

Syria's Promise and Challenges One Year After Assad's Fall

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DECEMBER 2025

THE ISSUE

One year after the collapse of the Assad regime, the fate of Syria's transition lies between the promise spurred by the Syrian people's resilience and the enormous challenges posed by years of devastating conflict and decades of authoritarianism. The window for a successful transition is not open-ended. To succeed, the transition government must prioritize efforts to mitigate sectarian tensions, expand governance authority beyond interim President Ahmed al-Sharaa's tight-knit circle, and double down on building domestic credibility. External stakeholders—especially the Gulf—have a critical role to play by insisting that aid and investment efforts are transparent, technically sound, and well-coordinated.

INTRODUCTION

In mid-November, we spent a few days in Damascus and its environs, meeting with a broad range of stakeholders, including Syrian transition government officials and representatives from Syrian civil society groups, stabilization and humanitarian organizations, the United Nations and the Gulf, and Syrian journalists and investors. The Syrians we met included some who stayed in Damascus throughout the conflict, some who moved to the capital from Idlib after Assad's ouster, and others who returned from neighboring countries and the wider diaspora.

Many Syrians are optimistic about their future. The new government has quickly forged ties with major world powers to end its international isolation. At the pinnacle of this campaign, Ahmed al-Sharaa became the first Syrian president to visit the Oval Office in November 2025. Violence is also declining, reaching a **record low** in November 2025. And after President Trump announced the lifting of sanctions on Syria, economic conditions are improving.

The government has boosted electricity provision in key urban centers, and the International Monetary Fund **said** the economy is showing signs of recovery after a staff team visited Damascus. To set Syria on a stable trajectory, a window of opportunity exists to capitalize on these positive trends.

ASSAD'S COLLAPSE OPENS OPPORTUNITIES

A new chapter has opened in Syria's history. The speedy and relatively bloodless Hayat Tahrir al-Sham offensive last December ended more than five decades of Assad-led authoritarian rule, paving the way for a "new Syria." Assad's fall creates significant opportunities for change and reform, ideally empowering the Syrian people to build an inclusive Syria that allows its rich and diverse population to thrive. The transition government has conducted remarkably successful diplomatic outreach, forging ties with key regional and international powers. Several elements of Syria's tran-

sition give reasons for hope at home: the resilience of the Syrian people, the unprecedented freedoms of expression and association, a keen willingness to learn from other transition experiences, and the goodwill of key stakeholders, notably the Gulf. These opportunities are key to stabilizing Syria, which would have broader positive effects on the wider region.

Syrians are also demonstrating their resilience and determination to rebuild their lives. Those with the financial means to do so have begun to rebuild their homes, even amid total devastation and absent basic public services.

FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION AND A VIBRANT CIVIL SOCIETY

Returning to Damascus for the first time since 2011, we were struck by an overwhelming freedom of expression, without fear of repercussions or a sense that the *mukhabarat* (secret police) were lurking everywhere. Everyone we met spoke openly about their hopes and disappointments in the current government. A diverse group of civil society groups meets regularly for lively discussions in a “salon” at **Beit Farhi**, a nineteenth-century home of a prominent Damascene Sephardic Jewish family in the old city. At a conference for Syrian influencers, one content creator responded to a call from a government official for influencers to show Syria’s progress by saying it was not his job to “beat the drum for the government” but to show the real Syria and its challenges. Walking through Souq Hamidiyeh in Damascus one evening, a Syrian friend berated black-clad security forces wielding big guns who had blocked the path to a famous historical site, given the presence of a high-level official. “Why are you blocking the way? We didn’t get rid of one dictator to have another one,” he told them. They politely rebuffed his complaint, and we went on our way to dinner. In Assad’s Syria, all these individuals would likely have been arrested, perhaps never to be seen again.

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cial means to do so have begun to rebuild their homes, even amid total devastation and absent basic public services. In multiple places, we witnessed the poignant sight of freshly laid cement blocks amid the rubble of seemingly uninhabitable buildings. Volunteers have begun to clear rubble, and entrepreneurs have established **initiatives** to recycle the estimated **40 million tons** of concrete rubble across the country. As one Syrian noted to us, “Rubble is money,” a reflection of Syrians’ enterprising spirit. **Highly publicized** crowdfunding campaigns in different towns and districts across Syria have raised hundreds of millions of dollars for reconstruction, including from members of the diaspora. The diaspora has proven a key driver of Syria’s recovery, with diaspora investors fueling economic activity in communities that lack international aid.



A dialogue between officials from the transition government and Syrian content creators, Damascus, November 11, 2025.

Photo: Will Todman

LESSONS LEARNED

Syrian transition government officials highlighted their study of other transitions, noting key “lessons learned” from Lebanon, Rwanda, and South Africa. Their takeaways from the 2011 experience of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood (MB) offered a fascinating glimpse into their learning. In Egypt, they noted, the MB was naive and misjudged its standing with the Egyptian public, assuming greater popular support than the reality. A significant percentage of the Egyptian public did not support the MB. They underscored the necessity of winning the support of the Syrian people by gaining their trust. Perhaps more ominously, they also noted that the new Syrian government comes to power backed by military power and seasoned fighters. As

a result, they should not fear that the military may overthrow the new government, as happened with President Mohamed Morsi in Egypt.

GULF ROLE

A stabilized Syria is central to Arab Gulf states' vision of economic diversification and an economically integrated Middle East that bridges the Gulf to Europe through the Levant. They have abandoned their internecine rivalries during the Syrian conflict. Instead, key Gulf stakeholders—especially Saudi Arabia and Qatar—are playing a constructive role focused on stabilizing Syria. They have provided **financial support** to cover public sector salaries, helping buttress the new government. Gulf **support** for the energy sector has helped improve the provision of electricity in key urban centers, even though Syrians continue to **struggle** with high electricity prices. Gulf actors have also provided emergency humanitarian aid to quickly fill gaps in coverage, including to **coastal regions** after forest fires.

Unlike during the conflict, Gulf donors now seek to coordinate their development aid with the United Nations, mindful of the need for deep technical expertise in Syria's complex post-conflict environment. They are effectively serving as a bridge between the United Nations and the transition government, which harbors deep suspicion of the United Nations, given its role during the Assad regime. Rather than scattershot support, a Gulf diplomat in Damascus said they channel their aid through the UN Development Programme. However, some NGO officials complained about the difficulties of engaging with Gulf donors, citing slow responses and the need for personal connections.

The Gulf is adopting an investment-centric approach to Syria, which dovetails with the transition government's strategy. However, some proposed investment projects, such as a Damascus **metro**, are ill-advised at this fragile moment when **70 percent** of the population relies on humanitarian aid.

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A TRANSITION IMPERILED?

A number of obstacles could impede Syria's stabilization trajectory. Major episodes of sectarian strife underscore the depth of distrust across Syria's diverse population and the country's continued fragmentation. The transition government's limited experience with pluralism and decentralized control raises the possibility that Syria falls back into authoritarianism. Meanwhile, unfulfilled popular expectations for recovery could lead to dangerous levels of cynicism and even renewed migration out of Syria. If not overcome, these challenges could make Syria a source of instability in the wider region once again.



Men hold up signs reading “Release of the detained” and “No to killing” in a protest in the coastal city of Latakia, following recent attacks against the Alawite minority community, November 25, 2025.

Photo: Haidar MUSTAFA / AFP via Getty Images

SECTARIAN TENSIONS

Syria's transition is fragile, fraught with challenges that threaten to derail the country if unaddressed. Since the fall of Assad, more than **3,400** people have perished in sectarian violence, including **recently** in Homs, between Sunnis and Alawites. Widescale **violence** against Alawites on the coast in March and **clashes** between Sunni Bedouins and the Druze community in Sweida in July underscore the deep divisions that plague Syrian society. Overt prejudices that arise in daily interactions are also concerning and a reminder of Syria's frayed social fabric. During a lunch at an upscale Damascene restaurant, a colleague cited an earlier incident when an Alawite female server was harassed by a Sunni customer who refused to be served by her. An Alawite journalist spoke of being discredited as “former

regime,” even though she had secretly supported independent media during Assad’s rule.

Episodes of sectarian strife have set back efforts to integrate minority-controlled areas, most notably the Kurdish-dominated northeast and Druze-governed Sweida in the south. Progress toward integration remains halting at best, given the gaping trust deficit between the transition government and minority leaders. Without confidence-building measures to secure the buy-in of key minorities, Syria becomes more susceptible to foreign interference as these minorities strengthen ties with external actors.

SHADOW GOVERNMENT

The rapid collapse of the Assad regime at the hands of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) prompted the influx of HTS’s Idlib-based bureaucrats. Thousands of Idlibi local government workers descended on Damascus, taking up positions across various ministries. They have formed their own power center within the transition government. In this emerging system, power accrues to some without formal titles or portfolios, leading many to describe it as a “shadow government.” In some ministries, real authority resides with these “shadow” elements. For example, Syria’s economic restructuring is **reportedly** run by a secret committee made up of individuals operating under pseudonyms, rather than those with formal positions.

More broadly, this Idlibi inflow in turn has spurred two key challenges: First, a culture clash with local Damascenes has emerged as the more religiously conservative Idlib residents bump up against the cosmopolitan culture of Damascus. Their stricter Islamic mores do not always mesh well with Damascus’s more liberal observation of Islam. Second, it has prompted a rift between “revolutionaries” who fought the battles to unseat Assad and others who did not participate directly in the fight. This has at times led Idlibi elements in Damascus to feel entitled and demand special treatment, such as **refusal** to pay traffic fines. However, the government has publicized efforts to push back on corruption. Ahmed al-Sharaa **ordered** the closure of his elder brother’s office in August, who was accused of using his family name to advance his personal interests.

CONCENTRATION OF POWER

Beyond the disproportionate Idlibi influence, power in the new transition government is centered in the presidency

and certain key ministries. A small circle at the top of government wields a huge amount of power. In particular, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) has emerged as a key locus of power. MOFA has placed its representatives in every ministry as well as in governorates and districts across the country, prompting one observer’s concern that an embryonic successor to the Ba’ath party is forming. Although government officials **speak** of their plan to establish a more inclusive political system, civil society activists described the National Dialogue Conference held in February 2025 and parliamentary elections as a “farce.” The government has given **no indication** of when it will legalize political parties.

BUILDING FROM A HOLLOWED-OUT STATE

The transition government inherited a bureaucracy that was hollowed out after decades of cronyism and authoritarianism. One HTS member said that when they arrived in the Foreign Ministry, they found offices with layers of dust from years of inactivity. The Strategic Studies Center had been shuttered for five years, and some entire departments were staffed by just one or two officials. The new government has launched a successful international headhunting scheme to attract highly skilled members of the diaspora to fill key positions. However, this system lacks transparency as none of these positions have been advertised publicly, and critics said that only those with pre-existing ties to HTS or those that “could be controlled” have been appointed.

SLOW AND UNEVEN RECONSTRUCTION

Much of Syria lies in ruins, and public services are lacking in large parts of the country, particularly rural areas. The World Bank estimates that reconstruction will cost **\$216 billion**. The fall of Assad coincided with a collapse of international aid, meaning reconstruction activities are woefully inadequate. The United Nations’ \$3.2 billion humanitarian response plan for Syria is only **25 percent** funded. With such high demand for reconstruction, wages for skilled construction workers have shot up, and specialized construction equipment is unavailable. Some groups trying to implement reconstruction projects complained about bottlenecks in the transition government and overly centralized control, impeding projects’ approval. These obstacles

have disappointed Syrians who had high expectations of the new government's ability to accelerate reconstruction.

In turn, the lack of reconstruction is slowing refugee return. As of September 2025, the primary barrier to return **cited** by refugees in neighboring countries was the lack of adequate housing. Some Syrians told us that refugee return is premature as Syria continues to suffer from insufficient housing and overstressed public services. Yet, slow refugee returns exacerbate reconstruction challenges, as many of those with the necessary skills to implement reconstruction activities remain unwilling to return.



Partial reconstruction of a building in Darayya, rural Damascus, November 11, 2025.

Photo: Will Todman

INSUFFICIENT DOMESTIC OUTREACH

Several interviewees voiced disillusionment with the government. They contrast the transition government's wide-ranging outreach to international actors with a failure to connect with domestic audiences. Al-Sharaa has delivered few public addresses to the Syrian people since taking power and has overwhelmingly focused on building legitimacy with international actors. We were in Damascus during al-Sharaa's Oval Office visit, when it was noted that steps such as joining the anti-ISIS coalition and seeking to deconflict with Israel risk alienating key constituencies, including more radical factions of HTS.

In addition, the government's external strategy risks unduly raising Syrian popular expectations for a swift improvement to their daily lives by failing to communicate ongoing challenges. While the government has **touted** securing \$28 billion in foreign investment in just six months, most of these deals have yet to materialize. For Syr-

ians struggling with inflation, inadequate public services, and high unemployment, the investment announcements brought unfulfilled optimism, undermining the government's credibility.

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RECOMMENDATIONS

Syria's transition holds the fate of the Middle East, given the country's geostrategic significance as the linchpin of stability. One year after Assad's fall, the transition government has made important progress, garnering international credibility, but falling far short of expectations at home. To succeed, the transition government must demonstrate concrete gains in reconstruction, reconciliation, and governance.



Syrian President Ahmed al-Sharaa waves to the crowd at the gate of Aleppo's Citadel during celebrations marking one year since the offensive that toppled Bashar al-Assad on November 29, 2025.

Photo: Bakr ALkasem / AFP via Getty Images

Specifically, the transition government should undertake the following steps to facilitate a successful transition:

- **Articulate a clear vision for Syria’s future:** The transition government should pair its vision with a multifaceted outreach strategy that reaches Syria’s diverse ethnic and confessional communities. Ahmed al-Sharaa should build on his **recent call** for Syrian unity by regularly speaking to the nation. One interlocutor intimated the transition government would benefit by al-Sharaa adopting Zelensky-style addresses.
- **Develop a whole-of-government transition plan with clear benchmarks, timeline, and deliverables:** The current approach is haphazard and chaotic. Instead, Syria’s complex post-conflict environment demands a coordinated, whole-of-government transition plan. The plan should identify key objectives by sector with measurable benchmarks and indicators, as well as realistic timelines. It should map out a clear division of labor among ministries to avoid redundancies and bottlenecks and establish clear technical leads with the authority to implement plans.
- **Expand governance authority beyond the Idlibi circle by empowering a broad range of technocrats across ministries:** This effort would include attracting the return of skilled technocrats from the diaspora and building a new class of technical experts who can help rebuild the country—a SyriaCorps (not unlike AmeriCorps) that attracts a broad spectrum of Syrians to build a new Syria.
- **Prioritize dialogue and reconciliation efforts at the community level:** This includes leveraging Syria’s vibrant and expanding civil society sector and building on post-conflict reconciliation experiences from other contexts. Cross-sectarian dialogues focused on shared needs can help reknit the social fabric in mixed communities. Assisting Syrian NGOs in bridging their own northeast and northwest Syria divisions, a necessity during Assad’s Syria, will also be essential.
- **Create transparent, accountable transitional justice mechanisms:** For reconciliation to take root, the trauma and deep wounds associated with the Assad regime must be addressed. There is no peace without justice, but only if pursued through accountable, transparent, fair processes that include both judicial and nonjudicial measures to address

large-scale human rights violations, war crimes, widespread abuses during war, and authoritarian rule. The **recent trial** in Aleppo addressing sectarian violence against Alawites on the coast marks an important first step, but for nationwide healing, perpetrators of the Assad regime’s brutality must also be held to account.

The Trump administration took a historic decision to lift sanctions on Syria and to give the new government a chance to secure Syria’s recovery. To fulfill the promise of an investment-led stabilization strategy for Syria, the United States should pursue the following:

- **Reopen the U.S. embassy in Damascus:** In order to demonstrate commitment to Syria’s stability, strengthen communication channels with key officials in the Syrian government, and facilitate engagement with Syrian entrepreneurs and civil society groups, the United States should reopen its embassy in Damascus.
- **Encourage Syrian government officials to establish a conducive investment environment:** Working with World Bank Group institutions, such as the International Finance Corporation and Multilateral Investment Guarantee Agency, the United States should promote a new investment law that enhances transparency in international investments and facilitates private sector engagement in Syria’s recovery that does not recreate Assad-era crony capitalism.
- **Support UN efforts to coordinate international donors:** Without an effective donor coordination platform, reconstruction efforts are doomed to be ineffective and duplicative and could fail outright. Nascent efforts by the United Nations to establish a platform for major donors to work together on key issues, coordinate measures, and funding will be critical to the overall success of Syrian stabilization efforts.
- **Press the government to act on its commitment to political pluralism:** Establishing a law to legalize political parties would consolidate hard-won political freedoms, bolster representation, and help avoid additional destabilizing bouts of intercommunal violence. Political stability is critical for an investment-led strategy to succeed.

- **Facilitate an agreement in Sweida:** This will require pressing both local leaders and the Syrian government to come to an agreement on decentralization, while securing Israeli willingness to cease its cross-border interventions and move toward the reestablishment of the 1974 **disengagement agreement**. ■

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This report is made possible by general support to CSIS. No direct sponsorship contributed to this report.

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