmarks. Analysis here builds on the Union's broader Mediterranean partnership strategy, as articulated in the Pact

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[1] World Bank, 'Syria's Post-Conflict Reconstruction Costs Estimated at $216 billion', Press release, 21 October 2025.
[2] A. Chughtai and M. Ali, 'Where do six million Syrian refugees live today?', Al Jazeera English, 10 December 2024.
[3] C. Lennon, 'Security Council lifts terror-related sanctions on Syrian President', UN News, 6 November 2025.
[4] UN OHCHR, 'UN Syria Commission finds March coastal violence was widespread and systematic: outlines urgent steps to prevent future violations and restore public confidence', Press release, 14 August 2025.
[5] UN News, 'Syria: UN Commission documents grave violations in July 2025 escalation in Sweida', 27 March 2026.
[6] The SDF are a predominantly Kurdish-led military coalition established in 2015 as the main local partner of the US-led anti-Islamic State of Iraq and Syria coalition in north-eastern Syria. Led by Mazloum Abdi, the SDF currently maintain a cautious relationship with the government of Ahmed al-Sharaa, supporting dialogue and Syria's territorial unity while simultaneously seeking to preserve substantial autonomy in the north-east. See: K. Campa and B. Carter, The New Syrian Army: Order of Battle, Institute for the Study of War, November 2025; on progress of the integration see R. Al-Khadr et al., 'Syrian Government-SDF Integration: Slow Progress, Optimism Holds', Enab Baladi, 7 August 2026.

for the Mediterranean and its associated Action Plans, engaging directly with current debates over the calibration of conditionality, the role of European actors in reconstruction financing and the relationship between Syrian policy, migration and broader Middle East and North Africa policy. In doing so, the paper seeks to provide the European Parliament with an integrated analytical basis for its scrutiny of executive action and the formulation of its own positions on EU-Syria relations in the period ahead.

The paper draws on a combination of methods and sources. It combines a review of academic and policy studies with media reports and interviews. Members of the research team conducted 19 interviews specifically for this project between March and June 2026, mostly online, with diverse academic and policy experts, members of civil society organisations, journalists, EU officers and diplomats. The interviews were semi-structured, with questions tailored to the interviewees' areas of expertise or practice. Additionally, this analysis also draws on nine interviews conducted by research team members in person during different research projects focused on: formulating the EU's policy towards Syria (October–November 2025 and June 2026 in Brussels); the situation of Syrian minorities and their perception of (in)security (May–June 2025 in Syria and December 2025 in Germany); as well as the country's political development (February 2026 in Syria). Identifying key trends and the development of scenario trajectories, then followed three steps aligned with a tailored scenario-building methodology, which is further detailed in the introduction of chapter 5.

The following analysis is organised around three interrelated questions:

1. How are domestic Syrian actors navigating the post-Assad transition and what factors will determine the future trajectory of the country?
2. How are regional and international powers repositioning themselves in post-Assad Syria, and what are the implications of these realignments for European interests?
3. What leverage does the EU possess to influence Syria's trajectory and how can it maximise the effectiveness of its policy instruments?

Chapter 2 examines Syria's domestic context, analysing: the institutional frameworks emerging under transitional authority; the dynamics of security-sector reform and armed-group integration; sectarian tensions, alongside humanitarian and economic conditions facing both the transitional government and the population. Chapter 3 surveys the regional and international context, examining how Türkiye, Israel, the Gulf states – the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Qatar – the USA, Russia, Iran and Syria's immediate neighbours (Jordan, Lebanon and Iraq) are adapting their Syria policies in the post-Assad period. Chapter 4 assesses EU engagement options, identifies available leverage mechanisms, maps internal coordination challenges and considers the scope for alignment with regional partners and international financial institutions. Chapter 5 assesses trends and develops scenarios for Syria's medium-term trajectories and their implications for European policy interests. The paper concludes with targeted policy recommendations addressed to the European Parliament.

2 The domestic context: Main shifts and internal dynamics

Eighteen months after Assad's fall, Syria's transitional order combines formal institutional progress with substantive ambiguity. The constitutional declaration concentrates executive, legislative and constitutional-amendment authority in the presidency, while a constellation of parallel structures – led by HTS-Idlib networks and the family of President Ahmed al-Sharaa – operates alongside official institutions, particularly across the economy and key state functions. Tribal mobilisation has gradually joined sectarian loyalty as the basis for security recruitment, raising questions about whose protection the state guarantees. The economy remains in deep crisis, whilst the position of Syria's minority communities – Alawite, Druze, Christian, Kurdish – remains uncertain in both formal and practical terms. This chapter traces these dynamics in turn.

2.1 Transitional political order

Following the fall of Bashar al-Assad's regime, Syria's new governing authority moved quickly to establish a formal legal and political framework for the transitional period. In January 2025, the Assad-era constitution was abolished, the parliament, army and security institutions were dissolved and al-Sharaa was appointed interim President. A five-year transitional timeline was set, during which presidential elections are to be held and a new constitution adopted[7].

The constitutional declaration issued in March 2025 gave this arrangement its foundational legal shape and offered an initial concrete signal of the political order that al-Sharaa envisions. It establishes a strongly presidential system in which the president appoints all ministers and judges without parliamentary approval, directly designates one-third of parliament and controls the committee responsible for appointing the remaining two-thirds. With executive authority extending across all three branches, the constitutional declaration has been read by legal scholars and international observers as a framework closer to centralised authoritarian rule than to transitional democracy. It has been criticised for its content, the very short and non-inclusive process of its deliberation as well as the composition of legal experts involved in its drafting, who were selected by al-Sharaa[8]. Islamic jurisprudence is stipulated as the main source of law and the presidency is constitutionally restricted to Muslims – provisions that, while open-ended in theory, are widely understood as effectively enshrining a Sunni legal framework[9]. Article 49 commits to a transitional justice commission, but its mandate is narrowly consultative and victim-centred, with no investigative or prosecutorial powers, focusing almost exclusively on Assad-era crimes while criminalising the glorification of the former regime[10]. Moreover, the institutions established by subsequent decrees based on Article 49 – namely the transitional justice commission and the missing persons committee – have made very limited public progress in delivering transitional justice[11].

The transitional government, announced in March 2025, mirrors and operationalises the constitutional declaration's logic. The 23-member cabinet, headed directly by al-Sharaa following the abolition of the prime ministership, further concentrates executive authority in the presidency[12]. Many ministers were drawn from the HTS-run Syrian Salvation Government in Idlib, though three posts went to technocratic and Assad-era figures – including Muhammad Nidal al-Shaar (economy and industry), Yarub Badr (transport) and Muhammad Yasir Barniya (finance) – signalling to international partners and domestic professional classes that basic state functions would be maintained[13].

Four portfolios were initially allocated to members of religious and ethnic minorities and one to a woman: Muhammad Abdulrahman Turko (education; Kurdish), Yarub Badr (transport; Alawite) and Hind Kabawat

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[7] O. Rifai, 'Syria and the New Era: A Tale of Two Speeches', Centre for Syrian Studies, University of St Andrews, 31 January 2025.
[8] J. Drevon and N. Hawach, 'What Lies in Store for Syria as a New Government Takes Power?', International Crisis Group, 25 April 2025; Unit for Political Studies, 'The Constitutional Declaration and Challenges of the Syrian Transition', Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, May 2025.
[9] J. Drevon and N. Hawach, 'What Lies in Store for Syria as a New Government Takes Power?', International Crisis Group, 25 April 2025; Syrian Arab Republic, Constitutional Declaration of the Syrian Arab Republic, 13 March 2025.
[10] A. Autin, 'Syria's Transitional Justice Commission: A Missed Opportunity for Victim-Led Justice', Human Rights Watch, 19 May 2025; R. L. Phillips, 'Syria Embarks on a Transitional Justice Project', International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, 1 September 2025; Syrian Arab Republic, Constitutional Declaration of the Syrian Arab Republic, 13 March 2025.
[11] F. Abdughany and R. Teitel, 'Transitional Justice in Post-Assad Syria: A Transformative Framework for Accountability and Reform', Just Security, 24 March 2026.
[12] C. Lister, 'Assessing Syria's Transitional Government', Syria Weekly, 30 March 2025; Associated Press, 'Syria Swears in New Transitional Government Months After Assad's Removal', CNN, 30 March 2025; J. Drevon and N. Hawach, 'What Lies in Store for Syria as a New Government Takes Power?', International Crisis Group, 25 April 2025.
[13] C. Lister, 'Assessing Syria's Transitional Government', Syria Weekly, 30 March 2025; Associated Press, 'Syria Swears in New Transitional Government Months After Assad's Removal', CNN, 30 March 2025; J. Drevon and N. Hawach, 'What Lies in Store for Syria as a New Government Takes Power?', International Crisis Group, 25 April 2025.

(social affairs and labour; Christian)[14]. The fourth, Amjad Badr (agriculture; Druze), has since been replaced by an HTS-affiliated Bassel Hafez al-Sweidan during a cabinet reshuffle instigated by the President in May 2026[15]. These appointees, though, are not closely affiliated with the communities they nominally represent and their inclusion has been widely read as tokenistic – a signal directed at minority constituencies as well as Western and Gulf audiences whose recognition and financial support the transitional government requires[16]. More on minorities can be found in chapter 2.4.

Parliamentary elections in October 2025, conducted via an indirect electoral college system, filled 119 of 140 contested seats in the 210-member People's Assembly[17], with 70 further seats filled by the president in July 2026[18]. However, voting in Suwayda, Hasakah and Raqqa was postponed on security grounds[19]. Previously postponed elections in Raqqa and Hasakah were held in March and May 2026, leaving Suwayda as the only place in Syria where the elections are yet to be held. While these elections were broadly welcomed and the People's Assembly held its first session on 12 July 2026, decision-making power remains concentrated in the presidency, with the assembly functioning largely as a consultative or confirmatory body within executive parameters rather than as an autonomous legislative institution[20].

2.2 Security sector and the armed forces

To address a security vacuum left by the Assad-era forces' collapse, the Ministry of Defence has integrated approximately 130 armed factions under its authority and plans to build a professional, voluntary army with a transparent personnel system designed to avoid the previous regime's patronage networks. External partners – notably Türkiye and Saudi Arabia – support training and knowledge transfer, as other actors gradually step up their involvement in security system reform efforts[21]. In parallel, Syria has made significant progress in re-establishing its police forces under the Ministry of Interior's auspices. Nevertheless, these efforts have shown many limitations, manifested in uneven performance among police officers on the ground, cases of strained relationships with local communities, gaps in information and knowledge-sharing systems as well as a lack of internal accountability procedures[22].

Integration into the Syrian Armed Forces (SAF) (officially, the Syrian Arab Forces)[23] remains problematic and uneven, with Druze[24] and Alawi[25] components standing largely outside the new force and remaining distrustful. Integrating the SDF – north-east Syria's mainly Kurdish armed actor – has been the most contested component of the military restructuring[26]. A March 2025 framework agreement between al-

[14] J. Drevon and N. Hawach, 'What Lies in Store for Syria as a New Government Takes Power?', International Crisis Group, 25 April 2025.
[15] H. Haid, 'Continuity Trumps Reform in Syria's Cabinet Reshuffle', Al Majalla, 12 May 2026.
[16] Interview with an academic and researcher, St Andrews, 27 April 2026; Human Rights Watch, 'Syria: Constitutional Declaration Risks Endangering Rights', Press release, 25 March 2025.
[17] N. Hawach, 'Parliamentary Elections in Post-Assad Syria', International Crisis Group, 6 October 2025; The Syrian Observer, 'Syria Holds First Parliamentary Elections Under Sharaa, but Questions Over Democratic Credibility Persist', 14 November 2025.
[18] SANA, 'Syria's new People's Assembly holds inaugural session', 12 July 2026.
[19] See R. H., 'Election results announced for Raqqa, Tabqa constituencies', Sana, 17 March 2026.
[20] H. Haid, 'Syria's Parliamentary Elections: A Turning Point or Another Top-Down Exercise?', Chatham House, 9 September 2025.
[21] M. Al Mustafa, 'Toward a Unified National Army: The Ministry of Defense's Restructuring Plan', Omran Center for Strategic Studies, 10 March 2026.
[22] G. Waters, Building Syria's New Ministry of Interior, Centre for Statecraft and National Security, 11 June 2026.
[23] The Syrian Armed Forces are the newly restructured military forces established by the transitional government of Ahmed al-Sharaa after the fall of the Assad regime in December 2024, aiming to integrate the major armed factions that emerged during the Syrian civil war. Although the Syrian Armed Forces are primarily built around the centralised military structures of HTS, many incorporated factions, particularly Turkish-backed groups from the former Syrian National Army (see later), continue to maintain varying degrees of autonomy and fragmented command structures. See: K. Campa and B. Carter, The New Syrian Army: Order of Battle, Institute for the Study of War, November 2025.
[24] A. J. Al-Tamimi, 'The Druze National Guard in Southern Syria', Middle East Forum, 18 September 2025.
[25] J. Salhani, 'Syria's Challenges to Rebuild Its Armed Forces', Al Jazeera, 4 January 2026.
[26] M. Al Mustafa, 'Toward a Unified National Army: The Ministry of Defense's Restructuring Plan', Omran Center for Strategic Studies, 10 March 2026.

Sharaa and SDF commander Mazlum Abdi (Kobani) stalled over the form of integration and the degree of political decentralisation of Kurdish-majority areas. After negotiations collapsed, a January 2026 government military offensive enabled Damascus to reassert control over significant parts of the country's north-east[27], followed by a US-brokered ceasefire[28], leaving broader political terms unresolved[29] (see chapter 2.5). Even where integration formally occurred, questions of loyalty persist among commanders who retain independent patronage networks, territorial bases and ideological commitments that predate their incorporation into the SAF[30].

Foreign jihadist elements and residual Islamic State (IS) networks remain an acute concern, with reported activity across multiple governorates, including Damascus[31]. IS attacks have declined since January 2025, but recruitment has intensified under the post-Assad order[32] and the group's adaptability cautions against treating it as defeated[33]. An estimated 5 000 foreign fighters who are not scheduled for SAF integration – many implicated in the 2025 Alawite and Druze massacres[34] – pose a particular risk of absorption into jihadist networks, while few states are willing to repatriate them[35]. Compounding these structural problems, some senior appointed officials have reportedly met with commanders linked to grave wartime violations, raising transitional justice and accountability concerns[36].

2.3 Informal internal actors

Next to the centralised political structure officially established by the constitutional declaration lies a series of internal power networks that this section terms 'informal internal actors'. These individuals and their networks of clients exercise a substantive authority without a legal mandate and are organised around personal loyalty, kinship, patronage as well as pre-existing social ties. Their influence on Syrian politics varies, but they cannot be neglected in analysing contemporary Syrian political life. The subchapters that follow examine the nature and reach of the most influential actors.

A constellation of bodies and individuals with links to HTS networks and the presidential family emerged following the fall of the Assad regime, often overriding formal institutions while retaining the appearance of bureaucratic legitimacy. Substantial decision-making has been carried out by the Foreign Ministry's General Secretariat for Political Affairs, headed by Foreign Minister Asaad al-Shaibani, which serves as a checkpoint for much of the policy coordination and implementation undertaken by both the government and Syria's provincial cities[37]. Although there are ongoing attempts to centralise some control and decision-making processes under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs[38], a number of reports published in May 2026 suggested that the General Secretariat for Political Affairs is itself now being dissolved – a reminder of how readily such parallel structures can be created and dismantled by decree. Furthermore, newly created positions within the judicial system, commonly referred to as 'the Sheikh', stand above Syria's official

[27] Al Jazeera Centre for Studies, 'Developments in Northeastern Syria: The End of the SDF?', 28 January 2026.
[28] Al Jazeera and Agencies, 'Syrian Army Enters Kurdish City of Hasakah as Ceasefire Takes Hold', Al Jazeera, 3 February 2026.
[29] Interview with Qatari-Syrian NGO worker based in Syria, online, 8 April 2026; Interview with Syrian journalist, online, 12 April 2026.
[30] P. Vacher, 'Turkey's Lingering Influence in Syria's New Army', New Lines Magazine, 2 February 2026.
[31] Interview with Qatari-Syrian NGO worker based in Syria, online, 8 April 2026; Interview with Syrian journalist, online, 12 April 2026.
[32] J. Drevon and N. Hawach, 'The Struggle to Pacify Syria's Foreign Legions', International Crisis Group, 13 May 2026.
[33] C. Lister, 'Syria Data Update (April 14-28, 2026)', Syria Weekly, 29 April 2026.
[34] J. Drevon and N. Hawach, 'The Struggle to Pacify Syria's Foreign Legions', International Crisis Group, 13 May 2026.
[35] J. Drevon and N. Hawach, 'The Struggle to Pacify Syria's Foreign Legions', International Crisis Group, 13 May 2026.
[36] P. Vacher, 'Turkey's Lingering Influence in Syria's New Army', New Lines Magazine, 2 February 2026; Human Rights Watch, 'Syria: Türkiye-Backed Armed Groups Detain, Extort Civilians', 14 May 2025.
[37] A. Y. Zelin, Institutions and Governance in the New Syria: Continuity and Change from the Idlib Model, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, December 2025.
[38] Interview with EC officer, Brussels, 11 June 2026; Interview with two EC officers, Brussels, 10 June 2026.

judiciary structures, including those of the attorney general and the Supreme Judicial Council[39]. Additionally, Maher al-Sharaa, the President's brother, who has served as Secretary General since May 2025[40], has been replaced as part of a reshuffle within the executive apparatus instigated by the President. This was most likely in response to allegations of nepotism and criticism of his performance. However, this reform is largely read simply as a recalibration of al-Sharaa's inner circle rather than a genuine broadening of the administration, with new appointees drawn overwhelmingly from the same loyalist pool[41].

Syria's official economic authorities are frequently overshadowed by informal investment channels and presidential family networks. Until May 2026, Hazeem al-Sharaa, the President's other brother, headed a 'shadow committee' coordinating investments, financial policy as well as economic restructuring and has spearheaded opaque billion-dollar settlements with Assad-era businessmen; no successor has been named[42]. Meanwhile, HTS-linked figures occupy strategic chokepoints. Most notably, ex-commander Mustafa Qadid operates as de facto 'shadow governor' of the central bank, holding veto power over the official governor's decisions, while concurrently heading the central organisation for financial control[43]. While some analysts with links to the government defend these arrangements as 'necessary adaptation to extraordinary circumstances', others read them as equivalent to 'Assad-era corruption'[44], 'regime-building'[45] or 'Idlibisation'. The latter expression refers to the nationwide scaling-up of a governance model developed by HTS in Idlib after 2017 in which informal networks, personal loyalty and patronage structures are applied in the allocation of positions and resources[46].

Moreover, tribal networks have emerged as one of the important instruments of governance, security and patronage. Tribes, particularly those displaced to Idlib during the war and integrated into HTS's social base, increasingly form the backbone of the new military, security and patronage system. The July 2025 Suwayda mobilisation, in which thousands of tribesmen streamed across the country to fight Druze militias unhindered by the government (see chapter 2.5), illustrated this dynamic clearly, with al-Sharaa endorsing and rewarding tribal mobilisation. This endorsement is being institutionalised, most visibly through the appointment of Hussein al-Salama, a former HTS militant and a member of the Abu Jamel clan of the influential Eastern Syrian Al-Uqaydat tribe, as head of general intelligence. Tribal mobilisation also substitutes for formal forces where the new army's reach remains limited, such as in Suwayda, the coast and potentially the SDF-held north-east. Experts have even argued that tribalism, a form of belonging and solidarity based on tribal identity, has, to a significant degree, complemented Assad-era sectarianism (loyalty based on sectarian identity) as the main organising principle of how current state authorities establish their network of loyalty and authority[47]. Nevertheless, sectarian tensions remain and are especially visible in the new governing structures' distrust of minorities, particularly the Alawites. See chapter 2.4 for more information[48].

Civil society has expanded noticeably since December 2024, with Syrian organisations operating primarily at the micro and meso levels, facilitating dialogue between state authorities and local communities, providing humanitarian assistance and cooperating with international non-governmental organisations (NGOs). The White Helmets (incorporated into the Syrian Ministry of Emergency and Disaster

[39] B. Alahmad, Syria — The Newly Created Position of "Sheikh/Head of the Judicial Directorate": Entrenching Loyalties at the Expense of Judicial Independence, Syrians for Truth and Justice, 2 October 2025.
[40] Syria in Transition, 'Syria's Phantom Institutions', May 2025.
[41] H. Haid, 'Continuity Trumps Reform in Syria's Cabinet Reshuffle', Al Majalla, 12 May 2026.
[42] Enab Baladi, 'Investigation: Syria Secretly Restructures Its Economy Led by Hazem al-Sharaa', 27 July 2025; K. Y. Oweis, 'Syria's Al Shara removes elder brother from influential position to curb image of nepotism', The National, 10 May 2026.
[43] T. Azhari and F. Dalatey, 'Syria is secretly reshaping its economy. The president's brother is in charge', Reuters, 25 July 2025.
[44] S. Legrand, 'From al-Assad to al-Shara'a: Technocratic and Banking Networks Behind Syria's Financialization', Noria Research, 6 January 2026.
[45] Interview with an Arabic-speaking academic, researcher and policy advisor, online, 28 April 2026.
[46] J. Yazigi, '"Idlibization" of the Economy: HTS's Economic Model Expands Nationwide', Syria Report, 21 October 2025.
[47] H. Dukhan, 'From Sectarianism to Tribalism: Rebuilding Syria's Power Structures', Arab Center Washington DC, 6 August 2025.
[48] Interview with an Arabic-speaking academic, researcher and policy advisor, online, 27 April 2026.

Management[49]) remain active, and various long-exiled Syrian accountability organisations are also returning to the country[50]. This nascent civic space is, though, conditionally framed by two instruments that reproduce Assad-era patterns of state oversight from opposite ends. Firstly, early in 2025 the government reinstated an 'umbrella system' requiring international humanitarian organisations to operate through state-affiliated Syrian 'national partners'. Secondly, in October 2025 it reactivated Law No. 93 of 1958, requiring Syrian domestic associations to secure government approval before receiving foreign funding or joining international bodies. Both Syrian civil society organisations and international observers warn that this framework recreates the restrictive environment of authoritarian civic control[51].

2.4 Sectarian dynamics and minority protection

2.4.1 Minority protection

Sectarian dynamics are among the most volatile fault lines in post-Assad Syria. The new government has consistently emphasised minority protection and the constitutional declaration contains formal guarantees to that effect, yet events on the ground have repeatedly contradicted these assurances[52]. Two incidents stand out for their scale and significance. In March 2025, sustained violence along the Syrian coast resulted in the massacre of an estimated 1 400 to 1 600 Alawite civilians[53]. In July 2025, Druze communities in Suwayda governorate were similarly subjected to organised violence, with death tolls up to 1 700[54]. Additional incidents point to a repeated pattern of violence against minorities. These include an attack on Mar Elias Church in Damascus during June 2025[55], reports of abductions of Alawi girls and women[56], together with March 2026 clashes between Christians and Sunnis in Suqaylabiyah[57].

The government's response to these events has been consistently evasive. These incidents have been attributed to 'local armed conflicts', framed as violence 'on both sides' or disavowed as falling outside governmental responsibility. National committees were established to investigate both the coastal and Suwayda events, yet their findings have characterised the violence as largely unsystematic and driven by acts of revenge[58]. Limited prosecutions have followed – most notably the November 2025 Aleppo military court trial of 14 rank-and-file suspects drawn equally from government-affiliated forces and alleged Assad loyalists, but no senior-level indictments have been issued. Moreover, in February 2026, various individuals detained in connection with events in Suwayda were granted amnesty by presidential decree[59]. The cumulative effect has been to confine accountability to low-level perpetrators while leaving command responsibility structurally unaddressed. Independent investigations have reached starkly different

[49] The White Helmets, 'Statement on the Integration of the Syria Civil Defence (The White Helmets) into the Syrian Government', 3 June 2025.
[50] Amnesty International, 'Syria: A year after Assad's fall, the rights of survivors and families must guide transition', 8 December 2025.
[51] Enab Baladi, 'Syrian NGOs oppose restrictions on funding approvals', 23 October 2025; Human Rights Watch, 'Syria: New Government Restricts Aid Operations', Press release, 12 May 2025; Amnesty International, 'Syria: A year after Assad's fall, the rights of survivors and families must guide transition', 8 December 2025; Syria Justice and Accountability Centre, 'Joint Position Paper on the Directive from the Minister of Social Affairs and Labor', 24 October 2025.
[52] Human Rights Watch, 'Syria: Constitutional Declaration Risks Endangering Rights', Press release, 25 March 2025.
[53] Human Rights Watch, 'Syria: March Atrocities Demand Senior Level Accountability', Press release, 23 September 2025.
[54] W. Al Nofal, 'Suwayda stands at a crossroads, one year after Assad's fall', Syria Direct, 19 December 2025; M. Bahah, 'Protection or partition? The future of Suweida and Syria's Druze', The New Arab, 22 January 2026.
[55] L. Sinjab, ''We're not safe here anymore' - Syria's Christians fear for future after devastating church attack', BBC, 30 June 2025.
[56] BBC News Arabic, 'I would scream in my sleep: Women from Syria's Alawite minority tell of kidnap and rape', 18 February 2026.
[57] O. Albam, 'Sectarian attacks rock a Christian town in Syria after a dispute', Associated Press, 28 March 2026.
[58] The Syria Campaign, 'Findings of national investigation into Syria's coast massacres spark anger among victims and human rights defenders', 23 July 2025.
[59] M. Omari, 'The Trial of Syria's Coastal Crimes: Initial Observations for Rebuilding Trust in the Judicial System', Arab Reform Initiative, 11 December 2025; The Syria Campaign, 'Findings of national investigation into Syria's coast massacres spark anger among victims and human rights defenders', 23 July 2025.

conclusions, documenting direct participation by Defence and Interior Ministry forces and characterising the coastal violence as 'widespread and systematic'[60].

Analytically, it is important to distinguish between two distinct drivers of sectarian tension. The first driver is religious and doctrinal: within an Islamic jurisprudential framework, non-Sunni communities may be positioned as second-class citizens, which can shape everyday relations at the local level. In other words, one strand of tensions stems from the view, held by an undetermined but visible number of Sunni actors, that minority communities are subordinate[61]. The second driver is structural and political: anti-minority sentiment may reflect the legacy of state–society relations under the Assad regime, which portrayed itself as a protector of religious minorities and relied disproportionately on members of the Alawi community, particularly within the security apparatus, while also cultivating alliances with Druze, Shi'a and Christian elites. As a result, these communities have often been collectively associated with regime survival, although this perception obscures considerable variation in their experiences, political positions and relationships with the regime[62]. A further caveat is warranted, though, as part of the violence may also stem from the general breakdown of order and local security, in which the state's weak monopoly on the use of force, uneven militia integration and the absence of functioning policing allow private violence to escalate along sectarian lines[63]. These dynamics coexist and at times overlap, yet their drivers must be understood as distinct policy matters, while they suggest different intervention points and trajectories.

The cumulative effect of the violations against minorities has been a marked shift in minority politics toward demands for autonomy or outright separation. For instance, some Druze voices in Suwayda have called openly for self-rule with Israeli backing[64], whilst Alawi calls for autonomy have been articulated but lack both external support and internal cohesion, leaving the community structurally isolated[65].

2.4.2 The Kurdish integration

Since 10 March 2025, a broader agreement between the SDF and the Syrian government has provided a formal framework for integrating SDF structures into the Syrian state's military architecture, though implementation has remained limited. The process gained renewed momentum following an escalation of clashes between the SDF and Syrian government forces in January 2026, which enabled the government to reassert control over significant parts of northern and eastern Syria, including major oil fields and key detention facilities – most notably al-Hol camp, where families of IS fighters have been held since the group's territorial defeat in 2019. US withdrawal from the Qasrak base in mid-April 2026 further weakened Kurdish leverage in ongoing negotiations[66].

The integration process remains politically sensitive: recent appointments have institutionalised SDF and Syrian Democratic Council representation within state structures, but persistent tensions surround legitimacy and external affiliations. Furthermore, localised protests in formerly SDF-governed Arab areas point to grievances over governance practices, representation and resource distribution[67]. Compounding these dynamics is an enduring mistrust between SDF elements and factions of the Syrian National Army

[60] UN OHCHR, 'UN Syria Commission finds March coastal violence was widespread and systematic: outlines urgent steps to prevent future violations and restore public confidence', Press release, 14 August 2025.
[61] J. Drevon and N. Hawach, 'What Lies in Store for Syria as a New Government Takes Power?', International Crisis Group, 25 April 2025.
[62] A. Fefer, 'Regime Change and Minority Risks: Syrian Alawites After Assad', Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 21 July 2025.
[63] International Crisis Group, Restoring Security in Post-Assad Syria: Lessons from the Coast and Suweida, 26 November 2025.
[64] W. Al Nofal, 'Suwayda stands at a crossroads, one year after Assad's fall', Syria Direct, 19 December 2025.
[65] F. Balanche, 'Back From Syria: Separatist Tendencies Prevalent Among Minority Groups', Fabrice Balanche, 5 December 2025.
[66] N. Bonsey and D. Khalifa, 'An Opportunity for Calm in North-eastern Syria', International Crisis Group, 30 January 2026.
[67] Interview with Qatari-Syrian NGO worker based in Syria, online, 8 April 2026; Interview with Syrian journalist, online, 12 April 2026.

(SNA)[68], rooted in their history of direct confrontation[69]. Representatives of the Syrian Democratic Council have consistently advocated for a more decentralised political system, particularly in Kurdish-majority areas. Damascus has signalled limited willingness to accommodate these demands, but its concessions remain cautious and ambiguous, leaving the extent of meaningful decentralisation uncertain[70].

2.5 Humanitarian and economic fragility

Syria's humanitarian situation remains dire and in urgent need of foreign support. Approximately 16.5 million people – around 75 % of the population – are in need of humanitarian assistance, with roughly 90 % of Syrians living below the poverty line and possibly 25 % in extreme poverty[71]. The lifting of EU and Western sanctions following Assad's fall opened initial channels for humanitarian funding and commercial activity[72], but relief has been partially offset by significant cuts in international humanitarian funding – most notably from the USA – which have materially worsened conditions on the ground[73].

As of May 2026, more than 7.2 million Syrians are acutely food-insecure, including 1.6 million facing emergency conditions and roughly 80 % of households facing chronic food insecurity[74]. Child malnutrition remains severe, with some 600 000 under-fives acutely malnourished[75]. The humanitarian safety net is itself fraying: the World Food Programme has halved emergency food assistance to 650 000 beneficiaries, scaled back operations from 14 governorates to 7 and halted the government-led bread subsidy programme – launched in June 2025 and reaching up to 4 million people daily through some 300 bakeries – citing a USD 189 million funding shortfall driven principally by US foreign-aid cuts[76].

The economic picture is one of structural fragility punctuated by tentative signs of recovery. Indicators such as 1 % gross domestic product growth, a modest strengthening of the Syrian pound, increased night-time light use, the reopening of businesses, new port concessions and the beginnings of foreign capital inflows suggest that economic activity is cautiously resuming[77]. The International Monetary Fund was even more optimistic in its recent forecast, expecting a growth of as much as 10 % in 2026 and strong growth in 2027[78]. The government has taken a number of notable measures: a 200 % increase in public sector salaries, a 200 % increase in pensions and a currency redenomination, removing two zeros from the Syrian pound[79]. These are meaningful signals of intent. Structurally, though, the picture remains dire: energy production is estimated to be down 80 % from pre-war levels, liquidity shortages persist across the banking system and

[68] The SNA was formed in northern Aleppo in 2017 as a Turkish-backed umbrella for armed opposition factions under the Syrian Interim Government, although it remained fragmented and internally divided. Despite its formal dissolution and integration into the SAF, many former SNA factions and patronage networks continue to influence the country's security landscape. R. Uddin, 'The Syrian National Army: Rebels, Thugs or Turkish Proxies?', *Middle East Eye*, 7 December 2024; Syria in Transition, 'What's left of the SNA', December 2025.
[69] P. Vacher, 'Turkey's Lingering Influence in Syria's New Army', New Lines Magazine, 2 February 2026.
[70] Interview with Qatari-Syrian NGO worker based in Syria, online, 8 April 2026.
[71] UN OCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: Humanitarian Overview Issue No. 2, 23 December 2025.
[72] The White House, 'Fact Sheet: President Donald J. Trump Provides for the Revocation of Syria Sanctions', 30 June 2025.
[73] UN OCHA, 'Syrian Arab Republic: At a glance | Urgently Prioritized Humanitarian Response Priorities 2025', 24 July 2025.
[74] UN News, 'Funding shortfalls force deep cuts to Syria food assistance: WFP', 13 May 2026; The New Arab, '80 % of Syrians Still Suffering Food Insecurity', 6 April 2026.
[75] The New Arab, '80% of Syrians Still Suffering Food Insecurity', 6 April 2026.
[76] UN News, 'Funding shortfalls force deep cuts to Syria food assistance: WFP', 13 May 2026; The National, 'WFP cuts emergency food aid to Syria by 50 % amid severe funding shortfall', 13 May 2026.
[77] World Bank, 'New World Bank Report Highlights Syria's Economic Challenges and Recovery Prospects for 2025', Press release, 7 July 2025.
[78] International Monetary Fund, 'IMF Staff Concludes Staff Visit to Syria', Press Release, 4 August 2026.
[79] The Syrian Observer, 'Sharaa Orders 200% Pay Rise for Public Sector Employees', 23 June 2025.

the informal economy continues to dominate[80]. The economic issues have also invited popular protests[81]. Of particular concern is the degree to which crony and predatory economic structures inherited from the Assad era are being reproduced under new ownership rather than dismantled – a dynamic with direct implications for the equitable distribution of reconstruction benefits[82].

Physical reconstruction requirements are estimated at over USD 200 billion, with some assessments placing the figure as high as USD 400 billion[83]. No single actor can meet these requirements. Moreover, conditions for large-scale international investment – security, rule of law and transparent contracting – remain only partially in place. Port concessions and foreign investment agreements represent early steps, but the structural economic preconditions for sustained recovery have not yet been met. Foreign investment dynamics, including Gulf and Western engagement, are addressed in chapter 3.

The humanitarian and economic situation, alongside missing reconstruction, bears directly on the number of Syrian returnees and impedes a more significant movement of displaced Syrians back to the country. Some 780 000 refugees have returned – roughly 12 % of the estimated 6.3 million Syrians displaced outside the country – alongside 1.7 million internally displaced persons who have returned to their areas of origin[84]. Return at scale remains unlikely in the short term, for two reasons. Firstly, sustainable return requires a level of institutional functioning – basic services, housing, employment and security guarantees – that does not yet exist in most areas of origin. Secondly, a significant share of Syrians displaced abroad have by now built stable lives in their host countries and hence for many return is neither a practical nor desired option. The question of minority return is even more precarious: given the sectarian dynamics outlined in chapter 2.4, conditions for the return of Alawi, Christian and Druze displaced persons are in various respects more fragile than they are for the general population[85].

3 The regional context: Winners, losers and new alliances

The fall of Bashar al-Assad was enabled by momentous transformations in the regional geopolitical environment, and it has itself reshaped Syria's regional and global relations, marginalising its former patrons Iran and Russia and bringing a new constellation of actors to the fore. Faced with limited military capacity, even within its own territory, al-Sharaa's government has adopted a 'zero problems with the neighbours' approach broadly modelled on early-2000s Turkish foreign policy under Erdoğan. Türkiye currently stands as Damascus's most important partner; Israel, the Gulf states, the USA, Russia and Syria's immediate neighbours pursue diverging and at times conflicting agendas. This chapter examines how each of these countries is shaping the post-Assad transition.

3.1 Türkiye

Türkiye is the most important actor in Syria today. It is particularly focused on securing the Turkish southern border and controlling Kurdish armed groups. As such, it advocates for a strong centralised state. In general, present Turkish interests are not significantly different from those pursued during the Syrian civil war. Foreign fighters involved with different factions, some Jihadist, as well as weapons and other goods, have been entering Syria through the Turkish border since the early days of the civil war, and Turkish NGOs

[80] O. Armentrout, 'Syria's Infrastructure Crisis: Health, Education, Jobs and Energy', The Borgen Project, 19 September 2025; World Bank, 'New World Bank Report Highlights Syria's Economic Challenges and Recovery Prospects for 2025', Press release, 7 July 2025.
[81] S. Heller, Road Warriors: How a Fight Over Trucking Explains the New Syria, The Century Foundation, 27 April 2026; H. Haid, 'Syria's private-sector workers are finding their voice', Al Majalla, 24 June 2026.
[82] Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 'New Regimes, Old Habits: The Reconfiguration of Crony Capitalism in the MENA Region', Panel Discussion, 13 November 2025.
[83] Y. Sayigh, 'Syria Needs a Reconstruction Plan', Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 31 October 2025; World Bank, 'Syria's Post-Conflict Reconstruction Costs Estimated at $216 billion', Press release, 21 October 2025.
[84] UNHCR, 'Syria Regional Refugee Response', Operational Data Portal, 2 April 2026.
[85] Interview with a Syrian minority member and NGO worker, Damascus, 20 June 2025.

were present in Idlib[86], helping the HTS to organise its government[87]. Some Islamist and ethnic armed groups, especially in the north-west and the north-east of the country, acted as proxies for Turkish interests. Armed groups operating under the SNA umbrella have continued to receive weapons, salaries, training and logistical support from Türkiye even after being integrated into the Syrian army; they constitute a non-negligible part of the Syrian military today. Despite integration within the national army, they retained part of their structure and links with Ankara through 2025[88].

Türkiye enjoys a certain amount of popularity amongst those segments of the population that support the al-Sharaa government. It is broadly perceived as a 'godfather' of the regime and a state model that balances secular institutions with Islamic values. However, Türkiye's influence over the Syrian government makes it difficult for the victims of pro-Turkish or Turkish-sponsored militias and their families, to seek accountability for crimes committed during the war[89].

Post-Assad Syria represents a sizeable market for Turkish products, which have been flooding into the country. These economic ties provide Ankara with an additional instrument of political interference and consolidate Turkish dominance over the Syrian economy. Aleppo represents a key strategic priority for Türkiye, offering significant economic potential for Turkish businesses and investors. Turkish interest in the Aleppo industrial zone of Sheikh Najjar represents one such example[90]. Its geographical proximity to Gaziantep (a city in south-eastern Türkiye) positions it as a natural entry point for Turkish goods, services and capital into the Syrian market. Beyond northern Syria, Ankara is also likely to expand its influence into other areas of the country, where economic and logistical opportunities intersect with broader geopolitical considerations.

In north-east Syria, the presence of Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK)-linked elements remains the central issue for Ankara as of June 2026. While some fighters have reportedly withdrawn[91] following the Syrian government's advances into the region in January 2026[92], others are believed to have remained, sustaining Türkiye's security concerns. This issue is closely linked to the broader PKK 'normalisation' process which has been unfolding within Türkiye since October 2024, adding an important domestic dimension to Ankara's Syria policy. The process gained additional momentum in mid-2026, when Turkish intelligence reportedly entered into direct negotiations with the PKK leadership in Qandil regarding a comprehensive disarmament roadmap, including timelines for the handover of weapons and dismantling of the organisation's infrastructure[93]. If successful, this process could significantly affect Ankara's future approach towards PKK-linked actors in both Iraq and north-east Syria. It manifests primarily through a combination of selective military presence and pressure on local security arrangements, namely the maintenance of buffer zones and efforts to weaken or transform PKK-linked structures through both negotiation and coercive measures. Security in the north-east and, more broadly, northern Syria, thus, remains a primary concern. In the absence of a stable security environment, prospects for investment, reconstruction and economic activity are likely to remain limited, reinforcing the centrality of security considerations in Türkiye's engagement with the region[94].

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[86] E. van Veen, 'Turkey's interventions in its near abroad: The case of Idlib', Clingendael Institute, September 2021.
[87] L. Kenez, 'Jihadist NGO linked to Turkish Intelligence increases activities in areas captured by Turkey-backed groups in Syria', Nordic Monitor, 6 December 2024.
[88] Human Rights Watch, 'Syria: Türkiye-Backed Armed Groups Detain, Extort Civilians', 14 May 2025.
[89] Interview with a Syrian researcher, online, 4 April 2026.
[90] Levant24, 'Aleppo Discusses Investment Cooperation with Turkish Businessmen', 25 August 2025; L. Porter, 'Postcard from industrial Aleppo: How Syria's hollowed-out northern powerhouse is coming back to life', The National, 26 December 2025.
[91] Al-Monitor, '100 non-Syrian Kurds return to PKK's Qandil stronghold under SDF-Damascus deal', February 2026.
[92] Al Jazeera Centre for Studies, 'Developments in Northeastern Syria: The End of the SDF?', 28 January 2026.
[93] Türkiye Today, 'Turkish intelligence requests disarmament timeline from PKK leadership: Report', 16 May 2026.
[94] Interview with Qatari-Syrian NGO worker based in Syria, online, 8 April 2026; Interview with Syrian journalist, online, 12 April 2026.

Beyond the Kurdish issue, Ankara is also concerned about jihadist prisoners held in north-east Syria. One of the key remaining challenges is the security of the al-Hol and al-Roj camps (facilities that have hosted tens of thousands of IS-affiliated individuals since the group's territorial defeat in 2019), the former of which is now controlled by the SAF, which recaptured large parts of the north-east in January 2026[95]. This process created a short-lived security gap[96], which enabled the escape of some IS-linked fighters and families held in the camp[97]. By April 2026, it appeared to be only a matter of time before the al-Roj camp would transfer from the SDF to the SAF. Some reports further suggest that the general amnesty issued by Ahmad al-Sharaa in mid-February[98] could extend to certain IS detainees, including those held in facilities such as Raqqa's al-Aqtan prison[99]. However, a general lack of clarity surrounding IS families' potential integration represents a critical issue and an obstacle to stabilising the north-east and establishing a coherent post-conflict governance framework[100].

In August 2025, a military memorandum of understanding was signed between Türkiye and Syria to strengthen the military, improve its capacity, restructure defence institutions and train its troops. Türkiye consequently started to supply the Syrian army with military material such as armoured personnel carriers[101].

3.2 Israel

Israel's reaction to the fall of the Assad regime was one of tactical mitigation and exploring a window of opportunity. On the one hand, the regime change constituted a serious blow to Iran. On the other hand, it has left Syria open to radical jihadist activity and uncertainty regarding the country's future.

Immediately after the regime's fall, Israel attacked various Syrian military targets and moved forces into the Golan Heights. Since then, it has occupied parts of southern Syria, with an increasing number of ground incursions by April 2026. This issue remains a point of contention between the two countries[102] and has reopened discussions around the future of the Golan Heights[103]. Israel's general geopolitical interests in Syria are to prevent the return of Iran and to counter Turkish influence, including through military actions[104]. Moreover, Israel is seeking to prevent the SAF from becoming a threat and, in the short term, avoid military buildup in the south[105].

In July 2025, during the Suwayda attacks (see chapter 2.5), Israel launched air strikes against various Syrian government positions, including the Ministry of Defence in the heart of Damascus, premised on the protection of the Druze community[106]. As is the case in Syria, Israel is home to a considerable number of Druze, who try to maintain transnational links with fellow Druze in Syria. As such, Israel often seeks to

[95] Al Jazeera Centre for Studies, 'Developments in Northeastern Syria: The End of the SDF?', 28 January 2026.
[96] N. Adler and J. Salhani, 'Exodus of ISIL-linked detainees from Syria camp sparks security concerns', Al Jazeera, 17 February 2026.
[97] L. Schumicky-Logan, 'Beyond Syria: Assessing the Security Risks of Former Daesh Wives and Youth', European Commission, Press release, 25 February 2026.
[98] W. al-Adawi, 'Did President al-Sharaa violate the Constitutional Declaration by issuing a "general amnesty"?', Enab Baladi, 24 February 2026.
[99] Interview with a Syrian fixer based in Lebanon, Aleppo, 16 February 2026.
[100] T. Gumrukcu, 'Turkey to help Syria with weapon systems, equipment under new accord, source says', Reuters, 14 August 2025.
[101] T. Gumrukcu, 'Turkey to help Syria with weapon systems, equipment under new accord, source says', Reuters, 14 August 2025.
[102] AFP and TOI Staff, 'Syrian FM: Security talks with Israel are focused on buffer zone, not Golan Heights', The Times of Israel, 14 February 2026.
[103] S. Rose, 'Syria aiming for stable relations with Israel, says minister Al Shibani', The National, 11 May 2026.
[104] S. Kassabali, 'Israeli strikes an air base in northwest Syria to prevent Turkish troops from deploying', Associated Press, 18 August 2026.
[105] The Arab Centre for Contemporary Syria Studies, 'Israeli Escalation in Syria in Early 2025: Strikes, Targets, and Repercussions', 25 February 2025.
[106] W. Christou, 'Israel strikes Syria's defence ministry in third day of attacks', The Guardian, 16 July 2025.

position itself as the protector of the Syrian Druze minority, yet remains more reserved towards the Kurds, despite traditionally having good relations with them[107].

One of Israel's main concerns regarding Syria is the growing influence of Ankara. These two countries' visions for Syria's political order diverge sharply. Türkiye envisions a strong centralised state, whereas Israel appears to prefer a more fragmented state that does not threaten its interests and in which it retains influence over border areas, either by force or strategic cooperation with local groups[108]. This competition could potentially fuel future proxy wars within Syria (see chapter 2.5).

However, at a bilateral level, Israeli-Syrian relations remain pragmatic. Direct talks between the two countries facilitated by the USA led in January 2026 to a joint statement establishing a 'joint fusion mechanism', meaning a dedicated communication cell aimed at avoiding military escalation, sharing intelligence and seeking commercial opportunities[109]. In general, Israel benefits from al-Sharaa's distrust of Iran and Hezbollah, whilst the hostility of some far-right Israeli parties towards al-Sharaa – at times described as a 'jihadist in a suit' – has not, as of June 2026, translated into policy. For his part, al-Sharaa is keen to demonstrate that he poses no threat to Israel, given Israeli military superiority. His focus is very much on state-building and maintaining friendly relations with the USA, which would be negatively affected by a larger conflict between Syria and Israel. Both Syria and Israel also share an interest in countering Iranian influence and weakening Hezbollah[110]. During the spring of 2026, Syria's army was involved in securing the Lebanese border and actively disrupting weapons smuggling to Hezbollah through cross-border tunnels[111]. Given that Israel wants to avoid both Iran's return and Türkiye's growing political influence in Syria, it also tries to work with other regional partners with which it shares elements of these concerns.

3.3 The Gulf states

The Gulf states, especially KSA, are seeking to fill the void left by Iran and do not want Türkiye to be the only actor present in Syria[112]. They align with Ankara's interests, namely, having a strong Syrian state in the region with a recovering economy. Their competition with Türkiye is therefore more likely to manifest in rivalry over reconstruction contracts and port access rather than in opposing political agendas. Riyadh has signed agreements to fund major infrastructure projects in Syria[113], while Qatar, alongside KSA, has been contributing to Syrian civil servants' salaries. Both countries have also been supporting Syria's reintegration into the Arab League and have been influential in preparing the ground for Syria's re-establishment of relations with the USA. In this respect, both Qatar and KSA prioritise swift economic reconstruction and are ready to provide diplomatic support to al-Sharaa's government[114].

The UAE emphasises restoring government institutions and reopening the Syrian economy. It resumed relations with the late Assad regime sooner than its larger neighbour; nonetheless, it does not appear to be hostile to the al-Sharaa government. It pragmatically re-evaluated its position following the fall of the Assad regime and seems to prioritise: countering the resurgence of jihadism; regional investments and

[107] Interview with a British Israeli-based researcher, online, 21 April 2026.
[108] M. Young, 'The Pull of Partition', Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 12 March 2025; Interview with a Syrian researcher, online, 4 April 2026; Interview with a French journalist, online, 12 April 2026.
[109] Office of the Spokesperson of the US Department of State, 'Joint Statement on the Trilateral Meeting Between the Governments of the United States of America, the State of Israel, and the Syrian Arab Republic', 6 January 2026.
[110] Enab Baladi, 'Al-Sharaa: We support Lebanon's efforts to disarm "Hezbollah"', 10 March 2026.
[111] L'Orient Today Staff, 'Tunnel used for "arms trafficking" between Syria and Lebanon discovered in Homs', L'Orient Today, 15 April 2026.
[112] Interview with a French researcher, online, 25 March 2026; Interview with a Syrian researcher, online, 4 April 2026; Interview with a French researcher, online, 6 April 2026.
[113] G. Sarya, 'Syria becomes a playground for foreign economic interests', ANF News, 14 April 2026.
[114] Interview with a French researcher, online, 6 April 2026.

general stabilisation of the country[115]. Due to these aligned interests, the KSA-UAE rivalry has to date not played a visible role in Syria, unlike situations in Sudan and Yemen[116].

Syria represents a potential route for exporting Gulf oil and gas to the Mediterranean – an issue that has gained renewed urgency amid the 2026 blockade in the Strait of Hormuz and that has been enthusiastically picked up by the Syrian government[117]. Gulf states also believe that stabilising the country would cement Iran's withdrawal from Syria, a point on which they are aligned with European countries[118]. Furthermore, for them, al-Sharaa's failure would risk plunging Syria into a renewed civil war, potentially lasting for years or even decades.

The Syrian economy's very low growth rate makes investment risky, but Gulf states – especially KSA and Qatar – are ready to step in, or at least they were prior to the 2026 war with Iran. In August 2025, an international consortium led by Qatar's UCC Holding secured a USD 4 billion concession for the expansion of Damascus international airport. An Emirati company has obtained a 30-year concession in the port of Tartus for USD 800 million. In February 2026, KSA created a USD 2 billion investment fund to develop the airport in Aleppo and announced the planned creation of Flynas Syria, an airline company 49 % owned by KSA[119]. A Saudi group is also developing SilkLink, a telecommunications project in Syria[120]. However, at the time of writing, it appears that damage to Gulf infrastructure from the war with Iran could for the moment lead these states to scale back their investments in Syria or alternatively prioritise projects connected with the transport of energy resources.

3.4 The USA

Prior to the start of the civil war and despite the mutual hostility manifested in Syria's inclusion in George W. Bush's 'Axis of Evil', the country was not a top regional priority for the USA, beyond its interest in containing Iranian influence and its counterterrorism policies. While supporting the Syrian opposition politically and being involved in non-lethal (and limited armed) support for the non-jihadist rebel forces, the USA not only built and led the anti-IS coalition but also supported the Kurdish forces in Iraq as well as Syria. In 2015, US troops were deployed beside the SDF to fight IS in Syria[121]. Beyond IS, the USA was aiming at the withdrawal of Iran from Syria and exerting pressure on Assad's regime through a combination of economic sanctions and diplomatic pressure[122]. US efforts were also directed at preventing a direct conflict between the SDF and Turkish forces[123].

Today, Washington is betting on al-Sharaa to deliver stability, thereby enabling it to disengage from the country without creating an opportunity for Tehran and Moscow. Following Riyadh's pressing calls[124], the USA lifted sanctions to allow the Syrian government to access resources, with the exception of sanctions against individuals and organisations linked to past abuses, corruption or terrorism as well as those involving transactions with Russia and Iran[125]. Repeal of the Caesar Act, effective on 1 July 2025 – which

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[115] The Syrian Observer, 'The UAE's Measured Approach to Post-Assad Syria: Between Strategic Caution and Emerging Engagement', 2 April 2025.
[116] Interview with a Syrian researcher, Germany, 4 April 2026; Interview with a British Israeli-based researcher, online, 21 April 2026.
[117] K. S. Diwan, 'Syria Escapes Iran War, Can It Benefit from It?', Arab Gulf States Institute, 15 May 2026.
[118] Interview with a French researcher, online, 6 April 2026.
[119] The Syrian Observer, 'The UAE's Measured Approach to Post-Assad Syria: Between Strategic Caution and Emerging Engagement', 2 April 2025.
[120] Saudi Press Agency, 'stc Group Signs Agreement to Implement "Silklink" Project in Syria', 7 February 2026.
[121] MEE Staff, 'Did the US fund the Syrian rebels that toppled Assad?', Middle East Eye, 11 December 2024.
[122] C. E. Humud and C. M. Blanchard, 'Armed Conflict in Syria: Overview and U.S. Response', Congressional Research Service, 12 February 2020.
[123] J. Jeffrey, 'Syria and US Foreign Policy: An Accidental American Victory', Hoover Institution, 11 March 2025.
[124] M. Jansen, 'Saudi Arabia calls for end to sanctions on Syria after Riyadh meetings', The Irish Times, 13 January 2025; N. Quilliam, 'The meeting of al-Sharaa and Trump has shifted the balance of power in the Middle East', Chatham House, 16 May 2025.
[125] A. Sharp, 'Trump Courts Sharaa to Secure a New Middle East Ally', Foreign Policy Magazine, 10 November 2025; See also Simpson Thacher, 'US Lifts Syria Sanctions, Strings Attached', 26 August 2025.

had been the latest (2020) iteration of the US sanctions on Syria in place since 1979 – has made it possible for economic actors to invest in Syrian infrastructure without fear of penalties linked to the broad secondary sanctions previously in place. It did not remove all risks, though, such as those related to licensing requirements and compliance considerations[126]. Over the past year and a half, Washington has also pressured Israel to reach an agreement with the al-Sharaa government, with Syria's signature to the Abraham Accords remaining one of the long-term goals of Washington in the region, and Trump personally hinted at a potential Syrian role in Lebanon[127]. In November 2025, Syria joined the US-led coalition against IS, and the al-Sharaa government now shares intelligence with the USA on the terrorist organisations operating in Syria[128]. This agreement was reached during the first visit of a Syrian head of state, namely al-Sharaa, to Washington in almost 80 years[129], and also marked a broader shift in US policy: the Syrian government progressively replaced the SDF as Washington's principal local partner in the campaign against IS[130]. This facilitated the transfer of counterterrorism responsibilities to Damascus and supported Washington's planned military disengagement, but it also weakened the SDF's leverage vis-à-vis the central government and raised concerns over the security of IS detention facilities previously administered by the Kurdish-led forces. Against this background, the USA transferred approximately 5 700 suspected IS members from SDF-run facilities in north-eastern Syria to Iraq in early 2026, seeking to prevent escapes and an IS resurgence amid the changing territorial and security arrangements[131].

3.5 Russia

Russia, and previously the Soviet Union, had been a longstanding backer of Syria under the Assad dynasty. Russia intervened militarily in Syria on 30 September 2015 to fight jihadist insurgents and avoid Assad's fall. Other Russian goals were to maintain a military presence in the Middle East (and using Syria as a strategic hub for supplying its forces and allies in Africa[132]), to build its army's (and the Wagner Group's) capacity, to contain Türkiye's influence in the country[133]. Starting in February 2022, Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine played a role in the fall of Bashar al-Assad by draining Moscow's military capacities in Syria[134]. Russia's main interest in Syria now is to retain strategic footholds through its military bases, namely the Naval base in Tartus and the Hmeimin airbase. After initially trying to put an end to Russia's presence in the country, the Syrian government has shifted its priorities and now intends to keep these Russian bases on its territory, even if under Syrian control, with external operating partners and envisioned joint training projects[135].

Despite Moscow's strong support for the former regime – including granting Bashar al-Assad exile in Moscow – relations between the al-Sharaa government and the Kremlin have deepened rapidly, beginning in the summer of 2025 and culminating in al-Sharaa's state visit to Russia in October 2025. As of mid-2026,

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[126] I. Al-Assil, 'What Lifting U.S. Sanctions Means for Syria's Transition', Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, 23 December 2025.
[127] A. J. Tabler, 'Sharaa on Trump's Five Points, Six Months On', The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 7 November 2025; A. Sewell, 'Trump presses Syria to take on Hezbollah, raising alarm in Lebanon and Israel', Associated Press, 28 June 2026.
[128] K. Y. Oweis, 'Syria steps up counter-terrorism raids after deal with US', The National, 2 December 2025.
[129] A. Sharp, 'Trump Courts Sharaa to Secure a New Middle East Ally', Foreign Policy Magazine, 10 November 2025.
[130] Al Jazeera Staff, 'US Envoy Says SDF's Role in Syria Has "Largely Expired" after ISIL', *Al Jazeera*, 20 January 2026.
[131] Lead Inspector General for Operation Inherent Resolve, Operation Inherent Resolve and other U.S. Government Activities Related to Syria & Iraq, U.S. Department of State, 1 January 2026 – 31 March 2026.
[132] P. Iddon, 'Reformatting: The Future of Russia's Military Bases in Syria', *The New Arab*, 19 June 2026.
[133] G. Pili et al., 'Russia: From Glory to Disaster in Syria', U. S. Naval Institute, October 2025.
[134] A. Al-Jaber, 'From Kyiv to Damascus: How the Ukraine War Shapes Syria's Fate', +963 English, 25 August 2025; K. Chen, 'Assessing Russia in Syria: The Impact of the Ukraine War', Vanguard Think Tank, 23 February 2024.
[135] N. Smagin, 'The Rapprochement Between Russia and Syria Is a Temporary Necessity', Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 4 September 2025; Meduza, 'Kommersant reports Syria plans to convert Russia's Khmeimim air base into military training and humanitarian hub', 27 April 2026; E. Avdaliani, 'Amid Retreat in Syria, Russia Reassesses its Options in the Middle East', Stimson Center, 17 August 2026.

Moscow provides Syria with economic assistance, wheat and oil shipments at favourable prices[136] and some military support, including coordination and intelligence sharing[137]. From August 2025, Syrian banknotes have continued to be printed by a Russian state-owned banknote-printing firm[138]. Moreover, Syria's reconstruction needs might require some Russian engineering expertise, as many of the technologies of key infrastructure (e.g. dams) are of Soviet origin[139]. Through these ties and debt leverage, Moscow seeks to rebuild its influence and maintain its foothold in the region[140]. While pragmatically benefiting both actors in the transitional period, the long-term sustainability of this arrangement is questionable[141].

3.6 Iran

The al-Sharaa regime perceives Iran as a threat to domestic as well as regional stability[142]. This hostility is largely related to the fact that Assad's Syria was a centrepiece of Iran's strategy in the Middle East by establishing a territorial continuity with its Lebanese proxy, thereby facilitating the circulation of weapons and military expertise toward the Israeli border. Not only has the fall of Assad's regime relieved some military pressure on Israel, but the partial withdrawal of Russian troops has also opened Syrian airspace to Israeli air forces, facilitating the interception of Iranian missiles and drones[143]. Iran has little to no influence left in Syria. Moreover, its means are limited and it has other priorities defined by the 2026 conflict in the Gulf, namely survival of the present regime and its key non-state allies in the region. Added to that, a policy of de-Baathification in Syria has led to an overhaul of the civil administration[144], leaving Iran without its previous partners in security institutions and in other key parts of the government. As of April 2026, it probably primarily maintains links with groups outside of the governmental institutions, such as some former regime soldiers and pro-Assad militias, which can represent a threat, especially in the coastal regions[145]. Indeed, a partial destabilisation of Syria through a pro-Iranian proxy would represent an opportunity for Tehran to divert US and Israeli attention[146]. Iran has also likely retained some residual smuggling networks and logistical channels connected to Hezbollah in southern Lebanon[147], but in the Spring of 2026, its influence is a shadow of what it once was under the Assad regime, with little chance of regaining it in the foreseeable future[148].

3.7 Jordan, Iraq and Lebanon

Since December 2024, Jordan's approach toward the new Syrian government has been more pragmatic, reflecting both shifting regional dynamics and Amman's prior involvement in the normalisation process with Assad's government[149]. Syrian-Jordanian relations are significantly shaped by Jordan's efforts to counter cross-border smuggling networks, particularly those associated with trafficking the drug Captagon from Syria into Jordanian territory and onwards to the Gulf states. Other shared concerns include: the

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[136] F. Dalatey, 'Exclusive: Syria relies on Russia's oil despite pivot to the West', Reuters, 1 May 2026.
[137] Robert Lansing Institute, 'Russia Revives Its Security Partnership with Syria After Assad's Fall', 20 January 2026.
[138] F. Dalatey, 'Exclusive: Syria to revalue currency, dropping two zeros in bid for stability', Reuters, 23 August 2025.
[139] E. Avdaliani, 'Amid Retreat in Syria, Russia Reassesses its Options in the Middle East', Stimson Center, 17 August 2026.
[140] K. Kassis, 'Russia's Enduring Grip on Syria', RUSI, 11 November 2025.
[141] N. Smagin, 'The Rapprochement Between Russia and Syria Is a Temporary Necessity', Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 4 September 2025.
[142] G. Myre and J. Rizkallah, 'Syria's new leader denounces Iran, calling its proxies a regional threat', National Public Radio, 4 February 2025.
[143] A. Y. Zelin, 'Syria Is Feeling the Fallout from the Iran Crisis', The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 18 March 2026.
[144] N. Asaad, 'Syria's Post-Baath Mass Dismissals: Transitional Justice or Catalyst for Division?', The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 10 October 2025.
[145] H. Haid, 'Syria's taswiya slow roll creates a host of problems', Al Majalla, 28 April 2026.
[146] Asharq Al-Awsat, 'Iran Mobilizes Remnants of Fourth Division to Stoke Syria Unrest', 29 December 2025.
[147] L'Orient Today Staff, 'Tunnel used for "arms trafficking" between Syria and Lebanon discovered in Homs', L'Orient Today, 15 April 2026.
[148] I. Jazaeri and K. Sharifi, 'One Year After Assad's Fall: Iran's Strategic Collapse in Syria', Radio Free Europe, 8 December 2025.
[149] M. Khurma, 'Syria in Transition and Implications for Jordan', Wilson Center, 6 January 2025.

status of around one million Syrian refugees in Jordan, developments in southern Syria, particularly the situation in Suwayda and its future arrangements[150] as well as the threat of a potential resurgence of IS on Syrian territory, with a risk of spillover for bordering Jordan[151]. A further domestic dimension concerns the Jordanian Islamic Action Front's role[152], which could be emboldened by HTS's victory in Syria. For the moment, Jordanian authorities are keeping the Islamic Action Front under control, reflecting concerns over its political ambitions.

Relations between the Syrian and Iraqi governments rest on a combination of mutual security concerns – most notably the potential resurgence of IS, given the more than 600 kilometres of shared border – energy cooperation and the maintenance of diplomatic ties. A central component of this relationship is the export of Iraqi oil to Syria, particularly to the Baniyas refinery, estimated at around 200 000 barrels per day in April 2026[153]. Although Baghdad has rapidly adapted to regime change in Syria, some Iraqi political actors – especially those connected to Iran – have raised questions about al-Sharaa's al-Qaeda past[154]. Within the Iraqi political arena, a number of influential actors have shaped engagement with Damascus, including Kurdistan Democratic Party leader Massoud Barzani and the prominent Sunni figure Khamis al-Khanjar, leader of the Sovereignty Coalition. Another priority for Iraq is securing access to the Euphrates River waters, which are vital for agriculture, electricity generation and drinking water supply. In this regard, cooperative engagement with Damascus is therefore essential[155].

Despite a complicated history of mutual relations and various contentious issues regarding border control, trade and the presence of several Assad-era officials and Syrian prisoners in Lebanon, Damascus has nevertheless been pursuing rapprochement with the Lebanese government[156]. This is unfolding in a context where both states are weak, unable to control their entire territories and at risk of destabilisation. The Syrian and Lebanese governments share a common interest in reducing armed conflict in the region. At the same time, some actors in Lebanon are concerned about the prospect of increasingly asymmetric relations as their neighbour recovers economically and rebuilds its army. Meanwhile, others view al-Sharaa as their natural ally[157]. During the April 2026 Israeli military operations in South Lebanon, the Syrian military focused its efforts on securing the country's border with Lebanon, as about 300 000 people fleeing the conflict in Lebanon have arrived in Syria[158].

4 The EU's engagement

4.1 The EU's focus in Syria

Since the fall of Assad's regime, the EU's approach to Syria has been defined by gradually increasing engagement with the new Syrian government and a series of key goals. In general terms and following

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[150] Syrian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates, 'A tripartite meeting in Damascus between Syria, the United States, and Jordan sets a comprehensive roadmap for resolving the Sweida crisis', Press release, 16 September 2025.
[151] M. Khurma, 'Syria in Transition and Implications for Jordan', Wilson Center, 6 January 2025.
[152] The Islamic Action Front is Jordan's largest and most influential opposition political party, widely regarded as the political arm of the Muslim Brotherhood in the kingdom, despite formally denying organisational ties. Founded in 1992, the party promotes an Islamist political agenda within Jordan's parliamentary system and significantly strengthened its position after securing nearly one third of the vote in the 2024 elections. See: MEE Staff, 'Jordan's Islamic Action Front told to drop "religious reference" from party name', Middle East Eye, 26 February 2026.
[153] Interview with an Iraqi Oil Report correspondent, online, 22 April 2026.
[154] G. Cafiero, 'Pragmatism Shapes Iraq's Position Toward Post-Assad Syria', Arab Center Washington DC, 1 July 2025.
[155] G. Cafiero, 'Pragmatism Shapes Iraq's Position Toward Post-Assad Syria', Arab Center Washington DC, 1 July 2025.
[156] L. Stephan, 'Syria and Lebanon: The search for a fresh start since Assad's fall and Hezbollah's collapse', Le Monde, 1 February 2026; A. Sewell, 'Lebanon's relations with Syria have made a dramatic positive shift post-Assad, deputy PM says', Associated Press, 3 February 2026.
[157] W.-C. Paes et al., From Fragmentation to Integration: Prospects for Security Sector Reform in Post-Assad Syria, International Institute for Strategic Studies, 17 October 2025.
[158] UN Meetings Coverage and Press Releases, 'Syria Could Be Success Story World Needs, Security Council Hears as UN Officials Outline Strategies to Support Country's Political, Economic Transition', 22 April 2026.

UNSC Resolution 2254 (later UNSC Resolution 2799 of November 2025), the EU has emphasised the politically-inclusive 'Syrian-owned' and 'Syrian-led' nature of this process that should lead to reconstitution of a stable Syrian state[159]. Different EU Member States have often advanced slightly different priorities and put forward different timelines, partially reflecting previously existing viewpoints and national sensitivities towards regional geopolitics[160]. In general, the EU has stressed the importance of establishing sustainable institutions in Syria, which could become a partner in stabilising the regional security order and countering terrorism, which could then facilitate the return of displaced Syrians and refugees[161].

More specifically, stated priorities regarding these goals have included: addressing humanitarian needs within the country; supporting conditions for economic recovery and reconstruction as well as protecting basic human and minority rights. Throughout 2025 and 2026, following the strengthening of diplomatic relations with the Syrian authorities, this has been accompanied by increased support for the nascent Syrian state institutions and Syrian civil society[162].

Translated into tangible political steps, this multi-focused approach has led to actions on various fronts, ranging from the removal of sanctions through enhanced humanitarian funding to engagement with civil society and stepped-up political relations. The EU has gradually suspended economic restrictions on Syria across a number of key sectors, culminating in the removal of all sanctions in May 2025, except those imposed on security grounds[163].

At the annual Brussels conference in March 2025, attended for the first time by the representatives of the Syrian government, the EU pledged EUR 1.3 billion for a regional humanitarian response to the Syrian refugee crisis in Syria, Jordan, Lebanon and Iraq for 2025 and 2026[164]. This pledge was further enhanced in January 2026 by an additional EUR 620 million specifically dedicated to post-war recovery, humanitarian assistance and bilateral projects[165]. While the EU and its Member States have been among the largest donors addressing humanitarian needs in Syria and neighbouring countries since the start of the civil war, this role was further strengthened throughout 2025 following the decline in US humanitarian and development assistance[166]. The EU has also assumed an important role in coordinating aid for Syria via the Syria Partnership Coordination Forum[167].

In the area of support for Syrian civil society and social cohesion, the EU organised its Day of Dialogue for the first time in Damascus on 15 November 2025. This event brought together hundreds of representatives from Syrian civil society organisations and NGOs, governmental authorities as well as EU officials to discuss issues such as transitional justice, accountability and the need for inclusive and participatory governance[168]. Additional support for civil society, youth and education, together with selected development and capacity-building initiatives, is also envisioned through Syrian participation in the Pact for the Mediterranean projects[169].

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[159] Council of the EU, 'Syria: Council approves conclusions', Press release, 23 June 2025.
[160] Interview with a Member State diplomat, Brussels, 28 November 2025.
[161] B. Speidl and H. Horváth-Sántha, 'Can Europe Still Matter in Syria?', Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 17 February 2026; Interview with a Member State diplomat, Brussels, 27 November 2025; Interview with an international civil society organisation expert, online, 23 April 2026.
[162] European Commission, 'EU opens new chapter in its relations with Syria', Press release, 9 January 2026.
[163] Council, 'Syria: EU adopts legal acts to lift economic sanctions on Syria, enacting recent political agreement', Press release, 28 May 2025.
[164] European Commission, 'EU pledges €2.5 billion to support Syria and the region', Press release, 17 March 2025.
[165] European Commission, 'EU opens new chapter in its relations with Syria', Press release, 9 January 2026.
[166] Interview with two EC officers, Brussels, 10 June 2026.
[167] European Commission, 'EU coordinates international support for the recovery of Syria's economy and reconstruction process', Press release, 11 May 2026.
[168] EEAS, 'EU hosts 'Day of Dialogue' in Damascus in support of Syrian civil society', 14 November 2025.
[169] European Commission, 'EU presents first Action Plan under the Pact for the Mediterranean', Press release, 17 April 2026.

This political track was reaffirmed through a series of official visits, most notably Syrian Foreign Minister al-Shaibani's trip to Brussels in March 2025 and Council President Costa's and Commission President von der Leyen's reciprocal visit to Damascus in January 2026. The latter represents a move towards broader European engagement in Syria, defined by the promise of future cooperation alongside political, trade and humanitarian pillars[170].

The latest important milestone was a High-Level Political Dialogue held in Brussels between representatives of the Syrian government and the EU on 11 May 2026. This was followed by the removal of the Syrian Ministry of Interior and the Ministry of Defence from the EU sanctions list and the relaunch of the Cooperation Agreement, thereby marking an important reaffirmation of the EU's resolve and strengthening both the political and trade pillars of the bilateral relationship. Parts of this agreement had previously been suspended in the context of human rights violations committed under Assad's regime at the onset of the civil war. This agreement is intended to restore legal coherence among different EU frameworks and enhance mutual trade relations. It aims to support the development of the Syrian economy by not only removing customs duties on most Syrian industrial products exported to the EU but also by preventing both parties from imposing quantitative restrictions on bilateral trade[171].

Further economic cooperation is envisioned through the provision of technical expertise in the economic and financial sectors, as well as support for private-sector funding and investment in the Syrian economy. The Technical Assistance Hub established throughout the spring of 2026 is then supposed to serve as a point of contact between the Syrian authorities and partners that offer capacity-building projects and technical expertise[172]. Moreover, the EU has also articulated plans to strengthen this partnership around security through dedicated capacity-building projects with the Syrian police and officers from the Ministry of Interior as well as cooperation on counterterrorism and efforts to combat organised crime[173].

4.2 The EU's leverage

Potentially, the EU has significant leverage vis-à-vis various stakeholders in Syria. While its primary leverage is with the Syrian authorities, it can also exert influence over other regional and international actors operating in the country.

The EU's key leverage in Syria lies within the economic and development spheres. The EU and certain of its Member States are major donors of humanitarian support to Syria and neighbouring countries. Given the country's humanitarian and reconstruction needs, the Syrian government is acutely aware of its dependency on external support. Recent cuts in humanitarian aid by many Global North countries (including some of the EU Member States), as well as expected fallout from the Strait of Hormuz blockade, along with the significant numbers of Syrians displaced by the war in Lebanon who fled to Syria, have all made fulfilling needs on the ground even more difficult[174]. European humanitarian support is thus crucial to meeting humanitarian needs and demonstrating a continuing commitment to the country.

This support is vital not only in the humanitarian area, but also in early recovery and reconstruction programmes that aim to revive economic life in Syria[175]. Such projects and investments in the economic infrastructure are highly sought after by Syria, as the economic situation is one of the major causes of

[170] European Commission, 'EU opens new chapter in its relations with Syria', Press release, 9 January 2026.
[171] European Commission, 'Commission proposes full resumption of EU-Syria Cooperation Agreement', Press release, 20 April 2026.
[172] European Commission, 'EU coordinates international support for the recovery of Syria's economy and reconstruction process', Press release, 11 May 2026.
[173] L. Bayer and F. Dalatey, 'EU to restore Syria relations, strengthen trade and security ties, document shows', Reuters, 17 April 2026.
[174] T. Fletcher, 'Briefing to the Security Council on the humanitarian situation in Syria', reliefweb, 22 April 2026.
[175] A. O'Mullony, 'EC proposes full revival of EU-Syria co-operation agreement', Brussels Signal, 21 April 2026.

popular discontent in the country[176]. As the EU had been a significant economic partner of Syria prior to the civil war, the recently announced Cooperation Agreement and Europe's focus on increasing mutual trade and business investments also have the potential to benefit Syria's economy[177]. Moreover, if European economic support is delivered on time and in a predictable manner, it could be regarded by Syrian partners as more reliable than investments and financial assistance promised by other regional states[178]. The EU is reportedly already perceived favourably among small and medium-sized Syrian businesses, who value European partners as a safer option than regional ones[179]. The EU's continued funding for development cooperation and reconstruction efforts could be decisive in this context and is a key point of leverage vis-à-vis the Syrian government and other regional actors.

At the same time, the EU also provides technical support and expertise needed to rebuild and stabilise the Syrian government's legal and economic institutions. There is certainly demand for such support from the Syrian side in specific areas. For instance, Syria's legal framework for the economy and economic planning would benefit from external expertise, thereby making it more appealing to foreign investors and international business actors[180]. While many capacity-building initiatives are already underway[181], the EU and its Member States are well-equipped to enhance such support and engage in other areas, such as security system reform, training for police and security personnel and border management. While these initiatives represent a softer form of leverage and are contingent on the Syrian side's approval, they nevertheless complement the EU support package and help stabilise Syria's political system. Moreover, the EU has an opportunity to draw on the Syrian diaspora's reservoir of skills and expertise, which could help not only connect the EU and Syria more closely but also tap into relevant contextual knowledge.

Given the prominent role that economic recovery and European economic support play in the country, the EU's ability to reimpose some sanctions remains another point of leverage. While security-related sanctions remain in place, the EU imposed a number of targeted sanctions against individuals involved in the 2025 coastal areas violence and those connected with Assad's former regime[182], along with other countries targeting similar individuals and groups[183]. Imposing or reimposing sanctions could help steer the Syrian transition and single out elements of the present regime involved in grave violations of human rights, which could be considered 'spoilers' in transition processes.

Finally, part of the EU's leverage in Syria still lies in its diplomatic capabilities and the international role played by some of its Member States, as well as the bloc as a whole. Although the EU is hardly a key diplomatic power in the contemporary Middle East, such support can be exercised and leveraged at the UN, its agencies and other international fora as well as other international organisations and agencies pivotal to Syrian reconstruction. The European diplomatic role can also be enhanced by active cooperation with other regional actors whose interests align.

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[176] Interview with a Member State diplomat, online, 9 April 2026; Interview with an international civil society organisation expert, online, 23 April 2026; see also S. Heller, Road Warriors: How a Fight Over Trucking Explains the New Syria, The Century Foundation, 27 April 2026; H. Haid, 'Syria's private-sector workers are finding their voice', Al Majalla, 24 June 2026.
[177] C. Mazzantini, 'The European Commission proposes resuming the cooperation agreement to normalise relations with Syria', EU News, 20 April 2026.
[178] Interview with an international think tank expert, online, 28 April 2026.
[179] Interview with a Member State diplomat, online, 31 July 2026.
[180] Y. Sayigh, 'Syria Needs a Reconstruction Plan', Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 31 October 2025; Interview with an international think tank expert, online, 28 April 2026.
[181] Interview with a Member State diplomat, online, 9 April 2026.
[182] Council of the EU, Decision amending Decision (CFSP) 2020/1999 concerning restrictive measures against serious human rights violations and abuses, Official Journal of the European Union, L 2025/1110, 28 May 2025.
[183] Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office, 'UK sanctions perpetrators of violence against civilians across Syria', Press release, 19 December 2025.

4.3 Challenges to the EU's interests

The EU naturally faces a number of significant challenges that might prevent it from fully realising and using its leverage to achieve the desired outcomes. These challenges stem from, inter alia: the complex situation on the ground and ongoing security issues; the Syrian government's lack of institutional capabilities and the absence of post-conflict reconstruction. While the Syrian government not only welcomes many European initiatives and funding but also shares certain European goals, it remains to be seen how much it is willing to align with European preferences on governance, the rule of law along with broader political and economic questions.

In broad terms, the Syrian political space is crowded with external partners, some pursuing agendas that do not fully align with European values and interests. As many cases over the past decade have shown, European partners in the southern neighbourhood can contest European policies, push back against European conditions and preferences, sometimes turning to other partners – such as Russia, China or the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states – to demonstrate that they have options beyond the EU[184]. In the Syrian case, this concerns regional powers, such as Türkiye, that already play a much more significant role than the EU does in shaping the Syrian government's policy-making, as well as global and regional powers with their own divergent agendas. Some Gulf states and Türkiye, have already pushed for certain governance benchmarks, mostly tied to the rule of law and protection of investments, that will shape the Syrian political order's future[185]. While these might, at this point, align in general terms with European interests, they might diverge on specifics and lead to institutionalised disadvantages for competitors of these powers.

Furthermore, European leverage is likely to be economic rather than coercive. While the Syrian government welcomes international funding and the EU has promised to provide certain much-needed resources, it nevertheless remains one of many potential funders[186]. Hence, any leverage gained through funding and other forms of support might be fleeting, and achievements gained easily reversed if, say, the EU and Syria disagree over fundamental issues. Moreover, the needs of a comprehensive Syrian recovery and reconstruction go well beyond what the EU can meaningfully offer. Its actual levels and forms of support, therefore, might be perceived as insufficient compared with the Syrian population's expectations for a rapid improvement of the situation[187].

Finally, the EU might find it challenging to align all its instruments and forms of support across different frameworks or through bilateral support and investments by its Member States. This concerns the effectiveness of financial and other forms of support, their coherence over time and across different initiatives performed by different EU agencies as well as their overall connection to the desired outcomes. At the same time, there has also been divergence between the interests of some Member States and their differing priorities in Syria. These have been mostly a function of their relationship with other regional players, namely Türkiye, and their divergent emphasis on human rights issues or returns of Syrian refugees[188].

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[184] R. A. Del Sarto and S. Tholens (eds), Resisting Europe: Practices of Contestation in the Mediterranean Middle East, University of Michigan Press, October 2020; R. Weilandt, 'Acceptance in principle, contestation in practice: EU norms and their discontents in Tunisia', Democratization, Vol 29, No 3, 2022, pp. 507-524; S. M. Cold-Ravnkilde et al., 'Rethinking Europe's approach to a defiant Sahel', Danish Institute for International Studies, 20 February 2026.

[185] E. P. Djerejian, 'External States and Syria's Challenge of Reunification under Transitional President Ahmed al-Sharaa', Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, 29 October 2025.

[186] France 24, 'Saudi Arabia to invest billions of dollars in Syria, including joint airline and telecom project', 7 February 2026.

[187] Y. Sayigh, 'Syria Needs a Reconstruction Plan', Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 31 October 2025.

[188] B. Speidl and H. Horváth-Sántha, 'Can Europe Still Matter in Syria?', Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 17 February 2026; Interview with an international think tank expert, online, 28 April 2026; Interview with a Member State diplomat, Brussels, 11 June 2026.

5 Trends and pathways of Syria's future

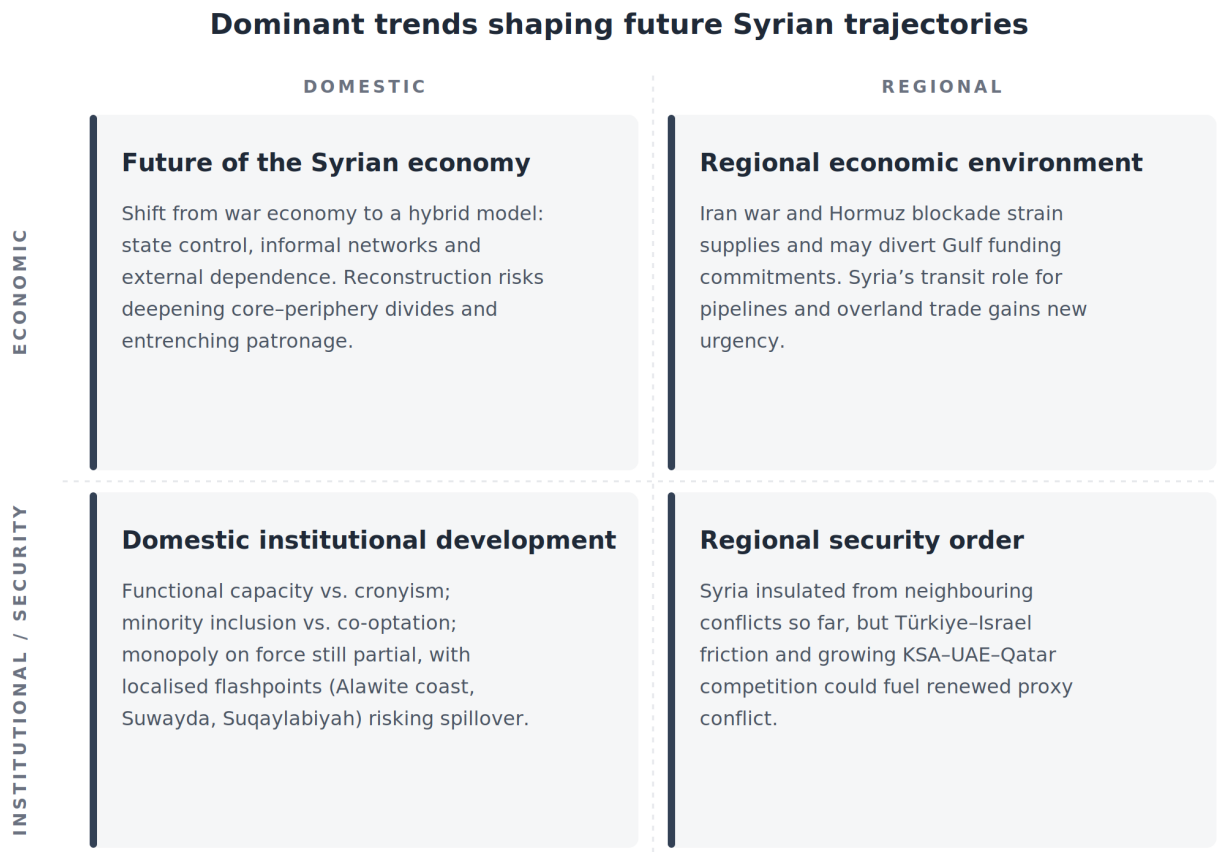
Building on the analysis of Syria's domestic dynamics, regional environment and external actors developed in the preceding chapters, this chapter now assesses the key trends shaping Syria's post-conflict trajectory and translates them into three ideal-type pathways for the country's development over the next 12 to 24 months. It does so by considering the interplay of: (1) structural legacies, institutional inheritances and conflict-era dynamics that constrain the range of possible futures; (2) the active forces, decisions and pressures currently shaping Syria's political, economic and security landscape and (3) the visions, incentives and normative frameworks that different actors are seeking to realise. The following chapter assembles these distinct forces into a framework that encompasses both domestic and external trends.

The foresight methodology which identified key trends and the three distinct trajectories detailed above comprised steps adapted for this project from various scenario-building methodologies[189]. Firstly, the research team evaluated previously compiled information and deliberated on the key trends shaping Syria's future; a question that was also asked during the interviews conducted for this paper. While discussing the trends, the team used the futures triangle approach and focused on how specific trends connect the structural determinants, constraints and barriers to change with present policies and visions of the future[190]. Secondly, the trends discussed were thematically clustered and, upon further deliberation, grouped into a 2x2 matrix. The matrix specifically positions Syria's future trajectories at the intersection of domestic and international trends and transformations of the economic and institutional realm. While at the international level Syria is dependent on the regional economic environment, domestically the economy is the key factor in the stability of the GoS. At the same time, the future of Syria is inseparable from the shape of the regional (geo)political order, while domestically, the development of nascent governmental institutions is a crucial factor for future stability or instability. Thirdly, the team identified three basic images of Syria's future development. These were developed so as to follow logically from the trends identified and, at the same time, enable further discussion of plausible divergent outcomes.

[189] J. Daniel and O. Ditrych, Foresight in a State of War and Geopolitical Tensions: Scenario-Building Methodology, RE-ENGAGE, 31 October 2024; L. Vesnic-Alujevic et al., Reference Foresight Scenarios: Scenarios on the Global Standing of the EU in 2040, Publications Office of the European Union, 13 June 2023.

[190] A. Fergnani, 'Futures Triangle 2.0: Integrating the Futures Triangle with Scenario Planning', Foresight, Vol 22, No 2, 2020, pp. 178-188.

Figure 1: Matrix of domestic and regional trends



Source: Authors' own development.

Applying this framework to the trends identified in the preceding chapters yields three broad pathways: (1) a state consolidation scenario characterised by increasingly functional institutions, more inclusive security provision and gradual economic stabilisation; (2) an authoritarian stabilisation scenario in which centralised control and patronage networks maintain a fragile order without building genuine legitimacy and (3) a fragmentation scenario in which governance failures produce renewed decentralisation, competing armed actors and persistent instability.

5.1 Domestic trends

The trajectory of Syria's post-conflict development will be shaped less by formal political arrangements and more by the internal dynamics through which authority is translated into governance. Rather than a linear transition toward stability, the emerging order is likely to reflect an ongoing tension between the consolidation of political power and identity fragmentation in a setting of centralisation and inclusivity (for example, among Syrian minorities such as Alawites, Druzes, Christians and Kurds). The current leadership's ability to navigate these trade-offs across economic, institutional, security and societal domains will ultimately determine whether Syria evolves into a relatively coherent political order or remains structurally unstable. Within these developments, many processes and stages of the country's transformation into a stable system will require external guidance, feedback and support. In this chapter, the focus will be on two trends: firstly, shaping the Syrian economy and economic reconstruction and secondly, the nature of governing institutions.

5.1.1 The future of Syria's economy

At the core of Syria's internal dynamics lies its economic system's transformation. The current trajectory suggests a shift from a fragmented war economy toward a hybrid model combining elements of state control, informal networks and external dependencies. Economic structures are unlikely to be neutral. Rather, they will serve as key instruments of political control and regime consolidation. Patronage networks, access to external rents and the persistence of informal economic practices will continue to shape resource distribution and influence political loyalties. This trend may be further reinforced by investments from GCC countries in sectors such as aviation, digital infrastructure, water security or oil infrastructure[191] as well as Türkiye securing key contracts in energy and aviation[192]. The key question here is whether some of the investments and support provided by these and other external actors will help revive Syria's peripheries by reaching beyond the economic centres and lucrative real estate deals in parts of the country that have so far been attractive to foreign investors.

A critical dimension of economic governance is the government's ability to sustain livelihoods and infrastructure, such as roads, schools (where there is no school, there cannot be long-term sustainable education), hospitals and other facilities serving the Syrian population. This includes not only the provision of basic goods and services but also broader issues such as employment generation, price stability and access to essential infrastructure. Failure here would not merely produce economic hardship but would directly translate into social instability, increased criminality – already happening due to the security apparatus's lack of presence and increasing poverty across the country – and the emergence of alternative governance structures at local levels. In such contexts, non-state actors (such as the PKK remnants in the north-east), local elites or armed groups (mainly IS and other affiliated Salafi-jihadist groups) may fill governance gaps, thereby further undermining central authority.

Reconstruction efforts and the ways in which they will shape the structure of Syria's future economy represent another decisive arena. However, this should not just be understood narrowly as physical rebuilding, but as a broader process of economic reconfiguration and its impact across the whole of Syria. The key question is not whether reconstruction will occur, but how, where and in what form it will be structured: who will control contracts, how resources will be allocated, and which actors will benefit from the process. There is also a risk that reconstruction will facilitate capital extraction, with profits transferred abroad rather than reinvested in Syria, as frequently occurred under the Assad regime. Without careful management together with an inclusive and accountable process, reconstruction risks reproducing the very dynamics of the war economy by facilitating capital extraction, entrenching inequalities and reinforcing patronage-based systems built on political loyalties rather than accountability and whole-of-society considerations. The key determinants will therefore be where the reconstruction will take place, how inclusive it will be and how much of the generated wealth will remain within the Syrian economy. An uneven or extractive reconstruction process could fuel future fragmentation, as some parts of the country and communities would be left out of the economic rebound.

5.1.2 Domestic institutional development

The evolution of formal institutions will play a central role in shaping governance outcomes. A key issue is whether institutions develop into functional mechanisms capable of implementing policy or remain largely symbolic, serving as extensions of the Syrian President's executive authority. The degree of bureaucratisation, administrative capacity and policy coherence will be critical indicators of institutional effectiveness.

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[191] The Syrian Observer, 'Saudi Arabia Pledges Billions for Syria's Rebuild as U.S. Firms Explore Oil Sector Entry', 9 February 2026.
[192] Turkish Minute, 'Turkey secures dominant role in Syria's reconstruction with $11 billion in energy, airport deals', 10 December 2025.

Closely linked to this is the question of governance quality, particularly the regime's ability to manage economic and administrative processes without excessive reliance on cronyism. While some degree of patronage is likely to be inevitable in a post-conflict environment, its scale and distribution will be decisive. Highly concentrated or exclusionary patronage networks risk undermining both efficiency and legitimacy, while more diffuse systems may provide short-term stability at the cost of long-term institutional development[193].

Another important dimension concerns the extent to which authoritarian practices are moderated or recalibrated. A full transition away from authoritarianism is unlikely given al-Sharaa's track record of governance so far, both in Idlib and in Damascus[194]. However, the regime's willingness and ability to respond to societal pressures and external demands will be crucial. This includes the existence of channels for civil society engagement, tolerance of dissent as well as responsiveness to public grievances and public protests (whether they call for stricter enforcement of religious norms, greater public freedoms or reform of economic policies). Where such mechanisms are absent, reliance on coercion is likely to increase, potentially generating cycles of repression and resistance. Here, the role of external actors – mainly the USA and the EU – will be crucial both in exerting pressure on the government and in supporting a counterweight to the present regime within civil society and the media.

Managing Syria's diverse social environment will serve as a key test of governance capacity. The extent to which minority groups – whether defined along ethnic, religious or regional lines – are included or marginalised will have direct implications for political stability. A distinction must be made between genuine power-sharing arrangements and the co-optation of selected elites or token appointments that are supposed to signal openness to Syria's foreign partners. While co-optation can provide short-term stability by integrating influential actors into the regime's framework, it does not necessarily address broader grievances within communities. Over time, such approaches may prove insufficient, particularly if underlying inequalities and exclusions persist. Failure to manage diversity effectively could lead to renewed fragmentation. This may take the form of increased local autonomy, low-intensity conflict or the re-emergence of external involvement through proxy actors. In this sense, minority governance is not a peripheral issue but a central determinant of long-term stability. Alternatively, the perception of threat from the minority population's perspective might be an important factor driving and justifying the deepening of authoritarianism.

Security remains a foundational element of state consolidation, albeit the nature of security provision is as important as its effectiveness. Meeting this central challenge involves consolidating a monopoly over the use of force. The continued presence of fragmented or competing security actors, whether formal and aligned with the Syrian government (such as the SNA divisions) or non-state and opposing it (such as IS), would signal a lack of central control and thus increase the risk of renewed instability. Moreover, the mere existence of centralised security structures is insufficient. The critical issue is whether security is provided as a public good or deployed selectively to protect regime interests. Inclusive security provision, extending across regions, communities and social groups, can contribute to much broader stability and legitimacy. By contrast, selective or discriminatory security practices risk alienating segments of the population and encouraging the development of parallel security arrangements. One of the main challenges in providing security will be to contain possible localised violence (such as the aforementioned Syrian coast Alawite massacres in March 2025, the escalation in Suwayda during July 2025 and the Suqaylabiyah incident in March 2026), which could escalate rapidly, possibly fuelled by misinformation campaigns.

Taken together, these dynamics suggest that Syria's institutional development is likely to be shaped by the tension between authoritarian centralisation and the need for broader political inclusion. The concentration

[193] Interview with a Qatari-Syrian NGO worker based in Syria, online, 8 April 2026.
[194] Interview with an international civil society organisation expert based in Dubai, online, 5 May 2026.

of executive power, limited institutional autonomy and continued reliance on patronage and coercion point towards the consolidation of authoritarian rule. However, this trajectory is constrained by pressure from parts of Syrian society, the state's limited capacity to govern the entire country without a degree of popular consent and legitimacy, and demands from foreign partners for more inclusive and accountable governance. The government's response to these pressures will determine whether institutions gradually acquire greater autonomy and capacity or remain instruments of presidential control. Failure to balance centralisation with inclusion could weaken institutional cohesion, intensify competition within the ruling system and contribute to renewed political and territorial fragmentation.

5.2 Regional trends

Domestic dynamics, including the gradual hollowing out of Syrian state institutions, economic deterioration and the regime's lack of legitimacy, contributed to the fall of Bashar al-Assad. However, the regime's collapse would have been difficult to imagine without changes in its external environment. Russia's war against Ukraine reduced Moscow's capacity to sustain its military involvement in Syria, while the losses inflicted on Hezbollah during its conflict with Israel weakened another crucial source of military support. These developments, alongside the broader erosion of Iran's regional network, reduced the capacity of Assad's allies to intervene decisively when opposition forces launched their final offensive.

Regional developments have continued to shape Syria's trajectory after Assad's fall. The reconfiguration of the Middle Eastern order initiated by the Hamas-led attacks of 7 October 2023 and Israel's subsequent military campaigns has affected Syria's security environment, its relations with neighbouring states and the involvement of external powers in the country. The latest iteration of this process at the time of writing (summer 2026) is the war involving the USA, Israel and Iran, together with its regional and global repercussions and the blockade of the Strait of Hormuz. Although the conflict's eventual outcomes remain difficult to predict, it may directly affect Syria by altering the regional balance of power, weakening or strengthening external actors operating in the country and shaping the resources available for reconstruction and economic recovery.

Two broader trends are particularly important for Syria's future: first, changes in the regional balance of power and the risk of further conflict involving Syria; and second, regional and global economic developments that will affect trade, energy supplies, foreign investment and reconstruction.

5.2.1 Regional security order

The current Syrian administration seeks to disassociate itself from any ongoing problems in its neighbourhood and prioritise post-conflict recovery. Moreover, Syria has so far managed to avoid direct involvement and arguably benefited from the fact that Iran's focus has moved to its own security and to maintaining Hezbollah's standing in its conflict with Israel. The deployment of Syrian forces on the Lebanese border and actions aimed at targeting Hezbollah's smuggling infrastructure in coordination with Lebanese forces represent some of the limited direct military attempts to insulate Syria from conflict[195]. Additional risks have emerged in the east of the country amid potential spillover from skirmishes in Iraq, although these have so far been contained[196]. If Syria continues to avoid direct involvement and the conflict in the Persian Gulf gradually de-escalates, its principal effects on the country are likely to be economic (see the next chapter), particularly through their impact on energy supplies, trade, investment and reconstruction. By contrast, a broader regional escalation could have direct political and security consequences for Syria

[195] Enab Baladi, 'Syria Reinforces Borders with Lebanon and Iraq Following Regional Escalation', 4 March 2026; France 24, 'Syrian troops uncover tunnel network on Lebanon border', 2 April 2026.
[196] S. Kalin, 'Saudi Arabia and Iraq Are Caught in a Hidden War Within the War', The Wall Street Journal, 20 April 2026; Asharq Al-Awsat, 'Syrian Army Says Base Targeted by Missiles from Iraq', 30 April 2026.

by increasing pressure on Damascus to align with competing powers, intensifying cross-border violence and foreign military intervention and turning Syrian territory into an arena for renewed proxy competition.

There have been repeated flare-ups of hostile rhetoric between Ankara and Tel Aviv, for instance, concerning Türkiye's role in Syria, accompanied by limited Israeli attacks on Turkish bases during March 2025 and strikes on a base in northwestern Syria in August 2026[197]. While these tensions have so far been managed through USA and Azerbaijan-led mediation and a Syrian move towards direct negotiations with Israel, they could increase in response to new developments in southern Syria or in connection with other conflicting issues between the two countries[198]. Whilst any overt conflict might not be in either party's interests at this point, if it happens, it could nevertheless contribute to increased instability in the country. Naturally, a sustainable solution found for the situation in Suwayda and a mutually acceptable agreement between Syrian and Israeli representatives (and their respective international backers) would mitigate the adversarial effects of such a trend.

Another potential conflict axis, with direct impact on the situation in Syria, concerns regional politics. Although there have been no indications of proxy conflict between the Gulf powers in Syria at this point (see chapter 3), open and growing competition between KSA, Qatar and the UAE would also have repercussions in Syria[199]. As the Syrian economy and government control over the entire Syrian territory are not consolidated at this point, a withdrawal of planned funding promised by the Gulf countries, competition over their role in strategic projects or, in extreme cases, support for radical and/or separatist actors would have a direct negative impact on Syria's stability. Moreover, it would also contribute to negative perceptions among other potential investors in the Syrian economy (see below) and might lead to avoidance of investment in the country due to perceived risks.

5.2.2 Regional and international economic environment

Syria is dependent on and closely connected to the regional and global economic environment. Expected fallout from the Persian Gulf crisis is likely to affect Syria in various ways. These concern trade and logistics disruptions, along with an overall shock to the global economy, as well as opportunities and funding available for reconstructing the Syrian economy. However, any impact from the Strait of Hormuz blockade and risks associated with reliance on a single trade route for the transport of energy and other supplies also create potential opportunities for Syria.

In broad terms, the Syrian economy is exposed to shocks from the war in Iran. Interruptions in natural gas supplies, indirectly linked to the war, contributed to a renewed electricity crisis and general uncertainty over the future of fuel and other supplies. This added yet another factor to continually rising inflation, which contributes to the prevalent poverty, unemployment and a potential decline in local production[200]. Moreover, the Syrian economy and public services were put under increased strain by the return of Syrians, currently around 700 000 and rising, fleeing the war in Lebanon. While none of these issues currently represents an economic crisis, they do nevertheless point to a broader negative economic impact of the war beyond its initial shock and to the fragility of Syrian economic recovery[201]. Further expected

[197] Reuters and TOI Staff, 'Israeli said to bombard 3 airbases in Syria where Turkey intended to deploy forces', The Times of Israel, 5 April 2025; S. Kassabali, 'Israeli strikes an air base in northwest Syria to prevent Turkish troops from deploying', Associated Press, 18 August 2026.
[198] Ö. Özkizilcik, 'Turkey-Israel Rivalry in the New Syria', Stimson Center, 14 January 2026.
[199] J.-P. Filiu, 'The power struggle between Saudi Arabia and the UAE is only on hold', Le Monde, 5 April 2026; C. Lons, 'Power struggle: What the Saudi-UAE rivalry means for the Red Sea—and Europe', European Council on Foreign Relations, 29 January 2026.
[200] Levant24, 'Power Supply Improves Across Syrian Provinces', 24 April 2026; A. Hakouk, 'Rising prices in Syria, two experts assess the economic situation', Enab Baladi, 11 March 2026.
[201] W. Todman, 'The War with Iran Threatens Syria's Recovery', Center for Strategic and International Studies, 12 March 2026.

aftershocks from the war and blockade, such as a global food and agriculture crisis[202], would then add to the existing issues and directly threaten food security for many inside the country (see also chapter 2.5)[203].

Perhaps even more importantly, the war in Iran might also affect Syria's foreign partners' abilities to deliver promised funds and investments on which the Syrian strategy of economic reconstruction relies. This is particularly true of the Gulf states (KSA and Qatar), which might choose to prioritise domestic economic recovery and the reconstruction of damaged facilities, alongside focusing on other countries and urgent crises, over at least some of the investments and funds promised to Syria[204]. The negative economic effects of the war and the potential shift to other priorities also concern other international donors, including the European states, and further compound the effects of the previously-announced cuts to development and humanitarian funding. However, the damage and negative effects of this trend might go beyond any direct capital provision, as the unstable regional environment, a lack of successful early reconstruction projects and other domestic issues might drive hesitant investors away from the Syrian economy.

At the same time, any impact from the Strait of Hormuz blockade might also drive a number of positive economic trends. Most significantly, this is reflected in the increased relevance of Syria as a transit space connecting the Gulf countries and Iraq to the Mediterranean. While such regional connectivity projects had already been explored before the war, they have now received renewed urgency and momentum, backed by regional and global powers, such as Türkiye and the USA[205]. This might mean, inter alia: increased revival of the pipelines connecting Kirkuk with the Syrian port of Baniyas; revitalisation of Syria's domestic oil network and production capacity as well as the development of new gas pipelines connecting Qatar to Türkiye[206]. Moreover, there has been interest in reviving other forms of overland transport to diversify regional trading routes and digital connectivity[207]. While these initiatives are contingent on sufficient funding and the availability of skilled labour, they might represent future contributions to Syrian economic recovery.

5.3 The three resulting pathways

A combination of previously identified trends, along with their specific shapes and intersections, is reflected below in three potential pathways, ideal-type images, for future Syrian development. As such, they are not intended to predict the future but rather indicate the potential implications of the trends discussed above and their interrelationships.

Which of the following pathways prevails will depend on how effectively internal trends are managed. Ultimately, the key challenge is whether the current leadership can move beyond mere control and develop the governance capacity and capabilities necessary to sustain a viable political order. More capable and more accountable institutions are a key feature of such development.

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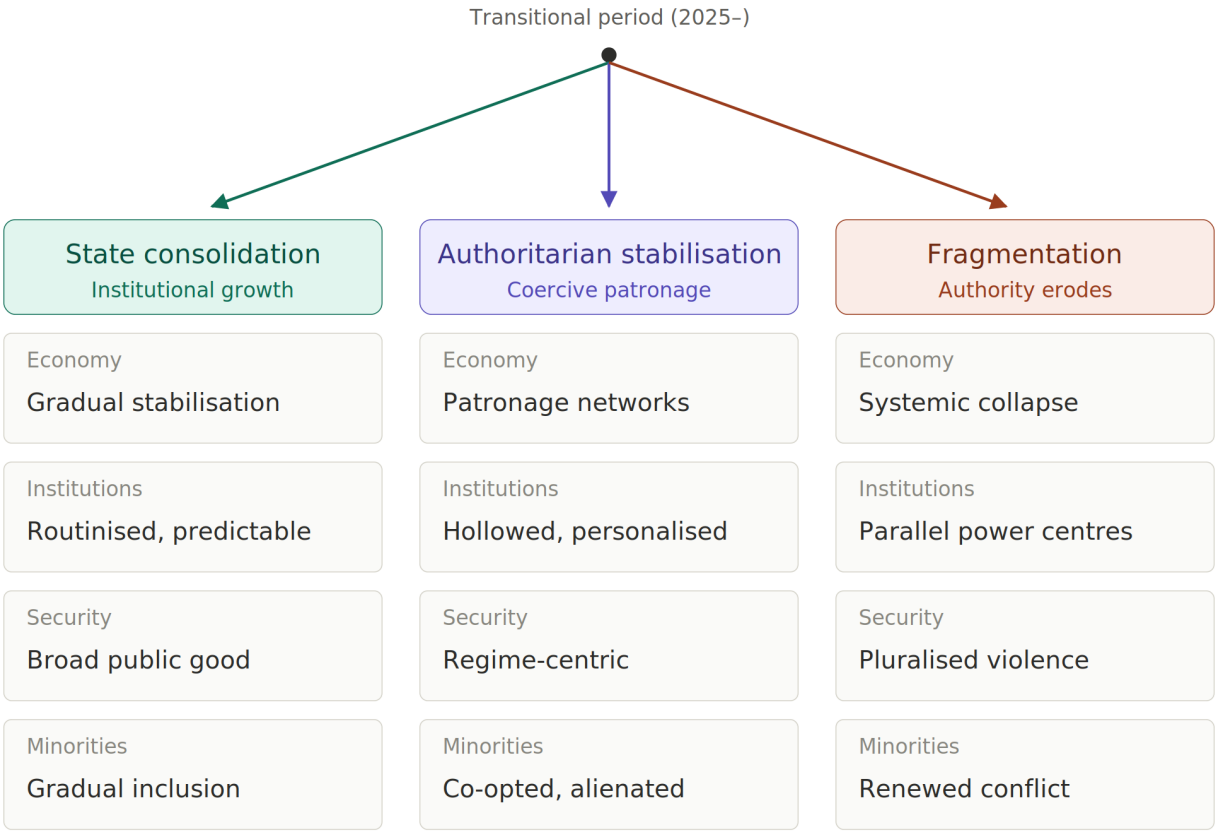
[202] Financial Times, 'The coming global food crisis', 18 April 2026.
[203] The Syrian Observer, 'Triple shock and the Syrian economy: can Damascus withstand the new wave of global pressure?', 16 April 2026.
[204] E. Solomon, 'Arab World Faces "Profound" Economic Crisis From Iran War, U.N. Agency Warns', The New York Times, 31 March 2026; A. Y. Zelin, 'Syria Is Feeling the Fallout from the Iran Crisis', The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 18 March 2026; C. Lister, 'US-Iran war gives Syria's global economic pitch more urgency', Al Majalla, 1 April 2026.
[205] Al Majalla, 'The US plan to turn Syria into an oil transit hub', 16 April 2026.
[206] W. Al Jurdi, 'Iran war sparks push to transform Syria into global energy corridor', Euronews, 24 April 2026.
[207] S. Abdulrazek, 'Türkiye, Syria Advance Strategic Partnership to Support Reconstruction', Asharq Al-Awsat, 11 April 2026; H. Haid, 'Syria Between Shockwaves: How the War on Iran Is Reshaping Its Transition', Arab Reform Initiative, 9 April 2026.

Figure 2: The three pathways



Source: Authors' own development.

5.3.1 State consolidation

The first pathway reflects a state consolidation scenario, characterised by relatively functional institutions, more inclusive security provision and gradual economic stabilisation. This would involve a partial shift away from wartime redistribution and patronage toward more predictable and productive economic structures, going hand-in-hand with a stable security environment.

While external support from KSA, Türkiye, the USA and other sources would remain important, these sources would no longer constitute the sole basis of economic survival. A new form of long-term sustainable economy would develop, building on returnees' experience and links with the global Syrian diaspora along with regional partners. Crucially, the state would demonstrate at least some minimal ability to sustain livelihoods, reducing incentives for alternative governance actors to emerge, namely those seeking to fill possible governance gaps through insurgencies.

Institutionally, consolidation would be reflected in the emergence of semi-functional administrative structures capable of implementing policy and responsive to the demands and needs of popular constituencies, including minority and less privileged actors. This does not imply the absence of authoritarianism, but rather its partial institutionalisation and existence within certain limits defined by the need for popular legitimacy and foreign support, conditional on the maintenance of basic human rights standards and political freedoms. Decision-making would become more routinised, less arbitrary and somewhat more predictable for both domestic and external actors.

In the security domain, one key defining feature would be the consolidation of the monopoly over the use of force (which must be addressed through transitional justice), accompanied by a gradual shift away from regime-centric security provision toward a broader, albeit still imperfect, public good. Security institutions

would become more coherent and less fragmented, reducing the likelihood of intra-regime competition or localised armed autonomy (in the case of SNA or remnants of SDF).

At regional level, this scenario would be supported by a gradual stabilisation of the Middle Eastern security order and a de-escalation of tensions between the Gulf states, Iran and Israel. Syria would increasingly benefit from regional connectivity projects, trade corridors and energy infrastructure linking the Gulf, Iraq, Türkiye and the Mediterranean. In particular, uncertainty surrounding maritime exports through the Strait of Hormuz could increase Syria's strategic relevance as an alternative overland transit route for oil, gas and other commodities destined for Mediterranean and European markets. Constructive relations with neighbouring states would reduce incentives for proxy competition on Syrian territory. Equally important would be the Syrian government's ability to maintain its current policy of distancing itself from regional conflicts, avoiding direct involvement in confrontations between Israel and Hezbollah or other regional actors.

Sustaining such a position would allow Damascus to prioritise domestic reconstruction and state-building over costly regional entanglements. Continued economic engagement from regional actors would reinforce reconstruction efforts and institutional development. In this environment, Syria would gradually transform from a source of regional instability into a contributor to regional economic integration.

5.3.2 Authoritarian stabilisation

The second pathway is a form of authoritarian stabilisation, where control is maintained through centralised authority and patronage networks, but with limited legitimacy and questionable long-term sustainability.

Here, the regime would consolidate control but fail to build broader and inclusive governance capacity. Stability would be maintained, but it would be shallow, uneven and heavily dependent on coercion and the patronage of key Syrian elite actors. Economically, the system would remain dominated by rent-seeking, clientelism and the selective distribution of resources. This would be partly enabled by limited flows of funds from regional actors willing to invest in select lucrative regions and areas. However, these investments would not create a basis for solid economic recovery. It would also be driven by a lack of effective conditionality in the provision of international support by Western actors, who would prioritise agreement with the current government and immediate results in an unstable region over sustainable stability. Reconstruction, where it would occur, would reinforce existing power structures rather than transforming them.

Large segments of the population would remain economically marginalised, relying on informal coping mechanisms, and their situation would be further worsened by regional economic downturn and a fall in remittances from Syrian communities abroad. This would make the society prone to localised protests, although rarely leading to actual policy changes. Institutionally, formal structures would still exist but would be hollowed out (along the lines of the aforementioned People's Assembly with its rather formal and controlled role) and would serve as a source of patronage and a 'fig leaf' to external partners who ask for more representative institutions. Decision-making would remain highly centralised and personalised, with limited bureaucratic autonomy. Governance would be reactive rather than strategic and policy implementation would be inconsistent.

Security provision in this scenario would be effective in protecting the regime but not necessarily the population, igniting ethno-sectarian divisions in society and fuelling everyday insecurity. Here, minorities and local actors are incorporated primarily through co-optation rather than genuine inclusion. This means that parts of these communities would continue to feel deep grievance towards the regime and might even be open to joining armed groups hostile to the Syrian regime. A more severe economic crisis at the regional level or other external pressures would threaten to push the country into renewed instability.

Regionally, this scenario would emerge in an environment characterised by limited stability but persistent geopolitical competition. While major regional actors would continue to support the Syrian government for pragmatic reasons, their engagement would remain selective and primarily motivated by strategic, economic and security interests. Syria would largely avoid becoming a direct battlefield for regional rivalries and seek to maintain a policy of distancing itself from ongoing conflicts, including confrontations involving Israel, Hezbollah and Iran. However, the country would remain vulnerable to shifts in external support, fluctuations in regional economic conditions and changing priorities among its partners.

The Syrian government would benefit to some extent from regional connectivity projects and efforts to diversify trade and energy routes amid continued uncertainty surrounding the Strait of Hormuz. Nevertheless, the absence of meaningful institutional reforms, legal certainty and transparent governance would limit Syria's ability to capitalise fully on these opportunities and transform them into sustainable economic development. Regional investments would remain concentrated in selected sectors and regions, often reinforcing existing patronage networks rather than supporting broad-based economic recovery. At the same time, competition among regional actors, including the Gulf states and Türkiye, could increasingly manifest itself through economic influence and political patronage inside Syria. While such competition would not necessarily threaten regime survival, it would deepen Syria's dependence on external actors and expose the country to future regional economic and geopolitical shocks.

5.3.3 Fragmentation

The third is a fragmentation pathway, in which governance failures lead to renewed decentralisation, the re-emergence of competing actors and persistent instability. Economically, this scenario is characterised by systemic failure, such as the inability to sustain livelihoods, provide basic services and coordinate reconstruction efforts.

This would stem as much from economic mismanagement at a national level as from the adverse effects of a regional economic downturn and the withdrawal of promised funds and investments. The lack of economic growth, ongoing insecurity and the lack of respect for the rule of law would discourage most international investors from engaging in Syria. The only exception is resource extraction, although this would fail to generate significant income for a large share of the population and would remain concentrated in the hands of a tight-knit clique comprising government-connected elites and local strongmen. As a result, local economies would become increasingly fragmented, often tied to informal or illicit networks crossing Syrian borders.

Institutionally, fragmentation would manifest as the erosion of central authority and the proliferation of parallel governance structures. Formal institutions would lose relevance on the ground, remain in a significant part of Syrian territory only as a formal power and be replaced by local power centres, militias, IS sleeper cells or hybrid arrangements between the state and local strongmen, some of whom might have closer ties to the central government than others.

Security dynamics in this pathway would be defined by renewed pluralisation of violence. The monopoly over the use of force would collapse or remain incomplete, with many actors exercising de facto control over different territories or sectors. The management of diversity would become particularly problematic. Marginalised groups may seek greater autonomy or external support, while unresolved grievances could escalate into localised or broader conflict. External actors, fearing the vacuum and its potential exploitation by actors hostile to their interests, could re-engage through proxies, further complicating the internal landscape. Naturally, insecurity and instability on the ground would also prohibit more sustained returns of Syrian refugees.

This scenario would likely coincide with a deterioration of the regional security environment and intensifying geopolitical competition across the Middle East. Rather than benefiting from regional stabilisation and connectivity initiatives, Syria would once again become an arena where external actors

pursue their interests through local partners, armed groups and competing political networks. The weakening of central authority would create opportunities for regional powers to expand their influence across different parts of the country (and to support different actors), further undermining efforts to restore national cohesion and effective governance.

Escalating tensions involving Iran, Israel, Türkiye and the Gulf states could contribute to the emergence of new proxy dynamics on Syrian territory, with local actors increasingly relying on external sponsorship. At the same time, regional economic crises and growing insecurity would reduce the willingness of both regional and international actors to invest in Syria's reconstruction. Unlike circumstances under the consolidation scenario, Syria would be unable to capitalise on its potential role as an alternative transit corridor linking the Gulf and Iraq with the Mediterranean, as insecurity, fragmented governance and weak institutions would discourage large-scale infrastructure and connectivity projects.

Persistent governance vacuums and weak border control would also create favourable conditions for the resurgence of IS and other transnational extremist groups. Concerned about these developments, neighbouring states could increasingly intervene through local proxies or unilateral security measures, further entrenching Syria's fragmentation. Rather than becoming a platform for regional cooperation and economic integration, Syria would once again be defined by instability, external competition and overlapping spheres of influence.

6 Implications for the EU: Moving from financial donor to strategic actor

The EU has been just one of many active international actors in post-Assad Syria. However, the pathways of Syrian development described in the previous sections, as well as the EU's existing leverage and key challenges, suggest that the EU's ability to achieve its core interests is far from assured. It is also dependent on which of the three broad developmental pathways outlined above the Syrian state-building ultimately follows. Nevertheless, the EU has a role to play in shaping the outcomes of these pathways and in determining which one might ultimately prevail.

The EU faces a set of dilemmas about its future role in the country that have defined its engagement across the southern neighbourhood more broadly and which has been repeatedly framed through the notion of becoming 'a player rather than a payer'[208]. The EU provides substantial funding but exerts disproportionately little influence over political outcomes compared with other, more assertive regional and global players. Syria, in many ways, represents a repetition of this pattern. Translating financial weight and normative standing into genuine political capital requires a coherent strategy, which the EU has so far lacked, coupled with a high degree of flexibility[209]. This dilemma is now addressed in what follows with a discussion about implications from the EU's actions, bearing in mind the three pathways detailed above.

6.1 Syria's economic recovery is threatened while humanitarian needs persist

The regional crisis triggered by the US and Israeli attacks on Iran represents one of the most significant short-term threats to Syria's economic trajectory and, by extension, the EU's core interests in the country. Its effects on Syria are many and mutually reinforcing, ranging from ongoing and upcoming economic shocks that increase financial and inflationary pressures to the potential withdrawal of some promised funding and investments (see chapter 4). While the Syrian economy has so far managed to weather external

[208] F. Di Sario, 'EU Mediterranean Commissioner: "We want to be players and not only payers"', The Parliament Magazine, 19 November 2025.
[209] B. Speidl and H. Horváth-Sántha, 'Can Europe Still Matter in Syria?', Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 17 February 2026.

pressures, these dynamics, taken together, risk pushing it from a fragile recovery into an acute crisis. Such a development might deepen poverty, weaken institutional capacity and potentially increase the probability of sliding from authoritarian stabilisation into fragmentation.

For the EU, this creates both an urgent obligation and a strategic opportunity. The former implies responding to humanitarian and economic deterioration with the needed support, continuing to sustain humanitarian reaction when Syrian resilience is most at risk. The latter lies in Syria's demand for external support. Here, the EU as a more reliable partner might increase its political standing if it responds swiftly and visibly, building on its already realised and planned projects and existing instruments for investment in the neighbourhood. This would also address Syria's strategic value as a land transit corridor connecting the Gulf, Iraq and the Mediterranean.

These projects, if structured transparently and governed in accordance with international investment standards, represent a contribution to Syrian economic recovery that the EU is well-placed to support, shape and embed within a broader governance framework. Under the state consolidation pathway, these opportunities can be harnessed for economic development. However, under authoritarian stabilisation, they risk being captured by the same patronage networks that already dominate reconstruction. The EU's engagement on this front should be an instrument of pathway steering, not merely economic assistance.

6.2 More significant refugee returns remain distant

Most Syrians living in their home country remain desperately in need of humanitarian assistance, with around 90 % living below the poverty line. The voluntary returns of Syrian refugees from EU territory, as well as neighbouring countries, face structural obstacles that no European initiative can overcome quickly. Nevertheless, allowing a humanitarian gap to widen would undermine the stability that the EU's broader engagement is supposed to support and thereby further discourage refugee return. A sustainable return of refugees requires functional public services, housing, employment and security guarantees, which remain absent across most of Syria. Without a manifested and visible development in this regard and without significant improvement in governance as well as the rule of law, premature return could produce a humanitarian and political backlash that damages both Syrian communities and EU credibility. Given the country's still-fragile economic situation and potential shocks on the horizon, the 'pull factors' for refugee returns are unlikely to change in the short term[210].

Medium term, the question is not whether Syrians want to return, as many do, but whether Syria will be capable of receiving them. The three scenarios outlined in this paper map onto distinct European outcomes. A consolidation scenario creates the conditions for meaningful voluntary return at scale. An authoritarian stabilisation scenario produces a superficially stable state that will generate renewed displacement pressures as minority exclusion, cronyism and security sector abuses accumulate. A fragmentation scenario risks generating new waves of displacement toward Europe, reversing any gains and creating acute humanitarian and political pressure on EU Member States. The EU's medium-term strategy must, as a direct interest, therefore treat governance quality alongside economic recovery, as it bears directly on the Syrian state's stability. This also means not compromising on core human rights and governance standards while dealing with the present Syrian regime.

6.3 The Syrian economy cannot rebound without institutions and accountability

The Syrian authorities urgently need external economic support and they are acutely aware of this dependency. The EU's early recovery and reconstruction programmes, together with the relaunched

[210] U. Yüksel and T. Strik, 'Why Syrian refugee return is driven by push, not pull', Migration Policy Centre, 20 March 2026; O. B. Dinçer and Z. S. Mencütek, 'Syria is not ready: what returnees reveal about return', ECPR: The Loop, 11 May 2026.

Cooperation Agreement and push to revive trade and investments, give the EU a genuine comparative advantage. The EU has put considerable effort into building a political relationship with Damascus. However, the risk is that this diplomatic capital will be spent on visibility rather than leverage and that the character of the political partnership will end up being determined by Syria's pathway rather than actively shaping it.

The emerging picture shows that economic reconstruction in Syria is being channelled through political clientelist networks. If the EU-funded reconstruction projects are implemented without meaningful governance reforms and regulatory oversight, EU engagement risks legitimising and entrenching these dynamics rather than correcting them. The short-term test is thus whether the EU can successfully gain acceptance of rule-of-law and governance benchmarks. However, other forms of control and accountability by the Syrian government (not only in the economic area) should also be strengthened. This concerns the basic capacity of governmental regulatory institutions, as well as nascent civil society watchdogs, to provide meaningful criticism and correction of governmental actions.

This also concerns security sector reform, which sits at the intersection of all three EU interests. Yet, the current state of Syria's armed forces and police represents one of the most significant short-term risks. In the absence of meaningful command-level accountability, the documented participation of government-affiliated forces in the 2025 atrocities and the lack of institutionalised reaction clearly illustrate the consequences of a security apparatus that is neither professionally trained nor genuinely subject to civilian oversight or human rights norms. The EU already considers activities that include capacity-building projects with the Syrian police and the Ministry of the Interior. These instruments should be deployed proactively and feature a strong human rights component. Genuine engagement with security sector reform, conditioned on accountability and civilian oversight, is one of the most direct routes by which the EU can convert its funding into durable political influence over the character of the Syrian state.

The three pathways outlined above are directly dependent on the success or failure in building sustainable political institutions. Naturally, the state consolidation scenario represents an outcome where the Syrian regime is willing to listen to its European partners and the EU is willing to exert some influence to mitigate some of the authoritarian and exclusionary tendencies of the current government. A provision of funds that is conditioned on progress in institution-building and respect for human rights, political inclusion and institutional accountability might support such a pathway. Naturally, the EU's role becomes much more precarious in the other two pathways, where the government either turns down such requests (if they are made in the first place) or central government fragmentation deprives the EU of an effective partner on the ground.

6.4 The EU's leverage is real but faces challenges

The EU does not act in a vacuum as it faces a range of potential competitors with diverging interests. Türkiye exercises far greater day-to-day influence over Syrian policymaking than the EU, shaping the Syrian army through military cooperation, dominating the Aleppo regional economy and exerting influence over Kurdish integration. Gulf states have committed billions to infrastructure investment, potentially without any strings attached, as opposed to the EU. Israel is openly interested in a weak Syrian state that does not pose a threat to its interests and security. The USA retains significant political leverage over the country through its role in sanctions lifting and its relationship with key regional players. It is clear that these actors do not necessarily share EU priorities. Hence, the EU must not only be ready to face potential divergences but also be actively prepared to address them.

Internally, the EU must also address the persistent challenge of aligning its instruments across different frameworks and reconciling divergent Member State priorities, which risk undermining the coherence and credibility of EU engagement over time. Humanitarian aid and development support, investment in infrastructure, technical support and capacity-building in legal and economic institution-building and

security sector reform remain valuable softer levers, but they are contingent on Syrian acceptance and cannot substitute for a coherent strategic framework.

This also means that the EU cannot achieve its goals in Syria unilaterally or through bilateral engagement with Damascus alone. Regional coordination with the GCC states, Jordan and Lebanon, as well as through multilateral fora, is indispensable. On refugee return, cooperation with Jordan and Lebanon, which together host over a million registered Syrian refugees, is necessary for any coordinated and safe return framework. On stability, aligning EU engagement with the Gulf states is essential in preventing reconstruction from entrenching the wrong dynamics. On security, EU cooperation with regional partners on border management, counterterrorism and the disruption of smuggling networks not only reduces the risk of spillover but also helps maintain EU engagement in the security field. The EU needs to engage in structured dialogue with the regional powers. Syria's potential as a transit corridor for energy and goods from the Gulf to the Mediterranean also gives the EU a platform for multilateral economic diplomacy. Strategic and coherent use of this diplomatic capital by all Member States is the medium-term multiplier for all other EU instruments.

The EU's regional engagement is crucial in all three pathways; the EU should focus on different priorities in each of them. The state consolidation pathway requires effective coordination of key partners of the Syrian regime. It is unrealistic to expect complete harmony of interests among all the actors involved, but so far, most actors seem to favour Syrian stability. The EU thus needs to make sure that it is sustainable stability that is based on building solid and accountable institutions, not a superficial authoritarian stability.

6.5 The EU and the Syrian pathways

The three pathways produce fundamentally different dynamics for EU political engagement. Under the consolidation scenario, a structured and conditional political partnership would find a Syrian counterpart with both the institutional capacity and the political incentive to respond to EU norms. A Damascus genuinely invested in building functional institutions, inclusive governance and international legitimacy would treat EU governance and rule of law conditions not as an external imposition but as a framework that reinforces its own state-building agenda.

Under the authoritarian stabilisation pathway, Damascus will actively seek the legitimacy and economic benefits of an EU political partnership while systematically resisting meaningful governance reforms and accountability. The tokenistic inclusion of minority representatives in the cabinet, the reactivation of Assad-era laws restricting civil society and the concentration of decision-making in presidential family networks all signal a government skilled at managing external perceptions rather than responding to them. In this scenario, an EU that accepts the form of partnership without insisting on its substance becomes an enabler of authoritarian consolidation in the name of political stabilisation. The authoritarian stabilisation pathway is also the one most likely to produce eventual instability through patronage networks that breed corruption and resentment, the exclusion of minorities and the suppression of civic space, all of which have the potential to generate popular grievances.

Under the fragmentation scenario, the EU's political partnership loses its primary interlocutor as central authority disperses and Damascus's capacity to deliver on commitments progressively erodes. Hence, the structured bilateral relationship that the EU has invested in becomes increasingly nominal, leaving the EU to manage relationships with multiple competing Syrian actors, such as armed factions, autonomous regional entities and external patrons. The political capital accumulated through bilateral engagement with Damascus erodes rapidly amid fragmentation, leaving the EU with fewer instruments and partners but higher costs.

Becoming a genuine player, therefore, means that the EU must use momentum generated by present initiatives to establish a structured political dialogue with explicit goals on the rule of law, civil society space and minority rights – making clear that the full benefits of recovery and reconstruction financing, trade and

economic cooperation pillars are contingent on demonstrable progress. The Syrian government needs international recognition and economic integration – the EU could be a provider of both. However, this does not mean that the EU should move away from other forms of support and engagement that it is already involved in, namely humanitarian support and support for civil society, as both contribute to a more stable and more inclusive Syria.

7 Recommendations to the European Parliament

Figure 3: The role of the European Parliament in each pathway

PATHWAY	EP'S PRIMARY ROLE	KEY TOOLS
State consolidation	**Constructive partner** supporting inclusive state-building, monitoring progress and holding all the stakeholders accountable	Budget increases, technical assistance oversight, consent to upgraded agreements
Authoritarian Stabilisation	**Critical watchdog** using leverage to prevent the entrenchment of patronage networks and pushback against the autocratic tendencies of the central government.	Withholding consent to new agreements, funding freezes, resolutions exposing tokenism and human rights abuses, increased scrutiny through committee hearings
Fragmentation	Shift to a **Humanitarian actor** that stresses protecting vulnerable populations	Resolutions on protection of vulnerable populations in Syria, cooperation with other actors on finding alternative implementation partners, increased role for regional coordination

Strengthen Syrian civil society with flexible and inclusive funding mechanisms

The EU should prioritise the development of organisational capacity within Syrian civil society and independent media, with particular emphasis on organisations operating across sectarian, ethnic, regional and other sub-state dividing lines. This has the potential to advance social cohesion and equality among the Syrian population. The EU is well-equipped to do so due not only to its long-term involvement in supporting Syrian civil society but also its role within the Syria Partnership Coordination Forum (harmonising donor requirements and planning actions). However, any such support needs to take into account the fragmented and unevenly controlled nature of civic space in the country, and it needs to account for the challenges that the local civil society organisations face[211]. It also needs to make sure that the support does not go only to the 'usual suspects' – organisations and individuals well-versed in the language spoken by international donors – and reach out to other parts of civil society, such as syndicates, professional unions and local initiatives[212]. Finally, the EU should support sustainable platforms that connect different civil society organisations and enable cooperation rather than competition for resources.

[211] See Search for Common Ground and Aleph Strategies, European Union Roadmap for Civil Society Engagement, EEAS, February 2026.
[212] See EEAS, EU - 2025 Day of Dialogue, 30 March 2026.

For its part, the European Parliament co-decides on the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument – Global Europe (NDICI-GE), which funds civil society programmes.

The European Parliament could:

- Emphasise the need to allocate long-term resources to this goal to enable predictable financing and, if needed, advocate for increased dedicated funding for Syrian civil society organisations
- If there are documented cases of governmental repression, the European Parliament could consider drafting resolutions specifically on protecting the Syrian civil society space and raise this issue with the Commission and European External Action Service (EEAS). Adopt its own initiative reports, drawing on the European Parliament's Committee on Foreign Affairs (AFET) and the Committee on Development reports, explicitly calling on the Commission to consider more flexible NGO registration requirements for Syria, citing issues with the country's legal procedures and civic space.

AFET could:

- Stress through committee reports, hearings and meetings that funding should be distributed more broadly and go beyond the usual suspects among the professional NGOs, also reaching regions and actors that are not as well connected internationally. The hearings and meetings could also be productively used to involve the Syrian diaspora in Europe in efforts to build and sustain a domestic civil society in Syria.

Under the consolidation pathway, emphasis should be placed on appropriately increasing funding. However, the other two pathways would rather call for increased European Parliament activity in scrutiny and funding flexibility, as well as in the identification of potential alternative partners, such as the UN and its agencies, which can reach out to and indirectly support Syrian civil society.

Emphasise institution-building to prevent concentration of power

EU governance and capacity-building programmes in Syria should be designed to empower institutions themselves rather than individuals within them, to guard against the undue concentration of power and political influence. To this end, EU funding and technical assistance should be directed towards civil society organisations and public institutions as structural actors. The EU should also be actively involved in more technical standards-setting activities in the key institutions and should provide recommendations on building sustainable institutions.

The European Parliament could:

- Advocate for the inclusion of specific benchmarks in the country programming documents to support 'institutional empowerment' in the Syrian context
- Use the established reporting mechanisms to specifically explore whether governance programmes in Syria contribute towards the stated goal of institution-building
- Build pressure, through its Security and Defence Committee, in case the EU is more actively involved in security sector reform projects in Syria (whether focused on the Ministry of Interior or the Ministry of Defence forces), to demand that these projects include explicit human rights training and civilian oversight benchmarks

AFET could:

- Use its existing formats of hearings and dialogues with relevant Commissioners and EEAS representatives in the context of both country-specific and more general debates on the NDICI-GE Instrument to scrutinise the nature of support provided to Syria. AFET could thus demand an explanation from the Commissioner for the Mediterranean and senior Directorate-General for the

Middle East, North Africa, and the Gulf officials on how EU technical assistance in Syria is structured, and make sure that it reacts to the risks of corruption and patronage in the form of concentration of training or resources around powerful office holders

- In case of doubt, request evaluations showing whether EU programmes have contributed to strengthening resilient institutions and validate that during fact-finding missions.

These recommendations and potential course of action become especially important under the authoritarian stabilisation pathway. As the Syrian government would be likely to concentrate power among loyalists, the European Parliament would need to use its budgetary leverage to insist on institutionalised capacity-building and the codification of budgetary provisions to safeguard the key principles of EU action. Under the fragmentation pathway, this recommendation becomes somewhat difficult to implement and will depend strongly on the specific form of such fragmentation.

Invest in material infrastructure alongside humanitarian and civil society support

The EU's assistance to Syria should ensure the rehabilitation and construction of material, civic and economic infrastructure, including schools, healthcare facilities and cultural centres. Such infrastructure projects have been explicitly identified as priorities by Syrian partners on the ground, and the EU should take such local demand seriously as it provides a highly impactful and visible form of the EU's involvement. Moreover, investment in material civic infrastructure should be a necessary complement to support for civil society organisations and the livelihood of Syrian communities, because it creates the physical foundations upon which community life and civic engagement depend, and it supports alleviating the service delivery role that many civil society organisations are now performing[213]. At the same time, it is necessary to adhere to conditions outlined in the second recommendation by focusing on institutional building rather than strengthening key personalities. The European Parliament's role lies primarily in ensuring transparency and proper scrutiny.

The European Parliament could:

- Call for increased allocations for infrastructure reconstruction within the next National Indicative Programme covering Syria
- While approving resources, support the Team Europe approach to avoid donor fragmentation among the European institutions and the Member States and increase the EU's visibility as a key contributor to Syria's reconstruction
- In adopting resolutions, insert explicit provisions demanding dedicated assistance to be allocated to physical civic infrastructure that is in demand by Syrian partners. Focus on sectors with the potential for blending public finance with future investments by EU companies under the Global Gateway strategy, with provisions of the 360-degree approach
- Follow up through the Committee on Budgetary Control, which could audit to check that infrastructure projects have been delivered as intended.

Under the state consolidation pathway, the European Parliament should ensure that funds are allocated to the stated priorities. However, under the authoritarian stabilisation pathway, infrastructure projects risk being captured by patronage networks. The European Parliament would thus need to demand the inclusion of additional transparency safeguards and anti-corruption clauses. In the context of the fragmentation

[213] See Search for Common Ground and Aleph Strategies, European Union Roadmap for Civil Society Engagement, EEAS, February 2026.

pathway, the European Parliament might call for redirecting some of the infrastructure funding to UN agencies or international NGOs to ensure sustainable delivery.

Explore a legal framework protecting the refugee status of Syrians returning home

The EU should explore a legal framework or temporary protection mechanism that allows Syrian refugees residing in Europe to return to Syria – whether temporarily or permanently – without automatically forfeiting their refugee or protection status. Although the 'go and see' approach might be controversial for some Member States, the current legal situation constitutes a structural disincentive to voluntary return and informed decision-making. The Turkish experience with such a policy indicates mixed results, as any decision to return to Syria is still hampered by dire conditions on the ground and the 'go and see' approach did not result in a significant increase in refugee returns[214]. However, a more flexible approach from the European side, combined with targeted reintegration support, could go beyond an emphasis on returns and strengthen links between the EU and Syria, facilitating investment and trade, thus contributing to Syrian economic recovery. However, any durable return process must be underpinned by legal certainty and protection guarantees.

The asylum and refugee policy is primarily a Member State competence. Nevertheless, the European Parliament has options on how it can follow up on this recommendation. It could:

- As part of the ordinary legislative procedure for EU asylum and migration law, explore options for proposing amendments to relevant directives that would allow Syrians to retain their protection status while temporarily visiting Syria. However, the European Parliament should make sure that any such change does not weaken the general asylum and refugee regime.

This recommendation would be of the highest urgency under the state consolidation pathway, where potential refugee returns voluntarily stem from stabilising conditions on the ground and economic development. Conversely, under the authoritarian stabilisation pathway, the European Parliament should act much more cautiously, emphasising that protection must remain in place given the likelihood of renewed persecution or exclusion. Under the fragmentation pathway, the European Parliament should strongly oppose any pressure for return and rather call for extended protection given the security vacuum and worsening conditions on the ground.

Ensure meaningful and inclusive participation of all of the Syrian population while avoiding tokenism

It is very much in the EU's interests that inclusion of the whole Syrian population in political, civic and reconstruction processes in Syria is substantive and meaningful. Their involvement must not be limited to symbolic or tokenistic representation of women and minorities. At the same time, externally-supported projects should not solely take an exclusively minority-focused approach that risks overlooking opposition actors and civil society representatives from the Arab Sunni majority, whose engagement is equally essential to building an inclusive and representative political environment in Syria.

The European Parliament has certain important tools to follow up on this recommendation; it could:

- Make use of the Subcommittee on Human Rights and hold hearings with Syrian minority representatives, civil society organisations and Arab Sunni opposition groups

[214] N. E. G. Aras and U. Yüksel, 'Between Choice and Constraint: Go-and-See Visits and Syrian Return from Türkiye', GAPs: Decentring the Study of Migrant Returns and Readmission Policies in Europe and Beyond, 21 November 2025.

- Commission and produce detailed reports on Syrian governance and external support, identifying cases of best practice or lessons to be learned
- Require reporting on how reconstruction projects engage both minority and majority communities
- In the event of identified issues, pass resolutions explicitly calling out tokenism in Syrian governance and demanding that EU-funded projects contribute in a demonstrable way to substantive participation.

While under the state consolidation pathway, the European Parliament should work constructively to support inclusive processes on the ground and ensure that they contribute to a more inclusive state-building process. However, the other two pathways would require a more sustained activism on the Parliament's side. Under the authoritarian stabilisation pathway, the European Parliament should step up its activity in presenting resolutions and calling for hearings to expose the gap between rhetoric and reality on the ground. This would also call for more scrutiny by the Parliament. Under the fragmentation pathway, the European Parliament would rather focus on protecting minorities, shifting emphasis in its activities from governance inclusion to basic humanitarian and human rights protection.

Combine economic investment with a focus on anti-corruption measures, the rule of law and human rights guarantees

It is in the EU's core interest that EU economic investments in Syria, including those from the private sector, financial institutions and bilateral cooperation programmes, are made strictly conditional on the effective implementation of anti-corruption measures and on verifiable progress in upholding the rule of law, human rights standards and fundamental freedoms. A stable and predictable legal environment is also essential for attracting more international investors.

The European Parliament has already incorporated the rule-of-law and governance conditionality into the NDICI-GE regulation. However, it could:

- Require the Commission to apply this conditionality rigorously to Syria, freezing disbursements if audits reveal the misuse of funds
- Use budget amendments to redirect funds if transparency benchmarks are not met.

AFET and the Committee on Budgetary Control could:

- Require the Commission to provide evidence that Syrian authorities are implementing anti-corruption measures before funding is released
- Hold hearings with EU auditors, Syrian civil society watchdogs and transparency organisations to assess whether EU funds are being captured by patronage networks and to understand the situation on the ground.

This recommendation would be manifested in a constructive and supportive yet vigilant role for the Parliament under the state consolidation pathway. However, under the authoritarian stabilisation pathway, the European Parliament should step up its oversight and highlight cases of fund abuse and corruption. To enforce change on the ground, the Parliament can use its political leverage to threaten suspension or withdrawal of cooperation and support programmes. Were the fragmentation pathway to apply, then the European Parliament will have to call for an alternative course of action and work with other EU institutions on finding an alternative funding mechanism and different implementation partners.

Enhance regional coordination to address key EU priorities

The EU should pay attention to regional coordination as an important dimension of its engagement in Syria, with particular emphasis on structured cooperation with Türkiye, the GCC countries, Jordan and Lebanon.

Such cooperation should focus on developing energy and transport connectivity corridors and strengthening border management frameworks, alongside debates on refugee returns and their protection. A coherent and coordinated regional approach is indispensable for achieving sustainable outcomes in Syria and effectively addressing all cross-border dimensions of the Syrian crisis.

The European Parliament has a number of tools to fulfil this recommendation; it could:

- Use the delegations it maintains to the Arab Peninsula and to the Mashreq countries, as well as sustained dialogue at interparliamentary level with Türkiye and involvement in regional fora, such as the Parliamentary Assembly of the Union for the Mediterranean and the Inter-Parliamentary Union, to build parliamentary-level consensus on coordinated approaches to Syrian reconstruction strategy and humanitarian response, Syrian refugee return, border management and energy corridors
- Actively raise issues related to the Syrian situation at meetings with these delegations and on these platforms
- Pass resolutions explicitly urging the Council to prioritise regional coordination and naming specific areas (such as refugee protection, energy connectivity and border security) where regional cooperation is essential.

Through AFET, the Parliament could:

- Regularly question the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy / Vice-President of the European Commission on progress in regional coordination, holding the EEAS accountable for diplomatic engagement with Türkiye, the GCC, Jordan and Lebanon.

Under the state consolidation pathway, regional coordination becomes easier as Damascus is seen as a reliable partner. The European Parliament's role would be to support structured multilateral frameworks, using the above-mentioned tools. The authoritarian stabilisation pathway would create a more contentious environment, where regional actors may diverge in their assessments of Damascus. In this case, the European Parliament delegations should advocate for values-based coordination in relevant fora that does not legitimise authoritarian practices. Finally, under the fragmentation pathway, regional coordination becomes critical to prevent spillover. The European Parliament's role would be to use the relevant fora to push for humanitarian support and border security coordination to manage the threat of regional instability.

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