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Syria's Transition:

Policy Pathways for Stability

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Executive summary

This report distils the deliberations of a multidisciplinary conference convened by the Syria Programme of the Conflict and Civicness Research Group (CCRG) at the London School of Economics in March 2026, examining seven interconnected domains of Syria's transition: (1) higher education and knowledge production; (2) health system governance; (3) justice and accountability; (4) political economy and reconstruction; (5) civic space and civil society; (6) environment and agriculture; and (7) security sector reform. The conference brought together academics, international policymakers, government officials, civil society practitioners, journalists, and diaspora specialists from inside and outside Syria, for a participatory, solutions-oriented deliberation structured towards the identification of actionable policy entry points. This report synthesises those deliberations, organised thematically. Each section provides an overview, identifies key challenges, and presents the policy recommendations that emerged.

Summary of Key Challenges

The following seven structural challenges emerged from the deliberations of the conference and recur across its seven thematic domains.

1. The legacy of authoritarian rule and protracted conflict. The two Assads' regime left a society fragmented by 50 years of authoritarian governance and 14 years of violent conflict. Physical infrastructure across every sector has been devastated. The economy has been weakened by years of international sanctions, the collapse of productive capacity, and extreme currency depreciation. Social cohesion has been eroded by displacement, sectarian polarisation, and the destruction of community networks. Every domain examined in this report operates within the constraints imposed by this inherited crisis.

2. Weak domestic legitimacy and ad hoc governance. A recurring concern across all sessions was the unclear mandate of the transitional authorities and the ad hoc, uncoordinated character of emerging governance structures. Participants identified a persistent lack of coordination between different ministries and between governorates and their sub-structures, producing overlapping jurisdictions, inconsistent policy implementation, and structural uncertainty for civic actors, health providers, and economic agents alike. The weak investment in domestic legitimacy, evident in the absence of inclusive consultation mechanisms, transparent decision-making processes, and meaningful civic

participation, compounds the challenge of constructing credible institutions capable of commanding public trust.

3. The increasing tendency towards centralisation. The transitional authorities have demonstrated a growing tendency towards centralisation that generates tension over where legitimate authority resides. In health governance, participants noted that routine administrative meetings still require travel to Damascus from across the country. In agricultural policy, centralised decision-making marginalises rural communities whose livelihoods depend on locally responsive interventions. In the security sector, the concentration of military and political authority in Damascus leaves peripheral communities without accountable governance. Moreover, fundamental economic governance choices such as privatisation, the terms of international engagement, and the allocation of economic resources, are being made with poor transparency and accountability. This centralising impulse sits uneasily alongside the operational reality of a fragmented state in which different regions have operated under different systems, salary structures, and lines of accountability for over a decade.

4. Institutional capacity deficits and the insider–outsider fracture. Years of exile and brain drain have severely depleted the institutional capacity and individual expertise available to Syria's transitional institutions. The displacement of a significant proportion of the country's educated professionals, including academics, doctors, lawyers, and engineers, has left critical gaps in every sector examined in this report. This capacity deficit is compounded by a structural insider–outsider fracture that runs through every domain. In the health system, it appears as the sidelining of grassroots expertise developed during 14 years of conflict. In civil society, it takes the form of polarisation between actors positioned inside and outside Syria. This fracture is structural, and any credible policy framework must address it as such.

5. The weaponisation of identity and the rise of sectarianism. The instrumentalisation of sectarian, ethnic, and political identities constitutes an active obstacle to inclusive governance and civic peace. Identity politics has fragmented civic space, shaped the composition of the post-Assad army, influenced the distribution of health resources, and conditioned access to justice. Participants expressed particular concern about the normalisation of sectarian discourse and violence. Sectarian logics have infiltrated the post-Assad military structure, where the composition of the new army and the recruitment of religious moral-guidance officers reflect prevailing ideological currents rather than the diversity of Syrian society. In the southern and coastal regions, unresolved grievances between communities have generated cycles of revenge

violence that the transitional authorities have proven unable or unwilling to contain. In civic space, the legacy of weaponised identities has fractured what had once been a shared principled agenda among civil society actors, with even accountability work now perceived as political opposition by segments of the population. Addressing sectarian polarisation requires systemic interventions across all domains, not isolated de-radicalisation programmes.

6. The tension between urgency and sequencing. A critical tension between the immediate needs of affected populations and the necessarily slow pace of institution-building confronts policymakers in every domain. Victims of political violence require immediate acknowledgement, material support, and information about the fate of the missing. Health systems require immediate functionality if they are to prevent further loss of life. Agricultural communities require immediate support to sustain livelihoods and prevent further displacement. Yet the construction of durable institutions, including judicial reform, health system governance, and security sector transformation, requires patient sequencing if it is to avoid the errors of hasty implementation. The risk, identified repeatedly across sessions, is that prioritising short-term relief forecloses the conditions for sustainable recovery.

7. The absence of reliable data, transparency, and the challenge of evidence-based policymaking. Syria lacks current demographic data, economic capacity assessments, health provision maps, and systematic accounts of civic organisation. Every session identified this deficit as a foundational constraint that impedes the formulation of evidence-based policies and plans. Governance decisions are being made without an adequate evidentiary foundation, and several sessions proposed institutional mechanisms, including needs-assessment systems, service-provider mapping, and comparative research programmes, to begin to address this gap. Compounding the data deficit is a pervasive lack of transparency in the operations of transitional institutions. The absence of transparent budgetary processes, public procurement standards, and parliamentary oversight mechanisms means that even where data does exist, it is not accessible to the civic actors, researchers, and communities who require it to hold institutions accountable.

Summary of Policy Recommendations

The following summarised and consolidated recommendations emerge from the discussions across all seven areas of the conference. They are directed at Syrian transitional authorities, international donors, civil society organisations, and the broader research community.

Knowledge Production and Higher Education

- Establish joint curriculum development programmes between Syrian universities and international partner institutions, with particular emphasis on the humanities and social sciences.
- Advocate for streamlined visa and approvals processes for visiting international scholars.
- Host co-production of knowledge workshops at Syrian universities, including institutions in Damascus, Aleppo, Homs, and Latakia.
- Develop international mobility grants for Syrian graduate students and faculty members.
- Engage Syrian diaspora academics and academic networks as strategic partners in rebuilding the sector, leveraging their expertise, institutional affiliations, and access to resources to support in-country institutions.
- Introduce new teaching methods and critical-thinking pedagogies, and reverse the effects of fourteen years of isolation by restoring access to international educational platforms, academic journals, and emerging technologies, including artificial intelligence.

Health System Governance

- Conduct a comprehensive mapping of health service providers and hospital capacities across all Syrian regions.
- Develop and pilot rotation programmes for medical personnel to address urban–rural disparities.
- Document and archive divergent medical accreditation processes across Syrian territories.
- Commission a feasibility analysis of alternative health-sector financing mechanisms.

Justice and Accountability

- Establish a multi-actor coordination mechanism for transitional justice involving civil society, international legal bodies, and victim groups.
- Develop a donor framework conditioning funding on the genuine participation of victims, with particular attention to families of the missing and forcibly disappeared.

- Prioritise documentation and archiving of evidence, including documentation for restorative justice and the recovery of missing persons.
- Support grassroots accountability initiatives as legitimate entry points in the absence of functional formal institutions.

Political Economy and Reconstruction

- Design a research-driven needs-assessment system led by research institutions and think tanks to ensure evidence-based targeting of post-conflict economic assistance, and develop the resulting policy proposals in consultation with relevant ministries and directorates to ensure institutional buy-in.
- Condition donor grants to prioritise rural and severely war-affected areas outside Damascus, linking geographical targeting criteria to conflict-damage assessments and poverty indices, and ensuring that the determination of priorities and the selection of projects originate in the affected localities themselves rather than being dictated from the centre.
- Activate investment commissions within the Ministry of Economy focused on labour-intensive, community-embedded sectors.
- Develop a comprehensive national economic strategy through a consultative process involving trade unions, commerce associations, civil society, and affected communities.

Civic Space and Civil Society

- Compile and integrate lessons from regional feminist and civic frameworks into local institutional-strengthening programmes.
- Develop a programme to promote women's participation at the community level and across all tiers of decision-making, including senior and middle leadership positions.
- Establish a strategic policy network producing simplified, advocacy-ready briefs, and advocate the resulting policy proposals with relevant ministries and directorates by expanding the bargaining space with the transitional authorities and identifying internal champions, including civil society actors who have joined the government in an official capacity.
- Develop a youth programme to nurture campaigning and advocacy skills.

Environment and Agriculture

- Develop an agricultural recovery programme addressing the full value chain, from production through processing to marketing and export.
- Establish an environmental governance framework embedding climate change adaptation, water management protocols, and land-tenure reform.
- Integrate transitional justice mechanisms into reconstruction planning, protecting the claims of displaced communities.

Security Sector Reform

- Establish institutional guarantees of military neutrality, including independent civic oversight mechanisms with civil society representation, as a precondition for international security sector support.
- Develop a comprehensive economic disengagement programme for military factions controlling productive assets, linked to credible political integration pathways.
- Commission independent documentation of demographic engineering practices as an evidentiary basis for transitional justice and property restitution.
- Support and scale successful community-based security models as complements to national military reform.
- Develop a clear political framework for the army's role, identity, and accountability, addressing the ideological vacuum that permits the naturalisation of sectarian influence.
- Develop a plan to render the security sector inclusive of Syria's diverse ethno-sectarian backgrounds, establishing representation as a structural condition of military reform rather than an aspiration deferred to a later stage.

1. Introduction

In March 2026, Syria remained a country navigating one of the most complex political transitions in its history. The collapse of the Assad regime had not been followed by a negotiated political settlement; instead, a fragile and temporary regional understanding held the situation within Syrian borders whilst a patchwork of transitional arrangements attempted to govern a society fractured by 15 years of conflict, displacement, and institutional destruction. The security sector was polarised and fragmented, with over 100 armed groups of varying ideological orientation, territorial reach, and institutional capacity now nominally absorbed into a hybrid military structure. The health system operated as a de facto patchwork: different governance models, salary structures, and service-provision arrangements persisted across Damascus, north-west Syria, and north-east Syria, with 90% of the population living in poverty and increasingly reliant on an expanding private sector. The judicial system bore the inheritance of decades of political instrumentalisation, and the expectations of victims for meaningful accountability collided with the structural incapacity of formal institutions to deliver it. Higher education, once a site of ideological control under the Assad regime, was attempting to reconstitute itself as a space for critical inquiry, even as the securitisation of intellectual life persisted under new governing arrangements. Civic space was constrained from without by a security-driven legislative framework and fragmented from within by the politicisation of identity and competing claims of representation. The agricultural sector, which historically contributed between 14% and 20% of GDP, had been devastated by the destruction of infrastructure, the displacement of rural populations, the fragmentation of land holdings, and the compounding effects of climate change. Reconstruction, far from being a neutral technical exercise, was already revealing itself as a domain of contested political economy, in which the interests of connected elites, military factions, and international actors competed for influence over the terms of recovery.

The Syria Programme of the Conflict and Civicness Research Group (CCRG) at the London School of Economics convened a two-day multidisciplinary conference in this context under the title 'Syria's Transition: Policy Pathways for Stability.' The conference brought together academics, international policymakers, government officials, civil society practitioners, journalists, and diaspora specialists from inside and outside Syria for a participatory, solutions-oriented deliberation across seven thematic domains. The format was structured towards actionable policy entry points. This report synthesises those deliberations, organised thematically. Each section provides an overview,

identifies key challenges, and presents the policy recommendations that emerged.

2. Knowledge Production and Higher Education Capacity

Overview

Syrian universities suffered devastating losses in the years following 2011. Faculty members and students were displaced, exiled, or killed in significant numbers. Physical infrastructure was destroyed or degraded, funding collapsed, and the COVID-19 pandemic further compounded these pressures. By early 2026, universities had begun to accommodate returning students and faculty, admission policies had been expanded to include students displaced from the north and east of the country.

The central analytical tension concerned the relationship between institutional rehabilitation and intellectual transformation. Participants agreed that the mere restoration of pre-conflict institutional capacity was insufficient; what was required was a fundamental cultural transformation of Syrian higher education, away from the Assad regime's instrumentalisation of universities as sites of ideological indoctrination and towards institutions capable of nurturing critical thinking, academic freedom, and inclusive governance. As one participant framed it, the challenge was to ensure that reforms change 'the philosophy and the mindset' behind new laws, not merely the laws themselves. This was a warning against reproducing old structures under new labels.

The discussion also surfaced a persistent structural tension between diaspora scholars and in-country researchers. The opening of access to Syrian institutions following the fall of the Assad regime had created opportunities for international collaboration, but it had also raised questions about epistemological authority, intellectual ownership, and the risk of what several participants characterised as neo-colonial patterns of knowledge extraction. The insider–outsider dynamic, participants argued, could not be resolved through goodwill alone; it required institutional mechanisms, including joint curriculum development, co-authored research programmes, and equitable governance structures, that ensured partnership rather than patronage.

Key Challenges Identified

1. The political securitisation of higher education persisted under the new governing arrangements. Approval processes for international visitors to Syrian

universities remained cumbersome and security-driven, with some participants reporting that securing permission from the Foreign Ministry took over six months. The boundaries of permissible intellectual inquiry were unclear.

2. The inherited pedagogical culture prioritised rote learning and ideological conformity over critical thinking and creative inquiry. As one academic noted, 'students are trained to think of what the right answer is, and that's what we need to get away from … truth is multiple, and we need to celebrate that.' Transforming this culture would require sustained investment in faculty development, curriculum reform, and institutional governance.

3. The fragmentation of Syrian academic networks, between those inside the country, those in neighbouring states, and those in the wider diaspora, had produced parallel knowledge ecosystems that did not communicate effectively with one another. Conferences organised entirely from abroad had left minimal impact within Syrian universities.

4. The funding environment for Syrian higher education remained precarious, with neither the transitional government nor the international donor community demonstrating the sustained commitment required for meaningful institutional rebuilding.

Policy Recommendations

1. Establish joint curriculum development programmes between Syrian universities and international partner institutions. These programmes should be structured to ensure genuine co-production of knowledge, with Syrian faculty members playing a leading role in shaping content and methodology. Particular emphasis should be placed on the humanities and social sciences, where the legacy of ideological control has been most pronounced.

2. Advocate with the Syrian Foreign Ministry and Office of International Relations for streamlined visa and approvals processes for visiting international scholars.

3. Host co-production of knowledge workshops at Syrian universities, including institutions in Damascus, Aleppo, Homs, and Latakia, to institutionalise the collaborative framework piloted at this roundtable. These workshops should address the three dimensions of knowledge production identified in the discussion: (i) the infrastructure and institutional conditions of production; (ii) the sociology of knowledge production, including the roles and positionalities of internal and external researchers; and (iii) the knowledge itself, including what has been produced, in which languages, and with what reach inside Syria.

4. Develop international mobility grants for Syrian graduate students and faculty members, with a focus on short-term exchanges of three to six months that allow exposure to new research methodologies and pedagogical approaches.

5. Complete and publish the edited collection (Handbook on Syrian Studies) for submission to Bloomsbury, accompanied by a concerted effort to translate and disseminate key research outputs into Arabic.

6. Mobilise the Syrian diaspora as a structural asset rather than a peripheral resource. The displaced academics, established scholarly networks, and institutional affiliations accumulated over fourteen years of exile constitute a reservoir of expertise, funding access, and international partnership that the sector cannot afford to leave dormant. Diaspora engagement should be institutionalised through co-authored research programmes, joint supervision arrangements, and structured channels through which diaspora scholars can contribute to curriculum design and faculty development, on terms that guard against the neo-colonial patterns of knowledge extraction identified in the discussion and that preserve the epistemological authority of in-country researchers.

7. Introduce new teaching methods and a critical-thinking pedagogy, displacing the inherited culture of rote learning and ideological conformity. This transformation should proceed in tandem with a deliberate effort to undo the effects of fourteen years of isolation, during which Syrian scholars were largely cut off from international educational platforms, academic journals, and emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence. Restoring institutional subscriptions, securing access to digital research infrastructure, and embedding training in contemporary research tools are foundational conditions for any meaningful pedagogical renewal.

3. Health System Governance

Overview

The analysis of health system governance was framed by three principles: legitimacy, localisation, and complementarity. Legitimacy referred to the basis on which health authorities claim the right to govern, a question of particular salience in a transitional context where no institution possesses an uncontested mandate. Localisation concerned the degree to which governance structures incorporate local expertise and respond to community-level needs. Complementarity addressed how different actors, including the state, non-

governmental organisations, the private sector, and international agencies, relate to one another within the health ecosystem. Syria was characterised as simultaneously a fragile state and a limited state: one in which the government did not fully control or effectively serve its population, and in which authority was shared, contested, or substituted by a multiplicity of non-state actors.

The private health sector had expanded significantly both before and during the conflict, driven in large part by the erosion of trust in the public sector. This expansion had created a structural dependency that was deeply inequitable: with 90% of the population living in poverty, the costs of private healthcare were prohibitive for the vast majority. Governance challenges were compounded by the sidelining of local expertise and grassroots health initiatives, particularly those developed in north-west and north-east Syria during the conflict period, in favour of centralised decision-making from Damascus. As one participant recalled, 'I remember when we had to travel … from Hassakeh to Damascus to have a meeting for two hours … and when I asked why we don't do rotation, they said, well, maybe it's better for you to come to see Damascus anyway.'

Participants debated whether decentralisation represented a solution or a risk. Several warned that decentralisation, absent adequate institutional capacity, would consolidate rather than resolve existing disparities, producing a permanently fragmented health system in which tribal, community, and military actors exercised unaccountable influence over clinical governance. The discussion also addressed women's leadership in the health system, noting that despite women's disproportionate operational contribution during the conflict, their representation in decision-making roles remained confined largely to maternal and neonatal health rather than extending to systemic governance.

Key Challenges Identified

1. The tension between centralisation and decentralisation was deeply political, reflecting contested visions of where legitimate authority should reside in a transitional state.

2. The sidelining of local and grassroots expertise, particularly from health actors who had developed innovative problem-solving capacities during the conflict, represented a loss of institutional knowledge that the health system could ill afford.

3. The absence of reliable health data meant that governance decisions were being made without an adequate evidentiary foundation.

4. The existing financing model was unsustainable: humanitarian-era funding mechanisms were ill-suited to the developmental logic required for health system reconstruction, yet alternative financing instruments remained unexplored.

5. The insider–outsider antagonism between exiled health professionals and those who had remained in Syria was producing mutual distrust that impeded effective collaboration.

Policy Recommendations

1. Conduct a comprehensive mapping of health service providers and hospital capacities across all Syrian regions, to establish a coordination baseline for governance planning. This mapping should cover both public and private providers, document the workforce distribution by speciality and region, and identify critical gaps in service provision—particularly in areas east of the Euphrates, where, as participants noted, centralisation has left entire communities without essential services such as cancer treatment.

2. Develop and pilot rotation programmes for medical personnel to address urban–rural disparities in service provision and reconnect fragmented regional systems. These programmes should draw on the model suggested by participants, in which doctors take leave from their primary postings to perform surgeries and provide specialist services in underserved camps and hospitals for three to four weeks at a time, with university faculty similarly undertaking semester-long placements at regional institutions.

3. Document and archive the divergent medical accreditation processes across Syrian territories to create a clear record for future workforce planning and credential recognition. The Ministry of Higher Education's recent recognition of degrees from northern and eastern universities represents a positive precedent that should be systematised and extended.

4. Translate and disseminate key health system research into Arabic, prioritising distribution to civil society actors, students, and academic institutions inside Syria. Participants emphasised that health governance cannot remain the exclusive domain of medical professionals and must engage broader constituencies if it is to be responsive and legitimate.

5. Initiate a bridging programme connecting exiled and in-country health scholars, using institutions such as the LSE as facilitating platforms for joint curriculum development and seminars. This programme should address the insider–outsider dynamic directly, creating structured opportunities for mutual learning that acknowledge both the 'persecution capital' of those who endured

the conflict inside Syria and the specialised expertise developed by those in the diaspora.

6. Commission a feasibility analysis of alternative health-sector financing mechanisms, including diaspora bonds, private investment models, and regulatory pathways for engaging international financial centres. Participants noted the urgent need for financial economists to work with international NGOs, the government, and the Central Bank to develop instruments that bridge the gap between humanitarian funding and developmental investment.

4. Political Economy and Reconstruction

Overview

The discussion on political economy sought to move beyond conventional macroeconomic indicators to examine the power relations between internal and external economic actors and their impact on everyday living conditions at the household level. A central argument was that economic governance choices were deeply political acts that would shape the distribution of power, resources, and opportunity for decades to come. The risk that reconstruction would serve the interests of connected elites rather than war-affected communities was acute. As one economist detailed, 'financial settlements have been made with the patronage networks that shaped economic life under the Assad regime, based on unclear ground … economic opportunities are allocated based on proximity to power [and] geopolitical pressure rather than merit.' The discussion emphasised the importance of good governance, the rule of law, and transparency as preconditions for legitimate economic recovery, whilst acknowledging that these preconditions were precisely what the transition had not yet secured.

The question of the Sovereign Fund, affiliated with the presidency but exempt from the oversight of official and parliamentary authorities, crystallised participants' concerns about transparency. As one participant observed, 'when we see this system deliberately centralise all the resources in the hand of [a few] with zero transparency … we're sleepwalking into a disaster.'

The conditions under which private and diaspora investment could be mobilised were also scrutinised. The transitional authorities appeared to view the Gulf states as an economic model, but participants cautioned that capital requires trust, independent institutions, courts, and clear regulation, none of which was yet in place.

Key Challenges Identified

1. The absence of transparent institutions meant that fundamental economic governance choices—including the degree of privatisation, the terms of international engagement, and the allocation of reconstruction resources—were being made without adequate public deliberation or accountability. Participants noted that even unions, which should represent workers' interests in these decisions, had been co-opted and functioned as extensions of state authority rather than independent civic organisations.

2. Corruption remained endemic, and the institutional mechanisms required to ensure transparency in economic policymaking were weak or non-existent. For instance, the Sovereign Fund's exemption from parliamentary oversight was cited as emblematic of a broader pattern of opaque resource allocation.

3. The international community's engagement with Syria's economy was characterised by a tension between the urgency of addressing basic needs and the risk of entrenching ideologically driven economic frameworks that served external interests rather than Syrian ones. For instance, Gulf states had signalled their intention to 'outsource reconstruction to private sectors and investors,' raising concerns about the terms on which foreign capital would enter the economy.

4. The economic dimensions of sectarianism and gender exclusion—including the unequal distribution of reconstruction resources along sectarian lines and the marginalisation of women from economic decision-making—required explicit policy attention.

Policy Recommendations

1. Design a research-driven needs-assessment system led by research institutions and think tanks, rather than by state institutions alone, to ensure that post-conflict economic assistance is targeted on the basis of rigorous evidence. This function should draw on local knowledge networks and produce findings in Arabic for dissemination inside Syria. The resulting assessment frameworks and policy proposals should then be discussed and developed in consultation with relevant ministries, directorates, and local governance bodies to ensure institutional buy-in and facilitate adoption into operational planning.

2. The need for international donors to condition grants to prioritise rural and severely war-affected areas outside Damascus. The risk that reconstruction investment would concentrate in urban centres, reproducing the spatial inequalities that had contributed to the conflict's onset, was identified as one of

the most consequential distributional choices facing policymakers. Donors should establish explicit geographical targeting criteria linked to conflict-damage assessments, poverty indices, and population displacement data; this could be done drawing on the UNDP's preliminary socio-economic impact assessment and the World Bank's poverty and equity analysis for Syria. Crucially, the determination of priorities and the selection of which projects are needed must originate in the affected localities themselves rather than being imposed from the centre; geographical targeting criteria should therefore be paired with participatory mechanisms through which local communities and sub-national governance bodies define needs and rank interventions, so that decentralised delivery is matched by decentralised decision-making.

3. Activate investment commissions within the Ministry of Economy with technical support focused on labour-intensive, community-embedded sectors, beginning with food processing and agriculture. These commissions should create structured pathways for small and medium enterprises, with particular attention to local value chains that can generate broad-based employment rather than concentrating returns among connected elites.

4. Develop a comprehensive national economic strategy through a consultative process involving trade unions, commerce associations, civil society organisations, and affected communities, to ensure that reconstruction reflects broad-based interests rather than elite capture. This strategy should address the governance of the Sovereign Fund as a matter of urgency, bringing it under parliamentary oversight and aligning its operations with international transparency standards.

5. Civic Space and Civil Society

Overview

Syrian civic space is increasingly securitised: the governing authorities maintain a dual rhetoric, signalling collaboration with international partners whilst enforcing a restrictive stance domestically. As one participant explained, the civic space is 'increasingly structured by a security lens and a security logic applied by the authorities … all filtered by security concerns rather than by civic rights.' The key state bodies influencing this space, including the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour, and the Directorate of Political Affairs, operate within vague and overlapping frameworks, exercising selective interpretation of legislative provisions. Participants reported that a women's political movement was unable to hold its first conference inside Syria and was forced to relocate to Beirut, and that researchers had been denied ethical

approval for health-related research by the Department of Political Affairs on the grounds that such work was politically sensitive.

From within, civic space is fragmented by the politicisation of identity. Competing narratives, competing claims of representation, and competing approaches to civic work have undermined what had once been a shared principled agenda. As one participant stated, 'identities have really been weaponised, and civic actors … are reflecting some of these divisive and polarising elements … this has undermined the collective agenda for civil society.' One participant captured the resulting dilemma: 'there is this narrative … about stability versus justice and accountability, which I don't know why they are contradicting, but it seems to be that we had to go through this.'

Participants also engaged with questions of how civil society could reclaim political agency. The concept of the 'situational intellectual' was introduced, describing the argument that Syrian civic actors must adopt differentiated positionalities across domains, engaging with government where possible and contesting it where necessary. The importance of grounding civic work in daily, community-level practices was emphasised as the foundation upon which more formal institutional advocacy could eventually be built. As one participant argued, civic actors must 'nurture the culture of campaigning … build their belief that they can do a change and give them the tools that they need.' This included local councils, community-level mediation, feminist activism in daily life, and youth-led advocacy, all of which represented forms of civic engagement that were already producing results despite the constrained political environment.

Key Challenges Identified

1. The legislative framework governing civil society remained security-driven, and the gap between formal legislative improvements and the governance of civic space in practice was wide. The multiplicity of security actors with overlapping jurisdictions produced an environment of structural uncertainty.

2. The fragmentation of civic space along identity lines had undermined collective action and made it difficult to build coalitions capable of engaging with the governing authority from a position of strength.

3. The funding landscape for Syrian civil society had shifted dramatically, with the international donor commitment to localisation remaining largely rhetorical rather than substantive. The withdrawal of US funding had further constrained the operational capacity of established organisations.

4. The emergence of new civic actors alongside the weakening of established organisations had produced a civic ecosystem that was simultaneously expanding and diluting. Many newly emerging organisations lacked institutional capacity, organisational memory, and accountability structures. As one participant detailed, a small NGO of five people seeking to organise an event for teachers in a southern village had to secure approval from 15 different directorates and two ministers. At the same time, established organisations that had developed sophisticated operational capacities in exile found themselves distrusted by communities inside Syria who saw them as outsiders. The result was a civic landscape in which neither new nor established actors possessed the combination of legitimacy, capacity, and access required for effective engagement.

5. The space for critical engagement with the governing authority was increasingly constrained. Civic actors who engaged in accountability work, human rights documentation, or political empowerment faced stigmatisation as political opponents rather than recognition as public-interest contributors. Humanitarian organisations that could bring international funding and provide services enjoyed relative operational freedom, but organisations working on political empowerment or human rights documentation faced increasing restrictions from the Department of Political Affairs. As one participant observed, 'the civic space today is definitely shrinking … there needs to be better collective [action] to fill it and push its margins wider.' The result was a compliance-driven civic space in which only service-delivery organisations could operate freely, whilst the political agency of civil society was systematically stripped away.

Policy Recommendations

1. Compile and integrate lessons from regional civic frameworks into local institutional-strengthening programmes, drawing on comparative evidence of what has and has not worked in analogous post-conflict settings. Participants noted the importance of learning from experiences across the Middle East and North Africa, where civic movements have navigated similarly constrained political environments, and of translating those lessons into practical toolkits for Syrian organisations operating under conditions of securitised governance.

2. Develop a programme to promote women's participation at the community level, designing concrete entry points for political engagement and reconstruction participation that do not depend on prior organisational affiliation. These entry points should be rooted in the everyday practices—local governance, community mediation, economic participation—through which women are

already exercising agency, and should aim to build pathways from community-level engagement to systemic influence.

3. Establish a strategic policy network bringing together subject experts across domains to produce simplified, advocacy-ready policy briefs on reconstruction, justice, and economic measures for use by civic actors inside Syria. This network should serve as a bridge between research institutions and grassroots organisations. The resulting policy proposals should then be advocated with relevant ministries and directorates by expanding the bargaining space with the transitional authorities and identifying internal champions of progressive causes, including civil society actors who have joined the government in an official capacity.

4. Develop a youth programme to nurture campaigning and advocacy skills, running pilot campaigns with trained young people to rebuild the organisational capacity eroded during the conflict period. Participants emphasised that young Syrians represent the most significant demographic force inside the country, and that structured investment in their civic skills—coupled with the creation of safe spaces for discussion and political participation—was essential to the long-term vitality of Syrian civic life.

6. Justice and Accountability

Overview

The approach to justice adopted during Syria's transition will shape whether that transition is perceived as legitimate, credible, and sustainable. The discussion was framed by a conceptual shift from treating justice as a single process to understanding it as an ecosystem: courts, civil society organisations, victim groups, grassroots actors, and international institutions all constitute interdependent components of a broader accountability landscape.

Three structuring tensions animated the discussion. The first concerned feasibility and political constraints: what was realistically possible given the structural condition of the judiciary. As one participant stated, 'Syria's judicial system remains structurally compromised. Its independence has been eroded by decades of executive dominance and the systematic use as a tool of control and as an instrument to legitimise repression.' Access to justice was deeply unequal, and the conflict had created multiple competing and even contradictory legal systems across the country. The second tension concerned urgency versus sequencing: the needs of victims, particularly for acknowledgement, material

support, and the recovery of disappeared persons, were immediate, yet the institutional infrastructure required to deliver formal accountability would take years to construct. The third concerned the relationship between institutional reform and victim-centred approaches.

Participants insisted that transitional justice could not be confined to individual criminal accountability. The scale and nature of violations, including detentions, torture, property dispossession, and economic crimes, required a broader framework encompassing truth-seeking, reparations, and institutional reform. One participant noted that 'everyone today talks about a victim-centred approach, but nearly no one has defined it … it actually means that any legitimate approach must be grounded in the lived experiences of Syrians across different regions and communities.'

A significant imbalance in documentation was identified. Research conducted over six years found a pronounced disproportion between documentation for criminal prosecutions and documentation for restorative justice, reparations, and the recovery of missing persons. The prioritisation of criminal prosecution had narrowed the focus at the expense of documenting the scale of harm and the needs of victims, including the estimated 400,000 potential property restitution conflicts that would accompany return.

Key Challenges Identified

1. The judicial system inherited by the transitional authorities had been shaped by decades of political control, leaving it structurally incapable of delivering credible accountability. Participants observed that the separation of powers remained absent: the executive branch controlled both legislative and judicial functions, and some officials within the transitional government had asserted that existing Syrian law was sufficient for transitional justice—a position that participants described as reflecting a lack of the specialised knowledge required for this domain.

2. The urgency of victim needs—particularly for the recovery of disappeared persons and the resolution of property succession disputes—collided with the necessarily slow pace of institutional reform. The establishment of a national missing-persons commission was underway, but its inclusivity and independence remained contested.

3. International coordination in the justice space was characterised by competing operational agendas that did not always align with the priorities of Syrian civil society actors. Funding for justice and accountability work had declined globally, and the space for civil society engagement within Syria was narrowing.

4. The resources available to grassroots justice initiatives and civil society groups were insufficient relative to the scale of the accountability challenge.

5. The socioeconomic and political marginalisation of victims meant that their participation in justice processes was often nominal rather than substantive.

Policy Recommendations

1. Establish a multi-actor coordination mechanism—involving civil society organisations, international legal bodies, and victim groups—to sequence justice interventions and prevent institutional competition from undermining victim trust. This mechanism should draw on the experience of six civil society organisations that jointly approached the transitional authority to provide technical input on the draft transitional justice law, an initiative that demonstrated both the feasibility of coordinated engagement and the limitations of current governmental receptivity to external expertise.

2. Develop a donor framework that conditions funding on the genuine participation of victims in the design of transitional justice programmes. Participation must extend beyond consultation to encompass genuine influence over priorities, design, and implementation, with particular attention to gender and to the ways in which political, social, and economic marginalisation have shaped different experiences of injustice.

3. Prioritise the documentation and archiving of evidence of violations as an immediate foundational task that must precede and inform formal institutional reform. Documentation efforts should be rebalanced to address the current over-emphasis on criminal prosecution and to include documentation for restorative justice—reparations, property restitution, and the recovery of missing persons—which will be essential to any credible transition.

4. Support grassroots accountability initiatives as legitimate, partial entry points in the absence of functional formal institutions. Participants cited the Balkan experience, in which summer schools for transitional justice built the human capital that later staffed formal mechanisms, as a model for Syria: 'these young people who started [with] enthusiasm learning about transitions ended up playing key roles.'

5. Ensure that transitional justice frameworks address structural dimensions of political violence—including socioeconomic marginalisation, property dispossession, and gendered patterns of exclusion—alongside individual criminal responsibility. Justice must be embedded within the transition as a core

component of rebuilding legitimacy, not treated as a secondary issue to be deferred until a political settlement is in place.

7. Environment and Agriculture Policy

Overview

Reconstruction is never a purely technical exercise. As one participant observed, reflecting on the experience of Lebanon, 'the reconstruction of Lebanon cemented the sectarian divisions … and that would be a fear that we want to witness in Syria.' This framing positioned the discussion as an inquiry into the cultural, environmental, and justice dimensions of reconstruction alongside its technical and economic parameters.

The agricultural sector had been devastated by the conflict. Infrastructure had been destroyed, rural populations displaced, land holdings fragmented, and the value chains linking production to processing and marketing severed. Climate change had compounded these pressures: the average temperature rise in Syria exceeded the global average; droughts in the Fertile Crescent were now estimated to occur every two years; and the flow of the Euphrates River had decreased substantially over the past two decades, affecting dams, electricity generation, and irrigation systems. Agriculture should be understood as a base for broader economic and social recovery, with contributions to food security, community engagement, livelihoods, and local governance capacity. The food-processing sector was highlighted as an area of particular potential, but farmers faced severe marketing difficulties, inadequate water-management technologies, and fragmented land tenure.

The relationship between reconstruction and memory was a distinctive theme. Grassroots memorial practices, including tree-planting programmes in the names of disappeared persons and the scanning and documentation of detention and torture sites, were discussed as forms of both collective mourning and political accountability. The decline of Syria's agricultural green belt, including olive groves and family farms in peri-urban areas, represented both an economic and a cultural loss.

Key Challenges Identified

1. The compounding effects of conflict-related destruction and climate change had produced an environmental crisis that could not be addressed through agricultural policy alone, requiring integrated governance frameworks linking water management, land tenure, climate adaptation, and rural livelihoods.

2. The fragmentation of land holdings—exacerbated by displacement, property disputes, and the absence of a functioning cadastral system—constrained the productivity of smallholder agriculture and impeded the introduction of modern production technologies.

3. The reconstruction agenda risked treating war-damaged landscapes as blank slates, erasing the claims of displaced communities and the cultural significance of destroyed environments.

4. The institutional mechanisms required to support agricultural recovery—extension services, credit provision, cooperative marketing structures, and phytosanitary standards—had been destroyed or rendered non-functional.

Policy Recommendations

1. Develop an agricultural recovery programme addressing the full value chain—production, processing, marketing, and export—rather than focusing exclusively on primary production support. Participants noted that Syria's food-processing industry, including olive oil production and canning, had historically been a significant contributor to employment and export revenue, and that recovery of these value chains should be prioritised alongside primary agricultural support. Storage facilities, processing infrastructure, and market access mechanisms should be included in programme design.

2. Establish an environmental governance framework for reconstruction that embeds climate change adaptation measures, water management protocols, and land-tenure reform as conditions of international support. Given that Euphrates River flow has decreased by 40% over the past two decades and droughts now recur every two years, any credible agricultural recovery strategy must integrate climate-smart solutions and address the transboundary water-sharing dimension with Turkey.

3. Initiate research and programming on environmental and agricultural recovery, including specific support plans for smallholder farmers and local agri-based industries in war-affected rural areas. Support for farmers' associations should be prioritised, as these organisations can serve as vehicles for both agricultural extension and civic engagement, enabling producers to voice challenges to the state and participate in policy formulation.

4. Integrate transitional justice mechanisms into reconstruction planning, ensuring that the claims of displaced communities and the cultural significance of destroyed landscapes are recognised in redevelopment frameworks. Reconstruction projects should be subject to community consultation

requirements that protect against the displacement of returned populations, as documented in the case of Homs farmers threatened by new urban development projects on their agricultural land.

8. Security Sector Reform

Overview

The current military structure was characterised as a reactionary construct: it emerged in the immediate aftermath of the fall of the Assad regime with the primary aim of preventing inter-factional conflict, and the Ministry of Defence pursued rapid amalgamation of armed groups rather than their dissolution or fundamental transformation. The result was a hybrid system in which over 100 armed groups had been nominally incorporated into approximately 20 divisions without the institutional preconditions for genuine integration.

The post-Assad army reflected a spectrum of loyalties and ideological orientations, with a dominant political identity mirroring the broader trajectory of the emerging state. The role of sectarianism in shaping the new army's composition was a central concern. Participants observed that the military did not reflect Syria's diverse social fabric; its composition along prevailing ideological and social currents meant it could not credibly function as a neutral peacekeeping force across societal fault lines. As one participant warned, 'at some point there are Sunni–Sunni grievances, and that's almost very much not being taken … [this] will create Sunni–Sunni infighting … and also will open the space for more radical groups within Syria.' The naturalisation of military influence in civic and religious life was a structural concern: the reservation of half of all mosques for military personnel during Eid prayer illustrated the blurred boundary between military and civilian authority.

Two phenomena of particular gravity were discussed. The first was demographic engineering: the eviction of Alawite communities from 23 villages and the appropriation of their agricultural land by military factions. The second was the emergence of military economic enclaves: some factions, now rebranded as formal divisions, had invested in key economic sectors, effectively establishing monopolistic control in a pattern that participants described as resembling military feudalism.

The integration of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) into the national military structure was discussed as a particularly fraught dimension. A massive gulf in expectations persisted: the SDF spoke of 15,000 to 27,000 personnel, whereas Damascus envisaged 3,000 to 4,500.

Counterpoints to the dominant state-centric model were also advanced. The Ismaili Council in Salamiya provided a successful case study of community-based security: it had organised community courts and volunteer police forces with government assent.

Key Challenges Identified

1. The military's hybrid structure—formed through fusion rather than transformation—lacked the institutional foundations for genuine integration, and the distinction between formal incorporation and substantive reform remained wide.

2. The post-Assad army did not reflect Syria's diverse social fabric, and its composition along prevailing ideological and social currents—compounded by the recruitment of religious moral-guidance officers—meant it could not credibly function as a neutral peacekeeping force across societal fault lines.

3. Demographic engineering and the military appropriation of agricultural land constituted ongoing violations that demanded documentation, mediation, and ultimately restitution.

4. Military economic enclaves and monopolistic control of productive assets represented a structural obstacle to both economic recovery and civilian governance.

5. The SDF integration process was characterised by a gap between the expectations of the parties that risked future destabilisation.

6. The absence of a clear political ideology for the army, coupled with the critique of liberal peace-building frameworks, raised fundamental questions about the normative foundation upon which security sector reform should proceed.

Policy Recommendations

1. Establish institutional guarantees of military neutrality—including independent oversight mechanisms with civil society representation—as a precondition for international security sector support. These guarantees should address the structural composition of the force, including the representation of Syria's diverse communities, and should establish transparent criteria for appointment and promotion that are insulated from political and sectarian influence. The current practice of reserving public religious spaces for military use should be discontinued as a signal of the institutional separation of military and civilian authority.

2. Develop a comprehensive economic disengagement programme for military factions currently controlling productive assets, linked to credible political integration pathways that offer alternative sources of legitimacy and livelihood. In areas such as Ghouta, Hama, and parts of Idlib and Aleppo, where military-feudalist enclaves have already become entrenched in sectors like construction materials, this programme must include divestiture requirements, transparent licensing of economic activity, and mechanisms to prevent former military actors from converting coercive power into economic dominance.

3. Commission independent documentation of demographic engineering practices—including the eviction of 23 Alawite villages, land appropriation, and property disputes—as an evidentiary basis for both transitional justice and property restitution processes. The ongoing agrarian mediation agreements, under which reparations are being structured over five-year harvest cycles, should be documented and supported as a model for community-level dispute resolution, whilst ensuring that the military's continued occupation of lands is addressed as a matter of political priority.

4. Support and scale successful community-based security models, such as those operating in Salamiya, as complements to national military reform. The organisation of community courts and volunteer police forces demonstrates that effective local security can be achieved where strong civil society networks, willing religious leadership, and government assent converge. Replication in other regions—particularly in vulnerable Alawite areas—will require investment in the civil society infrastructure that is currently absent and a shift in the governing authority's stance towards permitting community-led protection mechanisms.

5. Develop a clear and publicly articulated political framework for the army's role, identity, and accountability, addressing the ideological vacuum that currently permits the naturalisation of sectarian and religious influence within military structures. This framework should articulate the conditions under which the military is expected to operate as a neutral institution, and should be developed through a consultative process that includes civilian experts, civil society representatives, and members of diverse communities.

6. Develop an explicit plan to render the security sector inclusive of Syria's full range of ethno-sectarian backgrounds. Because the composition of the post-Assad army currently mirrors prevailing ideological currents rather than the diversity of Syrian society, inclusion cannot be left to incidental recruitment; it requires deliberate targets for representation, transparent and merit-based criteria for appointment and promotion across all ranks, and monitoring mechanisms that track the demographic composition of the force over time.

Such a plan should be treated as a structural precondition of credible reform and as the indispensable counterpart to the institutional guarantees of neutrality set out above, ensuring that the army can function as a national institution commanding the confidence of all communities.

6. Conclusion

This report reveals a transition that is simultaneously more fragile and more contested than conventional policy frameworks acknowledge. The policy recommendations advanced in this report share a common logic: they privilege institutional mechanisms over individual interventions, evidence-based targeting over operational convenience, and genuine participation over nominal inclusion. They identify concrete entry points across all seven domains that are actionable within the current political constraints and represent the foundational investments upon which more ambitious structural reforms can be built.

The recommendations demand that international donors move beyond the humanitarian–development binary that has constrained engagement with Syria for over a decade, and that Syrian transitional authorities recognise that sustainable governance cannot be constructed through security-driven and centralised frameworks alone. It requires the active inclusion of civic actors, academic institutions, and affected communities in the design of transitional arrangements.

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