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Syria

Three Requisites for Syria's Reconstruction Process

- Features -

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For the country's revival to be successful after years of war, inclusion of the population and democratization during the transitional period will be necessary, or national cohesion may be undermined.

The Assad regime's downfall on December 8, 2024, raised expectations for a better future in Syria. However, the initial optimism has been superseded by rising difficulties, including territorial and political fragmentation, foreign influence and occupation, and sectarian tensions. This has had a negative impact on a potential economic recovery and reconstruction process, which the country desperately needs. The [cost of reconstruction](#) is estimated at \$250–400 billion. More than half the population remains displaced, 90 percent lives under the poverty line, and, in 2024, 16.7 million people in Syria (or 75 percent of the population) required humanitarian assistance, according to the [United Nations](#).

In this context, discussions of economic recovery and development have already begun among Syrian social and political actors and international representatives. However, three major factors are needed for successful and sustained national rehabilitation and reconstruction. First, an inclusive political transition creating conditions for participation by different sectors of society. Second, the establishment of a counterweight to those in power that deepens the democratization of Syria's political space. And finally, an improvement in socioeconomic conditions to increase participation from below, particularly among the most vulnerable classes of society facing difficult living conditions.

Absent these conditions, Syria's economic recovery will be endangered and the likelihood of instability will rise as various political and social actors are left out. Even worse, if the new authorities continue to try to impose their will, this could lead to armed conflict. Similarly, the failure to more actively involve broader sectors of the population in the transitional phase could damage the latter's legitimacy. A lack of inclusivity could also nurture sectarian and ethnic tensions, further undermining national cohesion.

The Political Context After Assad's Downfall

After the collapse of the Assad regime, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, which had led the offensive against Syrian government forces, concentrated power in its own hands. Soon after taking over, the group's leader, Ahmad al-Sharaa, [chose](#) Mohammed al-Bashir to lead a caretaker government. Bashir previously headed the Syrian Salvation Government in Idlib. His government was composed solely of individuals from Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham or close to it. In January 2025, Sharaa went a step further and [appointed](#) himself interim president, before naming a [transitional government](#) under his authority on March 29 to serve until elections.

Once in office, Sharaa [formed](#) an "interim legislative council" after dissolving parliament and froze the constitution. He also appointed ministers, security figures, and regional governors affiliated with Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, or with armed groups of the Syrian National Army close to it. For example, [Anas Khattab](#) was initially named head of the intelligence services until his [replacement](#) by Hussein al-Salama in May. Khattab is a founding member of Jabhat al-Nusra, a predecessor of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, and was its leading security figure. As of 2017, he managed Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham's internal affairs and security policy. Khattab announced a restructuring of the intelligence services, even as the authorities also established a new Syrian army. They named Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham commanders as its highest-ranking officers, and chose [Murshid Abou Qasra as defense minister](#), elevating him to the rank of general. By reviving the army, the new regime sought to consolidate its control over Syria's fragmented

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armed groups and give the state a monopoly over weapons.

Similarly, key positions in the new transitional government are held by figures close to Sharaa. For example, Asaad al-Shibani and Abu Qasra retained their positions as foreign minister and defense minister, respectively, while Khattab was appointed interior minister. However, the government's real powers are in question, especially as the [National Security Council in Syria](#), headed by Sharaa and made up of his close associates (the foreign minister, defense minister, interior minister, and director of general intelligence), was formed at the same time with the aim of managing security and political policy. In a similar vein, the Foreign Ministry established the General Secretariat for Political Affairs at the end of March [to supervise domestic political activities](#), formulate general policies related to political matters, and manage assets of the dissolved Baath Party.

Syria's new authorities have also taken measures to consolidate their power over economic and social actors. They have, for instance, restructured the [country's chambers of commerce](#) by replacing a majority of members with appointees, including for the governorates of Damascus, Rural Damascus, Aleppo, and Homs. Several of the new board members are known for their close ties to Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham. This includes the new president of the Federation of Syrian Chambers of Commerce, Alaa Al-Ali, a former head of the Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham-affiliated Idlib Chamber of Commerce and Industry. In addition, in mid-April the brother of Ahmad Al-Sharaa, [Maher Al-Sharaa](#), was appointed secretary-general of the presidency, which involves managing the presidential administration and acting as a link between the presidency and state bodies.

The authorities have also [brought in new, affiliated figures](#) to head trade unions and professional associations. Notably, they [selected](#) a union council for the Syrian Bar Association, composed of members of the Free Bar Association Council operating in Idlib. Syrian lawyers responded by organizing a [petition](#) calling for democratic Bar Association elections.

The new regime's lack of democratic inclusivity has also been reflected in initiatives, conferences, and committees to shape Syria's future. For example, after the authorities had initially [postponed](#) the Syrian National Dialogue Conference, they held it in February 2025 [with around 600 participants](#). However, the process was strongly criticized. First, the Preparatory Committee was [established](#) less than two weeks prior to the conference and invitations were generally sent out only two days before, preventing the participation of many invitees from outside the country. The time allocated for discussions in the working sessions—on transitional justice, the economy, personal freedoms, and the constitution—was limited to four hours and prevented deeper exchanges. There was also an absence or underrepresentation of participants from certain regions, such as southern Syria and coastal areas, while the main Kurdish political actors, the [Autonomous Administration of the North and East Syria](#) (AANES) and the [Kurdish National Council](#), denounced the fact that they were not invited to participate in the conference.

The temporary constitution [signed](#) by Ahmad al-Sharaa in March was also panned by political and social actors, because of its content and lack of transparency in the selection criteria for the drafting commission. The [document](#) maintains provisions from the previous constitution. The official name of the country remains the Syrian Arab Republic, Arabic remains the sole official language, and there continues to be a stipulation that the president has to be a Muslim male. However, Islamic jurisprudence is now “the primary source of legislation” not “a major source of legislation.” While proclaiming the separation of powers, the temporary constitution hampers this by placing a wide range of powers in the presidency's hands. The president can submit laws, promulgate decrees, and veto parliamentary decisions. He is also in charge of designating the judges of the Constitutional Court, further [strengthening the powers of the executive branch](#).

On the economy, the government's orientation has not been discussed or shared outside a narrow circle of officials, whose primary aim is to secure power. The decisions taken by the new authorities have sought to impose their economic vision, [one rooted](#) in deepening neoliberalism and austerity measures. Such policies generally favor the

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business class. Ahmad al-Sharaa and his ministers have held [numerous meetings](#) with representatives of the country's chambers of commerce and industry, as well as with Syrian businessmen inside Syria and outside, to listen to their grievances and explain their own economic vision.

There are signs Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham wants to encourage privatization and impose austerity measures. Before his presence in January at the World Economic Forum in Davos, which personifies the interests of global neoliberal and capitalist elites, Shaibani, [told](#) the *Financial Times* that the Syrian authorities planned to privatize state-owned ports and factories, invite foreign investment, and boost international trade. He added that the government "would explore public-private partnerships to encourage investment into airports, railways and roads." [Damascus also reduced customs duties on over 260 Turkish products](#), harming national production, particularly in manufacturing and agriculture, which is struggling to compete with Turkish imports. Turkish exports to Syria in the first quarter of this year totaled about [\\$508 million](#), an increase of 31.2 percent compared to the same period in 2024, according to the Turkish Ministry of Commerce.

The government has also implemented austerity measures. Since December, it has [raised](#) the price of the standard 1,100 grams of subsidized bread from 400 Syrian pounds to 4,000 Syrian pounds, when initially the standard weight was 1,500 grams. The end of bread subsidies was announced for the following months, but without any specific date set. In January 2025, Electricity Minister Omar Shaqrouq [stated](#) that the government would also reduce or even remove subsidies on electricity prices, because "[current] prices are very low, much below their costs, but only gradually and only provided average incomes increase." Currently, the state does not provide more than two hours of electricity daily to Syria's main cities. Meanwhile, in January, the price of [a gas cylinder](#) used for cooking was [raised](#) from 25,000 Syrian pounds to 150,000 Syrian pounds, significantly affecting Syrian families.

Between December and January, the Ministry of Economy and Foreign Trade [announced](#) the dismissal of between a quarter and a third of the public workforce, corresponding to employees who, according to the new authorities, were earning a salary without working. Minister for Administrative Development Mohammed al-Skaff, who supervises the public-sector's headcount, went even further, saying state institutions required between [550,000 and 600,000 workers](#), less than half the current number. Since then, there have been no official figures for the employees dismissed, while some [have been placed on paid leave](#) for three months until their situation is clarified. Following this decision, protests by dismissed or suspended government workers [erupted](#) throughout the country.

At the same time, the Syrian authorities have repeated promises since the beginning of the year to increase the salaries of public employees by 400 percent and set the minimum salary at 1.12 million Syrian pounds (approximately \$86). Although these are steps in the right direction, they still await implementation and the salary amounts fail to cover living expenses amid a continuing economic crisis. At the end of March, the [minimal monthly expenses](#) for a five-member family in Damascus was estimated at [8 million Syrian pounds](#) (equivalent to \$666).

Building a Counterweight to Those in Power

A prerequisite for a successful process to revive and rebuild Syria is a strong civil society able to act as a counterweight to those in power. Civil society is not limited to local and international nongovernmental organizations, but also includes political parties, trade unions, professional associations, feminist and environmental organizations, local associations, and more. The aim would be to oppose new authoritarian dynamics in the country and Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham's consolidation of power through state institutions and its economic orientation. Democratic political space is crucial for encouraging participation from large sectors of society in economic and political reconstruction. The involvement of a majority of the population, especially the poorer and working classes, in the country's rehabilitation is crucial, as this should not be limited to political and economic elites and the wealthier strata in society. To promote such an approach, two prerequisites are required: guaranteeing civil peace and security and

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improving Syria's socioeconomic environment.

Civil peace remains elusive in Syria today. In some areas, particularly Homs and the coastal areas, there has been an absence of security, visible in violent sectarian incidents committed by the new security services and associated armed groups, including executions and assassinations. In March Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham and the Syrian National Army engaged in sectarian massacres of Alawite civilians in the coastal regions, [resulting in hundreds of deaths](#). While the violence was provoked by remnants of the Assad regime who organized coordinated attacks against members of the security services and civilians, the counterreaction encompassed all Alawites, according to a logic of sectarian hatred and revenge. In April and May, [armed groups connected to or supportive of the authorities](#) mounted attacks against the Druze population.

Responsibility for the massacres in March and the [continued killings of Alawite civilians](#), and now the Druze, lies principally with the new Syrian authorities. They failed to prevent them, and indeed were directly implicated and produced the political conditions making them possible. The authorities also failed to establish a mechanism promoting a comprehensive transitional justice process aimed at punishing all individuals and groups implicated in war crimes during the Syrian conflict. This could have played a crucial role in preventing acts of revenge and putting a lid on rising sectarian tensions. However, Ahmad al-Sharaa and his allies have no interest in transitional justice, almost certainly fearing that they may be judged for their own crimes and abuses committed against civilians.

Transitional justice also has a socioeconomic dimension in that it includes measures to recover public assets and prosecute financial crimes. These cover the privatization of such assets and the [distribution of public land to profit businessmen affiliated with the former regime](#), to the detriment of the population and its right to benefit from public resources more generally. However, the economic preferences of the new authorities, which involve reaching agreements and reconciliations with some of the business personalities associated with the Assad regime and deepening neoliberal policies and the privatization of state assets, run against the dynamics associated with a comprehensive transitional justice process.

In early March, the government signed a [memorandum of understanding](#) with AANES and sought a [rapprochement](#) with certain sectors of the Druze population in Suwayda. These initiatives demonstrated a need to strengthen its legitimacy nationally, regionally, and internationally, which was strongly shaken by the massacres in the coastal areas. However, implementation of the initiatives still needs to be assessed, as local communities in [Syria's northeast](#) and [Suwayda](#) oppose them. These communities organized demonstrations against the temporary constitution and the [ruling authorities' policies](#), including their unwillingness to punish the armed groups that had participated in the killings among coastal communities. Moreover, sectarian fighting in April once again resumed in certain areas of the country targeting Druze populations. To calm the tensions and prevent outside interference in national affairs, particularly by Israel, the Syrian government and Druze representatives [concluded an agreement in early May](#) covering security issues.

In addition to the risk of Syria's fragmentation, some foreign countries, particularly Iran and Israel, have an interest in heightening sectarian and ethnic violence. In this way, they can portray themselves as defenders of a particular sect and generate more instability. For example, Israeli officials have made [statements](#) expressing their readiness to protect Syria's Druze by military means, most recently conducting [warning airstrikes](#) after fighting took place near Damascus in the towns of Jaramana and Sahnaya, where many Druze are located. The main Druze social and political actors have largely [rejected such calls](#) and reaffirmed their loyalty to Syria and the country's unity. At the same time, the Turkish army has not completely ceased its threats against the Kurdish population of the northeast, despite the agreement reached between Damascus and AANES.

A second main requirement that would help widen political space in Syria is the improvement of the country's socioeconomic environment. This is especially necessary given the massive destruction from the war and the fact

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that [90 percent of the population lives below the poverty line](#). The [inability](#) of large sectors of the population to cover their essential needs, rent, electricity, school fees, and more, impedes their inclusion and participation in a reconstruction process in whose success they have a direct and objective interest.

The economic decisions of the new authorities are further impoverishing large swathes of the population and deepening underdevelopment in Syria's productive economic sectors. That is why the authorities cannot limit their discussions to businessmen and foreign actors. They must widen them to include other local social and political actors, including trade unions and peasant and professional associations. Therefore, dynamizing these organizations should be a priority, which can be done through free elections that mobilize their constituencies, as well as mobilizing the national labor force.

The revival of democratic mass labor organizations is essential for improving the living and working conditions of the population and expanding the space for political and class representation in reconstruction. In light of this, the [protests](#) in different governorates in January and February 2025 by laid-off public employees were promising, as were attempts to organize [alternative trade unions, or at least coordination structures](#). These new entities, in addition to opposing the mass layoffs, also demanded that salaries and wages be increased and [rejected the government's plans](#) to privatize state assets. However, the sectarian massacres in the coastal areas significantly reduced the potency of the protest movement, because of fears that armed groups close to the regime might react with violence.

The risk of an exclusive and elite-led reconstruction process will only reproduce social inequalities, impoverishment, a concentration of wealth in the hands of a minority, and the absence of productive development. All these elements, it should be remembered, were at the root of the popular uprising against Assad rule in 2011. Therefore, building a post-Assad transition on such foundations is bound to backfire.

What Future for Syria?

Any successor to Bashar al-Assad's regime would have faced enormous political and socioeconomic challenges. This cannot be underestimated. However, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham's political and economic predispositions have only made it more difficult to put in place the prerequisites of a successful and sustained reconstruction process during Syria's transitional phase. This has resulted in a poorer and more socially and politically fragmented society, which may bring new cycles of violence and sectarian tensions. Consequently, no economic recovery, let alone a successful reconstruction endeavor, is likely to occur. Syria is at a crossroad. If no measures are taken to bring about a more socially inclusive and democratic path, the country's agony will continue and may lead to the establishment of new authoritarian rule and forms of exclusion. This is a recipe for renewed catastrophe.

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[Source: Carnegie.](#)

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