

THE RETURN OF SYRIA TO THE EURO-MEDITERRANEAN COOPERATION ARENA

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EuroMeSCo has become a benchmark for policy-oriented research on issues related to Euro-Mediterranean cooperation, in particular economic development, security and migration. With 138 affiliated think tanks and institutions and about 700 experts from 32 different countries, the network has developed impactful tools for the benefit of its members and a larger community of stakeholders in the Euro-Mediterranean region.

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POLICY STUDY

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Policy Study

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List of Acronyms and Abbreviations

ACPSS	Al-Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies
AQI	al-Qaeda in Iraq
CFSP	Common Foreign and Security Policy
CSDP	Common Security and Defence Policy
CT	Counter-Terrorism
CVE	Counter Violent Extremism
DG ECHO	Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations
DG MENA	Directorate-General for the Middle East, North Africa and the Gulf
EBRD	European Bank for Reconstruction and Development
ECFR	European Council on Foreign Relations
EEAS	European External Action Service
EFSD+	European Fund for Sustainable Development Plus
EIB	European Investment Bank
ENP	European Neighbourhood Policy
ERC	European Research Council
EU	European Union
EUR	Euro
FPI	Foreign Policy Instruments
GCC	Gulf Cooperation Council
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GIS	General Intelligence Services
GIZ	Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (German Agency for International Cooperation)
HIP	Humanitarian Implementation Plan
HLP	Housing, Land and Property
HR/VP	High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy / Vice-President of the European Commission
HTS	Hayat Tahrir al-Sham
IDP	Internally Displaced Person
IEMed	European Institute of the Mediterranean
ISI	Islamic State of Iraq
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
MBS	Mohammed bin Salman
MENA	Middle East and North Africa
MIP	Multi-Annual Indicative Programme
MoD	Ministry of Defence
Mol	Ministry of Interior
MoJ	Ministry of Justice
MoUs	Memoranda of Understanding
NDICI	Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument
NFIs	Non-Food Items
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NIP	National Indicative Programme
NSC	National Security Council
OHCHR	Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights
POMEPS	Project on Middle East Political Science
SALW	Small Arms and Light Weapons

SANA	Syrian Arab News Agency
SDF	Syrian Democratic Forces
SME	Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises
SPCF	Syria Partnership Coordination Forum
SSR	Security Sector Reform
TAIEX	Technical Assistance and Information Exchange
TVET	Technical and Vocational Education and Training
UfM	Union for the Mediterranean
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
US	United States
UXO	Unexploded Ordnance
WASH	Water, Sanitation and Hygiene

Introduction

More Than a Cooperation Arena: The Wider Stakes of EU-Syria Re-engagement

Reem Turkmani

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Syria's return to Euro-Mediterranean frameworks is not simply a technical process of institutional reactivation. It is a political process of rebuilding a bilateral relationship that broke down abruptly, and that was already institutionally shallow before it broke.

The fall of Bashar al-Assad's government in December 2024 marked a significant turning point in European Union (EU)-Syria relations. After more than 14 years of war, sanctions, and near-total breakdown in bilateral ties, it created the possibility of a fundamentally different relationship; one that is built on partnership rather than containment, on structured engagement rather than the management of spillover.

This fall, however, left in its wake colossal social and economic damage that presents a challenge to both the new Syrian authorities and the donor community. Conflict-related physical damage is estimated at \$108 billion, with total reconstruction costs reaching \$216 billion, nearly ten times Syria's projected 2024 GDP (World Bank, 2025a). GDP contracted by over 50% between 2010 and 2022, extreme poverty now affects roughly one in four Syrians, and two-thirds of the population lives below the lower-middle-income poverty line (World Bank, 2025b). The social fabric has been further strained by one of the largest displacement crises in modern history (UNHCR, 2026)

When this Policy Study was initially designed, the framing question was focused around how Syria can be reintegrated into Euro-Mediterranean cooperation frameworks, and what that reintegration would require. It is a legitimate and pressing question given that the Euro-Mediterranean space, its institutions, instruments, and political logic, provides the most developed and readily available architecture for structured EU engagement with Syria's neighbourhood. The Union for the Mediterranean (UfM), the New Pact for the Mediterranean, the Barcelona Process legacy, the neighbourhood instruments and regional project pipelines: all of these are relevant to Syria's future, and all are examined in the chapters of this study.

But as the research unfolded, it became clear that this question could not be answered in isolation from the broader EU-Syria relations. Syria's return to Euro-Mediterranean frameworks is not simply a technical process of institutional reactivation. It is a political process of rebuilding a bilateral relationship that broke down abruptly, and that was already institutionally shallow before it broke. The instruments available through Euro-Mediterranean cooperation presuppose a degree of bilateral normalcy; a functioning Association Agreement, a negotiated Multi-Annual Indicative Programme (MIP), ministerial-level coordination channels, and institutional counterparts capable of absorbing and implementing structured cooperation that EU-Syria relations have never fully achieved. Syria was formally a member of the Euro-Mediterranean architecture before 2011, and the relationship still collapsed entirely. Understanding why and understanding what would need to be different this time requires looking at the wider EU-Syria relationship: its history, its structural weaknesses, and the specific complications that make the current re-engagement both urgent and genuinely difficult.

This is what each chapter does, from different analytical perspectives. The Euro-Mediterranean dimension runs through all four contributions, but it is situated within a wider examination of EU-Syria relations, past and present. The result is a more useful account of what Syria's return to the cooperation arena requires to be successful.

What the study finds

The four chapters converge on a shared diagnosis, reaching it from different vantage points and methodological starting points.

Before 2011, EU-Syria relations rested on structural deference to the Assad government. The 1978 Cooperation Agreement contained no governance benchmarks, no human rights provisions, and no enforceable conditionality. National Indicative Programmes identified political reform as a priority but allowed Damascus to hollow out any provision it found inconvenient. The relationship was institutionally shallow, and it collapsed entirely when the Assad government turned on its own population. The EU had access to the Syrian state but not to Syrian society, and it treated state-level engagement as a proxy for population-level impact in ways that produced neither reform nor resilience.

During the conflict years, the EU pivoted to sanctions, humanitarian response, and non-state engagement. This pivot had real achievements; a sustained investment in Syrian civil society and independent media produced organisations that have survived the transition and remain vital actors in Syrian public life. But the broader strategic model fell short. Restrictive measures failed to change regime behaviour while imposing heavy costs on civilians and the independent private sector. As the conflict lengthened, EU engagement drifted toward European security and migration interests, losing sight of Syrian political realities. Conditionality linked to political transition was applied at a level the regime was never going to meet.

The current re-engagement started promptly after the fall of the Assad regime. The EU has demonstrated its capacity for rapid political repositioning: lifting sanctions, restoring the 1978 Cooperation Agreement, including Syria in the New Pact for the Mediterranean, and launching the first High-Level Political Dialogue in May 2026. But this momentum has moved without a consolidated strategy, through instruments designed for more stable environments, and

in interaction with Syrian institutions still in formation. All EU programming continues to flow through annual ad hoc Special Measures rather than a negotiated MIP. Syrian authorities find EU procedural requirements complicated and opaque and have at times prioritised the political visibility of high-level meetings over the substantive content of partnership agreements. The EU, for its part, has not always communicated clearly what it can actually offer.

Internally, Syria's new authorities display centralising tendencies and have been implicated in serious human rights violations. The country remains fragmented territorially and socially. The security sector's sectarian character raises profound questions about its capacity to protect the country and particularly minority communities. Chapter 2 documents in detail how these dynamics - the contested transformation of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), the unresolved tensions around de-radicalisation, the gaps in hard and soft security policy - directly shape the conditions under which EU engagement can operate. Institutional security and civil peace are not downstream outcomes that follow stabilisation; they are its preconditions, and EU engagement must be designed with that logic in mind.

Yet genuine openings exist that did not before. The current government is far less hostile to civil society and independent media than the previous one. The civic space that expanded after December 2024 was not simply granted by the new authorities. It was claimed by Syrian civil society, activists, and communities through more than 14 years of resistance at every level. That space, however, is already under pressure, and its defence cannot be taken for granted (Gharibah, 2026). The EU's investment in Syrian civil society during the conflict years produced organisations that are now positioned not only to use this opening but to consolidate

The EU had access to the Syrian state but not to Syrian society, and it treated state-level engagement as a proxy for population-level impact in ways that produced neither reform nor resilience.

and widen it. Civic actors should be treated as strategic actors in that effort, not merely as implementing partners. The Syrian diaspora in Europe, many highly skilled and closely connected to their country of origin, represents a further underutilised bridge between EU instruments and Syrian realities. And the High-Level Political Dialogue creates, for the first time, a structured bilateral forum for consistent political engagement on reconciliation, inclusion, and the protection of all Syrians, especially communities at risk including minority communities.

Policy recommendations

Each chapter includes its own elaborated set of recommendations. The following distils their shared direction into a common framework.

1. Develop a consolidated strategy and move beyond ad hoc programming.

The absence of an MIP for Syria is the most significant structural gap in current re-engagement. Until it exists, EU programming will remain one-directional and disconnected from the governance incentive structure a genuine partnership requires. A Syrian MIP, developed in genuine consultation with both the Syrian government and civil society, should be treated as a priority milestone. Both sides would benefit from empowered high-level envoys able to coordinate internal resources behind a coherent strategy. The Syria Partnership Coordination Forum should be strengthened as the central hub for aligning actors and priorities.

2. Engage across Syrian society, not only through the state. A durable relationship requires sustained investment in civil society, independent media, higher education, culture, the independent private

sector, and the Syrian diaspora. Several EU instruments are already accessible without an Association Agreement including Erasmus+, Horizon Europe, Creative Europe, the Anna Lindh Foundation, and structured outreach to make them known and usable is both feasible and urgent. The Syrian diaspora in Europe should be explicitly included in the design and implementation of EU-funded recovery initiatives and in the MIP development process.

3. Link the scope of engagement to results - embedding accountability at every level from high-level dialogue to individual programmes.

Governance incentives should operate not only at the level of political dialogue but down to individual programmes and projects. The depth and pace of EU engagement, across funding volumes, instrument access, and institutional frameworks, should be linked to demonstrated progress on inclusive governance, accountability, and rights protection at every level. When communities consistently experience transparent, accountable, and non-discriminatory project management in EU-supported activities, they build expectations of good governance that generate their own political demand. All EU-funded activities should embed partnership integrity standards covering transparent recruitment, financial transparency, non-discrimination, mandatory civil society consultation, and independent monitoring.

4. Treat reconciliation, inclusion, and security sector reform as preconditions for stability.

The depth and pace of EU support for Syrian state institutions should be calibrated to progress toward inclusive appointments and decision-making that reflect Syria's demographic, ethnic, religious, and regional diversity. Protection of the rights of all communities at risk should be a defining standard of partner-

ship, monitored publicly and linked directly to the scope of engagement. Security sector reform must be a standing agenda item in the High-Level Dialogue, backed by concrete benchmarks. A security sector that remains dominated by one faction and operates outside civilian oversight is the most likely source of the next cycle of violence.

5. Invest in both hard and soft security cooperation. Hard security measures, such as intelligence cooperation, counter-terrorism coordination, and institutional capacity-building across the security and justice sectors, are necessary but insufficient. Soft security mechanisms are at least as important: supporting local dialogue forums, building alternative narratives that counter extremist discourse, and developing legal frameworks that distinguish between violent extremism and legitimate political activity. EU support can play a catalytic role in enabling civil society engagement in shaping counter-terrorism and counter-violent-extremism strategies.

6. Expand the operational footprint and strengthen delivery. EU engagement remains constrained by operational limitations: complex procedures, fragmented decision-making, limited in-country expertise, and an institutional culture that is cautious in ways that slow implementation even when funding is available. Strengthening the EU Delegation's presence, expanding sectoral expertise, and streamlining procedures are prerequisites for translating commitments into visible results on the ground.

7. Anchor the economic partnership in renewable energy, not fossil fuel transit. A relationship built primarily on Syria's potential role as a transit corridor for Gulf hydrocarbons would concentrate rent-based revenue and leverage at the centre of the Syrian state and work against both Syrian recovery and the EU's green transition

commitments. Syria's desert regions hold exceptional solar potential being the closest major solar resource to European territory accessible through land and could be connected to European grids via overland corridors at significantly lower cost than comparable North African projects.

8. Reform the sanctions architecture to prevent repeating past damage. Any future restrictive measures must remain strictly targeted at named individuals responsible for human rights violations or spoiler behaviour. An unconditional humanitarian carve-out protecting health, education, food, and essential services should be a permanent safeguard. Mandatory civil society impact assessments should be built into any future sanctions' architecture as a standing requirement.

9. For the Syrian authorities: engage strategically and deliver operationally. Europe offers something that the United States, Gulf states, and Turkey are not positioned to provide: structural support for the governance and economic reform imperatives that will determine whether Syria's transition produces durable stability. Clearer designation of counterparts, consistent follow-up on engagements, and greater space for direct technical cooperation at the sectoral level would significantly improve implementation. Articulating priorities in operational terms with sequenced, project-based needs and transparent budgetary information would improve alignment with EU instruments and increase European confidence.

What this study does not resolve

The ideological trajectory of Syria's new authorities is not settled, and the EU's

leverage over it is limited. The civic space opened since December 2024 may narrow further before it widens. Regional dynamics, including the Iran war, Turkish ambitions, and Russian residual presence, will shape Syria's transition in ways the EU cannot control. The instrument mismatch between what Euro-Mediterranean frameworks assume and what Syria's institutional landscape currently offers is real and will not be resolved quickly.

What the study does establish is that the EU has assets, instruments, and relationships that are genuinely relevant to Syria's future, and that the choices made now about how to deploy them will shape the relationship for years to come. Whether the return to the Euro-Mediterranean cooperation arena produces a durable partnership or reproduces the shallow engagement of the past will depend on whether both sides are willing to build something genuinely different.

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From Containment to Re-engagement: The EU's Evolving Approach to Syria after 2024

Assessing the EU's evolving policy toolbox and ways forward¹

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¹The views expressed in this chapter are solely those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the positions of the institutions or individuals consulted. While interviews have informed the analysis, any errors or interpretations remain the author's responsibility.

Introduction

The political transition that unfolded in Syria in late 2024 reopened a question that had long seemed closed: how, and to what extent, can the European Union (EU) re-engage with Syria after more than a decade of rupture? For years, the relationship between Brussels and Damascus had been defined by sanctions, humanitarian aid, diplomatic disengagement, and the management of regional spillover. Syria was exclusively treated as the epicentre of a crisis to be contained. The fall of the Assad regime disrupted that logic. It did not restore normal relations, nor did it resolve the many uncertainties surrounding Syria's future. But it created a new political context in which structured re-engagement became possible again.

This shift matters for reasons that extend well beyond Syria itself. The Syrian conflict has had direct and lasting consequences for Europe, from forced displacement and migration pressures to terrorism, organised crime, sanctions circumvention, and wider regional instability. In that sense, Syria's trajectory today is not a peripheral issue for the EU. Whether the country stabilises, rebuilds institutions, and gradually reconnects to regional and international systems is closely tied to core European interests in security, migration management, and regional order.

At the same time, the transition has created an opportunity to move beyond crisis management. It opens space for the EU to support the emergence of a more stable, institutionally grounded, and regionally connected Syrian state. Since December 2024, the Union has moved more quickly than many expected. It has re-established political dialogue, lifted economic sanctions, mobilised hu-

manitarian and socioeconomic support, launched new coordination mechanisms, and begun to rebuild its direct presence in Damascus. Yet this renewed engagement remains only partially structured. It is unfolding without a fully consolidated strategy, through a broad but uneven toolbox, and in interaction with Syrian institutions that are themselves still in formation.

This chapter is based on a combination of desk research, semi-structured interviews, and field-informed analysis. The desk review draws on EU policy documents, financial instruments, official communications, and secondary literature to reconstruct the evolution of EU engagement and its operational toolbox. This is complemented by interviews conducted between March and April 2026 with EU officials, member state representatives, Syrian public officials, experts, and practitioners involved in Syria-related policy and programming, as well as insights from field trips to Syria since 8 December 2024. All interviews were conducted on a non-attributable basis and have been anonymised. Not all interviews are directly referenced, but all informed the analysis, conclusions, and recommendations. A list of interviews is included at the end of the paper.

This chapter argues that the EU has moved quickly beyond the old model of containment and towards broader support for Syria's transition, but has done so without a coherent and unified framework. As a result, its growing range of instruments, spanning humanitarian action, stabilisation, socioeconomic recovery, political dialogue, and initial forms of economic engagement, remains constrained by limited scale, fragmented European action, and the absence of a clear roadmap linking immediate support to longer-term recovery and reintegration.

From cooperation to conflict to transition

EU-Syria relations before 2011

Before 2011, EU-Syria relations were limited and politically cautious, but they were not absent (Fève, 2022). Their institutional foundation lay in the 1977 Cooperation Agreement, which provided a framework for trade, financial assistance, and technical cooperation (European Economic Community, 1978). Syria's participation in the Barcelona Process from 1995 further embedded the relationship within the Euro-Mediterranean architecture, even if cooperation remained primarily pragmatic rather than transformative (European Commission, 1995).

The clearest attempt to deepen the relationship was the negotiation of an EU–Syria Association Agreement. Initialed in 2004 (Euractiv, 2004) and revived after a diplomatic thaw in 2008 (Black, 2008), the agreement was never signed, reflecting both Syrian concerns over economic adjustment and political clauses deemed intrusive by Damascus (Dostal & Zorob, 2009). As examined in greater detail elsewhere (Fève, 2022), the pre-2011 relationship therefore produced an architecture of engagement, but not a genuine political partnership.

On the eve of the uprising, then, the EU and Syria had failed to build a relationship that would be both economic and political. Still, an architecture existed, and mattered. It normalised technical cooperation, positioned the EU as a relevant economic interlocutor, and gave Brussels a foothold in Syria through agreements, regional forums, and neighbourhood instruments. Yet, it remained fragile and

depended on the assumption that gradual engagement, rather than confrontation, could shape Syrian behaviour over time. That assumption would collapse with the uprising and the war that followed.

The EU and the Syrian conflict

The outbreak of the Syrian uprising in 2011 and its rapid militarisation marked a decisive rupture in EU-Syria relations. Following the violent repression of peaceful protests across the country, the EU blocked the Association Agreement in May 2011, suspended Syria's participation in the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), and froze its aid and funding programmes (Council of the European Union, 2011), and later suspended parts of the 1977 Cooperation Agreement (European Commission, 2012), while Syria withdrew from the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) (Al-Mouallem, 2011). In December 2012, the EU Delegation in Damascus closed and its staff relocated to Beirut (European External Action Service, 2016). By then, the bilateral relationship had effectively collapsed.

In this context, the EU progressively shifted toward a crisis-management approach built around three main pillars: sanctions, humanitarian assistance, and regional spillover management, with the aim of protecting its domestic stability (Bedin et al., 2024). Sanctions became the Union's principal foreign policy tool through asset freezes, travel bans, sectoral restrictions, and limits on financial transactions (Lehne, 2012). At the same time, the EU developed a large-scale humanitarian and resilience-based response, becoming the leading international donor to the Syrian crisis, providing over €37 billion in humanitarian aid (European Commission, 2025b). This engagement became increasingly

The EU progressively shifted toward a crisis-management approach built around three main pillars: sanctions, humanitarian assistance, and regional spillover management.

regionalised and routed through UN agencies, international organisations, and neighbouring countries that host refugees. The creation of the Madad Fund in 2014 (European Commission, n.d-b) and the launch of donor conferences in London in 2016, and subsequently Brussels, institutionalised this approach, focusing on humanitarian support, resilience, and donor coordination across the region to manage spillover of the crisis.

Alongside humanitarian and donor tools, the EU also contributed, in more limited ways, to counter-terrorism and regional stabilisation, especially through support for the Global Coalition against Daesh (Global Coalition Against Daesh, n.d.) and assistance to mitigate the wider security consequences of conflict fragmentation (Levallois et al., 2023). But these efforts remained secondary to the dominant architecture of sanctions, aid, and refugee-related support.

The result was a clear paradox. While the EU's role in the Syrian conflict has been discussed and scrutinised from all angles at length (Moret, 2014; Havlová, 2015; Pierini, 2016; Turkmani & Haid, 2016; Asseburg, 2020; Levallois et al., 2023; Bedin et al., 2024), the key takeaway is that Brussels remained deeply involved in the Syrian crisis, financially, diplomatically, and normatively, yet it became increasingly absent from Syria as a political and institutional arena. Even when the EU later adjusted parts of its sanctions regime to facilitate humanitarian or limited economic engagement, the overall architecture remained unchanged. Until late 2024, European policy continued to rest on the assumption that Syria was above all a crisis to be managed, not a state with which structured political re-engagement was possible (Council of the European Union,

2024a; European External Action Service, 2024).

Current approach and policy toolbox

Sudden political transition

The fall of the Assad regime on 8 December 2024 abruptly transformed the context of EU engagement with Syria. The shift was not only unexpected in its timing but also in its implications. After more than a decade of policy built on containment, non-engagement, and the assumption of regime continuity, the EU was suddenly confronted with the need to redefine its posture almost overnight.

In this sense, the Union was taken short. Syria had long been absent from standard EU external frameworks, excluded from neighbourhood programming and managed primarily through sanctions and humanitarian instruments. There was no ready-made political or operational template for re-engagement. The transition, therefore, did not trigger the activation of an existing strategy, but forced the EU into a process of rapid political repositioning.

Yet rather than hesitating, the EU moved quickly to signal a shift. Within days, the High Representative framed the transition as a "historic moment" (Council of the European Union, 2024b), opening the way for renewed engagement. This was followed by an early sequence of political, diplomatic, and institutional signals aimed at re-establishing contact, reasserting relevance, and repositioning the EU within a rapidly evolving landscape. The post-December 2024 moment revealed a ca-

capacity for rapid alignment and decision-making when political conditions permitted.

This responsiveness, however, came at the cost of structure. Taken aback by the speed of the change of leadership in Damascus, the EU's re-engagement could not have been guided by a predefined framework, but was rather conducted via a series of successive adjustments, shaped by evolving conditions on the ground and internal coordination dynamics. The central challenge now is to move beyond this initial phase. The EU has demonstrated that it can react quickly when circumstances change. The question is whether this reactive flexibility can be consolidated into a more coherent and predictable approach. Without such consolidation, there is a risk that engagement remains driven by short-term adjustments rather than anchored in a clear long-term framework that can support Syria's recovery and reintegration.

Immediate EU response to the transition

Within weeks, the EU translated this repositioning into concrete political, diplomatic, and financial measures.

Sanctions were among the first instruments to be reconsidered. As early as January 2025, Commissioner Hadja Lahbib called for their suspension (Syrian Arab News Agency, 2025b), a position that translated into action the following month with the lifting of restrictions on key economic sectors (Council of the European Union, 2025a). By the end of May 2025, less than six months after the transition, the EU had removed all economic sanctions (Council of the European Union, 2025b), marking a decisive shift away from its most con-

sequential tool of pressure during the conflict.

In parallel, high-level political contacts were rapidly re-established. Less than a month after the transition, EU Head of Mission to Syria Michael Ohnmacht met with Foreign Minister Asaad al-Shibani in Damascus (Syrian Arab News Agency, 2025a), followed shortly by Commissioner Hadja Lahbib's meeting with Ahmad al-Sharaa (Anadolu Staff, 2025), marking the highest-level EU visit to Syria since 2010. These initial exchanges were followed by a steady rhythm of reciprocal visits, including al-Shibani's participation in the ninth Brussels Conference in March 2025 (The Syrian Observer, 2025), the first attended by Syrian authorities.

The EU moved to rebuild coordination frameworks. The launch of the Syria Partnership Coordination Forum on 18 March 2025, on the sidelines of the Brussels Conference, and its reconvening in July 2025, provided a platform to align key actors on recovery priorities (European Commission, 2025j). This was complemented by the agreement to establish a Technical Assistance Hub within the Syrian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, designed to streamline Syrian requests and better connect them with European expertise and support (European Commission, 2025j).

The EU also immediately reinforced its humanitarian response by launching a Humanitarian Air Bridge, enabling the rapid delivery of emergency health, food, shelter, and education supplies (European Commission, 2024c). In parallel, Commissioner Lahbib announced €235 million (European Commission, 2025d) in humanitarian support (European Commission, 2024e) to address persistent emergency needs and later increased it

The EU has demonstrated that it can react quickly when circumstances change. The question is whether this reactive flexibility can be consolidated into a more coherent and predictable approach.

to €308 million (European Commission, 2025e). This was complemented, later in 2025, by the mobilisation of €175 million² in dedicated socioeconomic support under DG MENA (European Commission, 2025c). The Commission also activated its stabilisation toolkit through the Foreign Policy Instruments (FPI),³ mobilising targeted crisis-response activities (European Commission, 2025j).

These measures were consolidated at the EU level through the adoption of the June 2025 Council Conclusions on Syria (Council of the European Union, 2025c). As the first collective political statement, they formalised the EU's shift toward engagement, outlining key priorities including support for a Syrian-led political transition, institutional reform, socioeconomic recovery, and accountability. Today, the Conclusions provide the closest approximation to a common EU framework for action at this stage.

Core instruments mobilised

The EU response to Syria's transition has not relied on a single instrument but on a layered, evolving toolbox combining humanitarian, stabilisation, and

development-oriented mechanisms. The current architecture rests on three main operational pillars: DG ECHO for humanitarian action, the FPI for rapid crisis response and stabilisation, and DG MENA, primarily through the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI)-Global Europe,⁴ for more structured recovery and institutional support. This division of labour has allowed the EU to respond quickly while gradually broadening the scope of its engagement.

At the core of this architecture lies NDICI-Global Europe, led by DG MENA. Because Syria has been excluded from the standard cycle of multiannual indicative programming, EU socioeconomic support has been channelled through ad hoc special measures rather than a structured country programme. As part of the €175 million package announced by the Commission, €139 million was allocated from the 2025 Special Measure, which structures EU support around three priority pillars: rebuilding state and institutional capacity, fostering economic recovery and financial inclusion, and promoting justice, social cohesion, and democratic participation (see Table 1).

² The €175 million in socioeconomic support builds on an initial €36 million committed in November 2024, prior to the regime's collapse, which was subsequently incorporated into the broader €139 million package allocated in 2025 as the EU restructured its socioeconomic assistance framework for Syria.

³ FPI is an EU funding tool designed for rapid, flexible crisis response, supporting activities such as mediation, stabilisation, security, and conflict prevention outside the EU. In Syria, FPI is used as a short-term, highly adaptable instrument to fund stabilisation-oriented actions like demining, transitional justice, and local mediation, complementing longer-term development tools by reacting quickly to evolving conditions on the ground.

⁴ NDICI-Global Europe is the EU's main external financing instrument for long-term cooperation, combining development aid, investment tools, and crisis response to support partner countries' economic, institutional, and social development. In Syria, it functions as the backbone for medium- to long-term engagement, financing socioeconomic recovery, institutional capacity-building, and early recovery programmes, typically through structured (called "special measures") programming rather than rapid crisis response.

Table 1. Specific Objectives, Outputs, Activities and Expected Results of the NDICI-Global Europe 2024 & 2025 EU Special Measure in Support of Syria

Year	Specific objective	EU contribution in EUR	Main areas of support	Indicative results / impact
2025	Rebuild the Syrian state and institutional capacity	26,500,000	Governance capacity, technical assistance to institutions, civil service training, administrative reform, health system strengthening	Stronger public institutions, improved service delivery, and more resilient health systems
2025	Foster economic recovery and financial inclusion	76,000,000	Agricultural value chains, rehabilitation of basic infrastructure, small and medium-sized enterprises (SME) support, vocational training, labour market programmes, microfinance, financial literacy	Job creation, increased productivity, improved access to finance, and local economic recovery
2025	Promote justice, social cohesion, and democratic participation	36,500,000	Community dialogue, peace-building, civic participation, civil society support, transitional justice, legal aid, HLP rights, human rights monitoring	Reduced social tensions, stronger local governance, improved rule of law, accountability, and reconciliation
2025 subtotal		139,000,000		
2024	Support early recovery and access to basic services	24,000,000	Area-based early recovery, rehabilitation of basic infrastructure, livelihoods, health, education, TVET, child protection, teacher training	Improved access to services, strengthened local resilience, better health and education outcomes, and enabling conditions for return
2024	Strengthen civil society, governance, and accountability	7,000,000	Civil society support, network-building, community dialogue, participatory governance, human rights monitoring, legal aid, justice and accountability work	Stronger civil society, improved local governance, enhanced social cohesion, and support to transitional justice
2024	Enable rights, returns, and programme integrity	5,000,000	Civil documentation, Housing, Land and Property (HLP) rights, legal identity support, property records, third-party monitoring, risk analysis, programme diagnostics	Improved access to documentation, reduced barriers to return, stronger property rights, and improved programme oversight
2024 subtotal		36,000,000		
Total 2024-2025		175,000,000		

Note. Adapted from Action document for 2024 special measure in support of the Syrian people (European Commission, 2024a) and Action document for the 2025 special measure in support of Syria (European Commission, 2025a)

It should be noted, however, that socio-economic support for Syria under NDICI-Global Europe predates the collapse of the Assad regime. In 2024, EU assistance was already being delivered through Special Measures, but under a markedly different political and operational logic, with the implementation explicitly avoiding any involvement of Syrian authorities (European Commission, 2024a). By contrast, the 2025 framework signals a clear shift by introducing a more structured form of re-engagement through consultation with Syrian public institutions and alongside a stronger emphasis on in-country implementation (European Commission, 2025a).

The second pillar is DG ECHO, which plays a central role in the European response and remains its most operationally consistent and field-oriented component. In a context where humanitarian needs remain acute across Syria (Mishra, 2025), DG ECHO continues to maintain a nationwide presence, combining rapid-response capacity with sustained delivery of life-saving assistance. Its intervention is structured around a comprehensive set of thematic priorities, ranging from emergency response and protection to health, water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH), shelter, food assistance, and education, and increasingly integrates early recovery elements to restore basic services and support self-reliance (European Commission, 2025e).

Table 2. DG ECHO – Syria Humanitarian Allocations 2025 (Humanitarian Implementation Plan + Emergency Top-Ups)

Date / Round	Allocation in EUR	Notes
January 2025	142,500,000	Baseline humanitarian envelope for Syria
March 2025	40,000,000	Scale-up to prevent collapse of basic services
May 2025	20,000,000	Targeted support (notably North-East Syria, camps & host areas)
Subtotal 1 (HIP)	202,500,000	-
July 2025 (violence – Sweida)	250,000	Rapid response to displacement (~190,000 people)
July 2025 (same crisis)	1,350,000	Hygiene, health, protection, NFIs
August 2025 (heatwave)	120,000	Health-focused response in South Syria
Subtotal 2 (Top-Ups)	1,720,000	-
Grand total	204,220,000	-

Note. Adapted from Technical annex: Syria regional and Lebanon crises—Financial, administrative, and operational information (Version 3, pp. 16–26) (European Commission, 2025k), and Syria (European Commission, 2025i).

Alongside DG MENA and DG ECHO, the FPI, led by the Service for Foreign Policy Instruments, has played a particularly important role in the immediate post-transition phase. FPI is the most flexible arm of the EU response, able to top up or redirect support in response

to localised violence or rapidly shifting conditions. In Syria, this has translated into support for mediation, civilian protection, demining, transitional justice, deradicalisation, and, increasingly, selected aspects of security-sector stabilisation (see Table 3).

Table 3. Focus and components of the FPI 2025 EU Special Measures in Support of Syria

Action Title	Date	Budget in EUR	Core Focus / Components	Policy Signal
Support to Syria in ensuring the protection of civilians and preserving national unity	4 June 2025	13,500,000	(1) Mine action & UXO clearance; (2) Engagement with armed groups & authorities for civilian protection and dialogue; (3) Media support & counter-disinformation	Early stabilisation with cautious engagement
Support to Syria in pursuing social cohesion through justice and accountability and prevention of violence and radicalisation	10 October 2025	18,000,000	(1) Prevention of radicalisation (Al Hol / Al Roj); (2) Transitional justice & victims support; (3) Social cohesion, mediation & reconciliation	Shift to state-adjacent engagement
Support to strengthening mine action and arms control in Syria	December 10 2025	10,000,000	(1) Mine action, surveys, clearance & risk education; (2) Weapons and ammunition management, stockpile security, SALW control	Initial support to core state functions

Note. Adapted from Support to strengthening mine action and arms control in Syria (European Commission, 2025f), Support to Syria in ensuring the protection of civilians and preserving national unity (European Commission, 2025g), and Support to Syria in pursuing social cohesion through justice and accountability as well as in prevention of violence and radicalization (European Commission, 2025h).

A further layer of engagement operates at the political and regional level. The re-establishment of a permanent EU presence in Damascus has been significant not only symbolically but also operationally, enabling regular coordination between the delegation, DG MENA, DG ECHO, FPI, the European External Action Service (EEAS), and Syrian counterparts. This has contributed to a more coherent and aligned EU approach despite the context's

fluidity. The pattern of engagements since early 2025 reflects a clear trajectory: initial contacts focused on re-opening channels and establishing working relations, but quickly expanded into a dense network of ministerial meetings, sectoral cooperation, and high-level political exchanges. This growing frequency and diversification of interactions signal a shift from cautious re-engagement to a more sustained and multi-level partnership.

Without a shared framework, engagement risks being driven by instruments and opportunities rather than by clearly defined objectives.

At the same time, this engagement has remained largely iterative rather than fully institutionalised, relying on successive contacts to structure cooperation in the absence of a formal framework. In that context, the High-Level Political Dialogue between the EU and the Syrian transitional authorities that took place on 11 May 2026 represented a key inflection point. While a good start and an additional step in the right direction, that is, the one dialogue, the key now will be to turn this inflection into lasting momentum.

Limits to current engagement

In political, diplomatic, and operational terms, the Union has moved further and faster than many expected after the transition. Yet the speed and breadth of European mobilisation should not obscure its limits. EU engagement remains constrained by structural, operational, and political limitations on both the European and Syrian sides. As a result, it remains more active than strategic, and more promising than transformative.

The absence of a consolidated strategy

The first and most structural limitation is the absence of a consolidated EU strategy for Syria, which the Europeans have worked without until today, more than a year and a half following the transition in Damascus. While the June 2025 Council

Conclusions (Council of the European Union, 2025c) and subsequent high-level statements (European Commission, 2026) provide political direction and establish a broad framework for engagement, they fall short of a fully articulated strategy. In particular, they do not clearly define sequencing, operational priorities, benchmarks for progress, or longer-term end goals. In practice, EU action continues to rely on a combination of Council language, financial instruments, diplomatic engagement, and ad hoc measures, but nothing beyond.

This gap is not accidental. It reflects the EEAS' preference for embedding Syria within a broader regional approach rather than developing a dedicated country strategy,⁵ as well as the difficulty of reaching consensus among 27 member states.⁶ Flexibility has value in a fast-changing transition, but the absence of a clearer roadmap leaves EU policy reactive and difficult for Syrian counterparts to interpret.

At the same time, a more critical approach could argue that the absence of a clear roadmap leaves EU policy vis-à-vis Syria overly reactive and insufficiently structured.⁷ Without a shared framework, engagement risks being driven by instruments and opportunities rather than by clearly defined objectives. This ambiguity is also evident on the Syrian side, with officials struggling to fully understand the EU's approach, not because of a lack of engagement, but because that engagement is not anchored in a clearly communicated, internally consistent strategic vision.⁸

⁵ Interview 6 – European member state #1, ambassador, interview, March 2026.

Interview 8 – EU official #2, headquarters level, online interview, March 2026.

Interview 10 – EU official #4, field-level, online interview, April 2026.

⁶ Interview 8 – EU official #2, headquarters level, online interview, March 2026.

Interview 7 – European member state #2, ambassador, interview, March 2026.

⁷ Interview 2 – European member state policy officer, online interview, March 2026.

Interview 4 – International policy expert, online interview, March 2026.

Interview 6 – European member state #1, ambassador, interview, March 2026.

Limited scale of financial engagement

A second limitation lies in the scale of the EU's financial engagement. For the

whole of 2025, the EU allocated €424.7 million, a figure that remains modest when set against the scale of Syria's destruction and recovery needs measured in the hundreds of billions (World Bank, 2025).

Table 4. Total Allocations for Syria 2025

Instrument	Total Allocation in EUR
DG ECHO (HIP)	202,500,000 (2025)
DG ECHO (Emergency Top-Ups)	1,720,000 (2025)
DG MENA (NDICI – Global Europe)	139,000,000 (2025)
DG MENA (NDICI – Global Europe)	36,000,000 (2024)
FPI (Foreign Policy Instruments)	41,500,000 (2025)
FPI (Foreign Policy Instruments)	4,000,000 (2024)
Total (Syria only)	424,700,000

Note. Elaborated by author based on European Commission financing decisions, action documents, and humanitarian funding information concerning Syria. (European Commission, n.d.-b, 2024a, 2024b, 2024c, 2024d, 2024e, 2025a, 2025c, 2025d, 2025e, 2025g, 2025h, 2025i, 2025k).

More concerning, however, is the projected trajectory of EU support. The €620 million package announced for 2026-2027 (European Commission, 2026b) amounts to €310 million per year, a 26.2% decrease from 2025 levels. Within this, humanitarian funding is expected to fall more sharply,

with initial allocations standing at €142.5 million per year, compared to €202.5 million in 2025, representing a decline of nearly 30% (see chart below). At face value, this suggests not only limited scale, but also a contraction of engagement at a time when needs remain acute.

Table 5. Total Allocations for Syria 2026-2027 (Provisional)

Instrument	Total Allocation 2026 in EUR	Total Allocation 2027 in EUR	Total Allocation 2026 & 2027 in EUR
DG ECHO (HIP)	142,500,000	142,500,000	285,000,000
DG MENA (NDICI – Global Europe)	140,000,000	140,000,000	280,000,000

⁸ Interview 3 – Syrian government official (foreign affairs) online interview, March 2026.

Interview 4 – International policy expert, online interview, March 2026.

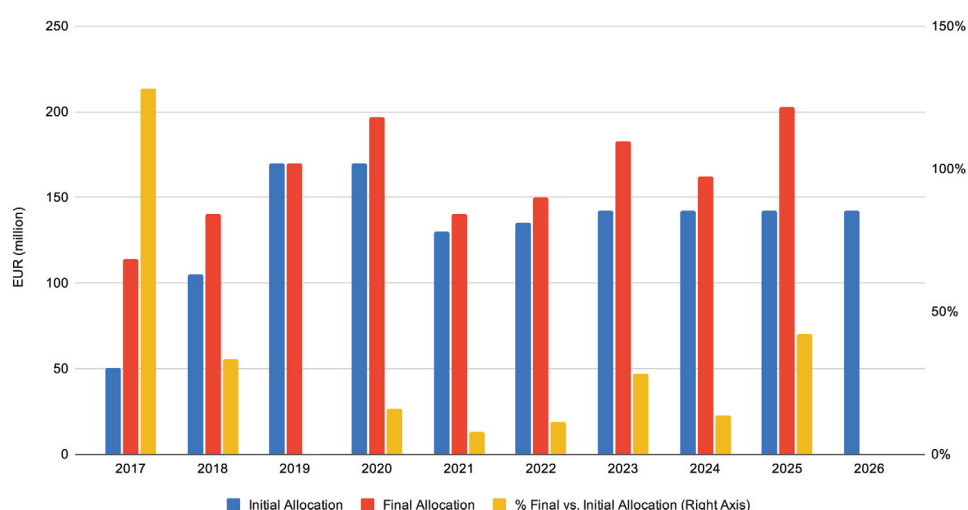
Interview 5 – Syrian government official, (economy), March 2026.

Interview 10 – EU official #4, field-level, online interview, April 2026.

FPI (Foreign Policy Instruments)	27,500,000	27,500,000	55,000,000
Total	310,000,000	310,000,000	620,000,000

Note. Elaborated by author. Figures are provisional. DG MENA allocations are based on information provided by an EU official in a personal interview conducted in 2026. DG ECHO figures are derived from the 2026 Humanitarian Implementation Plan (European Commission, 2026a) and are assumed to remain unchanged in 2027. FPI amounts are estimates calculated as the residual required to reconcile the stated total after deducting the DG ECHO and NDICI–Global Europe allocations.

Figure 1. DG ECHO Humanitarian Implementation Plan Allocations to Syria



Note. Sourced from annual DG ECHO Humanitarian Implementation Plans (HIPs) and Technical Annexes for the Syria Regional and Lebanon Crises (European Commission, 2024c, 2024e, 2025d, 2025e, 2025k, 2026a).

Nevertheless, this growing reliance on ad hoc reinforcements points to a more reactive funding model, in which resources are adjusted in response to evolving needs rather than anchored in a predictable, multiannual framework. While this flexibility enables rapid scaling, it also highlights the absence of a clear forward-looking financial strategy, reinforcing the structural limitations of EU engagement in both scale and predictability.

Operational limitations

Beyond questions of scale, EU engagement in Syria is constrained by operational and structural limitations that shape how far available resources can be deployed. These reflect both the institutional logic of EU external action and the conditions of engagement on the ground.

First, the absence of a formal programming framework limits the scope for large-

scale socioeconomic support.⁹ Unlike most Southern Neighbourhood partners given that Damascus was excluded from standard EU bilateral development programming, Syria does not benefit from a multiannual indicative programme, meaning that funding cannot yet be anchored in a structured, medium-term strategy agreed with national authorities. This makes it difficult for the Commission to design, prioritise, and channel substantial resources coherently, even where funding is available.

Second, EU instruments themselves impose constraints. Procedures remain complex, accountability requirements stringent, and decision-making fragmented across Brussels, Beirut, and Damascus.¹⁰ While these features are designed to ensure oversight and risk management, they also slow down implementation and limit the EU's ability to operate at scale in a fluid post-conflict environment. This is compounded by an institutional culture that remains cautious and risk-averse.¹¹ In Syria's case, this caution is particularly warranted given the political and operational sensitivity on the ground and the state's limited absorption capacity. As a result, even if it were possible for the EU to allocate millions or billions of euros for Syria, it would be unlikely to quickly materialise on the ground.

Third, the current engagement remains sectorally narrow. EU action is still heavily concentrated on humanitarian assistance, stabilisation, and early recovery, with only limited expansion into broader economic domains. While these interventions are essential, they do not amount to a comprehensive recovery strategy. A national re-

covery strategy should ultimately be Syrian-led, but the EU still needs a clearer roadmap on how its own instruments can support that process beyond immediate assistance. Key areas such as trade facilitation, financial sector normalisation, infrastructure financing, and large-scale investment support remain largely absent or underdeveloped, limiting the EU's ability to shape Syria's long-term economic trajectory.

Finally, these constraints are reinforced by a still-limited operational footprint. Although the EU Delegation has re-established a presence, the broader ecosystem that typically supports EU external action, including sectoral expertise, technical staff, and sustained in-country engagement, remains only partially deployed.¹² After more than a decade of disengagement, EU institutions and member states are also rebuilding their knowledge base and operational familiarity with Syria, which further slows the expansion of their activities.

Fragmented European engagement and limited collective leverage

A third limitation lies in the fragmented nature of European engagement, both within the EU system and between EU institutions and member states. While the Union has been able to mobilise a broad range of instruments relatively quickly, the overall European presence in Syria remains divided across multiple channels of engagement that are not always fully aligned.

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⁹ Interview 1 – EU official #1, field-level, online interview, March 2026.

Interview 10 – EU official #4, field-level, online interview, April 2026.

¹⁰ Interview 10 – EU official #4, field-level, online interview, April 2026.

¹¹ Interview 9 – EU official #3, headquarters level, online interview, April 2026.

Interview 10 – EU official #4, field-level, online interview, April 2026.

¹² Interview 6 – European member state #1, ambassador, interview, March 2026.

Interview 7 – European member state #2, ambassador, interview, March 2026.

In practice, EU policy is implemented through a combination of Commission instruments, EEAS-led political engagement, and an increasing number of bilateral initiatives by member states. These include reopened or strengthened diplomatic presences in Damascus, high-level political contacts, technical cooperation through national agencies, and sector-specific engagement on migration, returns, accountability, local governance, economic recovery, and private-sector reactivation. France and Germany were among the first European actors to engage the new Syrian leadership at ministerial level, while several member states have since moved to restore or expand their diplomatic presence. At the operational level, member state agencies also implement EU-funded programmes, as illustrated by EU-GIZ cooperation on TVET and local recovery. This multi-layered approach can increase flexibility and speed, but it may also dilute collective EU leverage. This multi-layered approach has certain advantages, particularly in terms of flexibility and speed, but it also dilutes collective leverage.¹³ Several interviewees noted that Syrian authorities often prioritise bilateral relationships with individual member states, which are perceived as more direct, more politically responsive, and easier to navigate than the EU system as a whole. As a result, engagement with the EU as a unified actor can be side-lined in favour of parallel national tracks.

This dynamic creates a structural tension. Many of the EU's most consequential tools, particularly in areas such as trade, market access, regulatory alignment, and

financial engagement, are held at the Union level. Yet political access and day-to-day interaction often take place through member states.¹⁴ The result is a disconnect between where influence is exercised and where key instruments are located, reducing the EU's ability to act as a coherent economic and political actor.

At the same time, coordination among EU institutions, while improved compared to the conflict years, remains imperfect. The division of roles among DG ECHO, DG MENA, FPI, the EEAS, and the Delegation has enabled a functional distribution of labour, but not always fully integrated planning and delivery.¹⁵ This is particularly visible when moving from humanitarian and stabilisation activities toward more complex recovery and economic programming, where institutional boundaries become more pronounced.

A complex and evolving Syrian counterpart

A final limitation lies in the nature of the Syrian state itself as a partner for engagement. While the political transition has opened the door to renewed cooperation, the institutional environment remains fluid, centralised, and still consolidating. Limited administrative capacity, frequent turnover of interlocutors, and unclear chains of authority affect even basic aspects of cooperation, from identifying the relevant counterpart to validating projects and ensuring follow-up.¹⁶ Decision-making is often slow, not necessarily because of unwillingness,

¹³ Interview 4 – International policy expert, online interview, March 2026.

Interview 6 – European member state #1, ambassador, interview, March 2026.

¹⁴ Interview 11 – EU official #5, headquarters level, online interview, April 2026.

¹⁵ Interview 1 – EU official #1, field-level, online interview, March 2026.

Interview 6 – European member state #1, ambassador, interview, March 2026.

¹⁶ Interview 1 – EU official #1, field-level, online interview, March 2026.

Interview 8 – EU official #2, headquarters level, online interview, March 2026.

but because institutions are still stabilising and internal procedures remain under-defined.¹⁷

This is compounded by a tendency toward centralisation of the decision-making process, particularly through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. While this reflects an understandable desire to maintain political control over external engagement during a sensitive transition, it also creates bottlenecks. Most interactions, approvals, and requests are channelled through a limited number of actors, reducing the autonomy of sectoral ministries and slowing down technical cooperation. As a result, engagement that could otherwise be handled at a technical level can be delayed.¹⁸ These constraints are further reinforced by potential controls over civic space. Because some EU-funded activities can rely on Syrian civil society partners, requirements for prior authorisation of workshops, events, and other activities can delay even small-scale projects.

Syrian authorities also appear to favour bilateral engagement with individual member states, which they understand better than the EU system.¹⁹ While understandable in the short term, this limits the effectiveness of EU-level instruments, reduces the benefits of coordinated support, and contributes to fragmentation.

More broadly, as the Syrian state remains in a phase of institutional rebuilding, several core elements required for structured international cooperation are still either absent or underdeveloped. This limits the usability and deployment of some of the EU's more advanced instru-

ments. Budget support (European Commission, n.d.-a) for instance, is not feasible in the absence of a credible, functioning state budget, while the conclusion of formal international agreements, a prerogative of the legislature in most countries, is constrained by the lack of a functioning parliament.

Recommendations

The limitations identified above should not be read as a failure of EU engagement, but rather as a reflection of the context in which this engagement is taking place. Indeed, one of the striking features of the post-December 2024 period is that the EU was able to react more quickly and flexibly than might have been expected, including through early political contacts, sanctions relief, humanitarian mobilisation, stabilisation support, and the launch of new coordination mechanisms. Yet, the EU's ability to translate that response into a sustained, strategically sequenced, and operationally coherent recovery framework still appears to lag behind. EU engagement must still operate through complex institutional procedures, member state coordination, compliance requirements, and political sensitivities. Syria, for its part, remains a highly fluid, centralised, and administratively fragile environment, still in the early stages of institutional consolidation and marked by security and governance risks that cannot be ignored. Taken together, these factors inevitably limit the speed, scale, and coherence of engagement.

Still, much more can be done within these constraints. Given the current toolbox,

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¹⁷ Interview 1 – EU official #1, field-level, online interview, March 2026.

Interview 6 – European member state #1, ambassador, interview, March 2026.

Interview 7 – European member state #2, ambassador, interview, March 2026.

Interview 8 – EU official #2, headquarters level, online interview, March 2026.

Interview 10 – EU official #4, field-level, online interview, April 2026.

¹⁸ Interview 8 – EU official #2, headquarters level, online interview, March 2026.

¹⁹ Interview 3 – Syrian government official (foreign affairs) online interview, March 2026.

the core challenge is the need to better structure, align, and operationalise the instruments already available. Even if a more ambitious engagement will take time to materialise, several practical steps could already improve the effectiveness, coherence, and impact of EU action in the short- to medium-term.

Clarify direction

A first priority is to strengthen the strategic clarity of EU engagement without necessarily moving toward a rigid, formalised Syria strategy. In practice, this does not require a new strategy document, but a more structured use of existing instruments and coordination formats to build a de facto roadmap.²⁰ The EU should align annual financing decisions, special measures, diplomatic messaging, and sectoral priorities around a clearer sequencing logic: what is feasible in the short term, what could follow as conditions evolve, and which benchmarks would justify moving from one phase of engagement to the next. Internal EEAS-Commission guidance, regular joint briefings, and more systematic coordination with member states can help establish a shared understanding of priorities, roles, and trajectories.

Existing coordination platforms should be more fully leveraged to support this effort. The Syria Partnership Coordination Forum should serve as the central hub for aligning actors and priorities, with more frequent meetings and the creation of sub-committees organised by sector or thematic priority.²¹ The High-Level Political Dialogue should be institutionalised as a regular

channel for strategic steering, while, over time, the reactivation of the EU-Syria Cooperation Council under the 1977 Cooperation Agreement could provide a more formal anchor for engagement on economic issues via the resumption of regular EU-Syria Cooperation Council meetings. Across all of these fora, communication should be more unified and consistent, reinforcing a coherent EU position and making the overall approach more legible to Syrian counterparts.

Strengthen the EU presence to enable delivery

A second priority is to deepen the EU's operational footprint in Syria, not as an end in itself, but as a prerequisite for more effective delivery.²² While the reactivation of the EU Delegation in Damascus marked an important step, the broader institutional presence remains limited relative to the scale and complexity of the engagement now underway.

Strengthening this presence includes expanding sectoral expertise, increasing the number of technical staff, and reinforcing coordination capacities within the delegation. A more robust in-country presence would allow the EU to engage more consistently with Syrian institutions, improve programme design, and respond more effectively to evolving needs. It would also help rebuild the institutional knowledge lost over more than a decade of limited engagement, including a practical understanding of how Syrian administrative and political systems operate.

²⁰ Interview 6 – European member state #1, ambassador, interview, March 2026.

Interview 8 – EU official #2, headquarters level, online interview, March 2026.

²¹ Interview 2 – European member state policy officer, online interview, March 2026.

Interview 6 – European member state #1, ambassador, interview, March 2026.

²² Interview 6 – European member state #1, ambassador, interview, March 2026.

Interview 7 – European member state #2, ambassador, interview, March 2026

Interview 10 – EU official #4, field-level, online interview, April 2026.

Interview 11 – EU official #5, headquarters level, online interview, April 2026.

A stronger presence is also necessary to move from mobilisation to delivery. The EU has shown that it can announce funding, establish political contact, and activate instruments quickly. But the credibility of this engagement will increasingly depend on its ability to translate commitments into visible results on the ground. This requires addressing bottlenecks within existing processes. On the EU side, efforts should focus on improving coordination across Brussels, Damascus, Beirut, and other operational hubs, streamlining procedures where possible, and prioritising projects that can realistically be implemented under current conditions. Delivering early and tangible results, particularly in sectors such as health, basic services, livelihoods, and technical assistance, would be essential to build trust and demonstrate the added value of EU engagement.

Gradually expand the scope of engagement toward economic reintegration

A third priority is to progressively move beyond the current concentration on humanitarian assistance, stabilisation, and early recovery. These areas remain indispensable, but they are not sufficient to support long-term stabilisation, nor do they address the broader challenge of reconnecting Syria to regional and international economic systems. Over time, the effectiveness of EU engagement will be judged not only by the volume of aid delivered, but by the extent to which it helps restore economic functionality, revive productive sectors, and reduce structural dependence on external support.

In this context, the lifting of economic sanctions has already played an important enabling role, and the possible reacti-

vation of older cooperation frameworks could, in time, provide a more institutional anchor for renewed engagement. Yet such steps, while necessary, are not in themselves enough to trigger broad-based recovery. They create political and legal space for action, but they do not automatically generate economic activity or institutional readiness.

The EU should therefore begin laying the groundwork for a broader and more economically oriented set of instruments. This includes trade facilitation, gradual improvements in market access, regulatory cooperation, and targeted support for productive sectors such as agriculture, agro-industry, light manufacturing, services, and local value chains. The Union's comparative advantage lies precisely in these areas, where it can combine technical expertise, regulatory knowledge, and access to a large market. At present, however, these tools remain underused, either because the necessary frameworks are not yet in place or because engagement has not yet reached a level where such instruments can be deployed effectively. In that sense, both having a more coherent strategy and a broader presence would be immensely beneficial.

To the Syrian authorities: engage strategically, deliver operationally, and enable reintegration

For the Syrian authorities, the current moment is both an opportunity for support and a test of credibility as a partner. The EU has demonstrated both political willingness and financial commitment, mobilising substantial resources over the past decade and moving rapidly to re-engage after the transition. This creates a clear incentive for Syria to engage

The EU should begin laying the groundwork for a broader and more economically oriented set of instruments.

constructively and predictably. Treating the EU as a serious long-term partner, rather than a secondary or purely transactional actor, as was the case throughout the relationship's history (Fève, 2022), is in Syria's own interest. A more proactive, structured, and cooperative posture would help unlock greater European support, reduce hesitation among EU institutions and member states, and generate political gains for Damascus by strengthening its credibility as a reliable partner in Syria's regional and international reintegration.

At the operational level, this requires a shift toward more reliable and responsive administrative practices. Clear designation of counterparts across ministries, consistent follow-up on engagements, and faster project validation would significantly improve implementation timelines. Allowing greater space for direct technical engagement with sectoral ministries, rather than centralising all interactions through a limited number of political channels, would reduce bottlenecks and make co-operation more effective.

The Syrian authorities would also benefit from articulating priorities in a more targeted and operational manner, moving from broad sectoral requests to clearly sequenced, project-based needs with priority sectors, realistic timelines, expected outcomes, and clearer budgetary information. This would improve alignment with EU instruments, increase European confidence, and support future scale-up. At the same time, economic reintegration will require stronger administrative and regulatory foundations, including more capable institutions in trade, customs, economic planning, and sector regulation, as well as clearer economic policies, more predictable rules, and more transparent engagement with private sector actors.

Conclusion

The return of Syria to the centre of EU attention is not a marginal development. It reflects the re-emergence of a strategic file with direct implications for European interests and values alike. Over the course of the conflict, Syria became a source of some of the most acute external challenges facing the EU, from mass displacement and regional instability to illicit networks and persistent security threats. Whether Syria stabilises, rebuilds, and reconnects to its neighbourhood is therefore not only a matter of solidarity, but of long-term European security and regional order.

The post-2024 transition has created an opening that did not exist before. It has allowed the EU to move beyond a model centred on containment and crisis management, and to re-engage with Syria as a political and institutional partner. In many respects, the Union has responded faster and more decisively than expected, re-establishing political dialogue, lifting economic sanctions, mobilising financial instruments, and rebuilding a presence on the ground.

Yet this initial momentum should not obscure the structural limitations that continue to shape EU engagement. The current approach remains characterised by strategic ambiguity, limited scale, fragmented European action, and a Syrian counterpart that is still fluid, centralised, and institutionally underprepared. As a result, EU engagement is increasingly active and relevant, but not yet capable of shaping the broader trajectory of Syria's recovery.

As we have seen, given the EU's capacity to engage, the challenge ahead lies in whether it can transform reactive flexibility into a more coherent and durable framework. This requires clearer strategic direction, a stronger operational presence, more ef-

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fective delivery, and a gradual expansion from humanitarian and early-recovery instruments toward tools of economic reintegration. It also requires a Syrian side willing to engage more predictably, strengthen administrative capacity, and translate broad priorities into operational commitments.

If these conditions are met, the EU can move beyond its role as a crisis re-

sponder and contribute more meaningfully to Syria's stabilisation and reintegration. If they are not, it risks remaining what it was for much of the conflict: indispensable as a donor, but secondary as a strategic actor. The transition has reopened the question of Europe's role in Syria. The outcome will depend on whether this opening is structured into a lasting framework for engagement.

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Security, Civil Peace, and the Conditions for EU Engagement

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Introduction

A central driver of renewed EU engagement with Syria is the objective of facilitating refugee return and reinforcing Mediterranean regional stability. Yet refugee return depends on security, basic socio-economic conditions, and credible institutional guarantees. This chapter argues that Syria's reintegration into Euro-Mediterranean frameworks depends not only on institutional stabilisation, but also on building socially legitimate and accountable security structures capable of sustaining civil peace.

The chapter combines qualitative policy analysis with desk research, public statements by Syrian authorities, and six semi-structured interviews with Syrian experts, officials, and civil society actors. It draws on comparative insights from European Union (EU) engagement in Eastern Europe and the Western Balkans to identify realistic entry points for Syria-EU cooperation.

Institutional security structuring

From rupture to rapid consolidation

The transformation of Syria's security and defence sectors after 8 December 2024 did not follow the negotiated or gradual reform trajectories commonly anticipated in earlier literature on post-conflict Syria and governance reconstruction (Heydemann, 2018; Bank, Lynch, & Perlman, 2025). It resulted from a decisive rupture in power, requiring rapid reconstruction of the security sector rather than incremental reform. This shift coincided with regional dynamics that led to the collapse of the previous regime and its security

architecture (Bank et al., 2025). Unlike cases such as Iraq's de-Baathification, the process was neither a full institutional vacuum nor a managed transition, but a rapid reconfiguration under new authority.

The former military, intelligence, and security institutions had already suffered a significant erosion of operational coherence and public legitimacy during the conflict years. Following the collapse of the regime in December 2024, these institutions were formally dissolved through top-down political decisions, while many personnel either entered transitional settlement arrangements or fled the country. The existing military and security infrastructures in the Salvation Government of Idlib assumed full control of the sector and relied on recruitment from other opposition armed actors and new recruitment. Fifty-two days after the collapse of the former regime, the announcement by the new President on 29 January 2025 during the "victory speech" officially declared the dissolving of all security and military institutions and announced the exclusive monopoly of carrying weapons by the new Defence Ministry. At the same time, armed actors remained fragmented, posing a risk of renewed instability. This created an immediate risk of parallel security structures and competing centres of authority, making rapid consolidation the central priority (Rojan, 2025; Bank et al., 2025).

The negative legacy of the previous system, marked by decades of coercion, politicisation, and intrusion into civilian life made continuity untenable. The security sector had to break visibly with past practices while maintaining operational capacity. This resulted in a hybrid model of accelerated institutional construction, where structures, regulations, and operations developed simultaneously.

The starting point was uneven across sectors. The Ministry of Defence, the Ministry of Interior, and intelligence services were largely rebuilt from scratch, while drawing on existing operational experience. The justice sector, by contrast, underwent significant personnel and leadership changes - including the replacement of court leadership, suspension and vetting of judges, and new recruitment processes - yet much of its core administrative and bureaucratic structure remained intact. This produced a slower and more uneven transformation process, contributing to an imbalance between enforcement and accountability.

Phases of institutional structuring

The restructuring process can be read through three overlapping analytical phases. The first, beginning immediately after 8 December 2024, focused on centralisation and institutional formation: restoring command chains, dissolving competing structures, creating the General Intelligence Services (GIS), establishing the National Security Council (NSC), and grounding the monopoly of force in the Constitutional Declaration. The second, becoming more prominent after mid-2025, focused on integrating armed actors, expanding internal security, and stabilising operations. The third, emerging more clearly toward late 2025 and early 2026, shifted attention toward professionalisation, training, codes of conduct, institutional discipline, and clearer civil-military boundaries.

These phases were not sequential government policies but overlapping stages of emphasis. They helped stabilise the country, but also produced unresolved challenges: uneven integration, limited inclusivity, weak training depth, justice-

sector lag, and a gap between formal structures and actual practice. These challenges matter directly for Syria-EU engagement because cooperation on security, migration, refugee return, and stabilisation depends on the reliability, professionalism, and accountability of Syrian state institutions.

Operational development across institutions

Following the overlapping phases of centralisation, integration, and early professionalisation, the security sector has moved into a stage of operationalisation. This stage is defined by the translation of institutional frameworks into day-to-day functions across the Ministry of Defence, the Ministry of Interior, and intelligence services. While formal structures have largely been established, their effectiveness depends on how consistently they are implemented across units and regions.

Ministry of Defence

The Ministry of Defence has focused on building a unified military structure capable of exercising territorial control and coordinating operations across previously fragmented theatres. This has involved the standardisation of command hierarchies, the centralisation of operational planning, and the consolidation of personnel and weapons systems into formal registries (Almustafa, 2026).

This reflects a shift toward a centralised, rule-based military hierarchy, where authority is derived from institutional position rather than factional affiliation. The Ministry has also worked to develop training institutions, military education programmes, and internal regulations aimed at

The justice sector, by contrast, underwent significant personnel and leadership changes - including the replacement of court leadership, suspension and vetting of judges, and new recruitment processes

strengthening professional standards and institutional discipline across military formations. However, the implementation of these standards remains uneven. The persistence of internally cohesive units - particularly those integrated as intact formations during earlier phases - indicates that formal integration has not yet fully translated into unified operational control (Tabler, 2026).

Ministry of Interior

The Ministry of Interior has taken the lead in internal security, gradually assuming responsibility for civilian governance functions that were initially handled by military actors. Its development reflects a deliberate shift from regime-centred control toward a service-oriented model of security provision.

Police and general security forces have expanded their presence across urban and rural areas, with an emphasis on accessibility, responsiveness, and visibility. The introduction of women police officers and increased engagement with local communities represent efforts to rebuild trust and legitimacy, particularly in areas affected by prolonged conflict (interview with Syrian Ministry of Foreign Affairs official, Damascus, 10 March 2026).

The expansion of internal security has reduced reliance on military forces for local governance and represents an important step toward institutional normalisation, although shortages of trained personnel, compressed training programmes, and an evolving institutional culture continue to limit performance.

Intelligence services

The restructuring of intelligence services has focused on centralisation, mandate

redefinition, and the elimination of overlapping jurisdictions that characterised the previous system. The establishment of the GIS and the consolidation of intelligence functions under a unified framework represent a shift from competitive and fragmented structures to a coordinated model aligned with executive authority (Syria TV, 2024; Al-Jnaidi, 2024).

This consolidation improved coordination and strengthened the role of intelligence in decision-making. Counter-terrorism (CT) coordination has also emerged as a key driver of institutional structuring, particularly through joint coordination mechanisms linking the Ministry of Interior, intelligence services, and defence institutions under a broader operational framework. While the Ministry of Interior has taken the lead in domestic CT operations, the GIS has played a central role in intelligence gathering and cross-border threat monitoring.

However, intelligence reform remains less visible and more sensitive than other areas of restructuring. The development of professional standards, internal oversight mechanisms, and clear operational boundaries is still ongoing. As with other parts of the sector, the gap between formal structure and institutional practice remains a defining challenge. In part, the NSC was designed to address this gap by providing an overarching coordination framework linking intelligence, defence, and internal security institutions.

External factors shaping institutional development

External dynamics have influenced institutional development, including regional training partnerships, evolving security threats, and shifting international align-

ments. These factors have reinforced the need for adaptive and flexible institutional structures. At the same time, the leadership has sought to manage relations with external actors present in Syria. This includes balancing the Russian military presence and facilitating a gradual reduction of its operational footprint while maintaining a functional relationship. More recently, co-operation with Ukraine in defence-related fields has expanded, reflecting a diversification of external partnerships.

The northeast as a critical juncture

The integration of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) represents the most critical and complex test of institutional structuring in the current phase. Unlike earlier integration efforts, which focused on fragmented armed groups, the SDF controls a distinct geographic and administrative space with its own governance and security structures. Integration requires aligning distinct governance and security structures within a unified framework.

The process is being implemented gradually through detailed arrangements addressing personnel integration, weapons control, command structures, and coordination mechanisms (Almustafa, 2026). The outcome of this process will be decisive. It will determine whether the state can consolidate authority across all regions without reproducing decentralised or hybrid security arrangements.

Core challenges

Despite significant progress, the restructuring process faces several structural challenges that continue to shape its trajectory, including the following:

- **Human resources and training:** Rapid recruitment has outpaced training capacity, resulting in uneven institutional culture and performance.
- **Implementation gap:** A central challenge remains translating formal structures into consistent practice. Bridging this gap is essential for transforming institutional design into effective governance.
- **Technological capacity:** Limited access to advanced technologies constrains operational effectiveness, particularly in areas such as border security, CT, and criminal investigation.
- **Justice sector lag:** The justice sector continues to lag behind security institutions. Capacity constraints, procedural backlogs, and reliance on legacy systems limit its effectiveness. This creates a structural imbalance between enforcement and accountability.
- **Inclusivity and representation:** The emerging security sector remains uneven in its social and geographic representation, reflecting the pressures of rapid consolidation and trust-building in a post-conflict environment. While the leadership has prioritised stability and institutional cohesion during the transition, broadening inclusivity across different Syrian communities remains essential for long-term legitimacy and national integration.
- **Northeast integration (SDF) - ongoing and contested:** The SDF integration process remains ongoing and contested, with gradual implementation aimed at maintaining stability while extending state authority (Almustafa, 2026).
- **Southern dynamics (Suwayda) - Security, external influence, and accountability:** Southern Syria, particularly

The integration of the Syrian democratic forces represents the most critical and complex test of institutional structuring in the current phase.

Suwayda, reflects overlapping internal tensions and external pressures, requiring a balance between security, reconciliation, and accountability.

- **While centralisation** has been prioritised for stabilisation, it also carries risks if it overlooks local governance dynamics and existing decentralised structures (POMEPS Studies, 2025).

From structure to function

The trajectory of this institutional development is directly relevant to EU-Syria engagement, as European cooperation increasingly depends on the reliability, professionalism, and accountability of Syrian state institutions in areas linked to security, migration, refugee return, and stabilisation. The same operational gaps also shape trust, legitimacy, and societal narratives, which are further explored in the following section.

De-radicalisation and social peace as institutional stabilisers

The institutional dynamics outlined in the previous section - particularly the gaps between formal structures and operational practice - have directly shaped patterns of trust, legitimacy, and narrative formation across Syrian society.

Contexts, narratives and grievances

The narrative of «Syrian victimhood» has been a popular narrative for recruiting ji-

hadists from all over the world to fight in Syria since 2011. The violent repression committed by the Assad regime against the peaceful uprising in its early stages formed a strong argument to convince youth with Salafi-jihadist affiliation to fight against the regime in Syria (Hecker & Tenenbaum 2019). From this narrative emerged al-Qaeda-linked group Jabhat al-Nusra and then Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), which later, at the end of 2024, managed to lead the military coalition that overthrew the Assad regime and took control of power in Damascus.

Therefore, the overthrow of the Assad regime was a strong factor in dismantling the most important argument for violent extremism in Syria. Moreover, HTS itself assuming power in Syria meant that a key player in this arena moved from the category of non-state violent extremist activity aiming at destabilisation to that of a state activity opting for stabilisation. However, at the same time, this transition is highly contentious. The transformations that HTS - the core of the ruling regime in Damascus - has gone through, from jihadist Salafism to adopting a state model today, are not credible to everyone. Likewise, the fact that a group of prominent figures with a jihadist past²³ are leading the new power structure makes the discussion around combating violent extremism and terrorism in Syria highly contentious today.

Some views believe that the new Syrian leaders are truly capable of intellectually and operationally transforming the thousands of fighters who have been engaged in the Syrian war on the Salafi-jihadist agenda (interview with a Syrian politician, 2 April 2026). This is because they themselves have already undergone this transformation since 2017, and have moved

²³ Including President Ahmad al-Shara' himself.

from Salafi-jihadism to the idea of building a state that responds to all its citizens (Drevon & Haenni, 2025). Nevertheless, others believe that the emergence of these former jihadist leaders sends misleading messages to several parties and may provoke a larger and opposing wave of terrorist activity.

On the one hand, Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) - one of the main opponents of the new leaders in Damascus - would be keen to work actively towards obstructing or attempting to topple this new regime. This is evident through unprecedented ISIS activity attempting to assassinate leaders of the new regime, or even carrying out bombings and targeted operations to destabilise the new order.²⁴ Today, ISIS finds in Syria numerous advantages that make its activity possible: it operates in vast areas of fragile security conditions, especially in the Syrian desert and regions bordering Iraq. It faces a newly-established security apparatus that is still in the process of gaining experience and capable personnel (Fawzi, 2026). ISIS also benefits significantly from those discontented with President Ahmad al-Shara' shifts after abandoning the previous approach, recruiting from among them. In addition, it takes advantage of those dissatisfied with the uncertain transitional justice process, considered to be undecisive in punishing those complicit with the former regime's crimes against the Syrian people. Hence, it feeds their desire to carry out immediate

punishment with their own hands by targeting specific Syrian communities, such as the Alawites.

From Syria's diverse communities' perspective, creating security and defence institutions by those who militarised and sectarianised the revolution prevents them from offering an inclusive model for a unified state. Their reliance solely on Sunni Arab recruits further undermines trust that these institutions serve all Syrians. This may push other communities to arm against the state, repeating the chaotic armed group experience since 2012. They justify this by referring to grave violations committed by state forces while suppressing rebellions in the coastal provinces and Suweyda in March and July 2025.²⁵ These violations cast doubt on whether the newly formed government forces have truly shifted from a Salafi Jihadist doctrine that justified killing based on religious identity to one that protects all citizens. Some argue that in the post-conflict phase, the forces remain fragile and undisciplined until a law-based doctrine takes root. Such violations deepen fear among Syria's communities, leading them to view the new authority as a threat, avoid institutions, and spread distrust of government forces.

From this perspective, the SDF integration process is not only an institutional challenge but also a test of social trust. Kurdish hesitation has been shaped by fears that violations seen in the coast

²⁴ In fact, ISIS has gained a relative advantage after HTS shifted away from jihadist Salafism, as it became the sole representative of this tendency in Syria, after previously competing with Jabhat al-Nusra - the former version of HTS - to represent this approach in the years following their split in April 2013.

²⁵ To suppress the coastal rebellion, thousands of undisciplined fighters committed serious abuses against civilians based on Alawite identity. The Syrian Network for Human Rights reported 1,662 victims: 1,217 killed by government forces or militias, and 442 by Assad-loyal rebels (Michael, 2025). Similar events unfolded in Suweyda, where government intervention in Druze-tribal clashes fuelled revenge killings, kidnappings, and destruction of Druze villages and farms. Nearly 1,700 people were killed, mostly Druze civilians targeted by government-linked forces attempting to control the clashes (OHCHR, 2026). In both cases, President Al-Sharaa set up truth committees to investigate violations and prosecute perpetrators, but their credibility was often questioned since they were government appointed.

Instability in Syria is not limited to jihadist terrorism. It also includes sectarian violence, local armed conflict, revenge dynamics, organised criminality, and unresolved wartime grievances.

and Suweyda could be repeated in north-eastern Syria. The integration process therefore matters both for consolidating the state's monopoly of force and for broadening the diversity and operational experience of the new security institutions. The Syrian military's operations in Kurdish areas have been more disciplined, with no clear violations compared to the coast and Suweyda. This shows the forces are evolving, learning, and striving for professionalism. The Ministry of Defence (MoD) also announced that violators in northeastern Syria would be held accountable, reflecting greater discipline and accountability than in earlier operations. (SANA, January 22, 2026). The new authorities are learning from past lessons to build trust, but still lack key elements for a comprehensive CT strategy, including distinguishing between hard and soft measures in CT and CVE policy.

Balance needed: parallel hard and soft security policies

Instability in Syria is not limited to jihadist terrorism. It also includes sectarian violence, local armed conflict, revenge dynamics, organised criminality, and unresolved wartime grievances. Hard security measures- such as arrests, prosecutions, intelligence coordination, weapons seizures, and disruption of financing- remain necessary, but they cannot address these broader drivers of violence on their own (Reed & Pohl, 2017). Military defeat of extremist groups does not equal ideological defeat, so operations against ISIS alone cannot end its influence (Hecker & Tenenbaum, 2019). Their narratives must

be dismantled to block them from shaping the present or future, as these stories strongly drive recruitment and unity (Gaub, 2021). Weakening them requires replacing such narratives with inclusive ones aligned with the state's vision. People must also trust the authorities' commitment to transitional justice to engage in building new narratives of peace and coexistence (interview with Syrian NGO leader, 19 April 2026). Yet, the state's role should not dominate, since the strength of alternative narratives lies in diverse stakeholders, reflecting a genuine state-society partnership.

After Assad's fall, ISIS carried out three major operations that highlighted the dangers of its renewed activity, beginning with the attack on St. Elias Church in Damascus's Dweil'a neighbourhood in June 2025²⁶ (Gritten, 2025). The second was the attack on American and Syrian soldiers near Palmyra²⁷ in December 2025, during a military meeting to coordinate joint efforts against ISIS (Jordan, 2025). The third attack targeted the Imam Ali ibn Abi Talib Mosque²⁸ in a predominantly Alawite neighbourhood of Homs (France24, 2025). These attacks underscored the need for stronger government efforts to track perpetrators and prevent future incidents. According to Mol statements, Syrian authorities received intelligence support from Turkey and the United States, which helped thwart subsequent attacks.

The Syrian Mol's Telegram account reported in 2025 and early 2026 on its efforts to track terrorist groups, defined mainly as ISIS, Assad-linked factions undermining civil peace, and Hezbollah

²⁶ The attack resulted in the killing of 25 people and injuries to dozens.

²⁷ The attack caused the deaths of two American soldiers, a translator, and three Syrian soldiers.

²⁸ The attack caused 8 deaths and more than 18 others injured.

activities against the new order. On 6 August 2025, the Mol foiled a plot by Assad regime remnants to bomb a church in Safita, Tartus. On 5 March 2026, it announced preventing an ISIS sabotage plan in Damascus through cooperation with Turkish intelligence, later referring the case to the Counter-Terrorism Directorate. After the Palmyra attack on American soldiers, American and Syrian forces launched joint airstrikes and raids on over 100 ISIS targets, killing and arresting nearly 50 members (Sang, 2026). On 5 May 2026, the Mol announced foiling a Hezbollah plot to target key Syrian leaders and spark clashes across several provinces.

Syrian-American cooperation deepened with Syria's admission to the anti-ISIS coalition in November 2025, following Al-Shara's US visit and the lifting of sanctions. It was further solidified through joint operations after the Palmyra attack, culminating in February 2026 with the US withdrawal from Syrian bases and their handover to the Syrian military. These operations included transferring about 5,700 ISIS prisoners from SDF-guarded prisons in Syria to Iraqi custody. This coincided with Damascus taking control of northeastern Syria after an Al-Shaddadi prison breach in January 2026, when clashes between government forces and the SDF enabled ISIS escapes. The breach exposed the rivalry over being Washington's preferred partner against ISIS, though Washington had already decided to end non-state actors' role. While this strengthened Syrian security institutions, integrating the SDF into state structures remains ongoing and requires independent evaluation to decide on its success.

The rushed transfer of ISIS prisoners to Iraq and dismantling of Al-Hol camp without a plan exposed the lack of a clear strategy for handling ISIS's legacy. The government appeared pressured by its supporters, giving more weight to sympathy for detained

families than to cautious management of ISIS resurgence risks (Sallon, 2026). Before the government relocated remaining families to another camp, many were smuggled out by foreign fighters stationed in Idlib (Atallah, 2026). The harsh conditions in Al-Hol had already fostered extremist ideas among deprived children and adolescents. The camp was evacuated within days, during which many escaped unsupervised, while the rest were moved to a designated camp in Ahktarin, Aleppo countryside (AlSayed, 2026).

From institutional security to civil peace in EU-Syria engagement strategic framing: engagement through convergence

The dynamics outlined above are directly relevant to EU-Syria engagement, particularly in areas of migration management, CT co-operation, and institutional stabilisation. European engagement is increasingly conditioned on the functionality and reliability of Syrian institutions rather than formal political alignment. Previous EU disengagement from Syria during the conflict significantly reduced its political leverage while increasing its exposure to instability, including migration and security threats (Turkmani & Haid, 2016). The return of refugees, in particular, depends on perceptions of security and institutional trust (interview with EU mission official, Damascus, 5 March 2026). At the same time, EU frameworks already prioritise institutional capacity-building and technical cooperation through mechanisms such as coordinated donor platforms and the Technical Assistance Hub (European Union, 2025). This positions institutional development - particularly in the security and justice sectors - as a

The return of refugees, in particular, depends on perceptions of security and institutional trust.

The EU can support tailored models by sponsoring platforms where police and grassroots groups jointly design approaches for Syria.

practical entry point for structured cooperation. A realistic approach to EU-Syria engagement therefore lies in phased, incentive-based cooperation, where technical alignment precedes political convergence, and where institutional consolidation and social stabilisation reinforce one another.

Hard security cooperation and institutional capacity

The new Syrian authorities have prioritised hard security measures in countering terrorism, particularly where international cooperation enhances their legitimacy. Cooperation in this field provides an opportunity for peer learning and knowledge accumulation for newly established institutions. Building on European experience in supporting security sector reform in transitional countries after the cold war context, especially in Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and later on in Georgia, EU-Syria cooperation in this domain can be structured through an incentive-based model, whether bilateral or multilateral. Key areas for cooperation could include:

- Creation of joint intelligence databases, shared investigation methods, data analysis patterns, process-tracing guidelines, and financial units to intercept terrorist funding.
- Capacity-building programs to strengthen institutionalisation, professionalism, and accountability, involving MoD, Mol, GIS, MoJ, and judges' and lawyers' unions.
- Establishment of a dedicated unit for crimes against women to handle gender-based violence, ensuring transparent reporting and credibility. Refugee families will not return if daughters' safety is at risk.
- Consistent quotas for women across all new recruits, including police, officers,

prosecutors, judges, and justice staff, encouraging women to seek justice without fear.

- Support for an Ombudsman to promote basic rights and give victims faster access to justice without overwhelming the conventional justice system.
- Cooperation frameworks including official institutions and local expertise from universities, think tanks, unions, and civil society, standardising inclusion of civil society to consolidate civil-military relations and expose institutions to global best practices, especially human rights standards.
- The EU can support tailored models by sponsoring platforms where police and grassroots groups jointly design approaches for Syria. European experience in police reform shows cooperation must go beyond training and equipment, focusing on community policing to strengthen accountability and ties with local communities. Though time-consuming, this builds responsiveness, accountability, and stability (Gaub & Walsh, 2020). Research centres and think tanks specialising in law, security, and defence can also bridge knowledge gaps through training design and policy support, drawing on regional networks and Syrian diaspora expertise.

Soft security, civil peace, and narrative formation

Many of these risks are linked not only to extremist organisations, but also to unresolved communal tensions, exclusionary narratives, localised violence, and weak conflict-resolution mechanisms. While hard security cooperation is necessary, it is insufficient on its own. A broader human security approach must gradually complement

operational measures such as raids, patrols, and border control. Soft security mechanisms remain less prioritised, as they are closely tied to domestic legitimacy and politically sensitive issues. The constrained political space makes it difficult to openly debate national security strategies, including CT policies (interview with a Syrian journalist, 7 April 2026). In this context, EU support can play a catalytic role by enabling civil society engagement in shaping CT and countering violent extremism (CVE) strategies. Framing such engagement as part of international cooperation can incentivise government openness while strengthening societal ownership. Building credible alternative narratives requires a broad-based process involving multiple actors. The February 2025 dialogue conference in Damascus demonstrated both the potential and the limitations of national-level dialogue, as it included diverse social actors but excluded political entities (Allam, 2025). Expanding such dialogue at the local level can provide more inclusive and representative platforms. Key soft security measures include:

- Supporting the establishment of local forums hosted by universities, municipalities, places of worship, and community centres to analyse root causes of violent extremism and identify policy gaps.
- Ensuring inclusive participation of youth, women, grassroots organisations, and community leaders in these forums.
- Mapping the ideological, political, economic, and social drivers of extremism and developing locally grounded responses.
- Supporting the development of alternative narratives that counter extremist discourse and hate speech while reflecting a shared national vision.

The creation of alternative narratives is particularly critical. The military defeat of

extremist groups does not equate to their ideological defeat (Hecker & Tenenbaum, 2019). Narratives remain central to recruitment and cohesion within these groups (Gaub, 2021). While the fall of the Assad regime weakened a core extremist narrative, new narratives have emerged, including perceptions of government leniency toward former regime figures and concerns about inclusivity and representation.

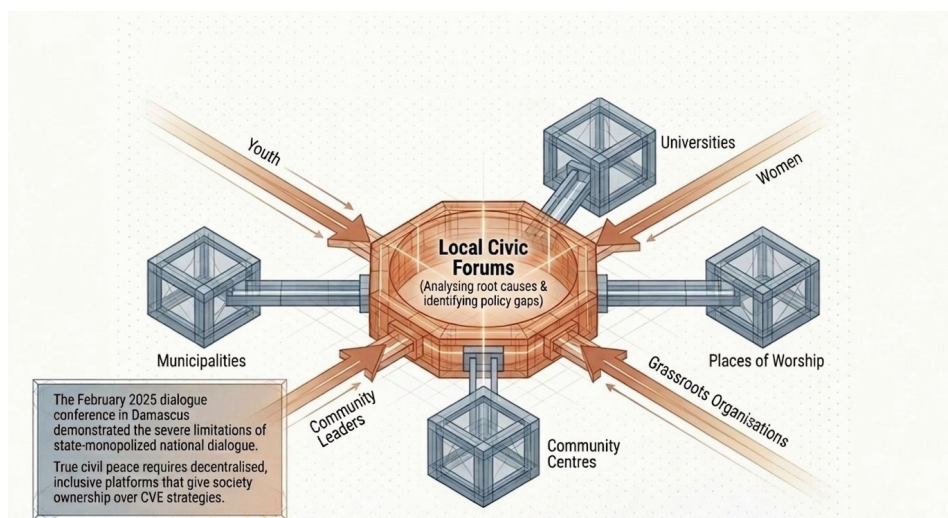
Local dynamics and drivers of extremism and conflict

Local conditions play a decisive role in shaping the presence and dynamics of extremist groups. In some areas, economic deprivation drives recruitment, requiring targeted livelihood interventions. In others, sectarian tensions reinforce cycles of violence, requiring intercommunal dialogue and cooperation.

Effective responses include:

- Creating economic opportunities in cooperation with the private sector and state institutions
- Organising interfaith and intercommunal initiatives to reduce sectarian tensions
- Supporting joint community projects that strengthen cooperation and isolate extremist discourse
- Encouraging local police participation in community initiatives to build trust and improve institutional performance
- Local engagement is essential, as isolated communities with limited demographic diversity are more vulnerable to extremist narratives. Strengthening social cohesion at the local level directly contributes to national stability, and hence promotes civil peace.

EU support can play a catalytic role by enabling civil society engagement in shaping CT and countering violent extremism strategies.

Figure 1. The architecture of local dialogue

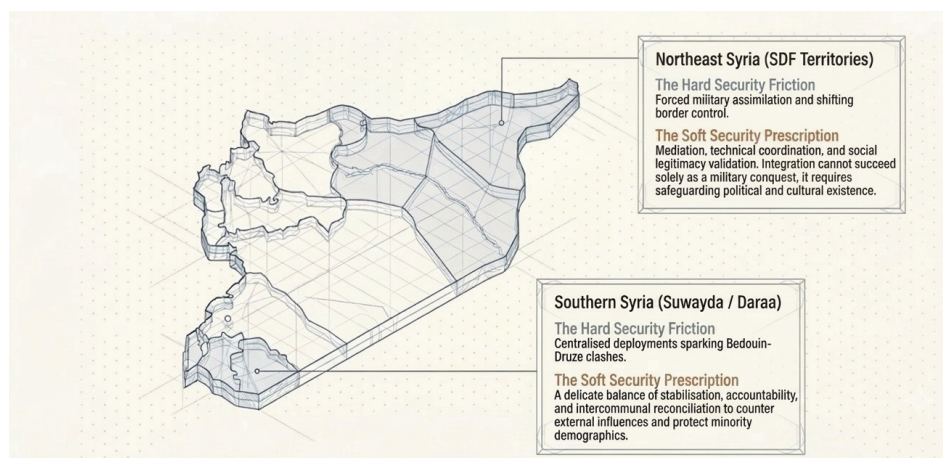
Note. Elaborated by authors. Created with NotebookLM.

Geographically, two areas stand out:

- **Northeastern Syria:** The integration of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) into national institutions represents a key test of both institutional structuring and social legitimacy. EU support can focus on mediation, tech-

nical coordination, and institutional alignment

- **Southern Syria:** Areas such as Suweyda require a balance between stabilisation, accountability, and reconciliation, particularly in the context of external influences and internal tensions

Figure 2. Geographies of fragility: tailoring soft security

Note. Elaborated by authors. Created with NotebookLM.

Legal frameworks, accountability, and political context

Legal and institutional frameworks are central to long-term stabilisation. Establishing laws that criminalise incitement and hate speech, alongside clear transitional justice mechanisms, helps shift conflict resolution toward legal and political processes (Khebiya, 2026). However, these frameworks must be developed through inclusive consultation to ensure legitimacy. The broader political context presents challenges. The limited space for political participation and the sensitivity of security-related discussions constrain open debate on CT strategies. At the same time, concerns over inclusivity and representation continue to shape public perceptions of legitimacy (interview with a Syrian NGO leader, 19 April, 2026).

A major gap remains in the legal framework governing CT. Existing laws from the previous regime were designed to suppress political opposition rather than address clearly defined terrorist acts. Developing a new legal framework that distinguishes between violent extremism, and legitimate political activity is essential. This requires activating legislative institutions, including the delayed parliament, and strengthening judicial oversight. However, this process is complicated by divergences within the ruling elite (interview with a Syrian official, 13 April 2026).

Detainee management and institutional gaps

The absence of a comprehensive strategy for managing detainees and high-risk populations highlights a critical institutional gap. Structured frameworks are needed to address detention, rehabilitation, and reintegration in a coherent manner.

This creates a clear entry point for EU-

supported cooperation through:

- Development of detainee management systems
- Support for camp transitions and reintegration programmes
- Capacity-building for institutions responsible for detention and rehabilitation

Targeted groups for rehabilitation strategies

Effective CT and stabilisation require targeted interventions for specific groups, including:

Former fighters: Individuals not integrated into state institutions, including foreign fighters, require ideological reorientation, vocational training, and livelihood opportunities. The Ghoraba brigade case illustrates the risks of insufficient reintegration (AlMaraghy, 2026).

Prisoners: Reviewing detainee cases is essential to avoid wrongful detention and prevent new grievances. The release of minors following investigations into Alqahtan prison demonstrates the importance of accurate classification (Hill, 2023; Levant24, 2026).

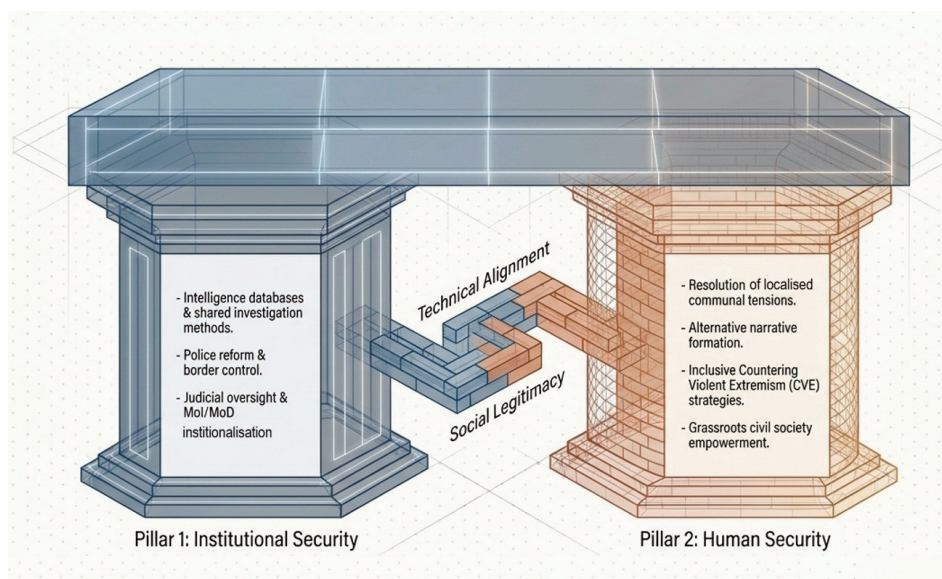
Government forces: Newly integrated personnel require continuous reorientation to ensure alignment with institutional norms. Violations in coastal provinces and Suweyda highlight the risks of insufficient training and blurred boundaries between formal forces and extremist actors (Fawzy, 2026).

ISIS-affiliated families: Families released from camps such as al-Hol and Roj require integrated programmes combining basic services with ideological reorientation and long-term reintegration support.

The limited space for political participation and the sensitivity of security-related discussions constrain open debate on CT strategies.

These targeted programmes must combine ideological, social, and economic components to ensure sustainable outcomes for all groups who may feel excluded in the new setup.

Figure 3. Two-track architecture of civil peace



Note. Elaborated by authors. Created with NotebookLM.

Conclusion: a phased and incentive-based approach

EU engagement with Syrian authorities to deepen institutionalisation, professionalisation, and accountability is essential for stabilisation. Many challenges observed during the transition stem from limited institutional experience and the pressures of rapid consolidation. International co-operation focused on knowledge transfer

and peerlearning can play a critical role in addressing these gaps.

At the same time, cooperation must be designed around incentives that strengthen both state institutions and societal ownership.

By supporting the convergence between institutional security and civil peace, the EU can contribute to stabilisation in Syria while advancing its own strategic priorities.

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Partners at Last? EU Engagement with Syria and the Case for a Durable Architecture

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Syria, the EU, and the challenge of re-engagement

The collapse of the Assad regime in December 2024 marked one of the most consequential moments in Syria's modern history and one of the most challenging for European Union (EU) foreign policy. Syria, a country within the EU's neighbourhood and part of the Mediterranean space that the EU has long sought to stabilise and integrate, was emerging from over a decade of catastrophic war. The EU is well placed to contribute to what came next: it had remained Syria's largest donor throughout the conflict years, it hosted over 1.5 million Syrian refugees, and it held a combination of financial instruments, diplomatic frameworks, and neighbourhood policy tools that no other partner could replicate.

After 14 years during which the EU had, by necessity, abandoned state-level engagement with Syria and worked instead through non-state channels and United Nations (UN) agencies, dealing with a Syrian government became possible again. For an institution whose external action architecture is built around state-to-state frameworks, cooperation agreements, neighbourhood policies, and structured political dialogues, this return to the familiar terrain of a governmental counterpart might have appeared straightforward. Except that it was not. The new Syrian authorities were led by figures whose political past the EU had spent years designating as a security threat. The EU's own instruments, designed for more stable transitional environments, were poorly adapted to a country whose institutional landscape remained fragmented across competing armed actors and contested territorial control. These complications on

both sides mean that the diplomatic momentum of early re-engagement has yet to produce the durable bilateral architecture that a genuine partnership requires.

This chapter examines EU engagement with Syria across three phases: the pre-conflict period of asymmetric partnership and structural deference to the Syrian state; the conflict years of severing ties with the state, imposing sanctions, and channelling support through humanitarian and non-state actors while abandoning any coherent political strategy; and the post-2024 moment of re-engagement, where the pace of diplomacy has run ahead of the institutional foundations needed to sustain it.

The chapter argues that a successful recalibration requires the EU to move beyond a purely state-centric model. The central question is not whether the EU should engage but rather how to engage: calibrating the depth and pace of engagement to demonstrate progress at programme and project level, investing in civic actors, local governance, and cultural ties that persist regardless of the state of relations with Damascus, and building bottom-up demand for better rights and governance rather than accepting a veneer of reform at the top. While such investment requires a level of political openness by the Syrian government, the EU could use its leverage to ensure that its investment in Syria goes beyond the central state.

The analysis draws on three main sources of evidence. First, a review of primary EU and Syrian official documents, including the 1978 Cooperation Agreement, the 2007-2010 Country Strategy Paper and National Indicative Programme, the 2011-2013 National Indicative Programme (NIP), EU Council conclusions and EEAS policy papers across the conflict and post-conflict periods, and an April 2026 EU

background paper on re-engagement circulated internally to member states. Second, a review of the academic and policy literature on EU-Syria relations, post-conflict reconstruction, sanctions impact, and Euro-Mediterranean cooperation frameworks. Third, interviews with EU officials and Syrian researchers, civil society representatives, and practitioners conducted as part of the research for this chapter, providing ground-level perspectives on re-engagement dynamics and institutional constraints on both sides.

The pre-2011 model: asymmetric partnership and its limits

The history of EU-Syria relations before 2011 is, at its core, a history of structural deference. The only bilateral agreement that resulted in a signed and ratified text was the 1978 Cooperation Agreement between Syria and the European Economic Community. The agreement was designed to facilitate trade and development cooperation, but not to promote political reform. It made no mention of democratisation, human rights, or institutional accountability. Its stated objectives, contributing to Syria's «economic and social development», «industrialisation», and «modernisation of agriculture», were development goals, not reform requirements. Conditionality, in any meaningful sense, was absent (European Economic Community, 1978).

The trade provisions of the agreement were themselves heavily asymmetric. Syrian industrial products gained essentially free access to the European Community market, with customs duties abolished almost entirely. Syria, in turn, retained the right to introduce or maintain customs duties on European goods

whenever it judged these necessary for its own industrialisation and development. Syria also received preferential tariff reductions on agricultural exports. The arrangement reflected the cooperative spirit of the 1975 Barcelona Process era, in which development partnership was seen as a sufficient foundation for political progress over time. What it produced, in practice, was a relationship in which the EU was Syria's largest trading partner and primary donor but held little structural leverage over how the relationship evolved.

Efforts to negotiate a more ambitious framework began in 2004, when talks on a full Association Agreement got underway. The draft agreement was intended to cover the economic, political, and social dimensions of the bilateral relationship and to lay the groundwork for Syria's eventual full participation in the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP). It was never signed (Turkmani, 2018). The EU presented the agreement as ready for signature in 2009, but the Syrian government requested additional time to review its provisions, and the process stalled indefinitely. The EU argued that even the unsigned draft had exerted a positive influence, noting that the Syrian government was using the agreement «as a reference for developing its reform agenda and as a guide for the country's modernisation process» (European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument, 2007).

The Country Strategy Paper and the 2007-2010, 2008 and 2011-2013 National Indicative Programmes (NIPs) offer a more granular picture of how EU engagement operated in practice, and its limits (European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument, 2007; European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument, 2008; European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument, 2010).

The EU presented the agreement as ready for signature in 2009, but the Syrian government requested additional time to review its provisions, and the process stalled indefinitely.

The documents were developed through a consultation process with the Syrian government and explicitly based on Syria's own national development agenda, the country's 10th Five-Year Plan. This alignment was presented as a strength: the EU was supporting Syrian-owned reform rather than imposing external priorities. In practice, it meant that the boundaries of EU programming were set by what the Assad government was willing to include in its own planning documents. The strategy identified political and administrative reform as a priority alongside economic and social development, translating it into planned support for decentralisation and local governance, judicial reform, and human rights capacity-building. Yet the political reform agenda was hollowed out before it started. The Syrian government indicated that human rights were «less of a priority than security matters and other aspects of the reform agenda,» and the EU accepted this framing. The 2007-2010 NIP committed to making human rights support available only «upon explicit request from the Government of Syria» and allocated no budget for it. The proposed mechanism for human rights engagement was limited to supporting a government-designed national human rights commission, an institution controlled by the same authority whose conduct was the subject of concern. Support for independent civil society and free media was not envisaged anywhere in the programming. The 2011-2013 NIP envisaged civil society support as part of political reform but routed it through the First Lady-led Syria Trust for Development, meaning that even this was mediated by a governmental platform.

What the NIPs actually delivered was a predominantly technocratic agenda: support for public financial management, customs modernisation, trade facilitation, and economic governance. While these

are legitimate development priorities, they were pursued without enforceable governance benchmarks and without any mechanism linking EU funding to progress on democratisation or political reform. Conditionality appeared only in indirect and operational forms. For example, making implementation dependent on the Syrian government's administrative absorptive capacity, which gave Damascus a structural veto over the pace and scope of reform without formally acknowledging it as such.

During the pre-conflict period, the EU also remained reluctant to criticise the human rights situation in Syria publicly, limiting itself to occasional statements condemning the detention of individual activists. By the time the uprising began in 2011, the EU had built a bilateral relationship that was substantively asymmetric, institutionally shallow, and structurally dependent on the goodwill of an authoritarian government. When that goodwill collapsed, so did the relationship.

Reactive by design: EU engagement during the Syrian conflict

The EU's response to the Syrian government's brutal crackdown on the 2011 uprising was swift and decisive: extensive sanctions, political disengagement, suspension of the Association Agreement negotiations, and the severing of bilateral cooperation programmes. What followed was less decisive. Having abandoned its pre-2011 state-centric model of engagement, the EU found itself without a coherent alternative. Syria continued to exist, its population continued to need support, and European interests in the country's stability did not disappear because the bilateral relationship had collapsed. The

EU was faced with the fundamental challenge of remaining engaged with a country whose government it had effectively excommunicated.

In the early years of the conflict, the EU's response was largely improvised. It pivoted towards non-state actors, supporting civil society organizations, UN agencies, emerging local administrative councils, and opposition-aligned governance structures in areas outside regime control, while rapidly scaling up its role as a humanitarian donor, eventually becoming the largest in the Syrian response. These were reasonable operational choices given the circumstances, but they were made without a coherent political strategy to underpin them. The EU had no established doctrine for engaging in a context where the recognised state had become the primary perpetrator of violence against its own population, and its institutional architecture was not built to function without a state partner at its centre.

With the previous NIP now irrelevant, EU funding continued to flow through ad hoc Special Measures without a strategy to replace it. Over time, the absence of strategy produced a damaging drift. As the conflict lengthened and its effects on Europe became more direct, through rising refugee numbers and the emergence of terrorism threats linked to foreign fighters, EU engagement increasingly narrowed around security and migration management. Counter-terrorism (CT) cooperation, border management, and refugee containment came to dominate the practical agenda, crowding out the earlier, if limited, emphasis on governance support and political transformation (Turkmani & Haid, 2016). The EU's engagement with Syria was being progressively redefined by what the crisis cost Europe, rather than by what Syria needed.

Only from 2017 did the EU attempt to regain a more strategic footing, introducing conditionality that explicitly linked reconstruction funding to progress on a credible political transition. The approach represented a genuine effort to use the EU's financial weight as leverage. In practice, it achieved little: the Assad regime had no interest in the political transition the EU was conditioning its support on, and other external actors with fewer governance demands were willing to fill the space. The conditionality was real, but it was applied at a political level the regime was never going to meet, leaving the EU with leverage it could not convert into change (Turkmani, 2019).

This period also produced a complication that would carry directly into the post-2024 moment. The EU had designated Jabhat al-Nusra (which later reconstituted itself as Hayat Tahrir al-Sham) as a terrorist organisation, listing its leadership accordingly. All EU humanitarian and governance support was strictly conditioned on the requirement that it should not benefit Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) or its members. This was a legally and politically necessary position given the designation, but it created significant operational constraints in areas of northwest Syria where HTS exercised de facto administrative control. When HTS-led forces swept to power in December 2024, the EU found itself having to manage a relationship with an entity whose leadership it had spent years formally treating as terrorists.

The sanctions imposed across this period failed in their declared primary objective: the Assad regime did not change its behaviour, and the core military and security institutions that sustained it were largely insulated from economic pressure. Banking and energy sanctions instead paralysed much of the formal private sector, cutting

The EU had no established doctrine for engaging in a context where the recognised state had become the primary perpetrator of violence against its own population.

independent businesses off from international financial channels and export markets, while regime-linked cronies proved adept at exploiting the black markets the sanctions inadvertently strengthened. At the household level, currency devaluation and the collapse of formal employment pushed the overwhelming majority of Syrians below the poverty line (Mehchy & Turkmani, 2021). Paradoxically, the economic vacuum deepened Syria's financial dependence on Iran and Russia and reduced the EU's own leverage over the regime it was trying to pressure (Yazigi, 2014). Rather than isolating Assad, the sanctions regime shifted Syria's external economic relationships decisively away from Europe and toward actors with no interest in political reform.

Recognition without architecture: EU re-engagement after 2024

The dramatic fall of Bashar al-Assad's government, at the hands of an HTS-led military coalition, created an immediate and unprecedented challenge. Resuming relations with the Syrian state became possible again overnight, but the authority now controlling that state was the same organisation that appeared on the EU's own terrorist designation list. There was no established EU playbook for such a scenario. The closest precedent, the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan, had produced a paralysed hybrid approach: engagement without recognition, conditioned aid without state-building. In Syria, which unlike Afghanistan falls under the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), the EU chose a different path. It moved, with notable speed, towards recognition and structured re-engagement.

The steps taken in the months since the transition have been substantial. The EU

and its member states lifted the majority of its Syria sanctions. Commissioner Šuica visited Damascus to announce Syria's formal reintegration into the EU's neighbourhood policy framework and its participation in the New Pact for the Mediterranean. Syria was readmitted to the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) in 2025 after a 14-year suspension, restoring access to the intergovernmental project platforms, in energy, water, transport, and urban development, on which the Pact's architecture rests. The EU reopened its delegation in Damascus and began restoring operational programmes.

The contours of a more formal engagement architecture solidified in May 2026. On 11 May, the EU held its first High-Level Political Dialogue with Syria in Brussels. The first structured bilateral political engagement of this kind in over 15 years. The dialogue was co-chaired by HR/VP Kaja Kallas and Syrian Foreign Minister Asaad al-Shaibani, with Commissioners Šuica (Mediterranean) and Lahbib (Humanitarian Aid) also present, a configuration that signalled the breadth of the EU's agenda: diplomacy, economic recovery, and crisis management simultaneously on the table (Council of the European Union, 2026b). The dialogue addressed two main areas: EU-Syria relations and regional issues, including opportunities to enhance cooperation while addressing regional stability concerns; and Syria's transition and EU support, with the EU reiterating its commitment to inclusive political transition, socioeconomic recovery, and reconstruction, while stressing the importance of upholding the rights of all Syrian citizens (European Commission/EEAS, 2026).

On the same day, the Foreign Affairs Council adopted a decision lifting the partial suspension of the 1978 EU-Syria Cooperation Agreement. The EU framed

In Syria, which unlike Afghanistan falls under the European Neighbourhood Policy, the EU chose a different path. It moved, with notable speed, towards recognition and structured re-engagement.

these developments explicitly as a shift from crisis response to long-term partnership: a signal that Syria is no longer to be managed as a humanitarian emergency but engaged as a country with which the EU intends a structured, durable relationship (Council of the European Union, 2026a).

A background paper circulated in April 2026 to member states by the EU's diplomatic arm offered more details of the envisioned new architecture: full resumption of the 1978 Cooperation Agreement; a trade and investment framework; a technical assistance hub for business environment reform; and EU support for Syrian police training and interior ministry capacity-building alongside CT and organised crime cooperation. On sanctions, the paper committed to «reframe and adapt» restrictive measures, maintaining targeted leverage while moving away from the broad sectoral approach, and confirmed that facilitating the safe, voluntary, and dignified return of refugees remains a central EU objective, reflecting domestic political pressures in member states that host significant Syrian populations, including Germany, which alone hosts roughly half of the Syrians currently living in Europe (AI-Monitor, 2026).

The paper also pointed to Syria's growing strategic significance as a regional connectivity hub. Syria is emerging as a transit corridor of heightened importance, particularly in light of the energy disruption triggered by the closure of the Strait of Hormuz, with overland Iraqi oil shipments already moving through the Syrian port of Baniyas. Ambitions to position Syria within the India–Middle East–Europe Economic Corridor, and Turkish, Syrian and Jordanian plans to upgrade a rail corridor linking southern Europe to the Gulf, further underscore the country's potential centrality to regional infrastructure.

President al-Sharaa has moved beyond indicating this position to actively promoting it as a diplomatic agenda. At the informal EU-regional partners summit in Nicosia in April 2026, he presented Syria's Four Seas and Nine Corridors initiatives, a connectivity vision originally proposed by Turkey before the Syrian conflict as a safe alternative artery linking Central Asia and the Gulf to Europe, arguing explicitly that the disruption of global trade routes following the closure of the Strait of Hormuz made new regional strategies urgent (Syrian Arab News Agency, 2026). He stressed that “Europe needs Syria as much as Syria needs Europe,” making a significant shift in framing EU-Syria relations. Syria's transitional government is not merely accepting EU engagement; it is seeking to shape the terms of it, positioning geographic and infrastructural assets as leverage in the bilateral relationship. How the EU responds to this framing will matter. An energy partnership built primarily around fossil fuel transit infrastructure would risk reproducing the patronage dynamics and state-dependency logic that made previous bilateral relationships politically fragile. The more consequential question is not whether Syria can serve as a corridor for Gulf hydrocarbons, but what kind of energy partnership serves both Syrian recovery and European strategic interests over the longer term.

Yet despite this pace of movement, the structural foundations of EU-Syria engagement remain thin, and all funding continues to flow through ad hoc annual Special Measures. The restoration of the 1978 Cooperation Agreement's full application is a meaningful step, but the Agreement was designed for a very different bilateral relationship and carries none of the governance benchmarks or institutional linkages that contemporary EU neighbourhood frameworks require. The EU's re-engagement, however ener-

Channelling engagement through the Pact's top-down intergovernmental logic therefore risks reproducing the pre-2011 assumption that state-level engagement translates into population-level impact.

getic in diplomatic and legal terms, has yet to translate into the kind of structured bilateral architecture that would make it durable (interview no. 1 with Senior EU official, 2 April 2026).

The New Pact for the Mediterranean and the structural limits of current engagement

The New Pact for the Mediterranean, launched in November 2025, is the most politically significant new framework shaping EU-Syria re-engagement. Syria's formal inclusion in the Pact, announced during Commissioner Šuica's visit to Damascus, signals a deliberate intention to reintegrate the country into the EU's neighbourhood policy architecture after 14 years of exclusion. The Pact rests on three pillars: human development, economic potential, and security, preparedness and migration management (European Commission/DG MENA, 2025). On paper, all three are relevant to Syria's current situation. In practice, the fit between the Pact's assumptions and Syria's actual institutional condition is imperfect in ways that matter for implementation.

The Pact was designed for a region of functioning, if imperfect, states. Its project frameworks, financial instruments, and governance linkages presuppose a degree of institutional normalcy: ministries capable of absorbing technical assistance, legal frameworks that permit trade facilitation, civil registration systems adequate for mobility partnership. Syria at present has none of these in reliable form. Central government institutions remain nascent and, in many areas, non-functional (interview no. 6 with UN official, March 20, 2026), and the new authorities, while

moving quickly to centralise executive authority, have not yet translated that centralisation into the administrative capacity that the Pact's implementation machinery requires (Interview Nr 4 with European policy expert, 8 April 2026). Channelling engagement primarily through the Pact's top-down intergovernmental logic therefore risks reproducing the pre-2011 assumption that state-level engagement translates into population-level impact.

Syria's return to the UfM is symbolically important and practically useful. Readmission in 2025 restored access to UfM ministerial platforms and project pipelines in energy, water, transport, and urban development, areas of immediate relevance to reconstruction. The UfM has historically struggled, however, to generate concrete project outcomes in conflict-affected or transitional settings (Blanc Altemir & Ortiz Hernández, 2014), and Syria's participation will test whether the institution can operate effectively in genuinely fragile contexts rather than defaulting to the more stable partnership environments for which it was designed.

The broader problem is one of sequencing and instrument mismatch. The Pact, like the ENP that preceded it, was built for a different relationship than the one currently on offer (Youngs, 2025). Several of its most significant instruments, the NDICI Multi-Annual Indicative Programme (MIP), a new Association Agreement or its equivalent, the EFSD+ blended finance mechanism, require institutional preconditions that Syria does not yet meet (interview no. 4 with European policy expert, 8 April 2026). Without a country MIP, EU programming for Syria continues to flow through annual Special Measures decided unilaterally in Brussels rather than negotiated within a structured bilateral framework. The consequence is not merely technical: the EU's most significant fi-

nancial engagement with Syria is, at present, both ad hoc and one-directional, a continuation of the conflict-era pattern in which Europe decided what Syria needed rather than agreeing it mutually with Syrian counterparts including the government and civil society (interview no. 1 with Senior EU official, 2 April 2026).

The Syrian authorities' own engagement with EU frameworks has added a further layer of difficulty. Damascus has proved slow to respond to EU technical processes, finds procedural requirements opaque and burdensome, and has at times appeared more interested in the political visibility of high-level meetings than in the substantive content of partnership agreements (interview no. 3 with ambassador of European member state, 6 April 2026). This is not unusual for a transitional authority managing multiple competing pressures, but it has slowed progress toward the bilateral architecture that genuine re-engagement requires. The EU, for its part, has not always communicated clearly what it is actually able to offer, nor adapted its presentation of available instruments to an interlocutor with limited prior familiarity with EU external action processes (Interview Nr 5 with Syrian government official, 8 May 2026).

Challenges, openings, and the case for a different approach

The preceding analysis points to a clear conclusion: neither previous model of EU engagement with Syria produced resilience, and a third approach that merely combines elements of both will not be adequate to the moment.

The challenges the EU faces in the current context are formidable and should not be

minimised. The new authorities in Damascus come from a movement whose ideological trajectory and commitment to inclusive governance remain genuinely uncertain. Centralising tendencies are already visible, and the authorities have been implicated in serious human rights violations in Sweida, along the Syrian coast (Amnesty International, 2025), and elsewhere. The country remains fragmented territorially and socially: armed actors continue to operate outside central government authority, a security sector whose sectarian character raises profound questions about its capacity to protect minority communities, and an economic governance environment in acute distress. Humanitarian needs remain very high. Central government institutions are nascent. These are not necessarily temporary transition-phase complications. Many will persist for years, and some may worsen before they improve.

Yet the current moment also presents genuine openings that did not exist before, and that distinguish it sharply from both previous phases of EU engagement. Understanding these openings is as important as understanding the challenges, because they define what a different logic of engagement can actually build on.

The most significant opening is structural, though its origins matter as much as its existence. The civic space that expanded after December 2024 was not simply granted by the new authorities. It was claimed by Syrian civic activists, journalists, and communities who had sustained organised resistance and independent public life through 14 years of war. The new government's posture toward civil society is meaningfully different from Assad's, but the space itself is more the product of Syrian agency rather than governmental generosity. It is also under pressure: there are growing signs that

the authorities are moving to constrain independent media, restrict certain forms of political expression, and centralise control over civil society activity. The opening is real, but it is neither stable nor guaranteed.

This matters for how the EU frames its engagement. Before 2011, the EU had access to the Syrian state but not to Syrian society. During the conflict, it had access to civil society in opposition-held areas and the diaspora, but not to the country as a whole. Now, for the first time, both are simultaneously possible: the EU can engage with the central government and with civil society actors, researchers, and communities across Syria's regions. That dual access is a strategic asset. The EU's engagement architecture should be explicitly designed to use this opening while it exists, and to make its defence a condition of the broader partnership rather than a rhetorical afterthought.

A second opening lies in the legacy of the EU's own conflict-era investment. Despite the strategic failures of that period, one element proved genuinely durable: sustained support for Syrian civil society organizations and independent media. These investments, maintained over 14 years in difficult conditions, produced organisations and institutions that have survived the transition and remain vital elements of Syrian public life. They are filling governance gaps, expanding civic space, holding new authorities to account, and sustaining a pluralistic public debate that the transition has not extinguished. This is not a peripheral achievement. It is the most important asset the EU has in Syria, and it was built not through state-level engagement but despite the absence of it. A new logic of engagement must treat these organisations not as implementing partners for EU pro-

grammes but as strategic actors in Syria's political transition, whose capacity, reach, and independence deserve active and sustained investment.

A third opening is the Syrian diaspora in Europe. Numbering over a million and half people, many of them highly skilled, closely connected to their country of origin, and with direct experience of European institutional life. The diaspora represents an underutilised bridge between EU instruments and Syrian realities. Their potential contribution to recovery, institution-building, and the cultural and educational reconnection of Syria with Europe could be substantial.

A fourth opening is strategic: the EU holds more financial and technical capacity than any other external actor engaged with Syria, and the High-Level Political Dialogue creates for the first time a structured forum for consistent political pressure on reconciliation, inclusion, and minority protection.

What these openings share is that they point away from the state-centric logic of both previous phases. The EU's most durable asset is not its relationship with whoever controls Damascus. That relationship has proved fragile, reversible, and subject to political dynamics the EU cannot control. Its most durable asset is its wider relationship with Syrian society; the civil society organizations it has supported, the diaspora it hosts, the researchers and communities across Syria that have experienced accountable governance in practice. A re-engagement architecture built around those relationships, with state-level engagement as a necessary complement rather than the primary organising logic, is more likely to produce the resilience and durability that the EU's previous approaches so conspicuously lacked.

Policy recommendations

The recommendations that follow are grounded in the analysis in this chapter. They address both the immediate choices the EU faces in designing its re-engagement and the longer-term architecture that the dialogue process should work toward.

The mechanisms through which the dialogue is conducted, who participates, how decisions are made, and what oversight exists, should reflect the principles the EU hopes to see in Syria's own governance. A re-engagement process that is itself inclusive, transparent, and accountable is not merely good practice; it is the most credible signal the EU can send about the kind of partnership it intends to build.

I. Treat reconciliation, inclusion, and security sector reform as foundations of stability, not promises for the future

Political reconciliation and inclusive governance should not be treated as downstream outcomes to be addressed once stability is achieved, they are preconditions for it. The High-Level Political Dialogue must be used actively to catalyse measurable progress on these fronts, not merely to generate diplomatic momentum.

The depth and pace of EU support for Syrian state institutions should be calibrated to demonstrated progress toward inclusive governance: appointments and decision-making that reflect Syria's demographic, ethnic, religious, and regional diversity, with meaningful participation of women, youth, and minority communities at all levels. Stronger progress should unlock deeper engagement, more instruments, larger programmes, and closer

institutional ties. Protection of human rights and minority rights should be a defining standard of EU partnership, monitored publicly and linked directly to the scope of engagement rather than confined to diplomatic statements.

The EU should use its political and financial weight to support a genuine Syrian-led reconciliation process, inclusive of communities beyond those represented in Damascus, through funding for dialogue facilitation and community-level reconciliation initiatives.

Security sector reform must be a standing agenda item in the High-Level Dialogue, backed by concrete benchmarks and linked to the broader funding framework. A security sector that remains dominated by one faction, excludes minorities, and operates outside civilian oversight is not only a human rights failure but the most likely source of the next cycle of violence.

The EU must also be willing to criticise serious violations publicly when they occur - through EEAS communications, European Parliament resolutions, and public statements - rather than confining concerns to private diplomatic channels.

II. Calibrate the depth of engagement to demonstrated progress: from high-level commitments to programme-level accountability

Design governance incentive structure that operates not only at the level of high-level political commitments but also at the level of individual programmes and projects. The depth and pace of EU engagement, across funding volumes, instrument access, and institutional frameworks, should be calibrated to demonstrated progress on inclusive governance, accountability, and rights protection at

The depth and pace of EU support for Syrian state institutions should be calibrated to demonstrated progress toward inclusive governance.

every level. Applied consistently, this creates positive incentives for reform from the bottom up: when communities consistently experience transparent recruitment, fair resource allocation, and accountable project management in EU-supported activities, they build expectations of good governance that generate their own political demand.

The following partnership integrity standards should apply to all EU-funded activities:

- Transparent and merit-based recruitment
- Financial transparency
- Non-discrimination and equal access
- Respect for human rights in operations
- Civic peace values: projects in divided or mixed communities must integrate conflict-sensitivity principles throughout.
- Mandatory civil society consultation and monitoring: all projects, including governmental infrastructure programmes, must include a structured independent civil society role at design and implementation stages. For example, housing reconstruction must involve prior consultation with displaced communities and organisations specialised in housing, land, and property rights, to prevent Housing, Land and Property (HLP) violations. All projects must include an independent monitoring and evaluation function, with the continuation and deepening of funding linked to genuine incorporation of findings.
- Active adherence to human rights standards: implementing partners must demonstrate that their internal governance

and operational practices are consistent with international human rights standards.

III. Invest in institutional familiarisation on both sides

The EU's institutional landscape – NDICI, the Pact for the Mediterranean, UfM project pipelines, neighbourhood instruments, the MIP development process – is genuinely complex. Syrian authorities, researchers, and civil society cannot engage substantively with frameworks they do not understand, and the EU cannot expect partnership-ready interlocutors to emerge without investment in creating them. The current relationship already reflects this gap: high-level political engagement generates momentum that fails to translate into durable bilateral architecture.

The EU should establish a structured technical partnership programme covering EU external action architecture, available instruments and their requirements, the technical and governance conditions for developing a Syria MIP, and UfM project development processes. Delivery should combine in-country workshops in Arabic, and the sustained embedding of EU technical advisers within relevant Syrian ministries and civil society platforms. Technical Assistance and Information Exchange (TAIEX) facility could be deployed for this purpose.

IV. Engage across Syrian society, not only through the state

Several EU instruments are already accessible to Syrian individuals and organisations without an Association Agreement, and structured outreach to make them known and usable should be part of the institutional familiarisation programme recommended above. The EU's re-engagement must not replicate the pre-2011

pattern of routing everything through central government; a durable relationship requires sustained investment across Syrian society.

Civil society: Establish a dedicated facility combining technical support and grants of varied sizes, from micro-grants for community initiatives to mid-sized grants for organisations with greater capacity, accessible to civil society actors across all regions of Syria. Existing mechanisms privilege established organisations based abroad; this facility should explicitly reach grassroots and newly-formed organisations inside the country, managed through re-granting intermediaries to reduce administrative burden. Conditions should focus on substantive values: civic peace, human rights, non-discrimination, and transparency.

Free media: Provide dedicated support for independent Syrian journalism and media through the Press, Public and Cultural Diplomacy instrument. The civic space claimed by Syrian activists and journalists through fourteen years of resistance is already under pressure from centralising authorities - a functioning independent media environment is both a precondition for the accountability the EU's governance objectives requires, and a direct expression of the partnership values the EU should be defending.

Higher education and research: Accelerate access to Erasmus+ (eligible from 2027), Horizon Europe, Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions, ERC grants, the European Training Foundation, and EuroMeSCo and IEMed networks. Eligibility alone will not generate uptake; active outreach to Syrian universities, research institutions, and individual researchers is essential as well as building the capacities of these institutions to benefit from this cooperation.

Culture: Cultural re-engagement is a strategic investment in reconciliation and in Syria's return to the Euro-Mediterranean space, not a soft add-on. Activate Syrian participation in Creative Europe, the Anna Lindh Foundation, and the Press, Public and Cultural Diplomacy instrument. The Syrian diaspora in Europe should be explicitly included in cultural programming as a bridge between European networks and Syrian creative and intellectual communities.

Private sector: Provide targeted technical support to Syrian businesses on instruments already accessible without a full trade framework, including the EUR.1 Movement Certificate available under the 1978 Cooperation Agreement. Deploy TAIEX for regulatory reform support and prepare the ground for the European Fund for Sustainable Development Plus (EFSD)+ and the European Investment Bank (EIB) instruments as institutional conditions develop. Support should reach the independent private sector, not only state-adjacent economic actors.

Diaspora: Establish structured mechanisms enabling Syrian diaspora members in Europe to play active roles in the design and implementation of EU-funded recovery initiatives - as advisers, co-implementers, technical experts, and bridges between European institutions and Syrian communities. This should include diaspora participation in the MIP development process, formal advisory roles in sectoral programmes, and targeted schemes facilitating the temporary return of expertise to support institution-building, education, health, and economic recovery. All cultural and educational instruments (including Erasmus+, Horizon Europe, Creative Europe, the Anna Lindh Foundation) should explicitly design outreach and participation pathways for diaspora members as part of their Syria engagement.

Developing a Syria MIP, in genuine consultation with both the Syrian government and civil society, should be treated as a priority milestone rather than a distant aspiration.

V. Rehabilitate the unfinished reform agenda - this time with genuine accountability and co-ownership

Several elements of the 2007-2010 NIP remain relevant as reform priorities. The problem was not the content but the absence of enforceable accountability mechanisms and the structural deference to Damascus that allowed the Syrian government to hollow out anything it found inconvenient. Several elements of the substantive agenda can now be pursued differently — with genuine partnership benchmarks, civil society embedded in oversight, and the depth of EU engagement explicitly linked to progress.

The most significant structural gap in current re-engagement is the absence of a Multi-Annual Indicative Programme for Syria (MIP). Developing a Syria MIP, in genuine consultation with both the Syrian government and civil society, should be treated as a priority milestone rather than a distant aspiration. Until it exists, EU programming will remain ad hoc, one-directional, and disconnected from the governance incentive structure the broader re-engagement requires.

The following areas from the earlier agenda remain relevant and should be redesigned with these principles:

Financial and economic reform: Public financial management, budget transparency, anti-corruption mechanisms, customs modernisation, and a banking system accessible to the independent private sector. Condition support on measurable improvements in public financial management indicators, with independent civil society and private sector representatives embedded in oversight.

Decentralisation and local governance: Syria's territorial fragmentation creates a

practical opening for genuine decentralisation that did not exist before 2011. A meaningful proportion of recovery funding should be channelled directly through local governance structures across all regions as an operational requirement, not a programming preference.

Social reform and protection: Update the earlier social agenda to reflect current realities: returned refugees and IDPs, war-affected communities, and a population largely below the poverty line. Design with genuine community input, address gender equality and minority inclusion explicitly, and calibrate continued EU support to demonstrated non-discriminatory access to benefits and services.

Education: Cover infrastructure rehabilitation, curriculum reform, teacher training, and the integration of conflict-affected children. Curriculum reform that promotes civic values, critical thinking, and a pluralistic understanding of Syrian history is as important as physical rehabilitation. Connect to Erasmus+ and Horizon Europe to rebuild Syrian academic ties with Europe.

VI. Anchor the economic partnership in Syria's renewable energy potential, not fossil fuel transit

Syria's re-emergence as a regional connectivity hub presents the EU with a strategic choice about what kind of economic relationship to build. The dominant framing, promoted actively by the Syrian government and echoed in EU background documents, centres on Syria's potential as a transit corridor for Gulf hydrocarbons to Europe. A relationship anchored primarily in fossil fuel transit concentrates revenue and political leverage at the centre of the Syrian state, creates EU incentives to prioritise pipeline security over

governance reform, and works against both Syrian recovery and the EU's own green transition commitments. It risks reproducing in the energy domain the same structural deference that characterised the pre-2011 relationship.

The EU should also consider renewable energy as the economic centrepiece of its long-term engagement. Syria's desert regions hold exceptional and largely undeveloped solar potential and, crucially, the Syrian desert is the closest major solar resource to European territory. Unlike comparable projects currently under development in North Africa, which require expensive undersea cable infrastructure to transmit energy across the Mediterranean, Syrian solar generation could be connected to European grids via overland cables through Turkey or the eastern Mediterranean land corridor, at significantly lower cost and with greater reliability. Large-scale solar development in Syrian desert regions would generate distributed employment across the country, align with the EU's Mediterranean energy agenda under the Pact for the Mediterranean and Global Gateway, contribute to Syria's own energy independence, and position the bilateral relationship within the EU's green transition framework rather than against it.

The EU could commission a feasibility assessment of large-scale solar development in Syria as part of early recovery

programming, engage Syria in the Trans-Mediterranean Energy and Clean Tech Cooperation Initiative, and ensure that EFSD+ and EIB instruments are explicitly oriented toward renewable energy infrastructure. The Four Seas and Nine Corridors agenda need not be dismissed, but the EU should engage with it selectively, prioritising elements that serve the green transition rather than accepting the fossil fuel transit framing wholesale.

VII. Reform the sanctions architecture to prevent repeating past damage

Any future restrictive measures must draw on the conflict-era record. Sanctions should remain strictly targeted at named individuals and entities responsible for human rights violations or spoiler behaviour and should never again be applied at the level of vital sectors. Three standing safeguards should be embedded in the reformed architecture:

- An unconditional humanitarian carve-out protecting health, education, food, and essential services from sectoral restriction regardless of state involvement in their delivery.
- A mandatory periodic impact assessment, conducted independently with Syrian civil society input, evaluating whether existing measures are producing unintended civilian harm and triggering automatic review when they are.

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Beyond Re-engagement: Toward a Strategic Europe–Syria Partnership

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The next phase of Syria's transition will centre on governance and economic consolidation amid ongoing questions over the identity and control of the state, as well as acute poverty levels and immense reconstruction needs, all of which are feeding continued insecurity. .

A moment to seize

Utterly outlandish. That is how the prospect of a visit by Syria's new president, Ahmad al-Sharaa, to major European capitals would have been described if suggested

to observers before December 2024 – just days before his forces surged out of Idlib and seized control of the country. Not only did the removal of Syria's brutal dictator, Bashar al-Assad, appear highly unlikely but no one could have imagined that European red carpets would be rolled out for a former al-Qaeda leader, then known by his nom de guerre Abu Mohammad al-Jolani, long subject to European Union (EU), US and United Nations (UN) sanctions.

Yet against all expectations, March 2025 saw al-Sharaa, now Syria's transitional president - with Assad in exile in Moscow - welcomed to the Elysée Palace by President Emmanuel Macron. This was followed by a European tour to Germany and the UK in March 2026, cementing a dramatic reversal of ties. With European Council President António Costa and Commission President Ursula von der Leyen visiting Damascus in January 2026, the relationship has been visibly transformed.

For nearly 15 years, Europe and Syria effectively endured non-relations. Europe sided with the opposition following the regime's violent repression of protests in 2011 and called for Assad's removal. Even prior to this, ties were lukewarm, with limited high-level engagement and weak institutional grounding. Today, however, ties are quickly being re-cemented. Following Assad's fall, Europeans lifted all sectoral economic sanctions on Syria and a new high-level political dialogue between the two sides was launched in May 2026.

This chapter assesses the evolution of European-Syrian ties since December

2024, tracing the pathway to this reopening. But it also argues that the restoration of ties still masks a disconnect, one that continues to impede the emergence of a genuinely strategic partnership. It argues that a combination of European political hesitation - over post-Assad governance and Syria's geopolitical positioning - and Syrian neglect amid more immediately enticing opportunities from the U.S. and Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, risks squandering a convergence of interests that could anchor a more stable and positive transition.

The next phase of Syria's transition will centre on governance and economic consolidation amid ongoing questions over the identity and control of the state, as well as acute poverty levels and immense reconstruction needs, all of which are feeding continued insecurity. The prospect of significant progress will continue to depend on direct external support, of which Europe's contributions remain undervalued, but also on key structural reform - an area in which Europeans are uniquely well placed to contribute, and which will be key to locking in an inclusive transition that underpins sustainable stability.

From cooperation to rupture: the collapse of Europe-Syria relations

Over recent decades, Syrian-European relations have never been strong. While the two sides inked a Cooperation Agreement in 1978 (Council of the European Communities, 1978), repeated efforts to deepen the partnership failed to bear fruit. Ties became particularly problematic after the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, when Syria embedded itself in the Iranian-led regional axis of resistance. With Syria providing support to armed groups in

Iraq and disruptively projecting its political and military influence in Lebanon, ties frayed further, alienating France in particular, which suspended diplomatic relations with Damascus in January 2008. While there were overlapping efforts by Brussels to bring Syria into a more institutional partnership, this failed to materialise, with long-standing negotiations to finalise an Association Agreement ending in 2009.

Ties collapsed entirely following the outbreak of nationwide protests against Assad in March 2011, which unleashed a civil war that killed more than 500,000 people, most at the regime's hands. The war saw nearly 7 million Syrians flee the country, with up to 1.5 million refugees arriving in Europe. Europeans responded by calling on Assad to step down in August 2011 (Ashton, 2011), cutting diplomatic ties and imposing a vast range of sanctions over the following years. While some Europeans maintained low-level diplomatic channels in Damascus and remained key humanitarian donors in regime-held areas, the EU recognised the Syrian opposition coalition as the legitimate representative of the Syrian people in December 2012 (EU Foreign Affairs Council, 2012).

Europeans were also drawn directly into battle in Syria, joining the US-led Global Coalition against Daesh/the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). This group emerged out of al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI)/Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) and in June 2014 declared a transnational Caliphate across Iraq and Syria - from where it directed and inspired a series of terror attacks across Europe. This U.S.-led military campaign also targeted Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), then known as Jabhat al-Nusra, a group led by al-Sharaa (then operating as al-Jolani) which broke with ISI in 2013, instead declaring allegiance to al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-

Zawahiri. In 2016 al-Nusra broke with al-Qaeda, forming HTS in 2017 and consolidating control in Idlib.

Over the following years, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) gradually adopted a more pragmatic posture, turning against Salafist jihadist groups and abandoning the transnational fight to focus on the struggle for Syria - even as it maintained an authoritarian and Islamist worldview (Haenni & Drevon, 2025). The group remained under UN, US and EU sanctions and Europeans maintained a no-contact policy, though this period did see the emergence of back-channel contacts.

But by 2024, European Syria policy had largely run aground. The bloc had effectively given up on the opposition - not seeing HTS as a viable alternative - and found itself increasingly divided between those seeking to maintain pressure behind an "Assad must go" position and those pushing for a degree of re-engagement on the basis that Assad had effectively won the civil war. Some European states began exploring limited re-engagement, even if there were no illusions about the regime's structural weaknesses, and a genuine warming of relations - as opposed to a pragmatic adjustment - was never on the cards.

Then, on 27 November 2024, HTS made its move, breaking out of Idlib, quickly seizing Aleppo, surging southwards and taking Damascus on 8 December. In the blink of an eye, the Syrian landscape was transformed.

A reset marked by mutual hesitation

Syria's transition has created the opportunity for a fundamental reset in Euro-

pean-Syrian ties. The sweeping away of Assad's brutal order and al-Sharaa's apparent pragmatic evolution have opened unprecedented space to remake the relationship. But while, eighteen months into Syria's transition, ties have been re-established, mutual hesitancy continues to define relations. As much as anything, this is reflected in the fact that, up until March 2026, al-Sharaa had only visited Europe once, while making multiple trips

to the US, Turkey, the GCC states – and even Russia. His March 2026 visits to Berlin and London, alongside the launch of the high-level political dialogue in May, may now signal a belated shift in gear.

From Europe's side, this reflects a set of overlapping dynamics. On the one hand, the opportunity created by Assad's fall was quickly self-evident. Europeans seized on reports of HTS's evolution, pointing to the conduct of its military campaign – during which violence was relatively contained – and al-Sharaa's rhetoric on inclusivity, as evidence of a partner they could potentially work with (author interviews with European officials, 2025). The French, German and Italian foreign ministers visited Damascus in January 2025 – early signals of Europe's willingness to engage the new leadership. This was followed by an easing of EU sanctions in February 2025 and the full lifting of sectoral measures in May (Council of the European Union, 2025). Sanctions against al-Sharaa and HTS were lifted in November 2025.

But the EU and member states nonetheless continue to view al-Sharaa's leadership with caution given his historic links to al-Qaeda and the still-authoritarian nature of HTS's rule in Idlib. They remain wary of legitimising an incomplete transition and have wanted to embed some conditionality – particularly around governance,

inclusivity, and rule of law – into the evolving relationship with Damascus (Middle East Eye, 2025). While al-Sharaa has taken a number of steps, including disbanding HTS in January 2025, holding a national dialogue conference in February 2025, signing a constitutional amendment to launch a five-year transition in March 2025, and conducting narrow parliamentary elections in October 2025, these steps have all proceeded in a tightly controlled fashion, raising European concern about a new form of centralised and potentially even authoritarian rule (author interviews with European officials, 2025–2026). This has been compounded by eruptions of regime-affiliated violence against minority groups including the mass killing of Alawites in March 2025.

The government says that it is working to consolidate inclusive governance, legitimate state control and rein in groups associated with more hardline forces (author interview with Syrian official, 2026). Al-Sharaa's move to offer Kurds long-denied citizenship, integrate their leadership into state structures and the government's more calibrated security response to conflict with the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces in the northeast in early 2026 suggests that some progress is being made. But the sense of an ongoing lack of an inclusive political vision amid a narrow consolidation of key sovereign powers continues to shape European perceptions (author interview with European official, 2026). For many Europeans there is continued ambiguity surrounding the trajectory of the transition and questions that still need to be definitively answered regarding the nature of al-Sharaa's pragmatic turn.

But European hesitation also reflects broader geopolitical calculations, particularly among member states (author interview with European official, 2026). For

some EU countries - particularly in the Baltics - a central concern is the new leadership's positioning towards Russia. These states view countering Moscow's influence, in the context of its war against Ukraine, as the bloc's foremost strategic priority, and think engagement with Damascus should be conditioned accordingly. This sentiment was articulated by the EU's HR/VP for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Kaja Kallas in December 2024: "Many foreign ministers [say] it should be a condition for the new leadership that they also get rid of the Russian influence" (Vinocur & Barigazzi, 2024). While Russia has significantly reduced its military footprint since Assad's fall, some Europeans remain frustrated by Damascus' reluctance to fully break with Moscow - and also surprised given Russia's long-standing military support for Assad (author interviews with European officials, 2025). Instead, al-Sharaa has pursued pragmatic engagement, visiting Moscow twice and striking a number of agreements (Antonov & Al-Khalidi, 2026). Russia retains key military assets in Syria, including the Khmeimim air base and a naval facility in Tartous, which continues to serve as a platform for projecting influence into the wider Mediterranean.

A second geopolitical factor relates to European concerns over Turkish influence, shaped by the long-standing rivalry between Ankara, Cyprus, and Greece. Having established strong operational ties with HTS in Idlib prior to the transition, Turkey has expanded its influence since Assad's fall (Aydıntaşbaş, 2025). Ankara has consolidated a close "strategic partnership" with Damascus (SANA, 2026), raising concerns in parts of Europe that Turkey will leverage its position to advance wider ambitions (author interviews with European officials, 2025-2026). Reports suggest that Turkey is pursuing a maritime boundary agreement with Syria to

strengthen its legal claims in the contested Eastern Mediterranean, with plans for a possible deal in 2026 to facilitate offshore energy exploration (Soylu, 2025).

Taken together, these domestic and geopolitical concerns have contributed to European hesitation in adopting a more forward-leaning approach. Progress has been uneven and some steps, such as efforts to extend sanctions relief to the Ministries of Interior and Defence, slowed (author interviews with European officials, 2026). While European institutions, alongside states like Germany and Italy, are active on the ground and providing important sectoral support in areas including health, energy and agriculture, this activity remains fragmented. European diplomats point to a growing convergence of EU and member state positions in 2026, but this has still not coalesced into a coherent strategy that amplifies impact on the ground and the bloc's influence (author interview with European official, 2026).

But the absence of a more strategic partnership is not solely a European story. It also reflects Syrian hesitation, with Damascus placing a limited focus on Europe during the first phase of the transition.

The U.S. quickly emerged as Syria's primary gateway for stabilisation, offering accelerated international political legitimisation, alongside critical economic relief given the reach of the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act - the 2019 US law imposing sweeping sanctions on Assad-controlled Syria. Given the global dominance of the US dollar, the lifting of US sanctions was always going to be central to the country's stabilisation pathway (Al-Assil, 2025) - and, by extension, to the new authorities' ability to consolidate domestic legitimacy.

From their first days in power, Syria's new leadership prioritised resetting rela-

The absence of a more strategic partnership is not solely a European story. It also reflects Syrian hesitation, with Damascus placing a limited focus on Europe during the first phase of the transition.

tions with Washington, building on indirect coordination with the US during their time in control of Idlib (Jeffrey, 2026). This involved early political outreach, assurances regarding the inclusive nature of the new government, and practical steps such as signing up to the global anti-ISIS coalition in November 2025, a further marker of their break with their extremist past. Crucially, it was underpinned by the strong backing of US Special Envoy Tom Barrack, who played a central role mobilising support for the new Syrian leadership in the administration and Congress. Notably from a European perspective, there has been little indication that Washington is pushing Damascus to curtail ties with either Turkey or Russia. Israel, which maintains important influence with the Trump administration, reportedly lobbied for the continuation of a Russian military presence as a counterweight to Turkish influence (Gebeily & Pamuk, 2025).

This strategy delivered rapid results. Trump met al-Sharaa in Riyadh in May 2025 - the first high-level meeting between the two countries in decades. Al-Sharaa followed this with a visit to the White House in November 2025 and secured the full repeal of the Caesar Act in December (though Syria's designation as a state sponsor of terrorism remains in place).

A key pillar of this success was al-Sharaa's parallel effort to deepen ties with GCC states, particularly Saudi Arabia, given the close relationship between Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) and Trump. Even prior to Assad's fall, GCC states had begun re-engaging Damascus on the assumption that the regime needed to be reintegrated to stabilise the region and contain spillover effects such as the Captagon trade (Alghannam, 2024). This approach was quickly recalibrated and intensified under al-Sharaa.

Saudi Arabia and Qatar have played particularly central roles, offering political and economic support. MBS provided key backing that facilitated al-Sharaa's initial meeting with Trump in Riyadh. Qatar was Syria's biggest donor in 2025, offering \$856 million in humanitarian aid, supporting public sector salaries to keep the government afloat, and - alongside Riyadh - settling Syria's arrears to the World Bank, opening a path to new international financing. Doha also provided critical gas supplies to help address Syria's acute energy shortages. GCC states have signed billions of dollars' worth of investment memoranda of understanding (MoUs), raising the prospect of reconstruction funding, even if the materialisation of these commitments remains uncertain given long-standing gaps between pledges and actual delivery (Ali, 2026).

Alongside this, the first phase of the transition has been marked by the deepening of ties with Ankara. While Turkey lacks the financial firepower of the GCC - and may be more focused on seeing its own construction companies make money from Syria's rebuilding than on channelling Turkish money into Syria - it has assumed an important role in the security domain. This has included a comprehensive military cooperation agreement, focused on training, institutional reform, border security, and counter-terrorism coordination (SANA, 2025). Turkey's role has also been shaped by shared interests in managing Kurdish dynamics, with Ankara supporting Damascus's efforts to reassert central control.

Amid the pursuit of these immediate priorities, European engagement has lagged in the new government's strategic calculus. Damascus has welcomed European re-engagement and ongoing support, including in the humanitarian sphere, where EU funding remains critical. The European Commission gave more than €204 million

in aid in 2025 and committed €210 million in 2026, with individual European states providing significant additional funding, with Germany, for instance providing €120 million in 2025. But European officials report more limited Syrian responsiveness to European engagement in the face of other priorities (author interviews with European officials, 2025-2026). In part, this may reflect acute capacity constraints with Damascus lacking the personnel and institutional depth to efficiently manage multiple external partnerships at a moment of significant pressure, particularly given the degree of centralised decision-making. But it also reflects a perception in Damascus that engagement with Europe is bureaucratic and less immediately impactful, making other relations more important for quick gains (including, for instance, with Russia to secure critical wheat imports). Syrians say European support is “slow” to materialise and wrapped in overbearing governance and geopolitical conditionality (author interview with Syrian official, 2026).

Why Europe and Syria need each other

Despite the current hesitation, Europeans and Syrians have a strong mutual interest in deepening cooperation. For Europe, its interest in supporting a successful transition - one that meaningfully stabilises the country - is clear. Syria sits at the heart of the Middle East and has been a source of sustained regional instability and spillover into Europe for close to 15 years, most notably through refugee flows and terrorist threats.

A stable Syria offers a direct pathway to addressing these challenges. It could provide the conditions for voluntary refugee returns, reduce the space for non-state

armed actors, and enable the re-emergence of a central authority capable of exercising control across the country. It could also position Syria as a new economic partner and connectivity nexus amid the regional disruptions provoked by the Iran war and increasing talk of the need for alternative trade routes (Asharq Al Awsat, 2026).

But Europeans also have an interest in the nature of this stability. Amid ongoing uncertainty over the nature of al-Sharaa's emerging form of governance, European involvement is a pathway to supporting the consolidation of an inclusive transition grounded in the rule of law. This reflects Europe's stated commitment to democratic values (as reflected in the EU's backing for the Day of Dialogue, held inside the country for the first time in November 2025), but also its practical interest in ensuring that stabilisation is sustainable. Without progress in cementing an inclusive political and economic transition, the new leadership risks a persistent legitimacy deficit, increasing the risk of ongoing instability. The eruptions of violence against minority groups since December 2024 point to the risks.

Deepening engagement is also a pathway to restoring European geopolitical relevance. In an increasingly contested global order, Syria presents an opportunity for Europe to project influence in its southern neighbourhood. Saudi Arabia is, for one, reported to see Syria as a potential centrepiece of the EU-GCC strategic partnership (author interview with European official, 2026). This is also a path to diluting Russian influence and responding to concerns about Turkish ambitions in the Eastern Mediterranean. The new Syrian government is working to maximise assistance inflows, and if Europeans want to grow their own influence they need to make a credible offer that

competes with other partnership propositions.

Crucially, securing these combined interests should be understood as an outcome of the process of engagement, not a precondition. European leverage will remain constrained – relative to both Damascus and other actors – and a strategy that conditions engagement on the prior delivery of a full package of reform and geopolitical realignment risks irrelevance. Without a more meaningful European role, the trajectory of Syria's transition will be shaped by others – often in ways that do not align with European interests.

Having emerged through the first phase of the transition, the government now needs to focus on delivering real improvements on the ground.

From the Syrian perspective, the case for deeper engagement is also strong. While the U.S., GCC states, and Turkey have been essential in addressing immediate needs, direct European assistance remains significant, and it also offers something of unique importance: structural support to help address governance and economic reform imperatives that are urgently needed to unlock wider stabilisation objectives.

Having emerged through the first phase of the transition, the government now needs to focus on delivering real improvements on the ground. This is now the country's foremost need (author interviews with Syrian experts, 2026). With a poverty rate of 90% (UNDP, 2025), reconstruction costs estimated at more than \$200 billion (World Bank, 2025) and intensifying cost of living pressures (Hakouk, 2026), the government faces acute challenges to secure social peace and durable stability. Recent months have witnessed an increasing number of nationwide protests linked to the continued dire state of the economy (The Syria Report, 2026) and the Iran war is further intensifying inflationary pressures (Haid, 2026).

While US sanctions relief and GCC MoUs offer promise, translating them into significant investment inflows that meaningfully grow the economy and deliver improvements for the population will depend on reforms that provide the conditions that businesses (like foreign donors) require to operate with confidence. The lack of necessary systems has already slowed the spending of allocated European support funding for 2026 (author interview with European official, 2026), pushed GCC states to channel salary support via the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) rather than government ministries (author interview with Arab Gulf official, 2025), and is delaying the entry of private sector investment (author interview with Syrian businessmen, 2026).

In this context European support could be structurally critical. Sustainable recovery will depend on the development of a credible economic model, as well as institutional depth, technical expertise and transparent regulatory frameworks that incentivise financial inflows and allow them to be effectively absorbed into the economy. This is not an area where GCC engagement has traditionally focused, nor is the Trump administration likely to devote meaningful resources to this effort amid significant US funding cuts for aid and development efforts. But it is central to the traditional Brussels-led approach. As one key example, restoring access to international finance and boosting investment inflows will require rebuilding correspondent banking relationships – a process that depends on key financial sector reform, an area where Europeans can provide essential technical assistance. Similarly, reviving private sector activity and trade links will depend on the establishment of transparent legal frameworks, including in the domain of property rights, and significant measures to de-risk the business environment – also areas where

the EU can offer deep expertise. Europeans may be among the few actors combining the ability and willingness to deliver this form of focused support.

In addition to structural assistance, Europe also still brings notable direct economic support to the table, which is too often discounted in importance. While Europe cannot match the headline financial promises of GCC states – figures that may fail to materialise – the bloc is a significant economic actor in its own right. The EU committed nearly €2.5 billion in support to Syria and the region in 2025 and 2026, covering both humanitarian and non-humanitarian support, and pledged a further €620 million for Syria in 2026 and 2027 (European Commission, 2026). Member states, led by Germany, have made further significant contributions. The bloc was also Syria's largest trading partner prior to 2011, and these historic linkages could play an important role in supporting recovery. At a larger scale, European instruments such as the European Investment Bank (EIB), European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) and Global Gateway could play an important role in funding infrastructure projects in key sectors such as the energy realm, which are critically needed for wider reconstruction.

Moreover, this European role could increase in importance amid the regional destruction – and economic cost – caused by the war with Iran. This could result in a decline in GCC support (England & Kerr, 2026), increasing the importance of complementary inflows. This will further increase the importance of creating a more permissive operating environment for wider global investments. And even if GCC states deliver promised investments, they too are increasingly focused on transparency, regulatory frameworks and ensuring their money delivers returns (El Dahan & Saba, 2023).

Conclusions and recommendations: building a real partnership

The May 2026 decision to lift the partial suspension of the Cooperation Agreement between the EU and Syria, as well as the launch of a high-level political dialogue, represents an opportunity to increase the pace of the European–Syrian partnership (Bayer & Dalatey, 2026). Seizing this moment will depend on political will. Europeans need to move beyond their current hesitation and view engagement as the means through which desired outcomes – in both the governance and geopolitical spaces – can be secured. For Syria, this will require a clearer recognition of the added value that European engagement brings to the country's recovery – including in terms of the benefit of aligning with European benchmarks to advance stabilising governance reform and secure wider economic inflows.

If there is mutual will to deepen engagement and Europeans can align around an empowered strategy, the EU's Pact for the Mediterranean could provide a practical framework for operationalising increased cooperation. Its emphasis on partnership over conditionality may be more palatable to Damascus, offering a more balanced basis for engagement (author interview with European official, 2025). But a partnership approach will also allow Europeans to embed desired governance objectives within cooperation lines, with the prospect of an enhanced agreement backed by increased financial support, incentivising Damascus to align with these standards. This will allow Europeans to maintain a more effective focus on necessary reform measures as part of the process of engagement. The Pact's focus areas – delivered through the newly established DG

Towards the goal of more effectively operationalising this approach, both sides could benefit from the appointment of empowered high-level envoys.

MENA – align closely with Syria's current structural needs. It also offers a platform for Europeans to tie the different threads of current support from both EU institutions and national capitals into a more coherent and strategic partnership offer.

In practical terms, this should translate into a European approach centred on high-impact areas, beginning with supporting the government develop a coherent, inclusive and transparent macroeconomic vision and using this as a launchpad for institutional capacity-building and regulatory modernisation. The EU's May 2026 announcement of the creation of a €15 million Technical Assistance Hub in Syria, designed to help strengthen the capacities of Syrian institutions, provides an ideal entry point for these efforts (European Commission, 2026).

In terms of direct focus areas, Europeans remain critical humanitarian funders - an important dimension that should not be marginalised as donors increasingly focus on wider recovery efforts - and their engagement in key sectors such as healthcare and agriculture is vital to helping meet immediate societal needs. But Europeans should also prioritise supporting the energy, transportation and financial sectors given their centrality to structural recovery efforts. On this front, restoring correspondent banking relationships and supporting financial sector reform will be critical to unlocking wider investment flows. Renewed engagement by the EIB and related instruments, including the Global Gateway, could play an important role in rebuilding key infrastructure. It could also help reintegrate Syria into the regional economy and build the country's capacity to act as a valuable land bridge in the post-Iran war regional order.

While strengthening state capacity and advancing economic development will be central to the European offer, the bloc

should maintain a sharp focus on deploying this partnership in support of an inclusive transition to undergird desired progress. Europeans need to keep encouraging important governance reform, including by offering support to build up the institutional role of the country's new parliament, channelling technical assistance to support the reintegration of Kurdish-administered regions, and backing transitional justice tracks. Europeans can also use Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) tools to provide targeted support in civilian security domains, including efforts to integrate the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), as well as policing and counter-narcotics. These are all areas where specialised European expertise can complement broader governance assistance in support of stability and rule of law ambitions.

It should also mean providing strong European support for wider societal actors as a means of helping cement their role in the new Syria. Syrian civil society continues to look to Europe as a key backer – a role that Europeans should champion with strong ongoing support (author interviews with Syrian civil society, 2025-2026).

Towards the goal of more effectively operationalising this approach, both sides could benefit from the appointment of empowered high-level envoys. From the European side, there is a need for an equivalent to US envoy, Tom Barrack, with the political weight to mobilise and coordinate European national and EU resources behind a coherent strategy. A European envoy could also play a wider role, engaging in sustained diplomacy with GCC capitals, Turkey and the US to better align international support. This would build on efforts already initiated through the Syria Partnership Coordination Forum (SPCF).

A high-level European envoy able to drive an empowered strategy would facilitate the work of the active EU ambassador on the ground - as well as European member state counterparts - who will continue to lead local engagement and implementation efforts. But this will, in turn, depend on the Syrian side recognising the importance of the European offer. Damascus could likewise be well served to appoint an empowered counterpart able to drive engagement and implementation with the EU and member states.

Al-Sharaa's record since December 2024 – including centralised decision-making and episodes of violence by forces affiliated with the government – gives Europeans legitimate reasons for concern;

but disengagement does not remove these risks, it simply removes Europe's ability to influence them. Strategic engagement offers Europeans the opportunity to influence the process to support positive trajectories and better align developments in Syria with their long-term interests. It is an approach that will empower the bloc to better compete with the influence and offers of other external actors such as Russia, but will also allow it to assume an important role in enabling the constructive impact of wider international support. For its part, Syria stands to gain a more strategic partnership with an actor uniquely positioned to address its structural challenges - and, in doing so, to help translate the gains of the transition into durable stability.

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