

| POLICY BRIEF

Syria at a Crossroads

Anchoring a Legitimate,
Inclusive, and Regionally
Integrated Transition

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Context

Syria's transition stands out as one of the few genuine political openings in a region otherwise defined by stagnation and competing agendas. A national dialogue, new institutional bodies, a People's Assembly, early security sector reform, and a reopening of civic space mark a genuine political shift that is creating new possibilities for Syria and for the region around it. Syria has repositioned itself internationally, moving from regional isolation to a candidate for partnership at a moment when regional dynamics are themselves being reconfigured.

Syria sits at the centre of a regional economic reconfiguration now under way: the reopening of the land corridor connecting Turkey, Syria, Jordan and the Gulf; pipeline and energy connectivity, the revival of trade and investment flows; and refugee return. Its stabilisation is consequential for a wider regional economic order, not for Syria alone. Underpinning this reconfiguration is a broader strategic shift. The weakening of Iran's forward presence across Syria and Lebanon has altered the regional calculus in ways that create political space that did not previously exist. Gulf states, Türkiye, Jordan, and European partners increasingly treat Syria's stabilisation as a shared strategic interest: border security, the disruption of captagon and other illicit trafficking networks that have spilled across the region, counter-terrorism cooperation, refugee return, and the protection of the economic and connectivity gains now taking shape.

This convergence of interests anchors the transition at the regional level. The United States has supported this opening, easing sanctions and lending political weight to the transition, while leaving the architecture of regional engagement largely to Gulf and European partners. Its durability will depend on whether the current alignment hardens into something institutional or remains contingent on the political cycle in Washington.

What will determine whether the opening consolidates is how a specific set of fault lines is navigated: Southern Syria, where the relationship with Israel at the regional level and the return of Sweida to state authority at the national level intersect; the relationship between the state and key constituencies, including the full integration of Northeast actors; recovery as a political and social process and not only an economic one; and the wider state and nation building agenda from legal frameworks to the forging of a new social fabric.

Southern Syria remains the most exposed fault line and the one where regional and national dimensions converge most sharply. Israel maintains a physical military presence; Sweida remains outside full governmental control and is increasingly tied to Israeli political calculations; and the broader Israel-Syria axis concentrates the most acute security and sovereignty pressures of the transition. The challenge runs along two intersecting lines: at the regional level, managing the relationship with Israel and the convergences and divergences of interest it generates; at the national level, restoring Sweida to full state authority in a way that holds locally and is not contested externally. A coherent approach to deconfliction, confidence building, and the cultivation of shared understandings that take the different interests at stake into account is needed.

On the economic front, the Grand Recovery Plan is where Syria's recovery and regional reintegration come together. It is not only an economic exercise but a political and social one: its credibility will shape the trust between the state and its people and the confidence of regional partners that their engagement is translating into results on the ground. Recovery felt unevenly across regions and communities will deepen the fractures the transition is trying to bridge. This requires the full engagement of regional and international partners.

The Northeast track and the government's broader efforts to build confidence with key constituencies across the country are progressing but require sustained political investment to consolidate. The integration of Northeast actors into the national political order is among the more politically significant items on the agenda, and the terms on which it is settled will inform how other constituencies approach their own relationship with the state. Trust between the state and its constituencies is built through sustained engagement with the communities whose participation the transition relies on.

Sustaining and deepening this opening also requires confronting a set of state-building challenges that are political in nature, not only institutional. The legal frameworks underpinning legitimate political participation have not yet been fully updated to reflect the new reality: the law governing political parties remains an unresolved gap as dozens of parties and hybrid civic-political bodies have emerged without a regulatory framework; the NGO law in force is inherited from the previous era and creates tensions between institutions and civil society. These shape whether the pluralism now surfacing is channelled into institutional life or remains outside it. Civic peace and the forging of a new social contract are the political foundations on which Syria's institutional order must rest.

Syria carries the weight of a decade of conflict whose fractures run deep across communities, regions, and lived experiences that the transition must now bridge. Reconciliation and transitional justice are not technical or legal procedures. They are political processes through which trust is rebuilt, the social fabric is repaired, and the conditions for a durable and legitimate political order are created.

The establishment of the National Commission on Transitional Justice and its Peacebuilding and Reconciliation Committee is a significant political commitment whose value will depend on whether it translates into a nationally owned and participatory process that reaches communities across Syria's diverse regions. Over the next three years, as set out in the constitutional declaration, Syria will navigate a dense process of institutional, legal, and constitutional building. At the end of this period, Syria will face an electoral cycle at parliamentary, presidential, municipal, and syndicate levels, each of which will require genuine institutional preparation and the political conditions for credible and inclusive participation, foundational to the long-term legitimacy of Syria's institutions.

Five strategic considerations organise the challenges, openings, and recommendations that follow: Legitimacy as the political engine driving institutional and political choices. Inclusivity and participation as structural imperatives. Reconciliation and transitional justice as the foundation of a new social contract. Recovery as political contract, social dividend, and regional opportunity. Regional alignment as a prerequisite for durable stability.

I. Regional Alignment as a Prerequisite for Durable Stability

Syria's transition is taking place inside a regional reconfiguration whose full implications are still being absorbed. The weakening of Iran's forward presence, the warming of Syria's relationships with Washington and Gulf capitals, and the growing recognition among regional actors that Syria's stability serves shared interests have created a more favourable external environment than at any point in the past decade.

But a convergence of interests is not yet a convergence of strategies. The interests of external actors in Syria's trajectory are not always aligned. Unmanaged, those interests risk fragmenting into competing bilateral deals and uncoordinated interventions that pull the transition in different directions. The Israel-Syria file concentrates the most acute and time-sensitive version of this risk. Southern Syria is where Syria's internal transition and the regional security environment intersect most directly. Israeli military presence, deliberate political engagement with Druze communities around questions of protection and political alignment, and Israeli security interests in demilitarised zones in southern Syria create a situation that requires active political management.

The following opportunities and recommendations should guide engagement on this file:

- **Southern Syria: Anchoring Stability and Sovereignty.** A structured approach to managing the southern security file must be developed, identifying practical confidence-building measures, and developing arrangements that protect Syrian sovereignty and reduce the security pressures driving continued Israeli military presence. The Sweida Roadmap brokered by Jordan and the United States provides a political basis that must be actively implemented. Syria's warming relationship with Washington is a significant asset that can help create the conditions for a structured and sustained process to manage this file. Regional partners, particularly Jordan and Saudi Arabia, both trusted by the Syrian government and holding strong relationships with Washington, have a direct role to play in sustaining political momentum and providing the backing this process requires.
- **Anchoring Syria's reintegration in a structured relationship with Europe.** European political, technical, and financial engagement with Syria's transition needs a sustained bilateral channel that goes beyond periodic diplomatic statements and aligns European support with Syrian priorities. Germany's decision to reopen its representation in Damascus, as one of the first European countries to do so, and the ongoing EU-Syria high-level talks in Brussels and Damascus are significant political signals that create a concrete opportunity. What is needed is strategic accompaniment to this dialogue process: supporting Syrian authorities position, and advance their priorities in European forums, connecting the dialogue to concrete financial and technical commitments, and ensuring that European engagement is coordinated behind Syrian priorities.

- **Building a structured dialogue to channel competing external and regional interests.** Multiple external actors are simultaneously present and active in Syria with interests that do not always converge: Türkiye maintains a significant economic and political footprint in the north, oil contracts are being signed with international actors, and Gulf, American, and European interests in Syria's trajectory each carry their own priorities. A structured dialogue bringing together Syria, Gulf states, the United States, Türkiye, the United Kingdom, and European partners around a common framework that respects Syrian sovereignty, coordinates external support, and manages competing interests through dialogue rather than competition is a political investment in Syria's long-term stability and regional reintegration.

II. From Political Contract to Regional Dividend: Syria's Grand Recovery Plan

Syria's Grand Recovery Plan is not only an economic programme. The plan connects national level reconstruction with local level trust building, social cohesion, and the restoration of confidence in state institutions across Syria's diverse regions, making it as much a political task as an economic one. It is also Syria's most compelling case for regional investment. Syria's geographic position connects Gulf states to Europe, energy producers to markets, and reopens trade corridors that have been blocked for over a decade, creating strategic incentives for regional actors to invest.

The following opportunities and recommendations should guide engagement on this file:

- **Removing the barriers to investment: completing the sanctions process.** Sanctions relief has created a window. Closing the remaining gaps, including Syria's removal from the state sponsors of terrorism list and the establishment of a clear legal and regulatory investment framework, is the precondition for unlocking the investment, reconstruction activity, and economic re-engagement.
- **From political backing to economic commitment.** Gulf states have demonstrated political commitment to Syria's recovery. A stable and economically integrated Syria reduces regional security risks, reopens trade and energy corridors, and creates economic opportunities that serve Gulf economies as much as Syrian ones. Translating that political commitment into financing agreements and contracts tied to Syrian-owned priorities and the Grand Recovery Plan is the concrete next step that converts strategic positioning into shared dividends.

- **Position Syria's recovery explicitly as a regional strategic opportunity.** Syria's recovery cannot be secured through bilateral deals alone, and its reintegration should not become a stage for competing external agendas. A structured Syria-Europe dialogue track and a dedicated regional dialogue bringing together Syria, Gulf states, Türkiye, Jordan, Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, and European partners would align external engagement behind Syrian priorities and generate the coordinated investment the plan requires.

III. Legitimacy as the Political Engine

The central political challenge of Syria's transition is building institutions that command the legitimacy required to govern. Legitimacy is the product of service delivery and a sustained political process in which communities across the country, including those most distant from Damascus and most scarred by conflict, see their priorities reflected in national frameworks and their expectations met. Where that connection is absent, formally constituted institutions become arenas for factional competition rather than instruments of shared governance. At the international level, legitimacy is equally consequential: it is what converts diplomatic goodwill into sustained political and financial engagement and what gives Syria the credibility to anchor its transition within a supportive regional and international architecture.

Several specific files concentrate this challenge. The People's Assembly remains the first and most visible test of legitimacy in Syria's transition. It is now fully formed: with President Sharaa's appointment of the remaining 70 members, the two stage process that began with last October's indirect elections has been completed. With the Assembly's formation now complete, the test facing Syria's transition shifts from composition to performance. Legitimacy will now be cultivated through what the parliament does: the laws it passes, the coalitions it builds, and the extent to which its work is felt by Syrians in tangible outcomes that respond to the transition's priorities. The parliament will be judged on whether it can translate representation into functioning institutional practice and legislative output. That output depends, in turn, on whether the Assembly can function as a coherent body in the first place. A body assembled to reflect Syria's plurality carries a structural risk of importing that plurality's fault lines wholesale, allowing the same communal, regional, and political tensions playing out at the social level to reproduce themselves inside the chamber. Left unmanaged, this risks hardening representation into polarisation and turning diversity into procedural deadlock rather than shared ownership.

Managing this dynamic is itself a strategic task for the transition. It will depend on internal rules that channel disagreement into negotiation rather than blockage, coalition-building practices that reward cross-cutting alliances over bloc politics, and a political culture within the chamber that treats plurality as a resource to be managed rather than a risk to be contained. Handled well, this is what will convert the Assembly's composition into durable legitimacy.

The legal and regulatory architecture for political participation is equally a legitimacy challenge. The law governing political parties remains an unresolved structural gap at precisely the moment when dozens of parties and hybrid civic-political bodies have emerged, reflecting genuine political pluralism that the transition has released but not yet channelled. The NGO law in force is inherited from the previous era, creating systemic tensions between state institutions and the civil society actors whose social reach and community trust the transition needs. Building the right legal and civic architecture at this stage is not a mere legal or regulatory exercise. It is a political investment whose returns will shape Syria's political environment for years to come.

The following opportunities and recommendations should guide engagement on this file:

- **Sweida as a legitimacy and sovereignty file.** Sweida's integration into the national framework is one of the most politically sensitive files of the transition. The community has historically maintained a degree of autonomy, and the current moment, where Israeli military presence and political engagement around Druze dynamics intersect with local grievances around representation, security, and institutional inclusion, requires a carefully calibrated political approach. Advancing this file would benefit from direct and sustained political engagement between the Syrian government and Sweida's community representatives, confidence-building measures, and institutional arrangements that give Sweida a genuine stake in the national framework. The September 2025 Sweida Roadmap, brokered with Jordan and the United States, provides the political basis for this engagement and must be actively and consistently implemented. The United States, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan can play a constructive role in supporting a Syrian-led process of engagement with local representatives in Sweida, and in helping to build the regional consensus around Syria's sovereignty and territorial integrity that this file requires.
- **The Northeast as a model for inclusive state building.** Sustaining and deepening the Damascus-Northeast dialogue and translating its outcomes into institutional arrangements that other regions can look to as a credible precedent are among the most important contributions to the legitimacy of the transition. On security sector reform, the integration of SDF-affiliated forces and entities into national security structures is a critical confidence-building measure that signals genuine commitment to shared sovereignty. Activating the implementation of President Sharaa's decree on Kurdish rights is equally urgent: easing citizenship processes for communities in the Northeast, resolving questions around Kurdish-language education in schools and institutions, and addressing the return of displaced Kurdish communities and their housing, land, and property rights are concrete steps that would demonstrate the state's willingness to engage with the realities of its Kurdish constituencies. Advancing this file in close coordination with regional partners, particularly the Kurdistan Region of Iraq and Türkiye, would help build the regional confidence and practical cooperation that a durable settlement in the Northeast requires.

- **Institutional capacity is a political investment, not a technical one.** Building legitimate institutions requires investing in the people behind them, not only the frameworks that define them. Syrian authorities and their international partners should invest in targeted capacity building programmes across ministries and their entities, local administrations, and transitional bodies at both central and governorate levels. Key institutions, including ministries and ad hoc entities at central and governorate level, are a particular priority: capable and well-resourced institutions are the backbone of Syria's international repositioning and domestic transition alike, and are central to shaping the political and institutional architecture of the process itself.
- **Building the architecture for political pluralism.** Many parties and hybrid civic-political bodies have emerged since the transition began. Without a regulatory framework, this pluralism risks becoming a source of fragmentation. A new law on political parties, developed through a genuinely consultative process, is the foundation on which a legitimate political environment depends and a prerequisite for future credible elections. Syrian authorities and parliament should draw on strategic advisory support and lessons from comparable transition contexts in developing this framework.
- **Civic space as a political asset.** A new law on civil society, developed through a genuinely participatory process, is a political investment in the social fabric on which durable stability depends. The current law, inherited from the era of Egyptian-Syrian unification, no longer reflects the political and civic landscape it is meant to govern. The Syrian Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour has initiated a consultation process that requires acceleration, adequate resourcing, and genuine engagement to produce legislation that adapts to the realities of the transition. The experience of other countries that have undergone comparable transitions offers relevant lessons that the Syrian process can draw on.

IV. Inclusivity and Participation as Structural Imperatives

Participatory processes are the political infrastructure through which Syria's transition generates the national cohesion and shared ownership it cannot build through institutional design alone. They are the mechanisms through which diverging expectations are aligned, through which communities across Syria's diverse regions see their priorities reflected in national frameworks, and through which common readings, common pledges, and a shared vision of Syria's political future are cultivated across its diverse constituencies. In a transition as complex and politically layered as Syria's, where the legacies of conflict, the diversity of regional realities, and the uneven distribution of trust between the state and its constituencies all create centrifugal pressures, participatory processes are necessary conditions for the social ownership and political durability.

The following opportunities and recommendations should guide engagement on this file:

- **National Dialogue: From a one-time event to a sustained political process.** The national dialogue of February 2025 was an important opening. It addressed five priority files: political and constitutional reform, transitional justice and reconciliation, economic development and reconstruction, security sector reform, and humanitarian issues. But a conference and a final statement do not build the trust, common readings, and joint pledges on which a durable transition depends. The real work of national dialogue is the sustained, participatory, and inclusive process through which Syrian society, across its diverse regions and constituencies, develops a shared ownership of the political choices the transition requires. Each of the five files demands its own dedicated process, bringing the right constituencies into genuine dialogue, surfacing diverging expectations before they harden into grievances, and generating the common pledges that translate political commitments into socially owned and politically durable outcomes. Syria can draw on relevant regional experience in designing and sustaining this process. Yemen's national dialogue, despite its ultimate political fate, offers directly relevant lessons on how a structured, multi-stakeholder process can be prepared and facilitated to generate genuine political ownership across deeply divided constituencies. International partners can provide strategic advisory support, technical accompaniment, and access to comparative lessons that strengthen the design and implementation of each dedicated dialogue process.
- **Building representation into the architecture of the transition.** Syria's transition will only generate the broad social ownership it needs if the political and institutional processes being designed actively reflect the country's diversity. Women, youth, minorities, and underrepresented regional communities must be embedded in the political and institutional architecture of the transition. Dedicated quotas across institutional frameworks are the concrete political mechanisms through which a genuinely representative transition is built. Regional and international partners have a role to play in supporting Syrian-led efforts to embed quotas and genuine representation into the country's political and institutional processes, including through political backing and financial engagement.
- **From consultation to joint pledge: a nationally owned participatory process.** Syria needs a sustained platform through which the state and its diverse constituencies can develop common readings, align expectations, and build the joint pledges that give political commitments their social and political durability. An opportunity is to accompany Syrian authorities in designing and implementing a process adapted entirely to Syrian realities and priorities, in full respect of Syrian ownership and leadership.

V. Reconciliation and Transitional Justice: Foundation of a New Social Contract

Reconciliation, civic peace, and transitional justice are the files on which Syria's new social contract will be forged. The state has taken significant institutional steps: the National Commission on Transitional Justice has been established within which a committee has been created to deal with reconciliation and peacebuilding, a National Commission on Missing Persons has been created, and a draft law on transitional justice has been prepared. But these are institutional starting points. Transitional justice and reconciliation are not technical or legal exercises. They are political processes through which the fractures of conflict are addressed, trust among communities is restored, and the foundations of a new social contract are laid.

What makes Syria's moment distinctive is that the social infrastructure for reconciliation already exists on the ground. Since the start of the transition, communities across Syria's localities have spontaneously established reconciliation and civic peace committees, creating locally owned and trusted bodies for conflict resolution, dialogue, and early response. In certain regions, tribal arbitration mechanisms and reconciliation customs provide additional locally grounded channels for managing disputes and rebuilding trust. These are not parallel processes to be managed alongside national frameworks. They are political assets that the state and its partners should recognise, resource, and connect to national frameworks, creating a coherent national infrastructure for civic peace that draws its legitimacy from the ground up.

The following opportunities and recommendations should guide engagement on this file:

- **From institutional creation to political impact: accompanying Syria's transitional justice and reconciliation ad hoc entities.** The political value of Syria's transitional justice institutions will be determined not by their existence but by the quality of the process they generate. The National Commission on Transitional Justice and its Peacebuilding and Reconciliation Committee require sustained strategic and political support across their full mandate to translate institutional creation into political impact: developing a nationally owned reconciliation framework, deploying tested participatory tools that move frameworks into genuine machinery, connecting Syria's process to relevant international lessons, advocating for its priorities in the regional and international forums where support is shaped, and opening a sustained political dialogue between the Committee and Syrian society that transforms institutional mandates into a nationally owned process with the credibility and legitimacy to hold. The credibility of Syria's reconciliation process depends as much on regional political and financial commitment as on the quality of its institutional design. Comparable transitions have benefited from dedicated international and regional funding mechanisms that provided the sustained financial backbone transitional justice processes require.

Investing in Syria's national reconciliation architecture. One of the most significant and underutilised assets of Syria's transition is the network of locally owned reconciliation and civic peace committees that communities have built since the start of the transition, alongside existing tribal reconciliation mechanisms and customary practices that provide additional trusted channels for conflict resolution and dialogue across different regions. Recognising, resourcing, and connecting these bodies to national frameworks would create a distributed national infrastructure for civic peace that draws its legitimacy from the ground up, gives the state trusted channels for early warning and early response, and ensures that reconciliation is owned and carried forward by Syrian communities themselves rather than imposed from above. The opportunity is to invest in these committees, connect their experiences, create structured spaces for exchange and mutual learning that allow successful approaches to be replicated, and equip them with the political recognition, technical support, and financial backing they need.



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