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SYRIA AFTER ASSAD

Governance, Economy, and Civil Society in the Transition, Mid-2026

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A NOTE ON THIS PUBLICATION

This paper is a companion piece to Civil Society Development in Syria, which traced the country's civil society from the nineteenth century through the first six years of the 2011 uprising. Where that paper closed with a brief postscript on the fall of the Assad regime, this one takes the transition as its full subject: what has been rebuilt, what remains contested, and what the record of the past eighteen months suggests about the road ahead. It reflects the situation as understood in mid-2026 and will be revisited as the transition develops.

SYRIA AFTER ASSAD: THE STATE OF THE TRANSITION

A Transition Declared, Not Concluded

Bashar al-Assad's regime collapsed on 8 December 2024, when a rebel offensive led by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham reached Damascus after a rapid advance from Idlib, bringing Syria's thirteen-year civil war to a close. Ahmed al-Sharaa, the movement's leader, headed a caretaker government through the following winter before a Constitutional Declaration, ratified on 13 March 2025 after a National Dialogue Conference the previous month, established a five-year transitional framework. A 23-member transitional government was sworn in on 29 March 2025, dominated by al-Sharaa's closest allies from HTS and the Salvation Government, with a smaller number of technocrats, civil society figures, and, notably, a few former regime ministers retained in post. A partial reshuffle in May 2026 has since adjusted the cabinet's composition. An interim People's Assembly was seated through an indirect selection process in October 2025, itself contested by parts of the country excluded from that process.

Eighteen months on, the honest assessment is that Syria has a transition in progress rather than a settled outcome. The institutions of a state are being reconstituted at a pace that has outrun the public trust, security guarantees, and legal clarity needed to sustain them, a gap that runs through nearly every file examined below.

Security: Real Ceasefires, No Single Monopoly on Force

The transitional government does not yet hold an undisputed monopoly on force, and the past eighteen months have tested that gap more than once. Coastal areas with a significant Alawite population saw a serious wave of sectarian violence in March 2025, followed by comparable violence affecting Druze communities in the south in July 2025, both of which drew EU human rights sanctions against specific individuals and entities and remain live grievances rather than closed incidents. In the north-east, integration talks with the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces, first agreed in March 2025 and reaffirmed in October, stalled repeatedly over the year, and January 2026 brought a new round of government operations to assert control over non-Kurdish-majority areas previously held by the SDF, alongside a fresh ceasefire and integration agreement covering some wartime governing structures and units. The Kurdistan Workers' Party's announcement in early 2025 that it would dissolve and disarm removed one long-standing complication from Turkey's position, but has not resolved Ankara's underlying objection to Kurdish autonomy in northern Syria. Islamic State remnants remain a live threat rather than a residual one, and the management of displaced persons and detention facilities

linked to the group is an unresolved file with direct implications for any durable security settlement.

Accountability: Selective by Design, Not Yet by Accident

A National Commission for Transitional Justice was established by presidential decree in May 2025, tasked with addressing past human rights violations and supporting national reconciliation, and prosecutions have followed in a number of high-profile cases, including the arrest in January 2025 of a relative of the former president tied to the detention and torture of children in Daraa in 2011, the episode widely credited with igniting the uprising. Set against this, the transitional government has retained in office a Minister of Justice against whom credible video evidence documents direct involvement in an extrajudicial execution in Idlib in 2015, a case civil society groups have repeatedly raised as a test of the government's own commitment to the accountability it demands of the former regime. The transitional government has yet to publish a clear transitional justice framework setting out how these cases will be prioritised, and Syrian civil society organisations, inside and outside the country, remain the most consistent source of pressure for one.

Sanctions Relief and a Fragile Economic Opening

The most consequential change of the past year has been economic. The EU lifted the bulk of its economic sanctions on Syria in May 2025, delisting 24 entities including the Central Bank of Syria, while maintaining targeted measures tied to human rights violations and extending its listings against Assad-era individuals into 2026. The United States followed a similar path, with President Trump announcing sanctions relief in May 2025 during a first meeting with al-Sharaa in Riyadh, an Executive Order removing most US sanctions effective July 2025, and Congress fully repealing the Caesar Act in the FY2026 defence authorisation, enacted in December 2025. Al-Sharaa's November 2025 visit to the White House, the first by a sitting Syrian head of state, and the process launched in mid-2026 to rescind Syria's state sponsor of terrorism designation, mark a level of normalisation that would have been difficult to imagine before December 2024.

The practical effect so far is one of removed barriers rather than transformed conditions. Syrian banks are beginning to reconnect to international networks, the Central Bank has been delisted across US, EU, and UK regimes, and initial foreign investment commitments have followed, but the World Bank's estimate of roughly 216 billion dollars in reconstruction needs, against an economy that contracted by more than half since 2010, gives a sense of the distance still to travel. European governments have been explicit that sanctions relief is not unconditional, and continued monitoring, particularly around transparency in the use of international funds, is likely to remain a feature of the relationship rather than a one-off condition.

Housing, Land, and Property: The File That Touches Everything

Syria's civil documentation and property crisis has emerged as one of the transition's most consequential and least resolved problems. A Norwegian Refugee Council assessment completed in December 2025, covering 1,200 families across nine governorates, found that 62 percent lacked civil identification documents and 61 percent lacked formal property documentation, rising to 80 percent among those who had returned since the regime's fall. The transitional

government has taken visible steps to restore basic institutional functions, including the resumption of real estate registration services in January 2025, but a series of Justice and Finance Ministry decisions issued between May and July 2025 have been assessed by specialists as falling short of a coherent political approach to restoring property rights or dismantling the exceptional confiscation structures used under the former regime. A December 2025 Justice Ministry circular restricting guardianship of minors to fathers and their paternal relatives has drawn separate criticism from rights organisations as a step backward for women's legal standing, with direct practical consequences for women managing property and civil affairs on behalf of their children. For a country where roughly 1.3 million people returned home in 2025 alone, nearly three times the prior year's figure, the absence of a credible property rights framework is not a technical gap. It is the difference between a return that leads to reintegration and one that leads to renewed dispute.

Civil Society: An Opening, and a New Set of Constraints

For Syrian civil society, the central change of the past eighteen months has been the ability to operate openly inside the country for the first time in decades. Within days of the regime's fall, a coalition of some 44 independent civil society organisations submitted a legal memorandum to the caretaker authorities calling for a time-bound, inclusive transition with guaranteed civil society participation. Diaspora organisations built over more than a decade of exile have had to adjust in parallel, as the centre of activity shifts back toward organisations working inside the country.

That opening has come with a new regulatory relationship to manage. The Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour, under Minister Hind Kabawat, opened work in April 2025 on a new law governing associations, intended to replace 1958-era legislation with a framework closer to international standards on freedom of association, a reform Syrian civil society organisations have themselves been pushing for. In the interim, an October 2025 ministry circular requiring prior government approval for any foreign funding or membership in international bodies drew a joint public objection from Syrian NGOs, who read it as a step toward the same donor gatekeeping this paper's historical section described under a different government. The funding environment has, separately, proven just as exposed to external shocks as it was during the uprising years: the US funding freeze in January 2025 forced established actors, including the Syria Justice and Accountability Center, to suspend programming immediately, a reminder that Syrian civil society's dependence on a small number of international funding sources remains a structural vulnerability rather than a historical footnote.

What the Transition Has, and Has Not, Changed

The comparison worth making is not between the transition and an idealised outcome, but between the transition and the conditions this paper's historical section described. Syrian civil society organisations are, for the first time since before 1963, negotiating directly and openly with a Syrian government over the legal terms of their own existence, rather than working around a state that treated independent association as a threat by definition. That is a genuine change, and it should be named as one. It has not, on its own, resolved the deeper pattern this paper has traced from the charitable associations of the nineteenth century onward: civil society's legitimacy has always been built through sustained, locally rooted presence, while the resources to sustain that

presence have just as consistently depended on funding relationships, whether with a colonial administration, a wartime donor coalition, or a transitional ministry, that Syrian organisations do not fully control. The transition has changed who sits on the other side of that relationship. It has not yet changed the relationship itself.

The most useful posture for anyone working on Syria in this period, donor, practitioner, or diaspora actor, is a form of grounded patience: neither the premature optimism that mistakes the end of Assad for the end of the country's structural problems, nor the fatalism that treats a genuinely open transition as indistinguishable from the stalemate that preceded it. Both read as more decisive than the evidence currently supports.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Diana Khayyata is Founder and Senior Advisor of Levantina Consulting, an independent advisory practice specialising in governance, social cohesion, conflict-sensitive programming, and HLP rights across the MENA region and Europe. Her career spans more than fourteen years, including roles as Senior Advocacy and Communications Officer with The White Helmets and Project Leader for HLP rights at PAX for Peace. She advises international organisations and donor agencies on governance and social cohesion programming in Syria, and has been published and quoted in NRC and Pharos.