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Policy Brief

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THE SECURITY AND RECONSTRUCTION NEXUS IN SYRIA: LESSONS FOR THE PACT FOR THE MEDITERRANEAN

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Introduction

In January 2026, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and European Council President Antonio Costa visited Syria and met with Syrian Interim President Ahmed al-Sharaa to discuss a "new chapter in bilateral relations", founded on three pillars:

- "A new political partnership supporting a peaceful and inclusive transition and reconciliation within Syria, and the country's regional reintegration;
- Enhanced trade and economic cooperation, including through Syria's involvement in initiatives under the Pact for the Mediterranean, backed by a substantial financial package for 2026 and 2027 to enable socio-economic recovery, reconstruction and facilitation of private investment;
- A financial support package of around €620 million for 2026 and 2027, which includes humanitarian aid, early recovery support and bilateral support" (European Commission, 2026).

In late April 2026, the European Commission additionally proposed the full resumption of the EU-Syria Cooperation Agreement.[1]

[1] "The EU-Syria Cooperation Agreement was partially suspended in 2011 in response to systematic repression and grave human rights violations by the Assad regime. The Cooperation Agreement has been the framework for cooperation between the EU and Syria since 1978, supporting Syria's economic and social development and promoting fair and lawful trade relations. It abolishes customs duties on imports into the EU of most industrial products originating in Syria and prevents quantitative restrictions on both sides" (European Commission, 2026).

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The war and political developments in Syria since 2011 have profoundly influenced European politics and policy. Between 2011 and 2024, European Union (EU) financial allocations to the "Syrian Crisis" – encompassing aid to Syria and neighbouring countries (Tuŕkiye, Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq and Egypt) – amounted to over €38 billion. Brussels has also pledged nearly €2.5 billion ($3 billion) for the 2025-2026 period (European Commission, 2026). The human dimension of this relationship is equally significant, as the Union currently hosts over 1.3 million Syrian refugees.

This brief examines Syria as a case study for advancing peace and stability in the Mediterranean region – one of the core aims of the Pact for the Mediterranean and, more generally, of the EU. Specifically, it engages the Peace and Security component of the Pact's third pillar, which envisions close EU engagement with partner countries on resilience of critical infrastructure, defence capacity-building, peace mediation and conflict resolution. As a Mediterranean country emerging from prolonged conflict, Syria's reconstruction trajectory will directly shape European political, security and migration dynamics across all these areas.

Alongside the vital assistance required to guarantee the resilience of critical infrastructures, any long-term security framework must address the underlying threats and drivers of instability in Mediterranean countries. This includes dynamics related to democratisation processes, equitable economic development and access to justice. Failure to address these issues risks undermining the conditions necessary for regional stability, development and the advancement of shared interests. Europe's security cannot therefore be confined to counterterrorism and migration management – particularly as calls for the return and deportation of Syrians have grown across several European countries in recent years (Moulson, 2026; Speidl & Horváth-Sántha, 2026).

The fall of Bashar al-Assad's regime in December 2024 represented, in many respects, a significant step forward for Europe's stability. It removed a political actor responsible for the forced displacement of millions of people and involved in illicit economic activity and trafficking (Daher and Mehchy, 2025) – issues which directly affected Europe. Meanwhile, 2025 saw the return of over 1.4 million Syrians, predominantly from neighbouring countries (UNHCR, 2026), and Syrian asylum applications in the European Union declined significantly.[2] At the political level, the new Syrian authorities gained rapid diplomatic recognition, sanctions were progressively lifted, major investment agreements were signed and access to global financial institutions was restored – raising positive expectations for the country's future. In addition, Syria witnessed an emerging civil society, engaging with political, social and cultural issues. Conferences, workshops, activities and projects have multiplied throughout the country, and particularly in Damascus. Meanwhile, street protests have become an increasingly significant mode of public expression, challenging and scrutinising political and socio-economic policies of the new ruling authorities.

Despite these developments, Syria continues to face profound challenges inherited from the Assad dictatorship and from the widespread destruction brought by the 2011–2024 war. The

[2] Applications diminished to around 42,000, in 2025 representing a 72% year-on-year decline (EEUA 2026).

new ruling elite in Damascus inherited a fragmented Syria, characterised by competing power structures and deep societal and ethnic tensions. The path towards economic recovery remains beset with challenges. Syria's needs are acute: the cost of reconstruction is estimated to range between $140 billion and $345 billion, with a central estimate of $215.6 billion, according to the World Bank (2025). It should also be noted that more than half of Syrians remain displaced, either internally or abroad. Over 90% of the population lives below the poverty line; nearly 17 million people require urgent assistance to survive; and more than nine million face acute food insecurity (Action Against Hunger, 2025). These conditions severely constrain Syria's socio-political stability and security, its prospects for economic recovery and investment, and the viability of the reconstruction process.

Against this backdrop, this brief argues that a successful reconstruction process requires a "human security" approach (Tadjbakhsh, 2005) – rooted in democratic reform, sustainable economic development and inclusive state-building – rather than a narrow focus on stability enforced through the centralisation of power and force. To that end, the brief is organised into three main sections that analyse the policies of Syria's new ruling authorities. The first examines Damascus' strategy to consolidate power through military force rather than political dialogue. The second analyses the concentration of institutional power and exclusion of political participation, as sectarian and ethnic tensions increase. Finally, the third considers Damascus' economic policies and their consequences for social cohesion and economic recovery.

Damascus' centralisation of power and the deepening of Syria's political fragmentation

Throughout 2025 and into early 2026, Syria experienced mounting violence, fragmentation and sectarian tensions. These included massacres targeting Alawite populations in north-western coastal areas in March 2025, which resulted in more than 1,400 deaths; attacks against Druze populations south of Damascus, in Jaramana and Sahnaya in April and May 2025; a suicide bombing in a church in Damascus in June 2025 (Salhani, 2025b); massacres in Sweida, southern Syria, in July 2025, in which more than 1,700 people were killed (United Nations Human Rights Council, 2026); an attack in March 2026 against the predominantly Christian city of Al-Suqaylabiyah in western Syria (Seen for Civil Peace, 2026b), following prior sectarian provocations (Syrians for Truth and Justice, 2026a); as well as the central government's military offensive to regain control over predominantly Kurdish areas in the north-east in early 2026. Following the July events in Sweida, Syrian Interim President Ahmed al-Sharaa declared in August 2025 that unifying Syria after years of civil war should not be achieved "by military force" (OLJ/AFP, 2025). However, as argued below, the Syrian ruling authorities have pursued a strategy of consolidating power over the fragmented country primarily through military offensives against specific regions, rather than political dialogue.

Coastal areas

Documented massacres targeting Alawite communities in the post-Assad era are indicative of a broader pattern of sectarian violence. Syrians for Truth and Justice (2025a) reported that a massacre in Fahil killed at least 16 people at the end of December 2024, while The New Arab

(2025) reported that a massacre in Arzah in early February 2025 resulted in 15 deaths. On a significantly larger scale, Syrians for Truth and Justice (2026b) further reported that "Between March 7 and March 10 of 2025, government forces and other armed groups stormed through more than 30 Alawite-majority towns, villages, and neighbourhoods, with the professed aim of targeting former government affiliates and uncovering arms depots. In the process they killed at least 1,400 people. In many cases, they moved house-to-house, demanding to know residents' sect, looting valuables, torching homes, and executing children, women, and men, including older people, often using overtly anti-Alawite slurs and rhetoric. In some places, fighters wiped out entire families."

While the sectarian violence of March 2025 against Alawite civilians was initially provoked by remnants of the Assad regime – who organised coordinated attacks against members of the security services and civilians – the counterreaction from armed groups affiliated with the new authorities targeted Alawites indiscriminately, reportedly driven by sectarian hatred and a logic of vengeance (Syrians for Truth and Justice, 2026b).

According to Syrians for Truth and Justice (2026b), primary responsibility for the massacres in March and July 2025 and for the continuous killings and kidnappings of Alawite civilians – particularly of women (Amnesty International, 2025) – in coastal areas and Homs lies with the new Syrian authorities. They failed to prevent them, and higher echelons of the state were reportedly aware and gave approval for the massacres, according to Reuters (Michael, 2025) and Human Rights Watch (2025b).

These dynamics were shaped in part by the political and security environment established by the new ruling authorities. They consistently described these acts as isolated incidents while taking no serious action against the main perpetrators. Despite establishing investigation committees to examine the crimes committed in the coastal areas, an amnesty decree was issued by Syrian Interim President al-Sharaa in mid-February 2026 covering crimes committed prior to its issuance, thereby undermining the path towards transitional justice and accountability (Al-Adawi, 2026). This demonstrated the authorities' unwillingness to hold perpetrators of crimes within their own ranks accountable.

More broadly, the authorities failed to establish mechanisms conducive to a comprehensive transitional justice process aimed at holding accountable all individuals and groups implicated in war crimes during the Syrian conflict. Such mechanisms could have played a crucial role in deterring acts of revenge and tempering rising sectarian tensions. Syrian human rights organisations have criticised the Syrian authorities' inaction on this issue. In particular, they denounced Decree No. 20, promulgated on 17 May 2025, establishing the National Transitional Justice Commission (NTJC). This commission is tasked with investigating serious violations attributed to the former Assad regime, while ignoring the numerous violations committed by other actors throughout Syria. This logic of selective justice contradicts the principles of equality and non-discrimination, excluding a significant proportion of victims from its mandate. Moreover, the organisations accuse the new authorities of contributing through this decree to "a culture of impunity, allowing armed groups and forces still operating

independently or under the aegis of the Ministry of Defence to continue to commit serious violations, including extrajudicial executions, abductions, enforced disappearances, arbitrary detentions, extortion and sexual violence" (Syrian Justice and Accountability Centre, 2025).

Syrian officials have repeatedly instrumentalised religious and ethnic minority identities in their efforts to consolidate power. For instance, they have characterised the Alawite community as a tool of the former regime against the Syrian people. During a speech at the 9th edition of the donors' conference on Syria in Brussels, Belgium, Syrian Foreign Minister Asaad al-Shibani stated that "54 years of minority rule led to the displacement of 15 million Syrians" (Television al-Arabiya, 2025) – implicitly suggesting that the Alawite community as a whole had ruled the country for decades, rather than a dictatorship controlled by the Assad family. While it is undisputed that Alawi figures held key positions in the former regime – particularly within its military and security apparatus – portraying the regime as favouring religious minorities while systematically discriminating against the Sunni Arab majority is analytically reductive.

The city of Homs further exemplifies the ongoing impunity surrounding sectarian killings. The grassroots organisation Seen for Civil Peace (2026a) characterised the situation in Homs as representing "a dangerous and ongoing pattern of lawlessness and blatant sectarian targeting, for which the political and security leadership in the governorate bears direct responsibility, by virtue of their legal mandate and de facto authority on the ground". Between January and February 2026, the organisation documented the killing of 30 civilians and the wounding of 38 others in Homs' governorate in sectarian incidents, out of a total of 265 recorded since the beginning of 2025. This is in addition to documented property seizures in Homs targeting Alawite individuals (Mahfoud, Al-Omar & Shullar, 2026).

Sweida and Southern Syria

Similarly, sectarian attacks against Druze populations in Damascus and the southern region of Sweida occurred in April and May 2025, prior to the massacres in mid-July that killed 1,700 and displaced nearly 200,000 (United Nations Human Rights Council, 2026).

The military offensive in Sweida in July 2025, reportedly led by armed groups affiliated with Damascus, was planned by the authorities at both military and political levels to "build military and security groups affiliated with the 'Transitional Administration' inside Sweida, as well as political groundwork aimed at penetrating the governorate by courting social leaders, religious figures, and politicians", as explained by researcher Mazen Ezzi (2025). During the military operations, Druze civilians and symbols were targeted and humiliated indiscriminately, as reported by the United Nations Human Rights Council (2026). The targeting of Druze populations by officials and pro-government media continued beyond the massacres of July 2025, as they labelled them as "traitors", "armed gangs allied to Israel" and "separatists" (Massoud, 2025).

The offensive took place following discussions in Baku, Azerbaijan, between Syrian and Israeli representatives. During the talks, the Syrian ruling authorities allegedly sought Israel's approval

for the reintegration of the semi-autonomous Sweida region under Damascus' control.[3] While Israeli officials expressed openness to limited reintegration – that is, the restoration of state services and the deployment of a limited local security force – Damascus reportedly misinterpreted this as authorisation for a full-scale military operation, according to Syria in Transition (2025). Israel subsequently conducted airstrikes against Syrian armed forces during their offensive on Sweida.

Notwithstanding ongoing talks between Israel and Syria, the former has adopted an assertive military posture towards the latter. These strikes, together with previous airstrikes following the fall of the Assad regime,[4] appear aimed at degrading Syria's military capabilities. This would prevent any potential future use against Israel, while sending a clear political signal that Israeli forces could provoke instability should the new Syrian government adopt a hostile or belligerent posture. Israel has continued to carry out strikes in Syria and military operations in the south of the country, resulting in "attacks on civilians, including raids, arrests, land bulldozing, and the use of mortar and artillery shelling", as reported by Syrian state news agency SANA (2026b).

Regardless of any Israeli approval, the Syrian authorities' decision to engage militarily in Sweida reveals a tendency to rely on external validation to justify coercive measures against local populations, rather than pursuing political engagement to resolve the matter.

Seen from this perspective, the military campaign against Sweida was aimed at consolidating full control over the southern province and marginalising Druze political actors unwilling to submit to Damascus' rule. At the same time, the central authorities promoted Druze figures such as Layth al-Balaousa and Suleiman Abdul Baqi who, despite limited influence or popular support, were willing to serve the government's interests. Some of these figures had prior relations with Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), and their profiles were elevated through official and pro-government media (Ezzi, 2025).

North-eastern Syria

A comparable pattern played out in Syria's north, where the government-led January 2026 military offensive followed the collapse of externally brokered negotiations – led by the United States (U.S.), France and Türkiye – between Damascus and local Kurdish authorities. For context, an agreement was concluded on 10 March 2025 between the Syrian Transitional Government (STG) and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), [5] brokered by the U.S. The agreement was intended to integrate both civilian and military wings of the SDF into the state. However, no progress was made for several months, as the two sides remained deadlocked. It has been suggested that this agreement was aimed partly at deflecting local and international attention

[3] The sectarian violence in Sweida deepened Druze mistrust toward the new Syrian authorities, reinforcing local disengagement from Damascus. Israel then increased its outreach toward Druze communities in Sweida, interpreted by some analysts as an effort to expand its influence.

[4] In the days following the fall of the Assad regime, Israel expanded its occupation by taking control of new territories on the Syrian side of Mount Hermon and the Golan Heights. It also destroyed key military sites and infrastructure in Syria by conducting airstrikes which targeted anti-aircraft batteries, military airfields, weapons production facilities, fighter jets and missiles.

[5] The Syrian Transitional Government (STG) works under the central authority in Damascus, seeking to restore nationwide control, while the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) are the Kurdish-led force controlling the semi-autonomous region in northeastern Syria.

from the massacres against Alawite civilians in March 2025 (Wilgenburg, 2025), reportedly committed by armed forces affiliated with Damascus (Human Rights Watch, 2025b).

As integration stalled, the Syrian government developed a plan to launch a military operation in Aleppo, before extending it to other SDF-controlled areas. The Syrian authorities mobilised Arab tribes in Deir ez-Zor and Raqqa that had been in contact with Interim President al-Sharaa in preparation for the offensive against the SDF in the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES). In January 2026, government forces reportedly targeted SDF fighters and Kurdish civilians (Syrians for Truth and Justice, 2026c). The offensive resulted in the capture of the Kurdish-majority neighbourhoods of Sheikh Maqsoud and Ashrafiyeh in Aleppo, displacing more than 100,000 civilians (ACAPS, 2026). Then, government forces took control of large parts of Deir ez-Zor and Raqqa following the withdrawal of the SDF. In Raqqa, troops looted Kurdish homes, forced Kurdish civilians into hiding and displaced thousands (ANHA, 2026). Tabqa and villages south of Kobani also suffered looting. STG forces subjected Kobani to a siege for several weeks, which raised alarms over deteriorating humanitarian conditions.

The ruling authorities and their allies have also employed hostile rhetoric against Kurdish populations and the SDF. For example, Syria's Minister of Endowments, Mohammad Abu al-Khair Shukri, issued a religious directive (*fatwa*) in January 2026 urging mosques across the country to pray for the success of the Syrian Arab Army's soldiers and celebrate what he described as their "conquests and victories" in eastern Syria. He further invoked the sixth verse of Surah al-Anfal[6] from the Quran (Rudaw, 2026a), heightening fears among Kurdish communities in Syria.

Once again, foreign backing proved crucial to the offensive. The operation took place just two days after a meeting in Damascus between the STG and SDF in the presence of US and Turkish military personnel – suggesting that Washington and Ankara either approved or at least did not oppose the offensive. As the offensive advanced, the U.S. and France officially claimed to be working to de-escalate tensions. However, neither applied sufficient pressure to halt the government's military assault. Despite Washington's long-standing partnership with the Kurdish SDF in the campaign against ISIS, the U.S. administration opted to support the new Syrian authorities in Damascus. This shift reflected the broader political evolution following the overthrow of the Assad regime and the progressive rapprochement between Damascus and Washington throughout 2025. U.S. President Trump met on numerous occasions with Interim President al-Sharaa and lifted the Caesar sanctions in December 2025. U.S. Special Envoy for Syria Tom Barrack made Washington's shift explicit when he stated that the SDF's role as the "primary anti-ISIS force on the ground" had "largely expired", and that the Syrian government was now prepared to assume such security responsibilities. He further argued that "Historically, the U.S. military presence in northeastern Syria was justified primarily as a counter-ISIS partnership", and that the STG's decision to join the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS in late 2025 had "fundamentally" transformed the situation in Syria (al-Jazeera, 2026).

For its part, the Turkish government consistently pressed for the SDF to dissolve and integrate into the Syrian army following the fall of the Assad regime. Moreover, Turkish officials repeatedly stated their willingness to support – and even fight alongside – STG forces against the SDF (Idon, 2026).

[6] The term "al-Anfal" was used by Saddam Hussein to justify his 1988 military campaign against Kurds in Iraq, which included chemical attacks, mass killings and destruction of civilian homes and infrastructure.

After the military offensive, a new government-SDF integration agreement was concluded on 29 January 2026, but its implementation remains deeply uncertain. More generally, tensions persist between Arab and Kurdish communities. Kurdish residents returning to the northern city of Afrin from Aleppo were, for instance, abused and physically attacked following local Kurdish celebrations at the end of March 2026, with the Kurdish flag burned and trampled. Local authorities imposed a curfew following these incidents. Prior to this, footage revealed that a group of young Kurds had taken down the Syrian flag in Kobani, suggesting that the attacks were an ethnically motivated response (Rudaw, 2026b).

At the same time, violations of human rights against the Kurdish population in the Afrin region and its surrounding areas have been ongoing, perpetrated by armed factions formerly operating under the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (SNA),[7] which were integrated into the Syrian army after the fall of the Assad regime in December 2024. A report by Syrians for Truth and Justice (2026d) documented the continuous "patterns of torture and inhuman treatment" and a "systematic policy of discrimination against Kurdish residents, in which the accusation of affiliation with Kurdish entities or involvement in the structures of the former self-administration was used to justify arrest and torture. These accusations were often accompanied by degrading rhetoric and ethnically charged insults, indicating that the violations specifically targeted Kurds on the basis of their identity".

Further disagreements between Kurdish and Syrian authorities are illustrated by disputes over Kurdish-language education in public schools. The former head of the Education Authority within AANES declared that the government-approved curricula would be translated into Kurdish for the schools in areas with a distinct Kurdish character. However, the Syrian Minister of Education, Mohammad Abdulrahman Turko, responded that such an approach would "contradict the legislative decree, which provides for teaching the Kurdish language alongside the Syrian state curricula", and that under the decree, Kurdish is allocated two or three hours per week, similar to the teaching of English and French (The Syria Report, 2026a). In late April 2026, Ahmed Hilali, a spokesperson for the Syrian residency team overseeing implementation of the agreement with the SDF, declared that two proposals regarding Kurdish-language education were under review: "First, that the Kurdish language becomes an elective subject taught once a week. This is within the framework of what is available and appropriate, and it has no negative aspects. Second, translating the Syrian national curriculum and textbooks into the Kurdish language. This one brings many problems with it, especially regarding the labour market and professional future" (Rudaw, 2026c).

Alongside hostile rhetoric and behaviour towards minorities, Syrian authorities and their supporters have reportedly sought to promote and build a common Arab Sunni political identity around themes such as "Banu Umayya" (Umayyad people) (al-Abdeh, 2025; Abd Alatef, 2016). This concept accompanies the narrative of "Mazlumiya Sunniya" (Sunni victimhood or injustice), which constructs an image of systemic discrimination of Arab Sunnis under the previous regime,

[7] The Turkish army and Turkish backed Syrian armed militias invaded the northern Syrian region of Afrin in the so-called Operation Olive Branch in the beginning of 2018. This region has been since then under Türkiye's control and its armed forces. There have been reports of grave and systematic violations committed by the SNA (Syrians for Truth and Justice 2026c).

and therefore that "our time has come to rule" (Daher, 2018). This narrative indicates an attempt to mobilise popular consent and unite large segments of the Arab Sunni population around a single bloc, despite significant political and social differences within this community.

These examples reflect a tendency to favour military confrontation – with foreign backing or approval – in order to achieve political gains, before engaging in political dialogue from a dominant position. In pursuing the objective of consolidating power against political rivals, the new ruling authorities have not hesitated to exploit sectarianism and ethnic tensions as tools of mobilisation, domination and control over the population. Damascus has instrumentalised sectarianism to distract the broader population from socio-economic and political grievances. Authorities scapegoat a particular sects or ethnicities as the root of the country's problems and label them a security threat to then justify repressive and discriminatory policies against the group. Sectarianism further acts as a powerful mechanism of social control, shaping the dynamics of class struggle, by fostering the dependence of segments of the population on their elite leadership. As a result, segments of the population are stripped of independent political agency and come to be defined – and to engage politically – solely through their sectarian identity.

Centralisation of power by the Presidency and HTS

Beyond military consolidation, the ruling authorities have extended their control over state institutions through the appointment of figures close to President al-Sharaa and Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) to key positions in the army and the security services. For example, Asaad al-Shibani and Abu Qasra retained their positions as foreign minister and defence minister, while Anas Khattab was appointed interior minister in the Syrian Transitional Government (STG), established in late March to replace the preceding caretaker government. All three had held key positions in the HTS power structure in Idlib prior to the overthrow of the Syrian regime in December 2024. HTS's governance of Idlib since 2017 has been characterised by a concentration of power at the political, military and economic levels, as well as by policies combining co-optation with the repression of rivals and opponents (Ajjoub, 2024).

The new ruling authorities have also established parallel institutions alongside existing ministries and official entities to further concentrate power. These include the National Security Council (NSC) in Syria – headed by al-Sharaa and comprising his close associates (the Foreign, Defence and Interior Ministers and the Director of General Intelligence) – and the General Secretariat for Political Affairs (GSPA). The GSPA was established in late March 2025 to supervise domestic political activities, formulate policy on political matters and manage the assets of the dissolved Ba'ath Party (Huquq and al-Adawi, 2026).[8] The concentration of power extends to the al-Sharaa family, as between mid-April 2025 and the beginning of May 2026, Maher al-Sharaa, the President's brother, was appointed Secretary-General of the Presidency – a position responsible for managing the presidential administration and liaising between the Presidency and state bodies – while his other brother, Hazem al-Sharaa, was appointed Vice-President of the Syrian Supreme Council for Economic Development – a role discussed further in the following section.

[8] In early May 2026, private information obtained by the website al-Modon (2026) reported of the possible decision to dissolve the GSPA issued by Foreign Minister, Asaad al-Shibani. However, this measure does not ensure the end of attempts by ruling authorities to control civil society organisations' activities within society.

Beyond state institutions, the authorities have sought to expand their control over other economic and civic organisations. For instance, the country's chambers of commerce and industry have been restructured through the replacement of the majority of members with government appointees and a reduction in the number of board members across the main chambers – Damascus, Damascus Countryside, Aleppo and Homs. Several new board members are known for their close ties to HTS, including the new President of the Federation of Syrian Chambers of Commerce, Alaa al-Ali – a former head of the HTS-affiliated Idlib Chamber of Commerce and Industry. HTS-affiliated figures have similarly been installed to head trade unions and professional associations without elections (Daher, 2025b).

Informal networks have been expanding within ministries and state institutions, comprising "administrative sheikhs"[9] and other opaque committees. These now manage essential sectors – from security and finance to foreign policy and internal administration – with minimal bureaucratic oversight (The Syria Report, 2025a). In these circumstances, official channels within state institutions are increasingly bypassed, and effective power is exercised by a small informal network of individuals operating with considerable autonomy and limited transparency (al-Jabassini & Daher, 2026; The Syria Report, 2026b).

The ruling authorities have further established new economic institutions that concentrate power within the Presidency while limiting independent oversight – including the Supreme Council for Economic Development, the Sovereign Wealth Fund and the Development Fund. In each case, substantial powers and responsibilities are vested in the Presidency with minimal mechanisms for oversight or accountability. For instance, the General Authority for Supply and Procurement (GASP) was established under the Secretary General of the Presidency and has been controlled by the President's brother until May 2026. It now oversees all internal and external procurement for state institutions (The Syria Report, 2026c).[10] Similarly, the creation of the Syrian Petroleum Company in October 2025 – which merged all state-owned oil institutions into a single entity – has further expanded presidential control, including over contracting, extraction, refining and distribution across the oil and gas sectors. Furthermore, the National Committee for Import and Export was placed in November 2025 under the authority of the Secretary-General of the Presidency, chaired by the head of the General Authority for Ports and Customs, with five deputy ministers and the Director of Customs as members.

The concentration of power around President al-Sharaa and allies across state institutions and society risks perpetuating further cycles of violence and sectarian tensions. Furthermore, the transition and reconstruction process risks remaining elite-driven, reproducing social inequalities, concentrating wealth among a minority and impeding productive development.

Alongside this institutional concentration of power, the transition process has been marked by the absence of inclusive democratic participation. This has been reflected in various initiatives, conferences and committees intended to chart the country's future, such as the Syrian National

[9] The Syria Report (2025a) described these "sheikhs" (who are not necessarily religious figures) as informal and influential representatives of the central authority in each ministry.

[10] See Article 2 of Presidential Decree No. 63 of 2026 Establishing the General Authority for Supply and Procurement.

Dialogue Conference of 25 February 2025 (Salhani, 2025a). The interim constitution was similarly criticised by a range of political and social actors, both for the lack of transparency in the criteria for selecting the drafting committee and for its content (Human Rights Watch, 2025a). While it formally declares the separation of powers, this is undermined by the broad scope of powers vested in the Presidency. In addition, Human Rights Watch (2025) further criticised that "as president, al-Sharaa also wields executive control alongside a cabinet of ministers, whom he alone has the power to appoint and dismiss, as stipulated in articles 31 and 35 of the declaration. The declaration also establishes a rigid presidential model, with no parliamentary ability to impeach the president, approve or remove ministers, or check executive power."

The elections for the People's Assembly in October 2025 also drew widespread criticism. The methodology adopted for selecting members of the future Parliament lacked transparency and inclusivity. The President retains the power to appoint one third of the members of Parliament, while the remaining two-thirds were selected by "regional subcommittees" themselves appointed by the Higher Committee for the Election of the People's Assembly, whose members were in turn selected by the Presidency. Moreover, representation remains incomplete: while seats have been filled in Raqqa province following its reintegration under Damascus' authority in January 2026, no representatives have yet been appointed for al-Hasakah or Kobani in Aleppo province – although this is under preparation according to Syrian officials (SANA, 2026a) – nor for Sweida in the Druze-majority south, which remains outside state control.

The ruling authorities have progressively formalised restrictions on social and political activity and on democratic rights. For instance, Syria's Interior Ministry issued new regulations regarding "the licensing of peaceful demonstrations, outlining procedures for organisers, responsibilities of authorities and penalties for violations" in early May 2025 (SANA, 2026c).

Moreover, local authorities have imposed restrictions on the holding of political conferences. In November 2025, the Syrian Ministry of Tourism issued a circular requesting tourism establishments to refrain from hosting events or conferences of a political nature without prior approval from GSPA – operating under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs – as it expands its powers to include monitoring political activities (al-Daleel, 2025).

The practical consequences are tangible: the Syrian Women's Political Movement held its Seventh Conference in Beirut in February 2026, rather than in Damascus, having been unable to obtain approval from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs despite submitting all necessary requests. The organisation characterised this as an act of "deprivation of our right to political engagement within our own country" (Syrian Women's Political Movement, 2026). The Syrian Ministry of Information also banned the "Hashtag" website and the "Jusour News" and "Al-Daleel" platforms from operating within Syria for failing to obtain official licensing from the General Directorate of Press and Media Affairs. This decision was criticised by journalists and lawyers, who argued that such measures risk undermining freedoms protected by Article 13 of the Constitutional Declaration (Ultra Syria, 2026b). While state officials have declared that these decisions "do not restrict freedoms but regulate them", human rights activists have nonetheless criticised these measures. Specific concerns include: the re-establishment of a permit system mirroring directives under Assad's regime; onerous bureaucratic requirements, such as the obligation to form a committee; a requirement for permits rather than prior notification; vague criteria allowing authorities to prohibit protests;

and penalties for violations of up to two years' imprisonment under the Syrian Penal Code (Megaphone, 2026).

The absence of meaningful popular participation in the political sphere and the tightening of control over civil society have been accompanied by economic policies that further impoverish the broader population. The deteriorating economic situation in Syria further constrains the ability of large sections of the population to participate effectively in political life. Instead, the majority are focused on meeting basic daily needs, such as housing costs, electricity and school fees. Should this situation persist, meaningful democratic engagement risks becoming confined to narrow segments of society, entrenching the patterns of exclusion and elite capture that have characterised the transition period. This dynamic is directly relevant to the Pact for the Mediterranean and the EU's interest in inclusive reconstruction, as political processes that fail to engage the broader population cannot generate the social legitimacy upon which durable peace and stability depend.

Economic crisis, austerity measures and arbitrariness

In its bid to attract foreign investment, the government has embraced a model of economic liberalisation, sharp austerity and a shrinking public sector (Daher, 2025b). These measures have been accompanied by policies that reinforce the concentration of economic power among the new ruling elite, while the vast majority of Syrians continue to live in poverty. These policies do not provide the necessary foundations for reconstruction and a sustainable economic recovery, which should include: an inclusive political transition creating conditions for participation by different sectors of society; the democratisation of Syria's political space and the development of a robust civil society capable of acting as a counterweight to those in power; and an improvement in socio-economic conditions to broaden participation from below (Daher, 2025a).

Austerity measures have been implemented to reduce, according to officials, "the burden on state expenses." However, these have had a significant impact on the population's purchasing power. The price of subsidised bread was raised in December 2024 from SYP 400 (for 1,100 grams) to SYP 4,000 (initially 1,500 grams, later reduced to 1,200 grams), exacerbating food insecurity among the most vulnerable. At the same time, the government suspended subsidies on fuel and oil derivatives, increasing production costs across the agricultural and manufacturing sectors. Since then, oil product prices have been denominated in U.S. dollars, directly exposing consumers to exchange rate risk should the Syrian pound depreciate (Daher, 2025b).

In October 2025, the Syrian government announced a significant increase in electricity prices. Prices increased from an average of 10,000-50,000 Syrian pounds (approximately $0.85-$4) to bills ranging from 600,000 to over 2 million pounds ($50-$169). Some families even saw their bills reach between 5 and 6 million pounds ($423-$508). The new prices have also severely affected key sectors, particularly manufacturing and agriculture, which were already facing rising production costs (Daher, 2026a).

The rise in prices of key commodities and services has also contributed to increasing inflation, pushing the cost of living higher still for Syrians. While the authorities raised public-sector salaries and pensions by 200% in July 2025, and by a further 50% in March 2026 – bringing the minimum wage to 1,256,000 pounds per month (approximately $114) – this remains far below the minimum and average cost of living for a family of five in Damascus, estimated at 7.26 million pounds ($660) and 11.6 million pounds ($1,055) at the beginning of 2026 (al-Riz, 2026). As a result, large segments of the population rely on remittances from relatives abroad, estimated at $4 billion annually (Dawwa, 2025).

Since coming to power, the Syrian authorities have announced plans to dismiss up to one third of the state workforce (al-Kousaa, 2025), targeting employees allegedly receiving salaries without fulfilling their duties. No official dismissal figures have been released, and the STG has yet to establish clear, legally grounded criteria or procedures for redundancies and suspensions, raising concerns about arbitrary dismissals, as documented by Syrians for Truth and Justice (2025b). Some employees were placed on three months' paid leave pending employment status reviews, while others were informed via WhatsApp of transfers to locations far from their place of work and residence. Employees of the port of Tartus, for instance, staged a sit-in outside the governorate building in December 2025 to protest against their transfer to the Jarablus and al-Bukamal border crossings in the eastern governorates (Sham TV, 2025).

Dismissals continued across multiple ministries in 2026: over 300 employees in the agricultural directorates of Latakia; more than 40 in Latakia's grain institution; 200 in the Tartus provincial ministry of agriculture; 400 from the Syrian Company for Construction and Development; several hundred employees from the electricity directorates in Homs, Latakia and Hama; and dozens from the Ministry of Information and the agricultural research centre in Quneitra (Daher, 2026b).

In this context, popular protests and strikes have proliferated, reflecting growing frustration among workers in private and public sectors with the government's economic policies. In the Idlib and Aleppo countryside governorates, teachers engaged in a large-scale strike in late January 2026 demanding permanent employment, the swift reinstatement of those dismissed and salary increases commensurate with the soaring cost of living. More than 1,700 schools in these areas closed for the "Strike for Dignity", in response to the authorities' failure to honour commitments regarding salary increases and improved working conditions (Ultra Syria, 2026a). Other sectors have also mobilised – including transport workers, industrial workers, students, lawyers and bakery owners – demonstrating deepening grievances across the country over the continued erosion of purchasing power and the deterioration of public services, as well as political and governance concerns (The Syria Report, 2026d). [11]

Some local communities have also mobilised against real estate projects in Homs and Damascus. In Homs, residents of the Qarabis neighbourhood – which had already suffered mass displacement under a pre-war initiative known as "The Homs Dream" – successfully pressured Kuwait-based Al-Omran Real Estate Development Company to cancel the element of its "Boulevard of Victory" plan affecting the neighbourhood (Mulhim, 2025). Similarly, Damascus residents successfully opposed a project that

[11] According to the website Syria in Transition (2026), polling in different areas of Syria has been showing growing dissatisfaction regarding socio-economic issues: "Yet by April the mood had changed. The most serious deterioration was in attitudes toward the economy and the state's capacity to manage it. Only 13 per cent of respondents now believed the government was doing enough to tackle soaring energy and food prices, while 66 per cent said its efforts were insufficient".

sought to transform Al-Jahiz Park – one of Damascus' last remaining public green spaces – into a commercial space with cafés and parking facilities (Haid, 2025).

Alongside austerity and neoliberal policies, the authorities have reinforced the concentration of economic power within ruling elites and their affiliated business networks. While memoranda of understanding (MoUs) between Damascus and foreign private entities or states are publicly announced, the selection processes and criteria for awarding contracts are not disclosed. A significant number of these MoUs and investments are largely shaped by political dynamics and personal relationships, undermining transparency and anti-corruption efforts. In some cases, opaque selection processes have awarded contracts to companies that lack the capacity or experience to implement projects (al-Jabassini & Daher, 2026).

The President's brother, Hazem al-Sharaa – officially Vice-President of the Syrian Supreme Council for Economic Development – has increasingly emerged as a significant figure in economic affairs and in the management of business elites, having accompanied the President on his first foreign visits to Saudi Arabia and Türkiye. A Reuters investigation further revealed that he heads a committee responsible for restructuring business networks through the acquisition of companies formerly affiliated with the Assad regime, taking control of assets worth over $1.6 billion. His broader role includes managing relations with local and diaspora business figures, alongside overseeing investments and development funds established by the President.

Several prominent figures associated with the former Assad regime have also successfully negotiated reconciliations with the ruling authorities, including Mohammad Hamsho, Samer Fawz and Salim Daaboul. This was reflected in the presence of Mohammad Hamsho's sons at the launch of the Syria Development Fund in Damascus on 4 September 2025, to which they donated $1 million (Enab Baladi, 2025). Such reconciliation agreements not only lack transparency but undermine transitional justice processes in the absence of legal action to prosecute individuals for economic crimes or to recover assets for the state and its citizens. More broadly, this process is part of a wider restructuring of business networks in accordance with the ruling authorities' interests, as other business affiliates of the former regime – such as Rami Makhlouf and the Katerji family – have had their assets absorbed by networks loyal to the new leadership (al-Jabassini & Daher, 2026).

The allocation of state contracts to private companies linked to HTS-affiliated figures has also increased. This has blurred the boundary between the private and public sectors, given the frequent absence of formal review mechanisms. One example is Taiba Petroleum, a subsidiary of Namaa Investment, which operates several state-owned fuel stations without public tenders or formally announced contracts from the Ministry of Energy. According to the Syria Report (2025b), Namaa has served as the primary financial and investment arm of HTS and has overseen "all companies operating in the petroleum sector in Idlib", under the supervision of former HTS commander Mustafa Qadid (Abu Abd al-Rahman Zirbeh). Other cases include the private firm Zajel – established in 2020 in Idlib to manage public transport lines and also owned by Qadid – which has taken over public bus operations across Damascus. This pattern extended to financial infrastructure. In April 2025, the Ministry of Finance selected the digital payment platform

Sham Cash, guaranteed by Sham Bank, to distribute salaries to public sector workers and retirees. Sham Bank was established by HTS in Idlib in 2020 and is likewise owned by Qadid (al-Jabassini & Daher, 2026).

The austerity measures, arbitrary workforce restructuring, lack of transparency and the consolidation of economic power within elite networks close to the new administration are deepening poverty and eroding the social trust upon which inclusive reconstruction depends. For the EU and the Pact for the Mediterranean, this means that engagement with Syria's reconstruction cannot be limited to infrastructure investments if the underlying economic governance reproduces exclusion and concentrates gains only among the new elites. Ensuring that reconstruction benefits the broader Syrian population is not only a matter of social justice, but a precondition for the regional peace and stability the Pact is designed to advance.

Conclusion

While any post-Assad government would have inherited a challenging set of political, social and economic problems, the Syrian ruling authorities' policies have compounded these challenges rather than solved them. Their political and economic orientation has impeded the laying of the foundations for an inclusive and democratic reconstruction and transition process that addresses security in all its dimensions, including its human security components. Furthermore, the economic decisions of the new authorities have failed to improve living conditions for large segments of the population and risk further deepening underdevelopment in productive sectors. To avert this, the EU should support a more democratic transition process that encompasses trade unions, political parties, feminist organisations, farmers and professional associations, and other local actors.

Government efforts to achieve national unity and sovereignty have focused on military means rather than political dialogue with diverse sectors of society and with political rivals. These policies have contributed to deepening the country's fragmentation and intensifying sectarian and ethnic tensions, accompanied by significant human rights violations and forced displacement.

Concurrently, the Presidency and its HTS-affiliated associates have sought to consolidate their hold over state institutions, the army, the economy and society, while limiting the effective participation of political actors and the broader population in the transition process and in decision-making. Failure to address these challenges risks producing a political transition and reconstruction process that does not reflect the aspirations of Syria's diverse social groups, and a country unable to provide social and economic services to broad sections of the population.

Sovereignty and unity are not simply about who holds arms; they are based on who holds legitimacy. Legitimacy cannot rest solely on foreign diplomatic recognition or military deployment to guarantee "the monopoly of violence" in the hands of the state. Such an approach neglects the political, social and economic foundations upon which all sovereign authority must rest and upon which a viable reconstruction process can be built. The state must be seen as legitimate, responsive and inclusive, capable not only of deterring threats, but of meeting needs.

Such an evolution has yet to take place in Syria's post-Assad political landscape. Consequently, neither a successful reconstruction process nor meaningful economic recovery is likely to occur under current

conditions. Syria is at a crossroads. Should no measures be taken to promote a more socially inclusive and democratic trajectory, the country's challenges will persist and may give rise to the establishment of new authoritarian rule and entrenched forms of exclusion. This would be a recipe for renewed catastrophe, with consequences extending beyond Syria, including to Europe.

The absence of economic recovery and an inclusive political process will encourage Syrians to seek better opportunities abroad. Brussels has a direct interest in preventing such a trajectory in Syria, which could generate further political instability, drive internal and external displacement, and sustain illicit networks and trafficking. These are precisely the conditions that the Pact for the Mediterranean's third pillar – which focuses on security, preparedness and migration management – is designed to address.

In this context, the following policy recommendations are addressed to the European Union:

- Promote an inclusive and democratic political transition that enables the participation of diverse sectors of society – including political parties, social actors such as trade unions, professional associations, feminist and human rights organisations – in the reconstruction process. Decision-making processes must be broadened to involve wider segments of the population and social and political actors.
- Support and strengthen the role of civil society actors – particularly advocacy, human rights and feminist organisations, as well as local grassroots initiatives pursuing democracy, social justice and equality – in the political transition and ensure their meaningful participation in economic discussions and decision-making. To this end, funding schemes and support programmes should be established on a medium- to long-term basis, with flexibility built into funding mechanisms.
- Support dialogue platforms between political and social actors that promote national and social cohesion and counter sectarian and ethnic hate speech.
- Consider promoting decentralisation policies to allow local populations to select their own representatives, empowering local and democratic governance institutions through financial and technical assistance.
- Promote free and transparent elections in trade unions, professional associations, chambers of commerce and industry so they can choose their own representatives. To this end, funding mechanisms and support programmes targeting independent and democratically elected actors could be established.
- Promote the establishment of a comprehensive transitional justice mechanism and accountability process for crimes and abuses committed against civilians by all armed actors responsible for human rights violations. Transitional justice should also encompass a social and economic dimension, including the recovery of state assets and accountability for those responsible for serious economic and financial crimes – such as the privatisation of public assets and the allocation of public land to Assad-linked business figures at the expense of the state and the public interest. Funding and technical assistance for civil society organisations, state institutions and programmes promoting these objectives are

essential. Support should also be extended to initiatives documenting human rights violations and fostering local advocacy.

- Support and protect micro, small and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs), particularly in manufacturing and agriculture, through funding and technical assistance – including the provision of solar energy and other ecological alternatives to mitigate electricity shortages; access to financial loans; capacity-building initiatives; and other forms of assistance to enhance productive capacities and trade opportunities.
- Support Syria's financial system, both private and public, in developing financial instruments and providing technical assistance to build and strengthen local capacities.
- Tie EU financial support, including the €620 million package for 2026–2027, to clear governance benchmarks linked to inclusive participation, transitional justice and transparency, ensuring that reconstruction funds do not inadvertently reinforce the patterns of elite capture documented in this brief.
- Support fiscal reform through technical assistance, including the introduction of a progressive taxation system for individuals and companies, the strengthening of tax compliance and the broadening of the tax base. Fiscal reform should enable the state to undertake social reforms that reduce inequality, such as universal health coverage and targeted investment in productive sectors.
- Facilitate and consolidate the legal settlement of Syrian refugees in Europe, enabling them to stabilise their living conditions and move freely between their host country and Syria. This would enable them to play a more active role in Syria's reconstruction.

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