

Syria in Figures

Making Sense of Syria's Economy

Aoun al-Dadat Crossing: The Intersection of Extortion and Lawlessness

The Aoun al-Dadat crossing in northern Syria epitomizes corruption and abuse, with displaced families suffering extortion and violence under local powerbroker Zakouri's control.

US Sanctions Legislation Up in the Air

With Caesar expiring soon and the Anti-Normalization Act parked in the Senate, what have Syrian Americans been advocating? What are the points of contention?

External Contribution

Steven Heydemann, Smith College, and The Brookings Institution

Syria in the Crosshairs: US Policy in the Trump Administration

What does Trump's presidency mean for Syria? Professor Heydemann shares his views on the main characteristics of the incoming administration and the possible scenarios.

Syrian Entrepreneurship in Türkiye

Syrian businesses in Türkiye boost the economy with jobs and exports but face anti-immigrant sentiment, regulatory hurdles, and limited resources.

Beijing's Empty Promises to Damascus

China's promises of investment, including those made after Syria's admission to the Belt and Road Initiative, remain unfulfilled, hindered by instability, sanctions, and Russian-Iranian dominance.

Interview

Ibrahim Olabi, Founder of The Syrian Legal Development Programme and Barrister at Guernica 37

Justice for Syria: The Role of Litigation and Accountability

This interview highlights how litigation and accountability foster justice and stability in Syria, tackling challenges like sanctions, funding, and normalization in a post-conflict transition.

Editorial Note: Unprecedented Uncertainty and Pragmatism

While finalizing this edition of Syria in Figures a few days ago, an unprecedented development began to unfold: the Syrian opposition, led by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), seized large areas of the country including all of Aleppo Governorate and parts of Hama.

All the information, maps, and analyses presented in this issue were prepared before these events. As the developments do not negate most of the arguments presented here, we decided to proceed with publishing while committing to addressing the implications of the latest developments in forthcoming editions.

These past few days underscore why Syria cannot and should not be ignored. The rapid shifts on the ground remind us of the complexity and fragility of the situation, as well as the profound impact these developments have on the region and beyond.

These events are unprecedented, and while they have sparked moments of joy and euphoria for many, they also carry deep uncertainty and renewed human suffering. Our thoughts are with everyone affected, including several of our team members on the ground.

Sincerely,
The Editorial Team

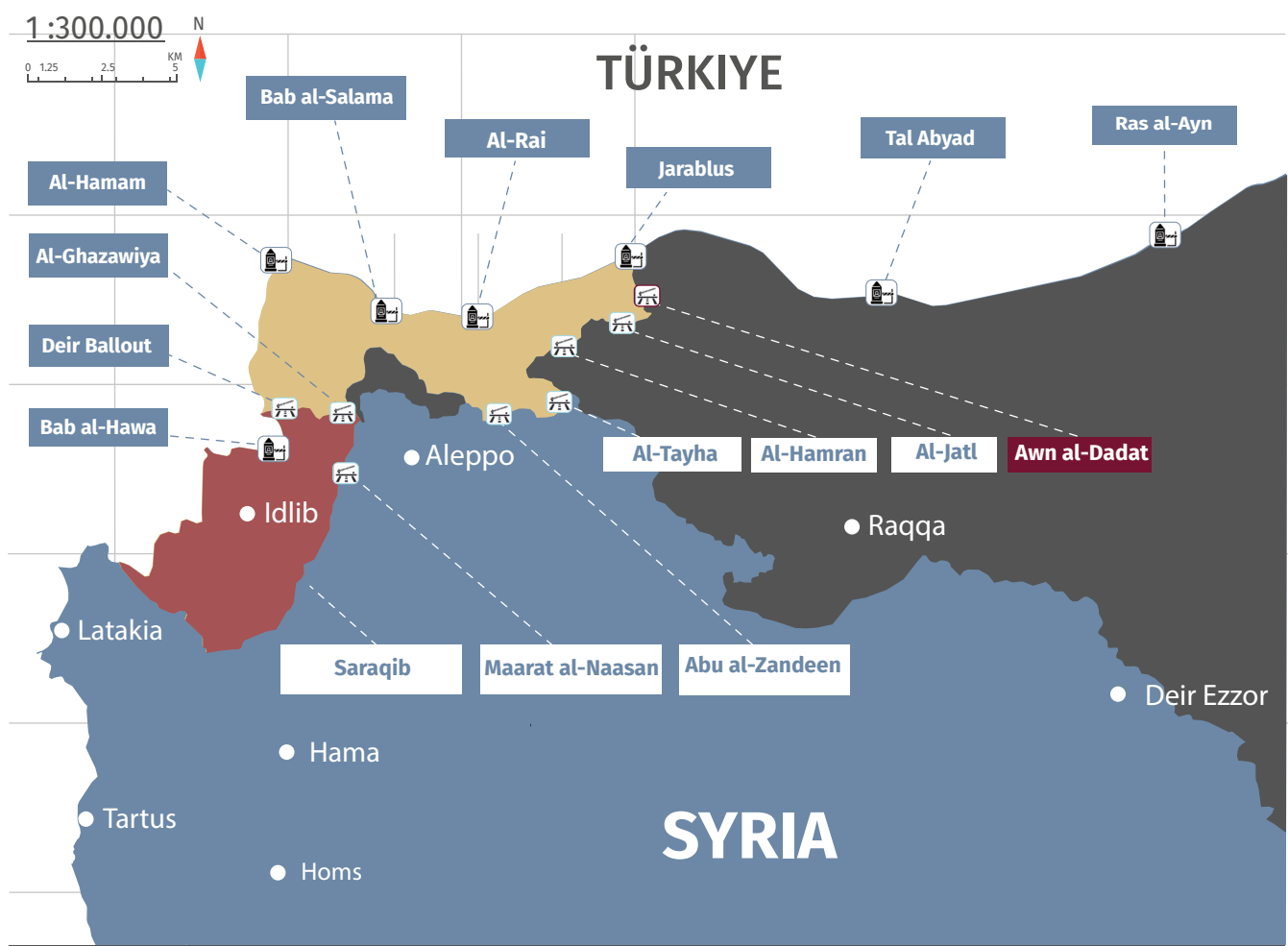
Aoun al-Dadat Crossing: The Intersection of Exploitation and Lawlessness

The October 2024 [return of thousands of Syrian refugees](#) from Lebanon brought renewed attention to the Aoun al-Dadat crossing, a site that exemplifies the exploitation and lawlessness pervasive in Syria’s fragmented governance. Located between Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)-controlled Manbij and Syrian National Army (SNA)-controlled Jarabulus, the crossing has become notorious not only as a transit point for displaced individuals but also as a hub for human trafficking and systemic abuse. Displaced families, stranded for days in [harsh conditions](#), fell victim to extortion by Zakaria al-Mousa—known

as Zakouri—his son Hazza, and their group, who wield significant control over the crossing.

Citing these abuses, the Türkiye-affiliated Syrian Interim Government’s Military Police [temporarily closed the crossing](#), further compounding the suffering of the stranded returnees. While the crossing later [reopened](#), it [closed](#) again on 1 November to Syrians returning from Lebanon, though some families are [occasionally allowed](#) to cross it. With no other alternatives, many were forced to turn to smugglers operating under Zakouri’s oversight.

Map of Northern Syria: Control Areas and Crossings



Control areas:

- The regime and allies
- Syrian Democratic Forces
- International crossings
- Domestic crossings

Note: As of 26 November 2024.

A Strategic Crossing Turned Exploitation Hub

The geographic significance of Aoun al-Dadat stems from its [position near the Turkish border](#), linking territories controlled by opposition factions, the SDF, and the regime. Originally intended as a [vital passage point](#) for humanitarian aid, commercial trade, and civilian movement, it has devolved into a flashpoint of [exploitation](#). Its strategic location has attracted not only legitimate activity but also rampant [human trafficking](#), extortion, and abuse, exacerbating the suffering of those seeking safety or opportunity across Syria's divided regions.

Zakouri, leveraging his position as a [local powerbroker](#), has transformed the crossing into a personal fiefdom. The town's [main square](#), originally known as 'Aoun Square,' is now commonly called '[Zakouri Square](#).' According to interviews with locals and journalists, travelers—many fleeing conflict or economic hardship—face exorbitant fees to secure passage, ranging from \$150 to \$200 per person. Those who cannot pay endure detention, blackmail, and inhumane treatment.

Local testimonies—collected by the authors—reveal the hardships faced by those stranded in this area. One mother and her daughters, harassed by Zakouri's group, were forced to flee on foot through dangerous terrain to find safety. Another man, separated from his wife at the crossing, waited helplessly as she was detained in degrading conditions until a bribe could be paid.

Beyond human security, the crossing is a central node for smuggling operations. Goods such as fuel, medicines, and even

vehicles flow through nearby [smuggling points](#) like Al-Halunji and Tukhar al-Saghir, which are overseen by Zakouri's network.



Photo of Zakaria Al-Mousa, known as Zakouri, (left) and his son, Hazza Al-Mousa, known as Hazza Zakouri (right).

The Web of Corruption and its Implications

Zakouri's power stems not only from being a powerful local tribesman from Aoun al-Dadat village but also from his [shifting](#) alliances with operatives from SDF and SNA factions. Although Aoun al-Dadat [lies](#) within SDF-controlled territory, Zakouri often enjoys relative freedom of action, reportedly providing financial incentives to maintain SDF's tacit approval, according to interviews with residents. In return, the SDF has intervened to protect Zakouri's operations during disputes with SNA-affiliated factions, reflecting a [mutual dependence](#) built on shared interests. Zakouri's influence is further bolstered by his [al-Awni Travel Company](#), which facilitates transport across conflict lines. The company assures its customers safe passage with escort services and protection from arrest at checkpoints, indicating its established connections with the security forces and authorities controlling the areas it traverses.

Similarly, Zakouri maintains ties with SNA factions that control the opposition side of the crossing. Local sources reported that groups such as the Sultan Murad Division, the 112th Brigade, and the Northern Brigade benefit from Zakouri's payments and [tribal connections](#), ensuring their cooperation and protection for his smuggling operations. These relationships create a network of power and influence that allows Zakouri to operate with impunity despite the [frequent closures](#) and reopenings of the crossing by the SNA's Military Police. Such closures do not always affect Zakouri's operations due to his control over adjacent smuggling routes.

The lawlessness at Aoun al-Dadat has far-reaching economic and social consequences. Merchants transporting goods are forced to pay bribes, increasing prices and deepening economic instability and fragmentation. At the same time, the lack of protection and widespread abuses at the crossing result in severe human rights violations.

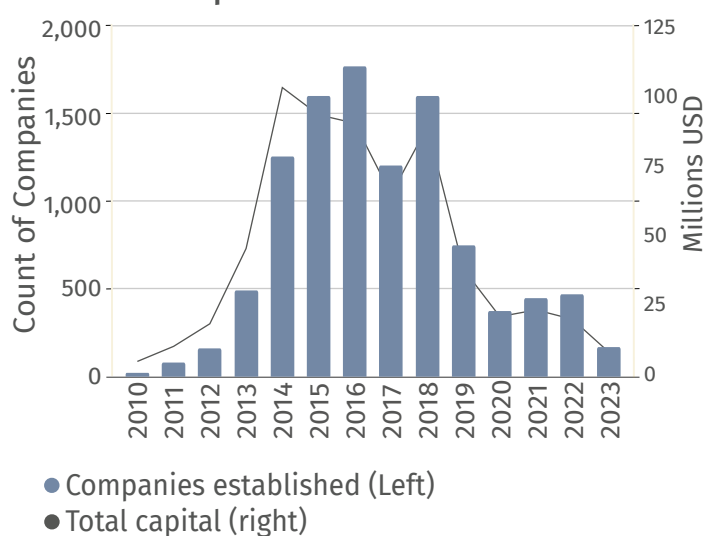
Aoun al-Dadat epitomizes everything wrong with the status quo and how various control areas engage. At its core, such crossings endure because de facto authorities—the SDF and the SNA—refuse to engage formally, leaving low-level actors dominating the scene.

Syrian Entrepreneurship in Türkiye

Following the Syrian conflict in 2011, Türkiye became home to approximately 3.6 million Syrian refugees, making it the largest refugee-hosting country in the world. As these displaced individuals sought to rebuild their lives, many turned to entrepreneurship as a means of economic survival and integration.

Between 2012 and 2023, Syrians established over 10,000 companies, injecting an estimated TRY 2.7 trillion (TRY is the Turkish lira; USD 618 million) in registered capital into the Turkish economy. This figure, however, likely understates the true scale of investment, as many businesses register only the minimum required capital. Moreover, a portion of [unregistered](#) companies remains unaccounted for.

Companies Established by Syrians in Türkiye and Total Capital



Source: Türkiye's Union of Chambers and Commodity Exchanges (TOBB)

Most Syrian-led companies operate in three [main sectors](#): wholesale and retail trade, manufacturing, and hospitality.

Syrian-led enterprises have become essential job creators, with each business employing [7.3](#) or [9.2](#) individuals depending on two different surveys,

meaning up to 92,000 jobs are directly tied to Syrian entrepreneurship in Türkiye. Beyond Syrians, who make up [60%](#) to [67%](#) of employees depending on various estimates, Turkish citizens fill the rest of the jobs. Through entrepreneurship, studies have shown that more than a quarter of a million Syrians in Türkiye, including workers and their families, [benefit](#) from the wages generated through this formal employment.

Beyond direct employment, Syrian-led companies also contribute to the Turkish economy through their business operations and investments. A large share of these companies report that their [suppliers are based in Türkiye](#), indicating strong integration with local supply chains and stimulating economic activity across various sectors. Furthermore, [about 10%](#) of Syrian-led companies have invested in real estate. This real estate acquisition represents a significant capital investment in the country and contributes to the local property market and potentially to urban development.

In fact, it should also be noted that Syrians could access work permits and property rights by [establishing](#) a company in Türkiye – blurring the line between the actual productive output linked to Syrian-owned businesses. However, [only 5%](#) of Syrian-led companies reported establishing their companies to acquire real estate. Syrian companies tend to be more [export-oriented](#) than their Turkish counterparts, with 55% engaging in exports compared to 31% of Turkish firms. More than one-third of

companies established by Syrians [report](#) that at least 50% of their revenues come from exports. About 35% of Syrian-owned companies [export](#) to the Gulf and MENA region. There is also a positive [correlation](#) between the increase in Syrian enterprises in Turkish provinces bordering Syria and increased Turkish exports to Syria, with Gaziantep accounting for nearly a quarter of Türkiye's total exports to Syria. This is especially significant for Türkiye as one of the reasons for the country's economic crisis and current account deficit, [driven by](#) reliance on imports and insufficient exports.

However, over the past few years, the trajectory of Syrian entrepreneurship in Türkiye has been uneven. In 2013, Syrian refugees were founding companies at a rate of 0.084% per person, compared to 0.059% of Turkish citizens. By 2023, Syrian business formation dropped to 0.005% while the Turkish rate rose to 0.136%.

The recent disparity points to growing barriers faced by refugee business owners. These include [access to capital](#), [local legislation](#), [language barriers](#), [limited access to formal banking services](#), and [mobility restrictions](#) due to residency requirements. [Barriers](#) such as limited capital and language, disrupted supply chains, and non-digital operational models also meant that Syrian-led firms were [disproportionately impacted](#) by the COVID-19 pandemic; 38% reported frozen operations in May 2020, compared to 30% of Turkish firms. As mentioned earlier, another key element is the obligation for companies engaging in productive activities to own real estate.

Integrating Syrian entrepreneurs into the Turkish economy is not merely an economic issue but also a social and political one. Growing [anti-immigrant](#) sentiment has led to instances of violence [targeting](#) Syrian businesses, creating an atmosphere of insecurity.

Syrian-owned businesses have significantly shaped local economies, particularly in export-oriented sectors. Yet these contributions have come amid growing challenges.

As Türkiye continues to grapple with the hefty costs of hosting millions of Syrian refugees, understanding the economic impact of Syrian labor and entrepreneurship offers critical insights and potential opportunities. This impact reaches beyond the business sector, influencing labor markets, international trade, and public policy.

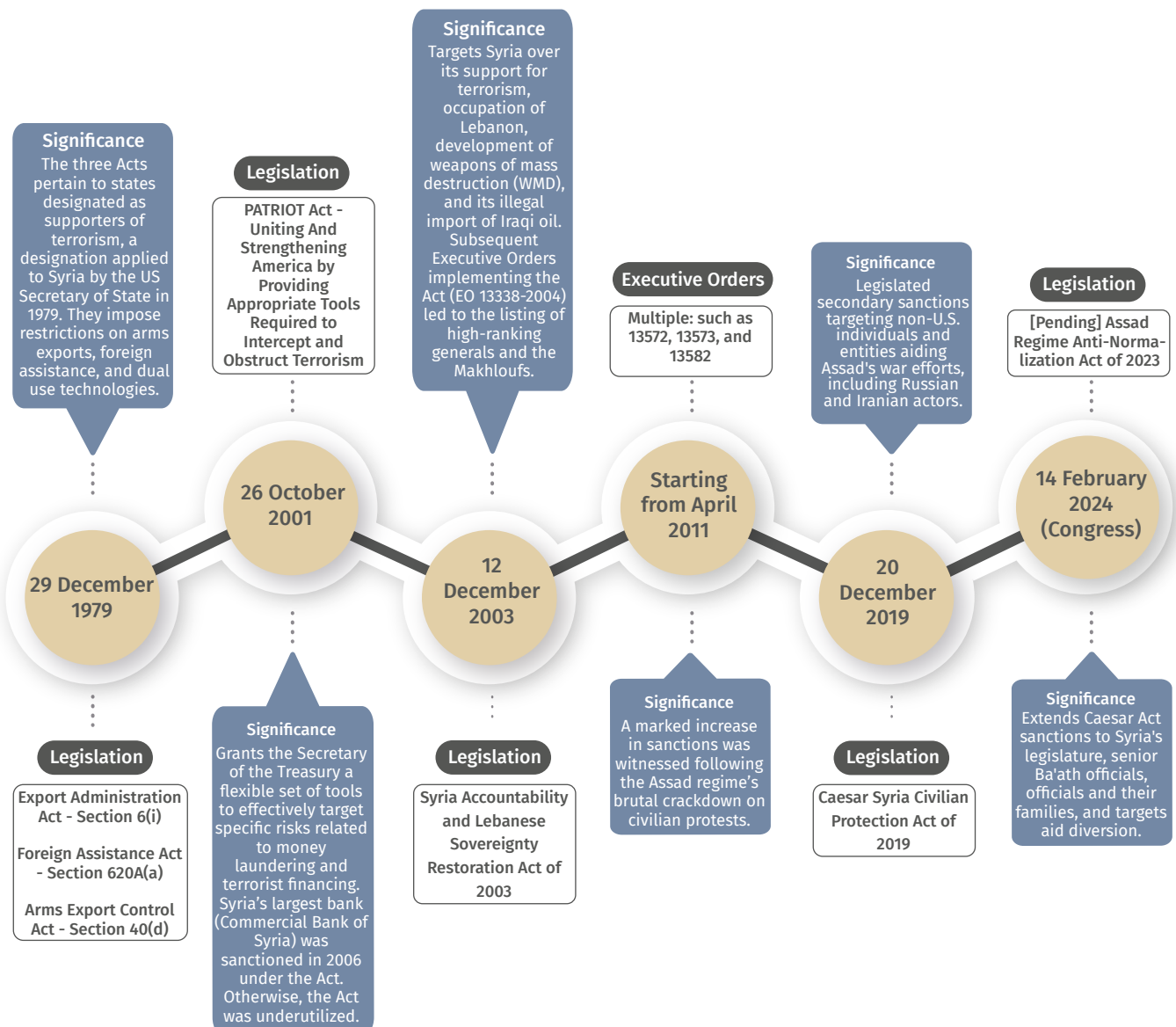
For more on Syrian employment in Türkiye, read [Winners and Losers: Syrian Refugees' Impact on Türkiye](#) in last month's edition of *Syria in Figures*.

US Sanctions Legislation Up in the Air?

US policymakers are currently considering two pieces of sanctions legislation for Syria—both of which could have critical impacts on the activities of the Assad regime, the political process, and the broader population. The first relates to the Caesar Act, set to expire in less than a month on 20 December; the second is the Anti-Normalization Act, which passed Congress early this year and was most recently re-introduced as the “Supporting Syrian Civilians Act.”

Syria has been under US sanctions since 1979. However, following the 2011 uprising and Assad’s brutal crackdown on protesters, the Obama administration expanded the sanctions considerably, including under the 2019 Caesar Act. Through targeting specific economic sectors, companies, and individuals, sanctions aim—in principle—to non-violently pressure Assad to halt attacks on the Syrian people and take steps toward a political settlement to the conflict.

Timeline of Key Events Relating to US Sanctions on Syria



The Caesar Act, passed under the previous Trump administration, further broadened sanctions on Syria by enforcing penalties against individuals and companies doing business with the regime in multiple sectors, including reconstruction, through the use of secondary sanctions.

“The Caesar Act is the only major political win of the revolution,” said Mouaz Moustafa, the director of the Syrian Emergency Task Force (SETF), which advocates for the Syrian people in Washington. “Support for Caesar is strong in Congress, across the board, [among] Republicans and Democrats and in the House and the Senate,” Moustafa said.

The Caesar Act is expected to be renewed through the same avenue it was originally passed in 2019, an annual defense policy bill known as the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA). Although Senate leaders filed the NDAA package for 2025 on 20 September, Caesar could still be “air-dropped” into the legislation and passed in December with the consensus of Senate and House leaders.

Although this is looking increasingly unlikely, Moustafa reiterated, “Caesar is safe to be renewed — either now or a little bit later, either through the NDAA or alternative avenues before the year’s end.”

Assad Regime Anti-Normalization Act of 2023

Under debate are provisions of a new bill known as the “Assad Regime Anti-Normalization Act of 2023-24.” The bill passed in the House on 14 February 2024, and has since been under scrutiny

in the Senate, with many Syrian-Americans advocating for its passage in NDAA 2025. On 11 September, the bill was re-introduced as the “Supporting Syrian Civilians Act” (SSCA). One of its articles calls for extending Caesar until 31 December 2028. But the Act includes much more, such as a “non-recognition” clause to affirm the US’s opposition to normalization with the Assad regime.

“We’re very interested in getting the Anti-Assad Normalization Act passed because it addresses many of the loopholes that Caesar, and US policy in general, has regarding Syria, which the Assad regime and its allies have used to build their financial and policy empire on its ruins,” said Dr. Muhammad Bakr Ghbeis, board member and former president of Citizens for a Secure and Safe America (C4SSA), a non-profit organization “dedicated to promoting democracy in Syria.”

The bill aims to curb the regime’s diversion of humanitarian aid through the UN and penalizes the expropriation of Syrian land. It also authorizes \$20 million in economic assistance and stabilization funding for northwest Syria, including funding for the White Helmets and for countering captagon operations.

Yaser Tabbara, the president of the American Relief Coalition for Syria, said that “Passing the Anti-Normalization Act will increase pressure on Assad, reinvigorate political discussions, and signal US engagement in seeking a collaborative political solution involving regional states considering normalization.”

Up for Debate

Leading Syrian–American advocates have expressed their concern over several provisions in the latest amendments to the bill, introduced as the SSCA by Democratic Maryland Senator Ben Cardin on 11 September. Senator Cardin chairs the Senate’s Foreign Relations Committee, where discussions over Caesar are taking place.

Mohammad Alaa Ghanem, a Syrian advocate in Washington, said: “We believe [Cardin’s amendments] would weaken Caesar and would make its enforcement a lot harder. Although we were open to compromise, the Senator and his staff have not shown willingness to cooperate. Given this situation, we’re holding off, and we would rather take up the bill next year.”

The deal-breaker for Ghanem was a newly inserted provision that would provide an “extremely broad” humanitarian exception within the Caesar Act, which he and other leading advocates argue could be easily exploited by the regime and its allies.

In a letter addressed to Senator Cardin on 20 September and reviewed by the authors, its signatories—including Ghanem—said that the exemption could exempt many activities currently under sanction and could allow regime actors to argue for the classification of any activity as “necessary for” or “related to” humanitarian efforts—and thereby the bill would “undermine the effectiveness of the Caesar Act.”

If the exception is not amended, Ghanem prefers to take up the bill next year. “We’d rather have Caesar as is than a weakened Caesar and a weakened

Assad Regime Anti-Normalization Act,” he said.

Humanitarian Aid

Humanitarian organizations, however, have consistently advocated for broader exemptions, as their operations are often hampered by the narrow interpretation of sanctions legislation and the overcompliance of involved actors.

The literature shows how sanctions increase compliance costs for humanitarian organizations, disproportionately affecting smaller—but critical—actors who are often forced to opt out of operating in Syria entirely. Avoiding the numerous indirect channels that could trigger sanctions takes resources and time, increasing compliance costs that many organizations cannot access.

Sanctions also often mean the due diligence period is extended, elongating the time from when a humanitarian actor initiates a transaction with a Syria-based client and when the transaction is approved. Unless clear general licenses or streamlined humanitarian carveouts apply, actors need to rely on specific authorizations. Obtaining such exemptions from sanctions can lead to project delays, or in some cases the loss of the project altogether.

These humanitarian obstacles are the unintended consequences of decades of sanctions in Syria that are not due to specific sanctions legislation. “[Caesar] has the strongest humanitarian exemptions in any bill—a bill written with the knowledge and understanding that sometimes sanctions can have

unintended consequences,” SETF director Moustafa stated. “The Syrian economy being destroyed, the overcompliance of banks [and other humanitarian obstacles], these things pre-date Caesar,” he argued.

What to Watch

The passage of the Anti-Normalization Act or SSCA appears increasingly unlikely under the current administration. However, the recent flip of the US Senate may help its passage chances next year.

Notably, in the next Congress Cardin will not serve in the Senate, having not sought re-election. Senator James Risch (Republican, Idaho)—a proponent of the Anti-Normalization Act and generally on expanding sanctions on Syria—is poised to take Cardin’s place as chair of the Foreign Relations Committee.

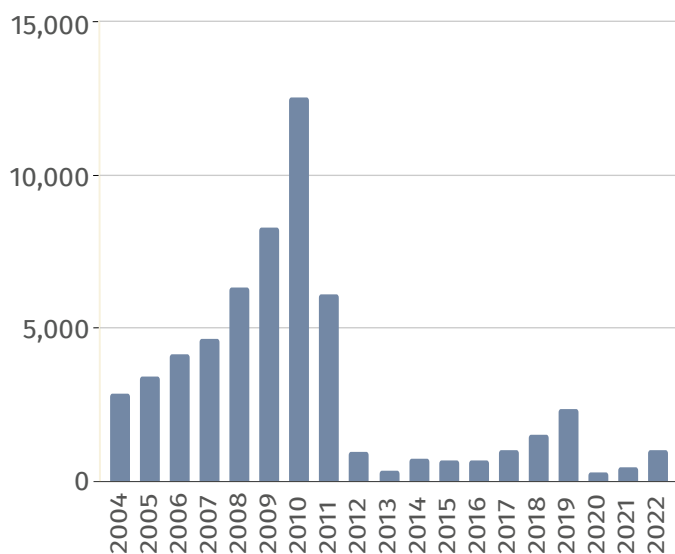
Furthermore, the appointment of Senator Marco Rubio as Trump’s Secretary of State and Congressman Michael Waltz as an advisor to the National Security Council are expected to play a “promising role” on the Syrian issue and on blocking Assad and his supporters, and will “tighten the noose around the Iranian regime,” Dr. Ghbeis [posted](#) on X. However, other potential appointees to the administration, as argued in the external contribution to this issue of Syria in Figures, might move the administration in the opposite direction. For the time being, uncertainty abounds.

Beijing's Empty Promises to Damascus

From the outset of the Syrian conflict in 2011, China has opted not to engage militarily as Russia and Iran have done. Instead, China's involvement in favor of the Assad regime has been characterized by openly supportive statements politically and economically.

Beijing, which has leveraged its [veto power](#) in the United Nations Security Council [ten](#) times to bolster the Assad regime, has used the veto power only [19 times](#) since it regained its seat in 1971, highlighting its unwavering political stance. This political support lent Russia, which used its veto to support Assad even more frequently, legitimacy on the international stage.

Chinese Visitors to Regime-Held Syria per Year



Source: Syrian Central Bureau of Statistics

While political support has been forthcoming, China's economic promises to Syria have rung hollow, raising questions about their sincerity, particularly in the context of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which Damascus [formally joined](#) in January 2022. Despite high-profile promises and declarations of "[strategic partnership](#)," the reality suggests that China's

investments in Syria are more rhetoric than substance. This is immediately apparent from eyeballing the number of Chinese visitors to the country, which crashed following the conflict, with minor movements relating to the security situation or the global pandemic.

The potential for investment in Syrian railroads and ports aligns with China's broader ambitions to expand its global economic footprint. Syria's location along the Mediterranean is favorable for China's BRI, which aims to enhance trade routes connecting Asia with Europe. Nevertheless, tangible Chinese investments have been conspicuously absent despite strategic significance.

China is more accustomed than Western companies to investing in risky environments, [such as those in Africa](#). Yet according to our review of the Syrian Gazette, virtually no Chinese companies have opened a branch in Syria since 2011, suggesting the country is too risky even by Chinese standards.

Instead, Chinese nationals have been establishing Syria-based companies, especially after the regime's military advances and the defeat of ISIS by the end of 2017. Our review of the incorporation documents of these companies suggests that most have not been licensed in the sectors that require an upfront investment—such as natural resource extraction and construction—reflecting a tendency to prioritize quick profits, especially in the trade sector. Regardless, our tracking of the online footprint of these businesses suggests that the vast

majority did not take off at all.

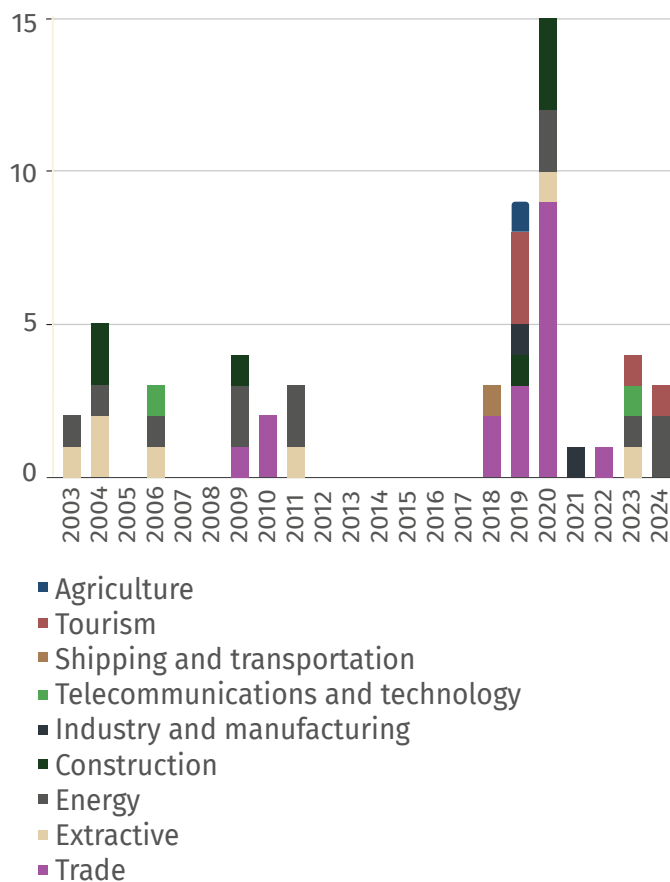
Several factors underscore the lack of Chinese investment, with the foremost being the country's political and security instability. Although the intensity of conflict in regime-controlled areas has lessened in recent years, and Bashar al-Assad appears to have achieved a modicum of political stability, Syria still ranks as the [fifth most fragile country](#) in the world, highlighting the unsustainability of the status quo.

Despite these challenges, Chinese officials have continued to express interest in Syria's reconstruction. In recent years, statements from Chinese leaders have emphasized their commitment to supporting Assad's government in revitalizing the war-torn nation. During a [congratulatory telegram](#) sent by President Xi Jinping following Assad's re-election in 2021, he asserted that China would provide "all possible assistance" to Syria in combating COVID-19 and revitalizing its economy. Moreover, China's September 2023 announcement of a "[strategic partnership](#)" with Syria was lauded as an important milestone in bilateral relations.

However, despite these high-profile commitments, the outcomes remain elusive. For instance, while Chinese tech giant Huawei [expressed interest](#) in rebuilding Syria's telecommunications system in 2015, no substantial progress has been made. Similarly, China's \$2 billion [pledge](#) in 2017 for creating an industrial park in Syria to host Chinese companies did not yield tangible results. Finally, despite an agreement on economic cooperation [signed](#) in 2020 between China and Syria, which included a Chinese donation for

humanitarian projects, broader economic engagement has not materialized.

Chinese Investment in Syria over Years and by Sectors



Source: Syrian government's Official Gazette

China's long-term vision for Syria appears focused on patiently waiting for conditions to improve before making substantial investments. Beijing's reluctance to enter the Syrian market, however, might cost it some long-term losses to Assad's other backers: [Iran](#) and [Russia](#), both of whom have established strong economic footholds. Most importantly, Russian dominance over key resources, including [phosphate](#) and [hydrocarbons](#), further limits opportunities for Chinese companies. For example, Syria's ports have been contracted out to foreign companies for at least three decades.

Syria in the Crosshairs: US Policy in the Trump Administration



External contribution

Steven Heydemann, Professor at Smith College and Non-Resident Fellow at the Brookings Institution

Donald Trump's pending return to the White House has been greeted by triumphal acclaim from his supporters and nervous apprehension from his critics. Both anticipate an administration poised to challenge established conventions in Washington, with a willingness to depart from democratic norms, reinterpret constitutional principles, and reject the liberal internationalism that has characterized US foreign policy since WWII. What Trump's transactional worldview means in practice remains unclear, but Syria is likely to test his administration's foreign policy. With US troops on the ground, strained Iran–Assad relations, and Israel targeting Iranian and Hezbollah assets, Syria could set the tone for his broader Middle East strategy.

If we take Trump's nominees for key national security and foreign policy positions as an indicator of his administration's approach, Syria policy will be sharply contested by appointees with dramatically different views. His

picks for Secretary of State, Senator [Marco Rubio](#), and National Security Advisor, Representative [Mike Waltz](#), are on record as strong advocates of the US troop presence in eastern Syria. Former Trump appointees rumored to be in line for key Middle East roles in the White House, such as Joel Rayburn, may bolster the position of those who want to see US forces remain. In contrast, Trump's nominee for Director of National Intelligence, [Tulsi Gabbard](#), is notorious for her criticism of US involvement in Syria, opposition to the presence of US forces, and a pattern of positive statements about both [Bashar al-Assad](#) and Russian President [Vladimir Putin](#). Fox News talk show host and National Guard veteran Pete Hegseth, Trump's nominee for Secretary of Defense, has a thin record on Syria but embraces Gabbard's skepticism of US military intervention in the Middle East. In a 2018 phone call to Hegseth's talk show, Trump affirmed his intent to withdraw US forces with Hegseth cheering him on. Influential voices, such as Elon Musk and Trump's son Donald Jr. and other informal advisors, are aligned with the "peace at any price" faction of Trump's inner circle, which advocates for US withdrawal.

Whatever the final composition of Trump's national security team—Gabbard and Hegseth might not [survive confirmation](#) hearings—Trump himself will have the final say. His views on Syria have changed little from his first term as president and his selection of loyalists for key positions means he is unlikely to face pushback from within, not least because so many former critics, including Rubio, have

transformed themselves into Trump loyalists.

In the years since leaving the White House, Trump's Syria calculus has become more complicated. How might Syria fit into a revived "maximum pressure" policy towards Iran? Will his unconditional support for Israel bump up against his apparent interest in ending conflicts in Gaza and Lebanon if ceasefires limit Israel's actions in Syria? Answers to these questions are as likely to be determined by Trump's gut instincts and impulsiveness as by input from advisors. For this reason, taking lessons from his first term are instructive for what lies ahead. Five key lessons stand out.

First, Trump tends to prioritize quick wins, focusing on issues he perceives as straightforward or easily achievable. Second, Trump is known to encourage competition among his advisors, often rewarding those who are most aligned with his preferences. This will encourage what might be called testing behavior by those seeking influence and currying favor, not only within his administration but among foreign actors, as well: strategies to tease out the most effective channels for influence within a fractured and chaotic policy process, whether formal or informal, will be the norm. Third, we can anticipate a likely return to the performative diplomacy that Trump favors, focusing on high-profile moments, such as meetings with North Korea's Kim Jong Un or withdrawing from the JCPOA, rather than engaging in the prolonged effort of traditional diplomacy. Fourth, Trump's favorable relationships with strongmen are likely to enhance the influence and access of figures such as Putin, Orban, Erdoğan, Saudi Crown Prince Muhammad Bin

Salman (MBS), Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed of the UAE (MBZ), and Israeli Prime Minister Bibi Netanyahu. Fifth, Trump's skepticism of executive branch institutions suggests that, even with loyalists in the State Department, his administration is likely to further centralize foreign policy decision-making within the White House, continuing a trend seen in both Democratic and Republican administrations.

At this point, we can only speculate about how these factors might shape Trump's Syria policy. Yet it is not far-fetched to imagine a scenario in which Trump invites Putin and Erdoğan to establish a condominium over northeast Syria—perhaps including a Russian security presence to address the concerns of Kurds and their US supporters—moves quickly to withdraw US forces, and identifies conditions that Assad would need to meet to trigger some measure of sanctions relief, with support from the Republican majority in Congress, including members who previously opposed normalization, such as Lindsey Graham. Such conditions could include steps reflecting the priorities of MBS and MBZ regarding narcotics smuggling and reducing Iran's influence in Syria, as well as those of Orban and other European and regional leaders regarding the repatriation of Syrian refugees. What's in it for Trump? His [remarks](#) on Syria's oil suggest he may demand preferential treatment for friendly US oil firms in exchange. At the same time, while quick wins in Lebanon and Gaza are clearly high on Trump's Middle East agenda, the likelihood of him moving to restrict Israeli actions in Syria remains low.

None of this may materialize, of course. What is certain is that Syria policy, like many other pressing issues, will likely reflect the same unpredictability, internal conflicts, and uneven management seen during Trump's previous term. Some observers of Trump's campaign argue that his administration could be more orderly this time, benefiting from years of planning and preparation by former appointees. While this possibility cannot be ruled out, predictions of a disciplined administration should be met with caution. This time, there may be fewer checks on Trump's decisions, with a more compliant Congress—at least through the 2026 midterm elections—a weakened intelligence community, and diminished institutional safeguards.

These factors do not bode well for American diplomacy in the next four years, whether on Syria policy or other critical foreign policy challenges.

Interview: Justice for Syria: The Role of Litigation and Accountability



Ibrahim Olabi, Founder of the Syrian Legal Development Programme and Barrister at Guernica 37

Q: How do litigation efforts contribute to long-term stability, reconciliation, and post-conflict transitions in Syria?

A: Litigation plays a critical role in fostering long-term stability and reconciliation in Syria by addressing grievances and delivering a sense of justice. This process helps individuals move forward, albeit in a subjective and personal way, and mitigates unresolved grievances that could hinder societal healing.

In post-conflict transitions, litigation is equally vital, centering on victims and survivors while ensuring that justice remains integral to reconciliation. By engaging actors with shared accountability goals and addressing conflicting policies, litigation navigates the complexities of rebuilding societal trust and relations. Ultimately, these efforts reinforce justice as a cornerstone for lasting peace and stability.

Q: How do litigation efforts and the regime's control over resources impact Syrians and accountability?

A: There are ongoing investigations into businesspeople connected to the regime, which have economic implications. Regarding the Assad regime's control over resources, its territorial control can sometimes complicate access to accountability initiatives. However, technological advances and collaborations with displaced Syrians have mitigated these challenges. Moreover, since international donors predominantly fund accountability efforts, the regime's control over resources has a minimal direct impact on these initiatives.

Q: Can accountability curb normalization?

A: From a political perspective, pursuing litigation against the Assad regime complicates normalization efforts. Politically, litigation creates substantial obstacles by forcing countries seeking to reestablish ties to confront the legal and narrative challenges of engaging with a regime or individuals under international arrest warrants, such as Syria's case under the Torture Convention at the International Court of Justice. These efforts also undermine the regime's attempts to rebrand itself as law-abiding, further isolating it within the international community.

This political isolation extends to economic constraints, as financial support becomes harder to justify when it risks association with war crimes or sanctions violations. Ongoing cases in Europe and the United States involving sanctions breaches and financial complicity reinforce these challenges.

The impact of accountability, however, depends heavily on visibility and civil society engagement. If these initiatives remain obscure, their influence diminishes. Publicizing accountability efforts and integrating them into broader advocacy strategies amplifies their deterrent effect, making normalization significantly harder to achieve.

Q: What role do economic sanctions play in complementing litigation efforts, and how effective have they been so far?

A: Economic sanctions, especially individual sanctions, play a critical role in complementing litigation efforts. They identify perpetrators, provide evidence, and indicate that there are ongoing case files against these individuals. Sanctions also facilitate legal action by highlighting sanctions evasion or circumvention.

However, sanctions have a dual effect. While they signal accountability and deter potential violators, they can also inadvertently alert targets, potentially complicating prosecutorial efforts. Their overall effectiveness ultimately hinges on robust enforcement and their integration into broader accountability frameworks.

Q: Litigation is extremely costly and lengthy. What conditions need to be met for litigation efforts to be worthwhile?

A: Litigation must be victim-centered, ensuring that survivors feel ownership of the process. Publicity and strategic alignment are equally critical, as cases should contribute to a broader narrative by highlighting widespread crimes rather than isolated incidents. Amplifying findings and ensuring they align with a long-term vision enhances their impact.

While litigation is costly, initial expenses are typically covered by civil society organizations and victim groups, with states often taking over as cases progress. For these efforts to be truly worthwhile, they must focus on achieving deterrence, maximizing visibility, and aligning with a clear, strategic purpose.

Q: How does funding from donors and governments with inconsistent human rights records affect the credibility and effectiveness of litigation efforts?

A: While governments may sometimes display double standards in their accountability policies, this should not discourage engagement in areas where their policies align with justice goals. Litigation efforts help set a global standard for accountability, demonstrating that justice is attainable. Although such inconsistencies may appear hypocritical, progress in one context can serve as a catalyst for broader movements toward justice elsewhere.

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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