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Syria Forward Forum Report: Building
Foundations to Address the Political, Security,
Economic and Social Challenges & Possible
Contributions from the International Community

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Executive Summary

This forum was the third in the series on the forward path for Syria; the earlier two were held in Doha in February 2025 and in Rome in May 2025. The first forum was organised by GISR in the immediate aftermath of the fall of the Assad regime and brought together experts from the Syrian diaspora. The overwhelming consensus that emerged from this discussion was that Syria should lead and be given the agency to shape its destiny as it moves forward. The second forum was jointly organised by GISR and the Italian think tank Med-OR on the heels of US President Donald Trump's maiden visit to the Middle East in his second term, and focused on the European perspective on developments in Syria. The common sentiment that emerged from this discussion was that the current leader, Ahmad Al Sharaa, is best placed to lead the embattled country and must receive the full backing of the West. The current forum, jointly organised by GISR and Stimson Centre, follows the historic UN speech of Ahmad Al Sharaa, the first by a Syrian head of State in 60 years. It brought together senior officials from Syria's new administration, regional diplomats, and international policy experts, primarily from the United States, to build further on the earlier two events on the optimal path for Syria to build its foundations to address the multifaceted political, security, economic, and social challenges besieging the country.

The discussions were structured into two primary sessions: the first, titled "Transition toward a sustainable democratic society," focused on the political, security, and social challenges, and the second, titled "Meeting the challenges of a shattered Syrian economy," focused on the economic challenges confronting the new Syrian administration. A prevailing theme was the recognition of the immense baggage inherited from the Assad regime, a cautious optimism about the ability of the new Syrian administration to overcome seemingly insurmountable challenges, recognition of security threats from a belligerent Israel, Iran and ISIS and the

necessity of inclusive governance, security sector integration and innovative economic strategies.

Key themes and findings

Inheriting a country replete with landmines

On Dec 8th, 2024, the Ba’athist Assad regime of Syria collapsed and Syrians got their country back, but one that was filled with landmines, both physical ones, but also social, economic and political mines. After 14 years of devastating civil war and six decades of inept and corrupt rule by the Assad regime, the entire social, political and economic fabric of the country was left in ruins. They inherited a bureaucracy that was rife with corruption, with several thousand ‘ghost employees’ that existed only on paper to benefit the family, fighters and loyalists of the Assad regime. When the new administration took over the reins of the government institutions, nearly a third of the workforce did not even show up for work.

Repairing the social fabric

Experts asserted that transitional justice and criminal accountability are essential for sustainable peace and national reconciliation, and for repairing the social fabric.

The Syrian official remarked that the new Syrian administration has embarked on an exercise to foster inclusiveness, with earnest efforts initiated as early as Dec 9th, 2024, when local committees were established in almost every neighbourhood, which then nominated representatives who served as focal points with the government to coordinate issues related to security and other services. This laid the groundwork for the subsequent Syrian National Dialogue, held in Damascus at the end of February 2025, in which over 1200 people representing all ethnic and religious minorities participated. The process of inclusion was further

advanced with the formation of the Syrian transitional government in March 2025, two-thirds of which was composed of technocrats and civil society members.

Experts pointed to recent sectarian violence in Sweida province with the Druze community and coastal Syria with the Alawites as eroding trust among minority communities. These incidents highlight the fragile internal stability of the country, marked by years of bitter civil war and lingering memories of atrocities committed. Also, these developments are interconnected, and any incident that threatens the security of one minority group alerts the others, who subsequently become sceptical of engagement with the transitional government. However, they also noted, with cautious optimism, that, as a collective, these groups, having endured years of violence, do not seek revenge but look forward to a future of coexistence and peace. The government's response to the incidents of civilian unrest was quick and decisive, establishing investigative committees and prosecuting the perpetrators in a fair, transparent and unbiased manner. However, while the government prioritises achieving a ceasefire when these incidents occur, other parties, notably Israel, do everything they can to sabotage these efforts. Then they (Israel) plant false narratives aiming to stoke further tensions between the ethnic groups and further inflame the unrest and violence.

There was consensus on the need for a decentralised administrative model that allows local communities to control culture, education, and language, thereby fostering a sense of belonging.

Forging a new security architecture

It was noted that with the previous regime's security apparatus having collapsed—evidenced by the immediate aftermath where military gear was abandoned in the streets—the victorious forces, led by the HTS, faced the urgent task of building a new state military from scratch. This necessitated the President's decisive dissolution of all armed groups and the establishment of a unified Defence Ministry. The primary challenge was avoiding a fractured state scenario like Libya's by convincing these diverse, sometimes extreme groups to integrate. Through a combination of incentives and persuasion, the government successfully brought a critical majority under a single command, uniform, and legal umbrella. While still a pre-disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration (DDR) phase facing issues like internal control and procedural gaps, consolidating most armed factions into a nascent national military structure within nine months represents a significant, if imperfect, achievement in stabilising the country.

New political formula

It was acknowledged that due to the lack of comprehensive civil data and the millions of Syrians displaced both inside and outside the country, a public election is not feasible. Instead, a new model using an electoral college has been created. Roughly 20,000 representatives, nominated at a grassroots neighbourhood level, will elect two-thirds of the upcoming Parliament. To ensure fair representation for women and minorities, the President will then appoint the remaining third to fill any gaps identified in the initial election results.

Syria is for Syrians

All experts agreed that a fundamental principle that should guide the actions of the international community is that the future of Syria belongs solely to the Syrian people. It is not for any external power to decide for them. Many international actors appear to view Syria as a fertile ground for pursuing their geopolitical, economic, and security goals in the region. While it was acknowledged that Syria was in some way a beneficiary of this geopolitical competition, the

distraction of Russia and Iran elsewhere being a significant contributor to the final fall of the Assad regime, it was also stressed that the role of the international community must henceforth be to support Syrians in making their own choices, not to impose its own. This necessitates a unified and firm stance in favour of Syria's unity, sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity. These principles are not negotiable. Every violation—whether through military occupation, external interference, or unjust escalation—directly undermines regional stability. Therefore, there is a need to collectively reaffirm support for international resolutions that protect Syria's independence and condemn any actions, such as the annexation of its territory perpetrated by Israel, that violate these core tenets. Some participants also criticised the role of Turkiye in Syria as undermining the sovereignty of the country while acknowledging legitimate security concerns emanating from the Syrian Kurds. It was also noted that the US President Donald Trump seemed comfortable outsourcing his Syria policy to Turkiye and Israel. However, it was clarified by Syrian representatives that the Syrians view Turkiye as an ally and partner, unlike Israel, whose actions towards the country have been extremely hostile and provocative. The top three security threats facing Syria currently were identified by the experts as threats from Israel, Iran and ISIS. Since December 9th, Syria has had over 1000 airstrikes, over 400 invasions by Israeli forces and the occupation of the buffer zone. Israel is pursuing the “Greater Israel” project while committing genocide in Palestine and violating the sovereignty of its neighbours through unprovoked attacks on Lebanon, Syria and Qatar, violating all international norms. Iran has also been playing a destabilising role in the region as it provides support to elements of organisations that maintain a hostile attitude towards the current Syrian administration.

Regional Security Framework

Several experts argued that the international community's current approach is fragmented and insufficient. One participant strongly advocated for the creation of a new regional security framework, akin to the OSCE, that includes all relevant actors, including Israel, Iran, Russia and the United States, to address the interconnected conflicts plaguing the Levant, whether it is in Libya or Sudan or Palestine or Lebanon or Syria or Iraq wherein the same regional and international actors are involved, rather than placing the entire onus on the nascent Syrian government.

Addressing the issue of Chemical weapons

Chemical weapons have been used by both State and non-state actors during the war in Syria, including against civilians. Despite several UN and OPCW missions, including the destruction of stockpiles of sarin and mustard gas, questions linger and concerns remain. As long as those questions are not answered and those weapons are not found and destroyed, the people of Syria and possibly beyond are not safe.

Exploring the UN's role in Syria

Possible UN roles in Syria include peacekeeping, peace enforcement and peacebuilding. Given the number of different local and foreign forces operating in and/or occupying Syria, some experts believe that a UN peace operation may be inevitable to fully stabilise Syria and restore its territorial integrity. Although the UN Peacebuilding Commission is not yet directly engaged in Syria, its goals are directly relevant to Syria's needs as it is facing a severe humanitarian crisis, mass displacement, and a long road to recovery and reconciliation. The UN's role in Syria will depend on several factors, including the new regime's ability to maintain and consolidate power; the willingness and ability of the Security Council to act; and, if the Council is paralysed by a veto of one or more of its permanent members, the willingness of the General Assembly to act

under “Uniting for Peace”. In recent years, Member States have invoked “Uniting for Peace” for Palestine and Ukraine; they could also do so for Syria.

Dire economic state of affairs

The Syrian state has transitioned from a middle-income state to a low-income state – the middle class has nearly disappeared. Syria's GDP has shrunk from \$26 billion in the 1960s to a mere \$7 billion. The GDP per capita is less than \$900 per year, and 90% of Syrians are below the poverty line. Reconstruction needs are estimated at \$400-\$600 billion. There is no infrastructure, no electricity, no drinking water, hyperinflation, high unemployment, and the massive destruction wrecked by the incessant bombings over the past 14 years has essentially brought the country's economy to its knees.

Sanctions continue to cripple the economy

The recent decisions by the West, especially the United States, to lift the sanctions were seen as a welcome development by all the participants. However, it was also noted that the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act, effective since 2020, aimed at the Assad regime, continued to deter foreign support for reconstruction efforts in Syria, even from regional countries such as Turkiye, Qatar and Saudi Arabia, which were highly supportive of the new Syrian administration. This effectively left the country to its own devices and provided virtually no outside help, despite its precarious economic conditions.

Syria is open for business

Economic opportunities need to be created by attracting foreign investment to foster social cohesion and integrate former combatants. Experts urged the Syrian government to proactively engage with private-sector arms of the World Bank Group – the International Finance Corporation (IFC) and the Multilateral Investment Guarantee Agency (MIGA) – to catalyse

private capital. On the regional level, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the UAE are expected to be among the largest investors in the country.

Syria-Lebanon interdependence

The economic interdependence of the two countries runs deeper than most realise and is a key opportunity. Syria used Lebanese financial institutions, service providers and even the ports to skirt several sanctions over the years. Both countries can support each other constructively in resuscitating their respective economies by leveraging existing synergies.

Inclusive economic growth

A presentation on lessons from other post-conflict states stressed that reconstruction must be linked to legitimate governance. It warned against elite capture of resources and over-reliance on large international contractors, instead advocating that funding be channelled through vetted local organisations and that women's economic participation and youth employment be prioritised.

Conclusion

The forum concluded with a sense of sober determination. The path forward for Syria is fraught with political, security, and economic obstacles of a historic scale. However, the discussions

revealed a clear blueprint: a Syrian-led process that prioritizes inclusive governance, integrates security forces, leverages economic opportunities for peace, and fosters a new, collaborative partnership with a redesigned international community. The success of this transition is seen not only as vital for the Syrian people but as a cornerstone for future stability in the entire Levant region.

Given the complex and deeply entrenched challenges facing Syria, it is imperative to sustain the momentum generated by this forum series. The dialogue must continue to provide a critical platform for strategic planning, international coordination, and adaptive support as the new administration navigates its precarious transition. By fostering sustained collaboration between Syrian leadership, regional stakeholders, and the international community, this ongoing initiative aims to ensure that the forward path for Syria remains guided by consensus, pragmatism, and a steadfast commitment to a stable and sovereign future.

Annexure

Consensus that emerged from the earlier two forums

Below are the key recommendations that emerged from the previous two roundtables—first in Doha in February 2025, and then in Rome in May 2025.

1. Inclusive Political Transition and Governance

- Both forums stressed creating a transitional government that reflects Syria's national character and diversity, moving beyond the current domination by armed faction representatives
- Expediting a constitutional declaration that defines Syrian national identity while guaranteeing equitable rights to all citizens and respecting cultural and social specificities
- Launching inclusive discussions to end six decades of political marginalisation, ensuring all major Syrian groups, components, and women are included
- Both forums warned against excessive political power for military supporters, given the absence of genuine political parties

2. Security Sector Reform and Integration

- Creating a national body free from political or regional influence to oversee the integration of armed factions into regular forces
- Building institutions based on fair national criteria that promote national loyalty over factionalism
- Implementing strategic plans to eliminate all foreign military presence and ensure state sovereignty
- Instituting reintegration policies that include comprehensive rehabilitation programs providing sustainable economic and social alternatives

3. Economic Recovery Through Syrian Leadership

- Investing in industries with existing advantages (textiles, food) while developing banking and insurance sectors for business environment stability
- Prioritising rehabilitation of roads, bridges, electricity networks, and renewable energy— with the Rome workshop noting that 70% of electrical infrastructure is damaged
- Reducing redundancies, enhancing transparency, combating corruption, and improving governance as prerequisites for attracting investment
- Both forums emphasised thoughtful reconstruction over ad hoc rebuilding, warning against creating closed sectarian areas that become hotbeds of tension
- Establishing vocational education matching labour demands and business incubators for small enterprises

4. Transitional Justice and Social Healing

- Forming independent committees to investigate violations since 2011, collect testimonies, and document patterns of abuse
- Establishing special courts for crimes against humanity and war crimes, modelled after hybrid courts in Bosnia and Cambodia
- Creating national bodies for preserving evidence and maintaining databases for approximately 150,000 missing persons
- Developing mechanisms that balance accountability with social peace and national unity

5. People-Centric Approach to Recovery

- Health, education, and essential services must be restored before expecting refugee return or economic revival
- Encouraging local decision-making through various mechanisms, including local elections
- As Rome participants noted, "people will not go back unless there is support and trust"
- Supporting community-level economic projects rather than top-down reconstruction plans

Critical Challenges Requiring International Support

Both forums identified areas where international engagement remains essential:

Sanctions Architecture

Both forums called for easing sanctions to enable recovery. The recent engagement with the World Bank and the IMF, facilitated by Saudi Arabia and Qatar's settlement of Syria's debt, demonstrates progress but requires further expansion.

Regional Stability

Both forums highlighted risks of negative spillovers into Lebanon and Iraq. The convergence of regional players—Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, UAE—around Syria's stability is encouraging but requires coordination to prevent competing agendas from undermining collective goals.

Sustained Funding

With humanitarian response plans severely underfunded and reconstruction needs approaching \$800 billion, innovative financing mechanisms are essential. Both forums emphasised that,

while massive aid is unlikely, targeted support for governance improvement and institution-building could catalyse broader recovery.