Issue 7: April 2025

Syria in Figures

Making Sense of Syria's Economy

Declining Aid in a Time of Rising Needs: Syria's Humanitarian Crisis

As needs in Syria grow, aid keeps shrinking–a toxic and cyclical double whammy. Adjusted for inflation, we show how actual aid contributions for 2024 are the lowest since the inception of the Brussels Conference. Further still, UN-channeled funds have experienced steeper declines. The outlook for 2025 is equally bleak.

Taxes in Syria, Episode One: The Big Picture

This first article in a three-part series charts the evolution of Syria's tax and fee systems during the conflict to inform ongoing reform efforts.

Inflation in the Post-Assad Era

Prices are finally falling, driven by customs reforms, the easing of domestic barriers to trade, and currency appreciation. However, when current constraints on liquidity are lifted, this might reverse.

What Do the Compositional Changes Between the Caretaker and Interim Governments Tell Us?

The composition of Syria's new cabinet signals a shift in tone, with better credentials and broader representation. Yet power remains concentrated in familiar circles.

External Contribution: Yassin Al-Haj Saleh, Syrian writer and former political prisoner

The Alawite Massacres and the Future of Syria

The Alawite massacres expose the deep entrenchment of sectarian rule in Syria. Unless the new authorities confront this "genocratic" structure, the cycle of identity-based violence will persist.

Interview: Ethan Goldrich, Former US Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for the Levant and Syria Engagement

Ethan Goldrich reflects on his term and proposes a policy approach toward dealing with Syria.

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Declining Aid in a Time of Rising Needs: Syria's Humanitarian Crisis

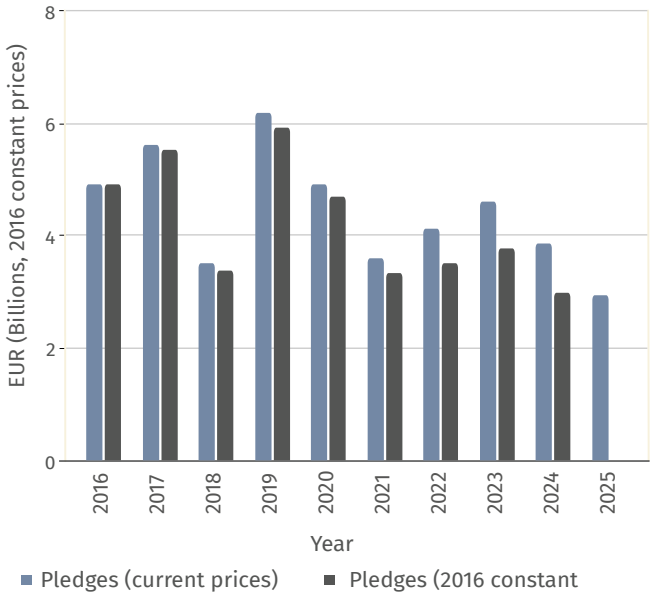
On 17 March 2025, the European Union hosted the Ninth Brussels Conference on Supporting the Future of Syria and the Region—the first to take place since the fall of the Assad regime. In total, EUR 5.8 billion was pledged in grants and loans for 2025 and beyond for Syria and the region. Yet behind this seemingly large figure lies a more sobering truth: ***real humanitarian support to Syria continues to decline, especially when adjusted for inflation.***

The response is mostly funded through grants—which do not require repayment—and loans, which should be repaid and are often extended to neighbouring countries rather than Syria-based institutions. Of the EUR 5.8 billion pledged, EUR 2.93 billion was earmarked in grants for 2025, along with EUR 1.29 billion for 2026 and beyond, and EUR 1.6 billion in loan pledges for 2025 and beyond. It's important to note that pledges for future years (e.g., 2026) are provisional and might change the following year. For the purposes of this article, we focus exclusively on pledges made for the same year in which the conference took place, in order to ensure consistent year-on-year comparisons.

Compared to 2024, when EUR 3.85 billion in grants was pledged, the EUR 2.93 billion pledged for 2025 represents a 24% nominal decrease—and an even steeper 36% drop from 2023, making it the lowest single-year grant pledge since the donor conferences began in 2016.

As commentators and politicians get fixated on headline figures, the erosion of money's purchasing power often escapes notice. Adjusted for inflation, the decline in aid is even more evident. Due to the absence of reliable consumer price data covering the whole of Syria, we rely instead on a proxy measure for inflation in donor states, covering the largest collection of donors: the EU and its member states. Using the EU's Harmonised Index of Consumer Prices, pledges have dropped by 39% between 2016 and 2024 in constant 2016 euros. For 2025, the outlook is equally bleak: current pledges are already the smallest ever recorded in nominal terms, and inflation-adjusted values are expected to be even lower, with inflation continuing to rise.

Pledges Made at the Brussels Conference for Syria and the Region

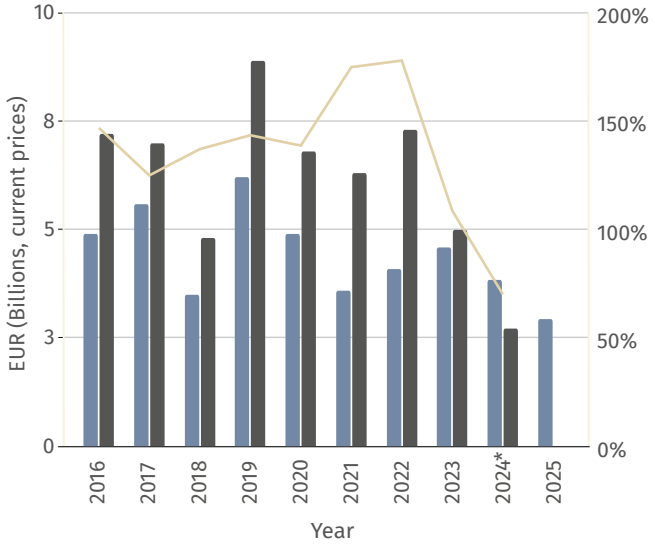


Source: European Commission; Eurostat; Authors' calculations.

As with pledges, not only are contributions—the actual funds committed, contracted, or disbursed–lower in nominal terms, they also buy significantly less than they once did. For example, 2022 contributions of EUR 7.3 billion were the second-highest in nominal terms, but

only the fifth highest in constant 2016 euros, amounting to EUR 6.3 billion. Furthermore, while contributions often exceeded pledges in the past (125%–178% between 2016 and 2022), recent years show a sharp decline with the ratio falling to 109% in 2023.

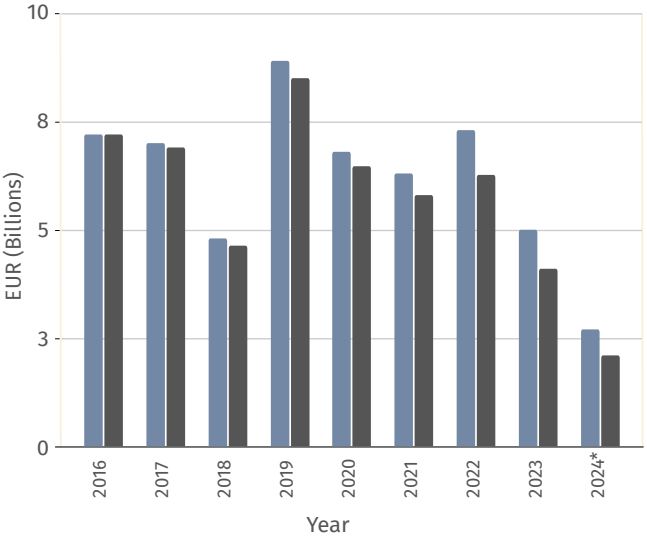
Pledges and Contributions at the Brussels Conferences for Syria and the Region



**As of July 31, 2024. Source: European Commission*

Preliminary figures for 2024 suggest a continuing decline. With EUR 2.7 billion contributed by July, and assuming monthly contributions carrying until the end of the year at the same pace, total contributions would reach around EUR 4.62 billion in current prices. Yet in constant euros, this would amount to only EUR 3.2 billion—a 21% year-on-year decline, and the lowest in real terms since the inception of the Brussels Conferences.

Contributions Made Following the Brussels Conference for Syria and the Region



**As of July 31, 2024. Source: European Commission; Authors' calculations.*

UN Programs Falter

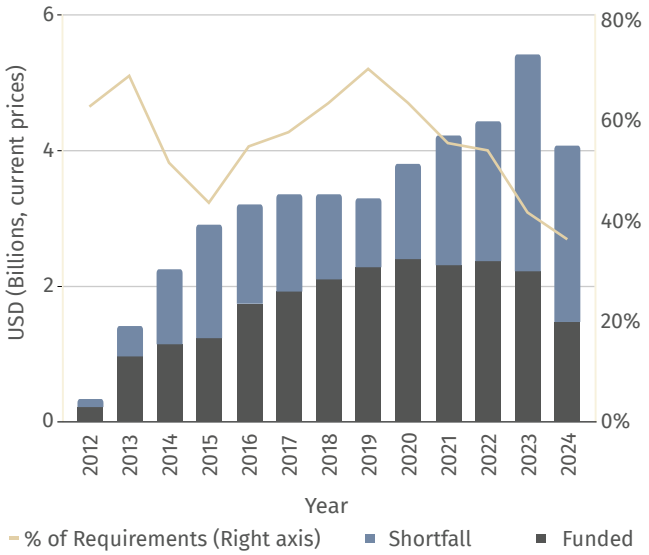
Another way to assess the drop in aid to Syria is to examine the figures from UN-coordinated humanitarian aid programs, which constitute the largest bulk of humanitarian spending.

Brussels Conference pledges include both humanitarian and non-humanitarian funding, making them broader in scope than the UN-coordinated Syrian Humanitarian Response Plan (SHRP) tracked by the UN Financial Tracking Service (FTS). The FTS captures only allocations made under UN-coordinated aid programs.

This difference partly explains why the Brussels Conference and FTS figures do not generally match. For instance, in 2023, Germany's contribution to the SHRP was reported as USD 315 million via FTS, compared to approximately USD 395 million recorded in the Brussels tracking system. Similarly, France's contribution was USD 61 million under FTS, versus approximately USD 85 million (EUR 79 million) in the broader Brussels figures.

Figures tracked by FTS paint a much bleaker picture of the decline in aid than the numbers reported through the Brussels Conference contributions, suggesting a donor shift away from the UN as a funding vehicle.

Syria Humanitarian Response Plan Funding and Requirements

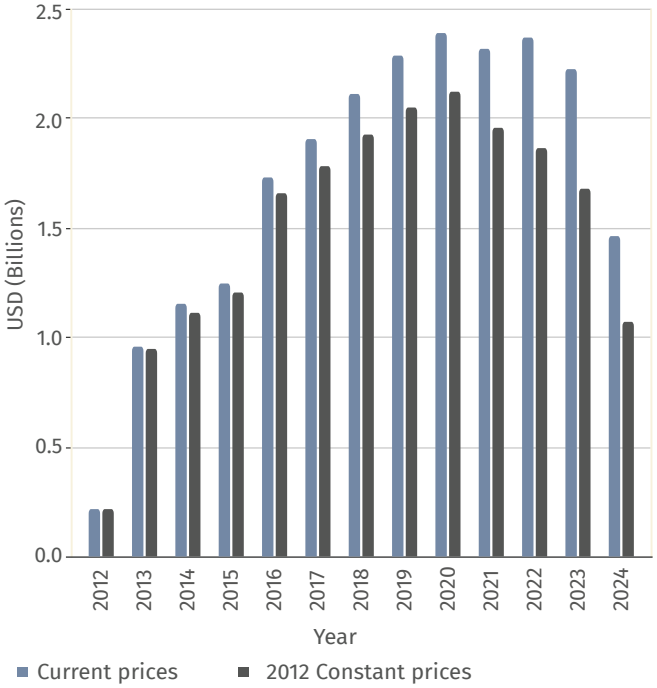


Source: UN Financial Tracking Service; Authors' calculations.

In 2020, SHRP funding peaked at USD 2.4 billion (current), equivalent to USD 2.1 billion in 2012 dollars. But by 2024, funding dropped to just USD 1.5 billion, which equals a mere USD 1.1 billion in constant dollars—a nearly 50% real decline in just four years. In fact, 2024 marks one of the third lowest levels of real humanitarian funding under the UN-sponsored programs since the crisis response began in 2012.

It is possible that the full picture for 2024 has yet to emerge, as some 2024 data on funding may still be reported into mid-2025. However, the figures currently available align with public statements by UN officials citing that only 35% of requirements have been fulfilled by contributions.

Syria Humanitarian Response Plan Funding



Source: UN Financial Tracking Service; Authors' calculations.

This decline is particularly alarming given that funding requirements steadily increased every year between 2012 and 2023, peaking at USD 5.4 billion in 2023 before seeing a drop in 2024. Yet, despite these rising needs, the funding fulfillment rate hit a record low in 2024, with only 36% of requirements met.

Looking Ahead: Political Momentum, Humanitarian Gaps

In spite of the consecutive decreases in aid that Syria has witnessed over the past years, humanitarian needs have never been higher—a dynamic that is increasingly circular, as underfunding itself can contribute to the further deterioration of living conditions. The outlook in early 2025 remains deeply concerning.

Despite the regime change, the number of people in need continues to grow. UN agencies estimate that over 16.7 million Syrians require assistance—the highest figure since the conflict began. This includes 7.4 million internally displaced

persons (IDPs) and more than one million recent returnees, many of whom are arriving to destroyed homes and areas plagued by infrastructure collapse.

In response, the UN launched a USD 2 billion appeal for the first half of 2025 to reach just 8 million of the most vulnerable. Yet by late March, only 8% of that target had been funded. The UN's Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) has warned that continued underfunding will result in even greater costs—for both Syrians and regional stability.

Challenges to humanitarian funding, such as the US administration's suspension of aid, risk having a detrimental impact during this critical period. The severe shortfall is already creating major operational constraints for humanitarian organizations. In a briefing to the UN Security Council on 25 March 2025, Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator Tom Fletcher noted that almost half of US-funded organizations have received full or partial stop-work orders, and that humanitarian staffing has been cut by 40%. This reduction in capacity is severely hampering the delivery of life-saving assistance.

While the lack of funding lies at the heart of the issue, another continued challenge to humanitarian operations in Syria stems from the continued enforcement of UN and US sanctions. While not directly targeting humanitarian actors, these measures have produced far-reaching indirect consequences that significantly hinder relief work. As noted in previous issues of *Syria in Figures* (February and March 2025), lingering financial restrictions have disrupted agencies' ability to process cross-border payments. Sanctions-linked obstacles have delayed procurement, increased operational costs, and often forced aid agencies to rely on informal financial networks—raising serious transparency and accountability concerns. Easing sanctions would undoubtedly streamline humanitarian operations and enable more direct, timely, and accountable delivery of aid—in sum, managing to do more with less as humanitarian funding continues to decline.

As Charles Lister noted in our March issue: "While Assad's departure has unlocked the door to recovery, the door itself can only be opened by sanctions relief—principally from the US government." This statement holds true not only for broader economic recovery, but also for ensuring the continuity and effectiveness of humanitarian aid.

Inflation in the Post-Assad Era

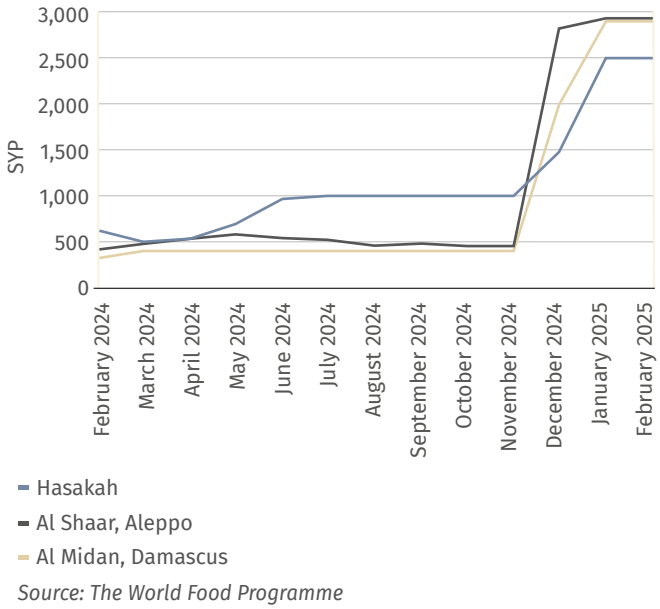
During the conflict, the Assad regime resorted to printing money as a common, though inflationary, method to finance persistent budget deficits. Initially the effects were subtle, with prices rising slowly. But as more currency flooded the market, with declining overall economic activity, inflation accelerated.

Following the collapse of the Syrian regime in December 2024, the country witnessed a drop in prices, with an annual deflation of 6.4% in January 2025, according to the Central Bank of Syria, followed by deflation of 15.2% in February 2025—down from an inflation rate of 109.5% in the same month of 2024. This dramatic reversal, driven by a series of actions by the Caretaker Government (CG), such as the abolition of ten import duties and removal of domestic barriers to trade, marked a step toward monetary stabilization efforts. Furthermore, the engagement of the new authorities with international financial institutions and the easing or suspension of Western sanctions brought renewed confidence, signaling the beginning of a new phase of reform that might have also contributed to the appreciation of the Syrian pound (SYP), making imports cheaper.

The decline in prices was preceded by short-lived inflation. According to the Syrian Center for Policy Research, Syria experienced a surge in consumer prices in December 2024 as the CG formed the new government, easing subsidies and removing price controls on essential goods like fuel, bread, and cooking gas. This increased transportation, electricity, and fuel costs, directly impacting production expenses. Inflation varied considerably across regions, with former regime-held areas—where subsidies existed—seeing inflation rates exceeding 22% month-over-month (M-o-M), while areas like Idlib and Raqqa saw slight price declines.

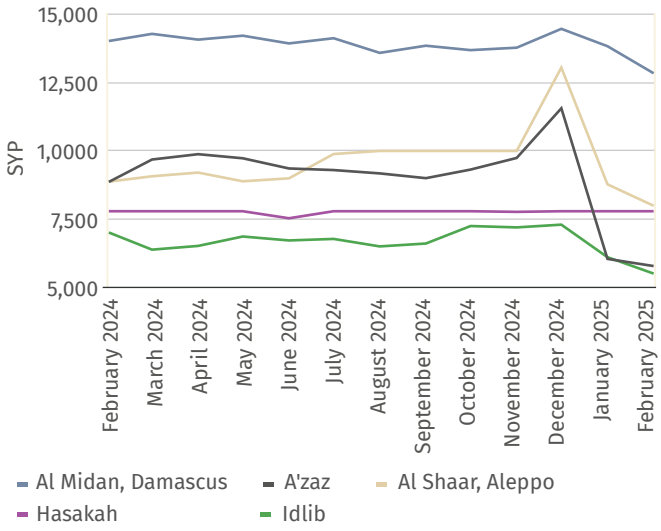
The World Food Programme also revealed that while the cost of the Minimum Expenditure Basket dropped by 15% in January relative to the previous month, trends across specific goods continue to vary. In January 2025, gas prices rose 38% month-over-month due to the removal of domestic gas subsidies, while bread prices increased 35% due to subsidy reductions. However, bread prices in shops decreased, and prices for vegetables, dairy, meat, and crops also fell.

Price of Subsidised Bread Sold in Bakery



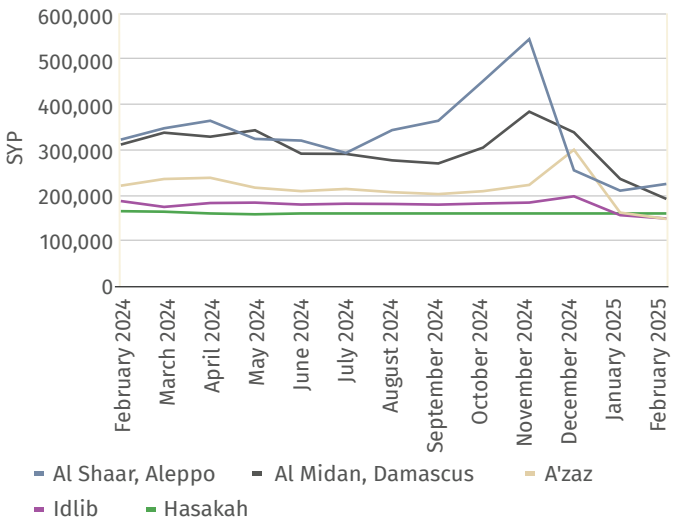
Source: The World Food Programme

Price of Non-Subsidised Bread Sold in Shops



Source: The World Food Programme

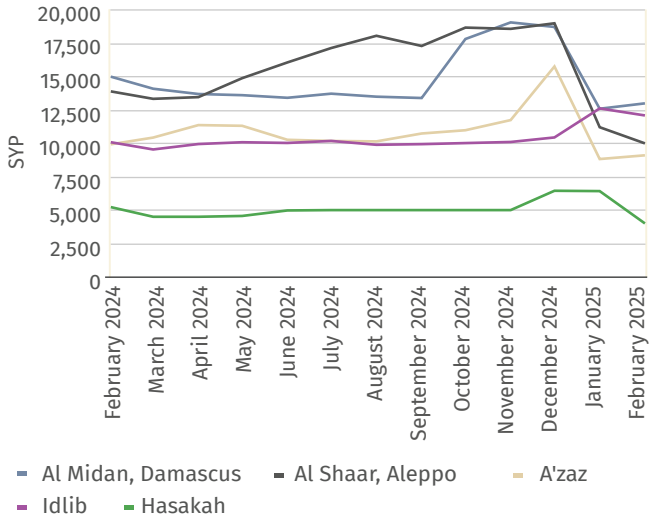
Price of Gas in the Parallel Market



Source: The World Food Programme

The World Food Programme's report also highlighted the disparity across provinces. The implementation of a unified customs tariff on 11 January 2025, had differing impacts across the country. In former Assad regime areas, it resulted in price reductions, while in the regions of Idlib and northwestern Aleppo, it caused sharp price increases—up to six times for certain goods. The variation was due to the fact that tariffs in opposition areas were lower than the new tariffs, while the opposite was the case in former regime areas.

Price of Diesel for Heating in the Parallel Market



Source: The World Food Programme

The World Food Programme noted the reasons behind the recent overall decline in prices. Removal of military checkpoints, relaxation of import restrictions, the opening of the road between Aleppo and Idlib, and the abolition of the "Al Damimah" duty—an import duty introduced under Assad, intended to streamline customs processes and bolster the domestic economy—have all directly contributed to the recent decrease in prices.

Additionally, the appreciation of the SYP against the USD—strengthening in the parallel market from nearly 14,000 per USD before the military operation that toppled the regime in November 2024 to around 10,000 currently—is likely to continue to gradually translate into cheaper imports. However, this trend may prove short-lived. A significant portion of the SYP's recent appreciation appears to result from stringent restrictions on money supply, particularly through limitations on cash withdrawals from banks and cross-account transfers. These measures are likely part of a broader effort to crack down on Assad-era cronies and seize their assets, with the

restrictions on cash movement designed to minimize financial leakages before the process is completed. Nevertheless, as core economic fundamentals have not substantially improved, any easing of these restrictions is likely to trigger at least a partial rebound in the exchange rate, translating in due course into higher import prices, and higher inflation.

Taxes in Syria, Episode One: The Big Picture

At the heart of any country's political economy lies its taxation system, through which governments finance their operations, redistribute wealth, and influence and redirect economic activity. Following the downfall of the Assad regime, the Minister of Finance in the former Caretaker Government formed a committee under his chairmanship, aiming to overhaul and modernize the operations of the taxation system and to propose legislative changes to amend its structure. Interim President Ahmad al-Sharaa has also highlighted the ongoing tax policy reforms aimed at fostering an attractive investment environment and creating job opportunities. The review of the tax system was not bound by a deadline, but it's likely to take a considerable amount of time.

This series of three articles in *Syria in Figures* will describe and analyze the tax and fee systems, focusing on how they have evolved during the conflict to help inform future policy formation.

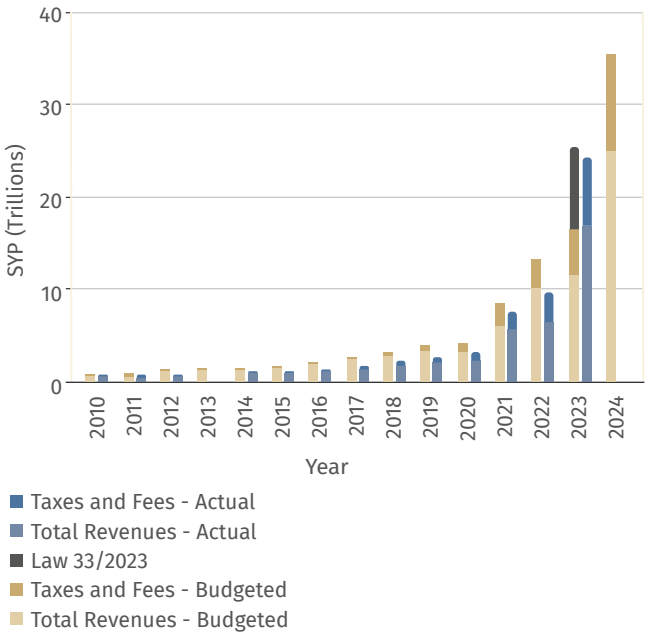
Before we delve into the topic, it is important to note that the distinction between taxes and fees in Syria is not often clear, as some fees function like taxes—especially in being compulsory and not tied to a direct, identifiable benefit—such as "reconstruction fees" imposed even in restaurants.

Even before the conflict, efforts to improve tax compliance were hindered by complex exemptions and preferential treatment for certain industries, weak enforcement technology, corruption, and administrative inefficiencies. During the conflict, revenues from taxes and fees fell from USD 6.3 billion in 2010 to only USD 0.6 billion in 2023, according to calculations based on the government's end-of-year audit accessed by our advisory.

To offset the decline, the government resorted to excessive and highly inflationary money printing, shifting taxes and fees from being the primary source of state revenue—constituting 42% of total government income in 2010—to just 31% in 2023.

As shown in the chart below, there has been a consistent gap between budgeted and actual revenues, indicating a pattern of unwarranted optimism by the government and a weakened ability to forecast. Note that the apparent increase in projected revenues for 2023 reflects a budget revision under Law 33 of 2023, which raised the estimate of overall revenue to SYP 25.5 trillion, as confirmed by our review of the end-of-year audit.

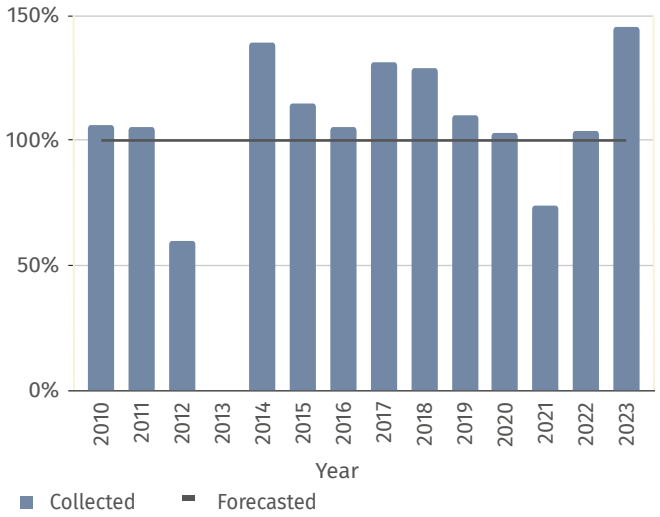
Taxes and Fees vs. Total State Revenues



Source: State Budget, accessed through the Official Gazette and Annual State Budget Audit from a Primary Source

However, as the chart below shows, much of the tendency to over-forecast state revenues stems from non-tax and fee sources—indicating that tax and fee revenues have comparatively been more accurately projected.

Actual Relative to Budgeted Taxes and Fees

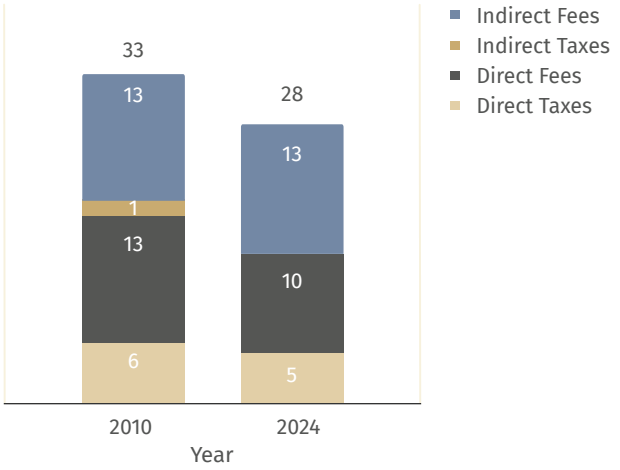


Source: State Budget, accessed through the Official Gazette and Annual State Budget Audit from a Primary Source

The annual state budget classifies taxes and fees as either direct or indirect. The key distinction between the two lies in who bears the cost and how the payment is made. Direct taxes and fees, such as income taxes and business licensing fees, are paid straight to the government by individuals or entities, with the financial burden falling on the payer. In contrast, indirect taxes and fees (e.g. value-added tax and import duties) are embedded in the price of goods or services and are typically collected by intermediaries, who can then transfer the cost to end users. Indirect taxes are generally easier to collect and harder to evade, which may explain the government's increasing relative reliance on them after 2011.

As shown in the chart below, the number of tax and fee items declined from 33 in 2010 to 28 in 2024. This reduction came primarily from a drop in direct fees (from 13 to 10) and direct taxes (from 6 to 5), while some indirect taxes on produced goods were abolished. The trend suggests an overall simplification of the tax and fee code, which will be explored further in our next issue.

Structure of the Tax System in Syria



Source: State Budget, accessed through the Official Gazette

While the number of taxes and fees changed only slightly over time, the composition of revenues from each of them shifted considerably. The relative reliance on fees increased—from 43% of total tax and fee revenues in 2010 to 62% in 2024, according to state budgets. Furthermore, although revenues from indirect taxes and fees fell in absolute terms during the conflict, they rose as a share of total revenue—from 20% in 2010 to 53% in 2024. These shifts likely reflect both administrative convenience—fees and indirect charges are harder to evade at the point of transaction—as well as political considerations. Unlike taxes, fees can often be adjusted without parliamentary approval, and greater reliance on them may help maintain the impression that Syria imposes fewer formal taxes. These compositional changes will be examined in more detail in the next two issues of *Syria in Figures*.

The General Commission for Taxes and Fees, regulated by Law 41 of 2004, serves as the backbone of Syria's tax system. The Commission is responsible for developing and implementing tax policy in line with the state's financial and economic strategy. Its duties include drafting legislation, estimating revenues, combating tax evasion, negotiating tax treaties, and coordinating with regulatory and customs authorities to ensure enforcement. Last month, the Caretaker Government's Minister of Finance appointed the Tax Commission's Director, Nasser al-Abdallah, as Vice Chairman of a new committee tasked with reviewing the national tax system. However, with the formation of a new ministerial cabinet under the Interim Government last month, the review committee's status and operations remain unclear.

Mr. Abdallah announced that the review may lead to the cancellation or amendment of several taxes—including the Martyr's Stamp, the War Effort stamp, the Reconstruction fee, and taxes on real estate rents—some of which were introduced after 2011. A draft resolution has also proposed either suspending taxes on wages and salaries in both the public and private sectors or increasing the minimum exemption thresholds. He further noted that the Ministry is advancing digital transformation to improve tax system efficiency and service delivery. The tax inquiry system, originally introduced to detect hidden tax bases and verify submitted declarations, is now being replaced by a new Anti-Tax Evasion Department, which will use entirely different mechanisms, tools, and technologies.

As Syria moves toward post-conflict recovery, tax and fee reforms will play a critical role in shaping the future. The outcomes of these reforms carry not only economic but also social and political implications in determining who benefits and who bears the cost. Reform efforts can be broadly categorized into operational and structural initiatives.

On the operational side, several low-hanging fruits can yield immediate results. Measures such as digitization, curbing informal economic activity, and combating corruption will quickly improve compliance and revenue generation. These efforts aim to broaden the effective tax base, improving the equity of the system by ensuring that a greater share of the population contributes to public finances—without increasing the burden on existing taxpayers.

At the structural and more strategic level, however, a full redesign of the tax and fee system will affect the future course of the entire country, not only economically but socially as well. Therefore, it should be approached methodically, incorporating input from subject-matter experts, technical assistance from international organizations, and consultation with the Syrian public. A considered, inclusive, and comprehensive process is the only way to ensure a positive impact on the entire country without social and political backlash.

What Do the Compositional Changes Between the Caretaker and Interim Governments Tell Us?

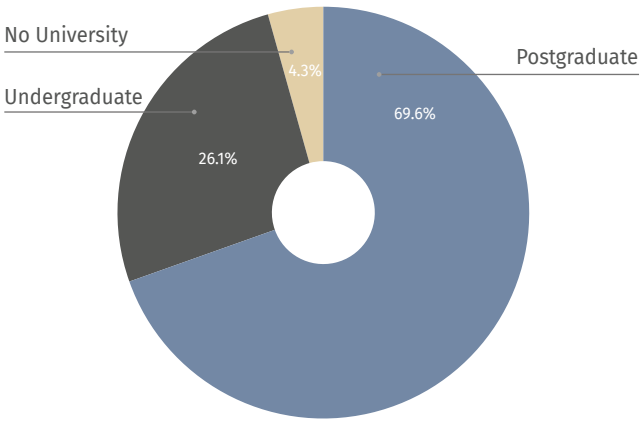
In our last edition of *Syria in Figures*, we raised what seemed like straightforward questions about Syria's transition: Will loyalty eclipse competence? Will HTS's dominance continue? Will the cabinet represent Syrians better?

At the time, Syria stood on the brink of a declared transition, with the cancellation of the Prime Minister role and a new constitutional framework. Amid promises of reform and inclusivity, Syria's Interim Government (IG) was announced on 29 March, offering something new: ministers we could actually identify. Unlike the opaque Caretaker Government (CG), this cabinet features more individuals with public records and identifiable backgrounds, signaling a shift in selection criteria and an overall improvement in the notability of the ministers. So, what have we really got?

Technocratic Upgrade, with Caveats

The new IG is notably better credentialed than its predecessor. Of its 23 ministers, 16 hold post-graduate degrees, many from prestigious institutions in Europe and North America, and several have held senior roles, either in Syria or abroad.

Syria's Interim Government: Educational Profile



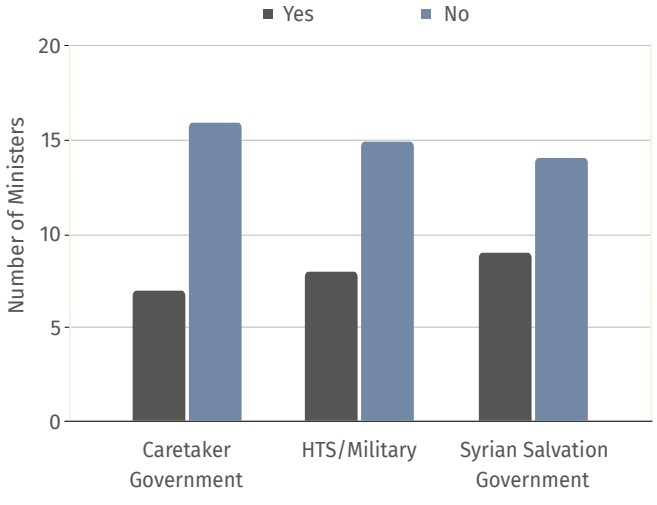
In contrast, the CG was composed largely of ministers with basic undergraduate qualifications from Syrian universities and minimal experience in formal state institutions. Some profiles lacked even publicly available educational information.

While the new cabinet isn't purely technocratic, it marks a clear shift toward significantly higher educational standards and more diverse institutional exposure, particularly in areas relevant to economic governance.

HTS and the Lion's Share

While the new IG presents a more polished and pluralistic face, its composition reveals strategic continuity beneath the surface of diversification. Nine ministers have known affiliations with the Syrian Salvation Government (SSG), and eight are linked—directly or indirectly—to HTS or its military formations. These affiliations are concentrated in the most influential portfolios, including foreign affairs, defense, interior, justice, and local administration, suggesting that core power remains tightly held even as new figures are introduced.

Syria's Interim Government: Affiliation Analysis



At the same time, the cabinet marks a deliberate broadening of the leadership pool. 14 ministers have no SSG ties, and 15 are free from HTS/military affiliations. Notably, 16 of the 23 ministers did not serve in the CG, with many having backgrounds in humanitarian work, development, academia, and the private sector.

Compared to the CG, where over half (55%) of ministers were SSG-affiliated and factional ties were widespread, the new cabinet presents a more varied mix of affiliations and trajectories.

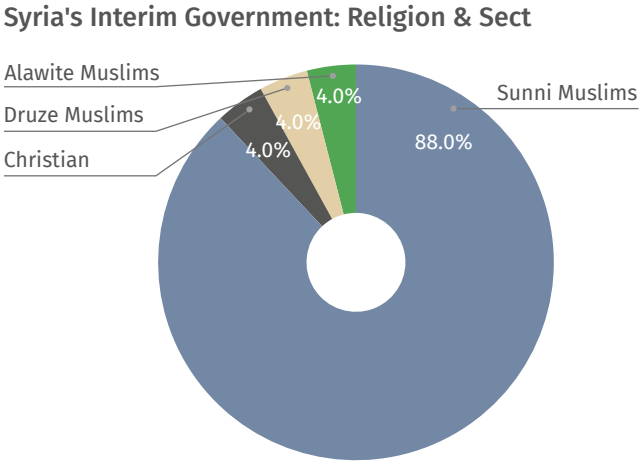
From No Women to Virtually No Women

Of the 23 ministers, only one is a woman, appointed as Minister of Social Affairs and Labour. A Christian from Damascus with a postgraduate degree in law and diplomacy, she carries international credibility. But her appointment, while symbolically significant, is confined to a traditionally "soft" portfolio, reinforcing rather than challenging entrenched ideas about women's roles.

This isn't just tokenism; it's containment. In systems where ideological norms influence political appointments, women's inclusion is typically restricted to sectors aligned with social cohesion or cultural affairs. This appointment doesn't represent a breakthrough in gender equity but a carefully managed exception. While it's an improvement from the all-male CG, the glass ceiling remains unbroken—just artfully reframed.

Sunni Arabs Playing a Less Dominant Role

The IG is still overwhelmingly Sunni Arab Muslim, with 20 of 23 ministers identifying as Sunni. However, there are signs of cautious broadening: one Druze and one Alawite minister have been appointed, marking a modest shift from the CG, which had no sectarian diversity.



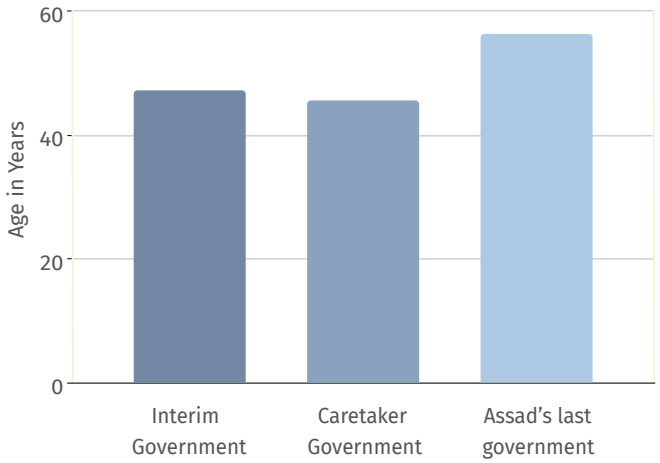
Religiously, the cabinet includes one Christian; ethnically, it remains predominantly Arab, with two Kurdish ministers reflecting a similar share of the overall population.

As the government's sectarian and ethnic composition remains narrowly focused, the inclusion of a few minority figures seems more like a calculated gesture toward inclusivity than a true sharing of power.

Age Distribution: Youthful Energy?

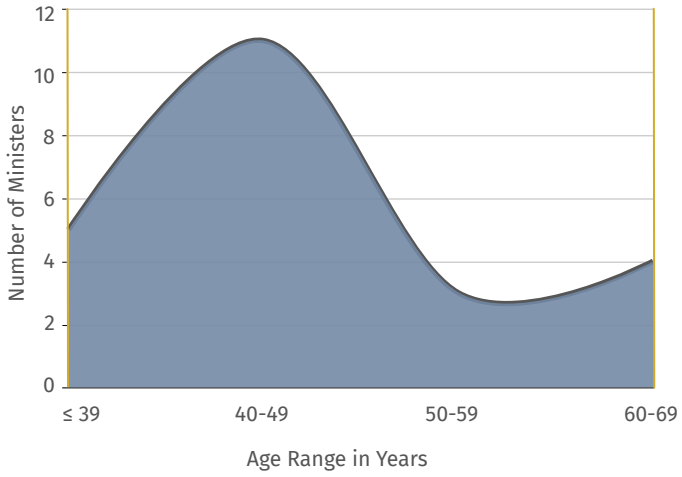
With an average age of 47.3, the IG continues the generational shift seen in the CG and remains a decade younger than Assad's last cabinet.

Average Age of Ministers Across Successive Syrian Governments



However, while four ministers are in their 60s—most with prior government experience, adding institutional weight—a considerable share are relatively young and may bring fresh energy and new ideas.

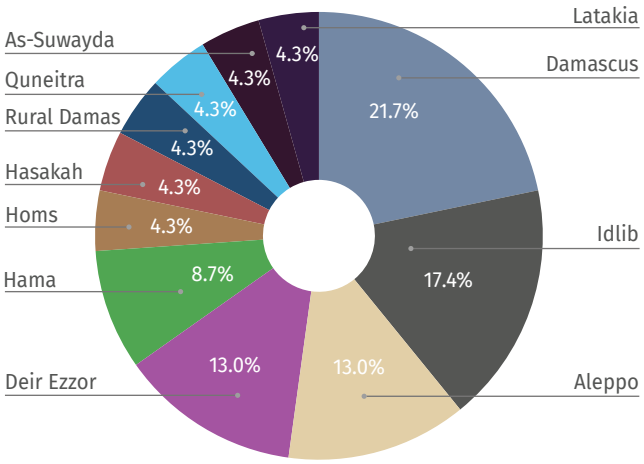
Syria's Interim Government: Age Cohort



Improved Geographic Representation

The IG draws ministers from 11 governorates (only Raqqa, Daraa, and Tartous are not represented), a notable shift from the CG's heavy concentration in former HTS areas in northwest Syria. Damascus now leads with five ministers, followed by Idlib with four, and Aleppo and Deir Ezzor with three each. This broader spread marks a clear improvement in geographic representation, and the inclusion of ministers from marginalized areas suggests a deliberate effort to counter perceptions of territorial exclusivity.

Syria's Interim Government: Geographic Distribution

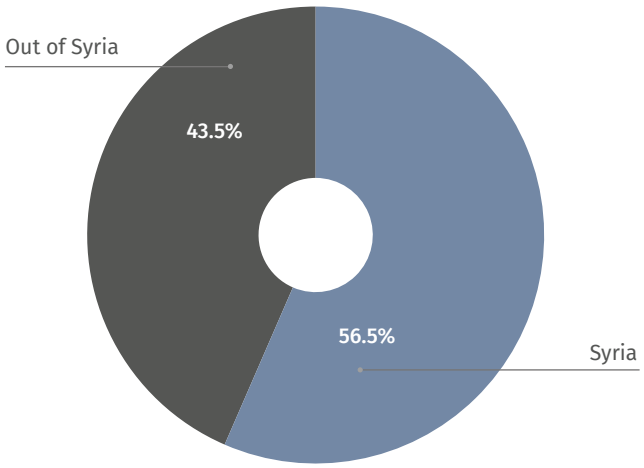


However, the center of gravity hasn't shifted entirely. Over half of the cabinet still comes from Damascus, Idlib, and Aleppo, meaning that while the geographic footprint has expanded, power remains concentrated in familiar zones. The true test will be whether this spatial diversity translates into political pluralism.

Country of Residence (Before and Upon Appointment)

One interesting aspect of the IG is that 43.5% of its ministers were residing outside Syria prior to their appointment, a composition familiar in other contexts following regime change, such as Iraq (2003), Libya (2011), and Rwanda (after the 1994 genocide).

Country of Residence Before or Upon Appointment



This isn't just diversity for show; it reflects a deliberate blending of domestic and diaspora leadership, combining grounded political actors with internationally exposed technocrats. Many of these ministers not only hold postgraduate degrees but also bring with them relationships built in embassies, think tanks, NGOs, and multilateral institutions.

However, given the strong influence of HTS-affiliated ministers, newcomers from abroad may struggle to translate their external networks into leverage. Whether their international ties will open doors or be quietly severed remains to be seen.

From another perspective, this transnational composition mirrors exile-return dynamics observed in other post-conflict contexts, but with a distinctly Syrian twist. It's not a post-liberation elite returning en masse; rather, it's a calculated blend of insiders and outsiders attempting to co-govern a fractured state.

So What?

The new IG appears more polished than its predecessor, with improved technocratic expertise, greater educational attainment, higher visibility, broader geographic and sectarian representation, and a high share of ministers from the diaspora. Many appointees bring the sheen of diplomacy, academia, or international NGOs, contrasting sharply with the insular CG. However, much remains unchanged: HTS and SSG-linked figures still dominate core ministries, and gender inclusion is largely symbolic. So, while the cast and tone have shifted, the fundamental structure and control remain familiar. Whether this blend is a genuine step toward inclusivity will depend on how the team will work together; only time will tell.

EXTERNAL CONTRIBUTION: The Alawite Massacres and the Future of Syria

Yassin al-Haj Saleh, Syrian writer, leftist dissident, and former political prisoner who spent 16 years incarcerated under the Hafez al-Assad regime

Like all honeymoons, the "Syrian revolutionary honeymoon"—in the words of Asef Bayat—was destined to end eventually. For nearly three months, many people were happy and in a celebratory mood after the fall of the Assad family regime, which had ruled the country for 54 suffocating years. But the end of the honeymoon came in a painful way: a hard awakening to five days of massacres in the coastal region between March 6 and 10. Most of the victims were Alawites, who make up close to 12% of Syria's population and to whom the Assad family belongs. There had already been low-scale frictions and tensions in the region, with casualties from this confessional group [Alawites], but what began on March 6 was something else entirely—both in scale and in its semi-genocidal nature. People were targeted and entire families decimated for one reason only: being Alawite. Houses were burned, property stolen, elders insulted. The main sources for the carnage were the perpetrators themselves, who inadvertently—or even proudly—filmed their heinous crimes and shared them publicly. It was a deep shock, a traumatizing experience for Syrians who had hoped that the monstrous times were now behind them.

On the fourth day of the massacres, the transitional president, Ahmad al-Sharaa, established a committee to investigate "the events in the coast." A man who seems to believe deeply in the power of committees, he formed another one—a civil peace committee—and appointed an Alawite, a childhood friend of his, as one of its three members.

The bloodshed began when some armed loyalists of the fallen regime attacked General Security forces in rural parts of Latakia, killing some and capturing others. This appears to have triggered a wave of panic among many Sunni communities, afraid they might lose the power they had only just gained. The fear was stoked by mosque imams who called people to jihad. Thousands of armed men stormed Alawite villages and began killing in a Rwandan-like fashion—though on a smaller scale and over a shorter time. Some of the perpetrators were driven by religious doctrines that viewed Alawites as infidels; they targeted men of fighting age. Others were fueled by sectarian hatred, believing all Alawites to be loyalists of the Assad regime; these attackers killed indiscriminately, slaughtering entire families—even children. The role of General Security personnel was mixed: some protected civilians, while others participated in the massacres.

The number of victims may exceed 1,000, possibly even 2,000. It is legitimate to speak of genocidal violence, not just oppressive violence, because the "crime" of most victims was who they were—not what they did. This kind of violence has its roots in what I call the "genocratic" structure of Syria's current government—and of the former regime. By genocracy, I mean the rule of a *genos* (from Greek: race, dynasty, tribe…), rather than the *demos* (the people), regardless of whether the *genos* is a majority or a minority. A *genos* can be a religious, racial, ethnic, or national group—the same ones named in the UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide of 1948. What we call "sectarianism" in Syria and the Middle East is a genocratic arrangement that politicizes inherited differences and pits them against one another. Genocratic regimes and movements do not only undo democracy by eliminating the *demos*; they also prepare the ground for genocides.

Syria's state and social order have been trapped in genocratic politics since Hafez al-Assad came to power in 1970. Since then, sectarianism became structural in the making and remaking of state power. The Islamization of the Syrian revolution in 2012 and afterward cannot be understood apart from this background—at least not completely.

The new rule in Syria has acted as genocratically as the Assad regime—that is, in a sectarian way. The fact that Sunnis are the demographic majority changes nothing. This means the genocidal violence that broke out so indiscriminately along the coast is organically tied to the sectarianization of the state. The history of the Assad regime includes many genocidal massacres, and this has entrenched genocidal tendencies in Syrian society. Syria's hope of avoiding future massacres depends on fighting sectarianism head-on.

This is not an impossible mission. Two things are essential for success: first, the state must not discriminate among its citizens or sectarianize its institutions; second, citizens must be able to build independent organizations and political parties across religious and ethnic lines, free from state interference. Hafez al-Assad did the opposite on both fronts, and the new authorities have shown no awareness of sectarianism's deadly danger—or any intention to confront it.

Two policy things are very vital now. Full autonomous authority for the committee investigating "the events in the coast," which has just gained three additional months for its mandate. The new transitional government will lose all credibility if the committee fails to name things by their right names, punish the perpetrators, and deliver justice to the victims.

Second, Sharaa must speak openly to the Syrian people about the old and new tragedies, and their structural connection to sectarianism. He must be able to say that the Alawites are Syrian citizens, equal to all others in rights, duties, and respect. The old feuds must be left to history. He and his men must act, think, and speak like statesmen, not like victorious parties or sects. Sectarian rhetoric must be condemned, and religious figures who use it should be held accountable. The state must

encourage initiatives across society, especially in sensitive regions, to foster dialogue and understanding.

It is a vital necessity to salvage Syria's future from becoming a mere repetition of its recent past, where victims become perpetrators, or vice versa. This vicious circle of sectarianism must be broken here and now.

Interview: with Ethan Goldrich

Ethan Goldrich; Former US Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for the Levant and Syria Engagement

Q: Would you have believed six months ago that Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) would control Damascus? Did the speed of their advance surprise you? Why didn't Russia intervene—and could there have been a deal with Türkiye?

A: No, I wouldn't have believed it. When I left my position in mid-September, we had a sense that an Israeli operation in Lebanon would have repercussions for Syria, but the idea of HTS taking Damascus wasn't on the radar. That same week, Israeli operations in Lebanon escalated, weakening Hezbollah's ability to support the Syrian regime and contain HTS in the northwest. By the time of the ceasefire around 27 November, HTS likely saw an opening and moved quickly. The US focus up until that time was still much more on Lebanon than on Syria.

Yes, I was surprised at how fast it happened. I expected Iran, Hezbollah, or especially Russia to step in—but Russia didn't even try. They just stepped aside and let it unfold. We had always wondered how the Ukraine war was impacting Russia's role in Syria, but didn't realize they had become so weak and distracted that they would not keep Assad afloat.

As for a Russia-Türkiye deal, I highly doubt it. Their coordination, particularly through Astana, was never smooth or productive. I never saw any indication they could have pulled off something as major as collaborating to remove Assad without the world noticing.

Q: Where did the Syrian opposition succeed, and where did it fall short?

A: Their biggest success was keeping the hope for change in Syria alive. Even when the Arab League and others moved toward normalization with Assad, the opposition ensured that those efforts remained half-hearted. They kept Syria on the international agenda, maintained pressure through sanctions and UN mechanisms, and prevented full normalization with a regime still seen as a pariah.

They also laid groundwork for a future Syria—working on constitutional ideas, civil society, and governance alternatives, even under dire circumstances. That persistence means that when Assad fell, there was something for the international community to engage with—so HTS wasn't the only option.

Their presence is also shaping HTS's behavior today. Even HTS is attempting inclusivity in ways it likely wouldn't have if the opposition had simply disappeared. That's a credit to the opposition's endurance.

Were they perfect? No. The Syrian National Coalition and others weren't always inclusive enough, but there were late efforts to bring in new, more diverse and younger voices. Still, no matter how well they performed, they couldn't have toppled Assad while Russia and Iran were backing him militarily. Until those props disappeared, Assad felt he didn't need to give an inch.

Q: Was the US position on Syria principled?

A: Yes. Once Assad was firmly propped up by Russia and Iran, it was not realistic for the US to remove him militarily. The Biden administration focused instead on humanitarian aid, accountability, and counterterrorism in the northeast—prioritizing areas where the US had real leverage. They tried to preserve the political process, and maintain ceasefires. Wars in Ukraine and Gaza further complicated the situation. All the while, the US refused to normalize with Assad, believing it was wrong and ultimately ineffective. In hindsight, not engaging with the regime was clearly the right call.

Q: Was it principled to intervene only against ISIS, not Assad, despite Assad causing far more civilian deaths?

A: US policy prioritizes US national security. ISIS directly threatened US interests and allies, making intervention more politically and strategically justifiable. While Assad's brutality caused great suffering, US administrations were not prepared to engage in another full-scale intervention in the region. The US instead emphasized humanitarian aid and support to refugees, but military resources were reserved for missions with clearer strategic stakes. That's the political reality.

Q: Some argue for using one US-designated terrorist group to fight another. Do you think that worked in Syria?

A: This debate is shaped by history—people still think back to Afghanistan in the 1980s and the US working with jihadi groups at that time. But the real question is whether a group like HTS in a different place and a different time has shown the capacity to evolve.

From what I saw, even while in government, HTS seemed different—more adaptive. I'm not saying we should have engaged with them back then—they were still a designated group and we had other priorities—but there were signs something unusual was happening in northwest Syria.

[Interim President] Sharaa, too, appears to be trying to show he can evolve, whether out of self-interest or something more. So rather than asking, "Should we work with terrorists?" the better question is "If a group evolves into something else, can we help shape that evolution?"

Personally, I think we should. If they show signs of progress, it would be unwise to keep punishing them under outdated policies. We need both carrots and sticks to steer behavior.

Q: Do you believe Sharaa and HTS have changed? What would it take for the US to support delisting them from terrorist designations?

A: It's hard to say definitively if they've changed—but the way forward should be to engage, observe, and reward positive steps, while withholding support or reapplying pressure if they regress. It's a long process and needs to be based on behavior.

The clearest path is for them to align with UNSC Resolution 2254. It may be old, but it still outlines key benchmarks: an inclusive transitional government, a political process, and eventually a constitution. HTS's recent steps toward forming a transitional government are a start, though far from perfect.

Rather than drafting a whole new UN resolution—which could get bogged down in geopolitics and Security Council dynamics—we should use 2254 as a framework. If Sharaa's government moves toward inclusivity, avoids excluding minorities and women, and makes real progress on governance and reform, then we should find ways to recognize that. If not, we hold the line.

Q: How do you balance rewarding good behavior without enabling a new authoritarian regime?

A: It's a real challenge. You can't blindly reward progress—what matters is the quality of institutions being built. Are power and responsibility shared, or is everything concentrated under HTS? Are independent voices involved? That's how you assess the risk of future authoritarianism.

A stable Syria isn't enough—what replaces Assad must be better, not just different. This moment presents a narrow opportunity for meaningful change. If we get it wrong, we risk helping create another dictatorship that sows future instability.

Q: Should sanctions on Damascus be lifted now or used as leverage?

A: They should absolutely be used as leverage, but more effectively. Not through blanket or immediate removal—but through clear, realistic steps and consistent dialogue. The Syrian government needs to see that progress can lead to tangible benefits in a reasonable timeframe.

Right now, there's little visible incentive. If we maintain a policy of "do everything, then we'll think about sanctions," they'll turn elsewhere—Russia, China, or extremist actors. That vacuum can be dangerous. Instead, we need a step-by-step approach: if Damascus does x, we lift or ease y. That's how to keep influence and avoid fueling hopelessness.

Q: So you're calling for a more active US approach to Syria?

A: Yes—but not just academic debates like before. This is a real government seeking recognition and resources. So we should adopt a step-by-step approach: dial sanctions back gradually in exchange for clear, positive actions.

Immediate removal would be a mistake—we'd lose leverage. And with US humanitarian aid limited, sanctions relief may be one of the few incentives we can still offer.

What's urgently needed is more direct engagement. Senior US officials should visibly talk to this new government and clarify what steps could unlock real benefits. There are people in Washington who see the complexity of the situation—hopefully, their voices are heard. Done right, this could be a real foreign policy success.

Q: What advice would you give to the current Syrian leadership, regional partners, and advocacy groups?

A: Syria has a rare opportunity. Many powerful countries still care about what happens there—and if the new leadership engages them wisely, it could bring real benefits.

Talk to Türkiye about stability and border concerns. Engage the US—there's still a US military presence, so why not explore a framework, like in Iraq, that clarifies roles and brings mutual benefit? Reassure Lebanon that Syria won't interfere as before. Even with Israel, try to restore calm and avoid escalation—perhaps reaching a modus vivendi via third parties, if not directly.

Show Europe that Syria is becoming a safe, cooperative state, and needs their support to enable more substantial refugee returns. Tackle the Captagon trade seriously—countries like Jordan will take notice. And if the government proves it's on a better path, Gulf countries may be willing to invest seriously in Syria's future.

If Sharaa is serious, he could be remembered not as another strongman—but as a transformative leader who built something new for Syria and the region.

As for advocacy groups, they should stay engaged—especially with the US administration. They should help officials see Syria not just as part of a broader regional template, but as a specific place that provides a unique, timely opportunity. If done right, smart engagement could lead to real achievements—and credit—for those involved.

In Europe, where resources are more available, advocates should ensure they're channeled effectively, especially as US support may decline.

Finally, avoid getting entangled in internal Syrian politics. Don't back individual players or factions. That undermines credibility. Instead, approach this as Syrians abroad working for the good of the country—not one political figure. Constructive pressure—like urging inclusivity and reform—is helpful. Playing favorites is not.

Q: In a post-Assad context, how should the US handle individual sanctions—especially those imposed symbolically or on technocrats? Should they still be used as leverage, and what mechanisms exist for removal?

A: There should be a comprehensive review of all Syria-related sanctions. Listings that were symbolic or that targeted technocrats may be outdated in the current context.

That said, sanctions shouldn't be lifted all at once. The direction should be toward gradual removal, using them as leverage to encourage positive behavior. If the new government sees that certain steps—like being more inclusive—lead

to concrete relief, that creates momentum. But if there's no light at the end of the tunnel, no indication that change will be rewarded, they'll go elsewhere—China, Russia, or worse.

What's needed is more direct engagement. The US should talk to the new Syrian government, lay out a clear list of things to do, and show that steps forward will be met with relief. That way, sanctions can remain a tool—not just for punishment, but to help steer things in the right direction.

SYRIA IN FIGURES

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Syria in Figures is a monthly publication that provides data-driven and insightful analysis of developments shaping Syria's political economy. It prioritizes relevance and novelty, which makes it a vital resource for policymakers, humanitarian implementers, researchers, and other stakeholders attempting to understand Syria's complex landscape.

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Editor in Chief: Karam Shaar
Coordinator and Contributor: Benjamin Fève
Fact-Checking: Vittorio Serracapriola
Contributors: Mohamad Ahmad, Fareed Fakhoury
Designer: Amin Qurabi
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