

A low-angle photograph of a crowd celebrating with Syrian flags against a bright sun. The sun is a large, bright white circle with rays, positioned in the upper left quadrant. The crowd is silhouetted against the bright sky, with many people raising their hands and holding up Syrian flags. The flags are green, white, and red with a red star in the center. The overall mood is one of triumph and hope.

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Rethinking U.S. Engagement in Syria: Localized Peacebuilding in a Post-Aid Environment

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Cover image: Syrians celebrate on Jan. 20, 2025, after government forces retook Raqqah, Syria, from the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces. (Ahmad Hasaballah/Getty Images)

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Following the collapse of the regime of President Bashar al-Assad in December 2024, Syria entered a new phase marked by political transition but persistent humanitarian, economic, and governance challenges. As of 2026, an estimated 15.6 million people in Syria require humanitarian assistance, including more than 5.5 million internally displaced persons.¹ Reconstruction needs were estimated at \$216 billion. Although approximately 2.9 million Syrians returned to their communities in 2025, these returns have further strained already fragile infrastructure and essential public services. At the same time, reductions in U.S. foreign assistance have constrained humanitarian and stabilization efforts, underscoring the need for a more sustainable approach.

To guide Syria's transition toward U.S. interests, Washington's engagement in Syria must shift away from aid-centric models toward targeted, partnership-based, and conflict-sensitive approaches that center local ownership. Rather than relying on large-scale financial assistance, the United States can leverage diplomatic engagement, technical support, and direct partnerships with local actors to support inclusive peacebuilding. Three core recommendations will help the U.S. achieve this outcome: prioritize partnerships with historically underrepresented local actors; support grassroots initiatives that expand participation in peacebuilding; and address the structural sources of exclusion and fragmentation — including property rights, transitional justice, and inclusive governance. By adopting this approach, the United States can sustain meaningful influence in Syria's transition, even in a resource-constrained environment.

Introduction

The collapse of Bashar al-Assad's regime in late 2024 marked a historic turning point in Syria's conflict, but it did not resolve the structural conditions that fueled instability over the past 14 years. Syria's postconflict transition remains shaped by fragmented governance, economic collapse, mass displacement, unresolved political settlements, and continued tensions. While the formal end of Assad's rule created opportunities for political transformation, it also opened a fragile and uncertain transitional period in which competing actors continue to struggle over the country's future.

At the same time, the United States is recalibrating its role in Syria amid the decline of large-scale foreign assistance. For more than a decade, U.S. engagement relied heavily on humanitarian aid, stabilization programming, and governance support.² However, reductions in assistance funding and the dismantling of major U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) programs have significantly narrowed Washington's traditional mechanisms of influence. Against this backdrop, U.S. engagement should shift away from centralized, aid-driven stabilization models toward partnership-based approaches that support inclusive peacebuilding at the local level. Rather than relying primarily on large-scale reconstruction assistance, the U.S. should prioritize locally embedded civil society actors, support grassroots peacebuilding initiatives, and address structural sources of exclusion that continue to undermine long-term stability.

The United States can support inclusive peacebuilding processes in Syria despite the decline of large-scale foreign aid. Effective U.S. engagement will depend on three core priorities:

1. Prioritizing partnerships with historically unrepresented local actors
2. Supporting grassroots initiatives that expand participation
3. Addressing structural sources of exclusion and fragmentation

1 United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), "Syria Humanitarian Fund", OCHA, <https://www.unocha.org/syria-humanitarian-fund>

2 Natasha Hall and Will Todman, "Lessons Learned from a Decade of Humanitarian Operations in Syria," Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), April 22, 2021, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/lessons-learned-decade-humanitarian-operations-syria>

By adopting this approach, the United States can help support a more inclusive and locally grounded peacebuilding trajectory, even within a resource-constrained environment.

Syria remains a key geopolitical arena where regional powers — including Türkiye, Iran, the Gulf states, and Russia — continue to compete for influence over governance arrangements, territorial control, and economic reconstruction.

Analysis

The humanitarian situation underscores the fragility of the transition. As of mid-2026, approximately 15.6 million Syrians require humanitarian assistance, including more than 5.5 million internally displaced persons,³ while 4.4 million registered refugees continued to reside in neighboring countries, including Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, and Türkiye.⁴ Although the fall of the regime prompted new return movements — approximately 750,000 refugees and 1.7 million internally displaced persons returned to their areas of origin by August 2025 — these returns are occurring under deeply precarious conditions.⁵

Economic Collapse and Structural Vulnerability

Syria's economic collapse remains a central obstacle to long-term stabilization. Since 2011, the country's gross domestic product has contracted by approximately 70%, from approximately \$60 billion in 2011 to an estimated \$17.5 billion by 2022, with a gross national income per capita of \$830. By the end of 2025, more than 90% of the population lived below the poverty line.⁶ Reconstruction costs are estimated to exceed \$200 billion, far beyond the capacity of either the transitional government or international donors to finance in the near term.⁷

While the U.S. suspension of Caesar Syrian Civilian Protection Act sanctions in 2025 and the law's subsequent repeal by Congress marked significant political developments, the lifting of legal restrictions has only partially restored Syria's access to international finance systems. The Caesar Act, enacted in 2019, imposed sanctions and financial restrictions on Syrian government institutions, businesses, and individuals linked to the country's civil war and widespread human rights abuses committed during the conflict.⁸ Continued derisking policies among international banks have constrained investment and slowed recovery. As a result, economic recovery — particularly in the absence of large-scale international funding — is likely to be a long process.

Declining U.S. Assistance and the Emerging Policy Gap

The contraction of U.S. foreign assistance has significantly altered the landscape of international engagement in Syria. Historically, the United States served as Syria's largest bilateral donor, providing approximately

3 United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), "Syria Humanitarian Fund", OCHA, <https://www.unocha.org/syria-humanitarian-fund>

4 UNHCR, "Syria Emergency," UNHCR US, <https://www.unrefugees.org/emergencies/syria/>

5 International Organization for Migration (IOM), "Nearly 750,000 Displaced Syrians Have Returned to Their Places of Origin, New IOM Data Reveals," IOM, January 16, 2025. <https://www.iom.int/news/nearly-750000-displaced-syrians-have-returned-their-places-origin-new-iom-data-reveals>

6 Danish Immigration Service (DIS), Syria: Security Situation, Return and Documents (Copenhagen: Danish Immigration Service, December 2025), <https://us.dk/media/xifjzgn/rapport-syria-security-situation-return-documents-2025.pdf>

7 World Bank, "Syria's Postconflict Reconstruction Costs Estimated at \$216 Billion," World Bank, October 21, 2025, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2025/10/21/syria-s-postconflict-reconstruction-costs-estimated-at-216-billion>

8 Elliot L. Engel, "H.R. 31—Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act of 2019," 116 Cong. (2019-2020), introduced January 3, 2019. <https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/house-bill/31>

More than 600,000 people lost access to food assistance and nearly 1 million Syrians were left without water, sanitation, and hygiene support.

\$580 million in fiscal year 2024 through USAID's Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance and the State Department's Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration⁹ — supporting humanitarian relief, stabilization initiatives, governance development, and civil society capacity-building. During the first 10 years of its civil war, these programs constituted the backbone of U.S. engagement in Syria.

In total, the United States has spent more than \$12.8 billion on humanitarian assistance for the Syria response, including at least \$5.5 billion inside Syria.¹⁰ However, beginning in January 2025, the administration of U.S. President Donald Trump implemented a sweeping freeze on U.S. foreign assistance, followed by systematic contract termination. By June 30, 2025, all USAID stabilization programming in Syria had been formally terminated, with at least \$126 million in early contract cancellations.¹¹

The consequences were immediate. More than 600,000 people lost access to food assistance and nearly 1 million Syrians were left without water, sanitation, and hygiene support.¹² Additionally, over 100 health facilities in Deir ez-Zor, Hasakah, Raqqa, and Aleppo risked total closure.¹³ Furthermore, nongovernmental organizations operating in northeast Syria were forced to suspend programs, reduce staff, and absorb significant financial losses, even in cases where partial waivers were granted.¹⁴

These cuts have also weakened the Syrian civil society groups that played central roles in local stabilization and community support efforts throughout the conflict. Syrian-led groups — including feminist organizations supporting survivors of detention, grassroots women's initiatives, and organizations documenting forced disappearances — experienced collapse of critical funding streams.¹⁵ Reductions in assistance also risk undermining counter-Islamic State operations as weakened local partners diminish community-level coordination and reduce pressure on extremist networks.¹⁶

The cumulative effect of these cuts not only weakened humanitarian responses but also affected strategic U.S. priorities. U.S. leverage in Syria, long operationalized through aid relationships and partner capacity-building, has diminished at a critical moment in the country's transition. This dynamic reinforces the need for alternative forms of U.S. engagement in the absence of large-scale aid.

Governance and Inclusive Peacebuilding Challenges

The fragmentation of political authority in post-Assad Syria remains one of the greatest obstacles to durable peace. Although the Syrian Transitional Government formally governs from Damascus and has expanded its

9 Jeremy M. Sharp Syria: U.S. Relations and Bilateral Issues, Congressional Research Service, RL 33478 (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, updated, March 11, 2025). https://www.congress.gov/crs_external_products/RL/PDF/RL33487/RL33487.175.pdf

10 Natasha Hall and Will Todman, "Lessons Learned from a Decade of Humanitarian Operations in Syria," Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), April 22, 2021, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/lessons-learned-decade-humanitarian-operations-syria>

11 "USAID Humanitarian Aid Canceled," NPR, April 22, 2025, <https://www.npr.org/sections/goats-and-soda/2025/04/11/g-s1-58942/usaaid-humanitarian-aid-canceled>

12 Northwest Syria NGO Forum, "Policy Analysis: USAID Funding Freeze and Its Impact on the Humanitarian Response in Syria," February 25, 2025, <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/policy-analysis-usaid-funding-freeze-and-its-impact-humanitarian-response-syria>

13 "Syria Risks Collapse after USAID Cuts", Un Porte Per, March 10, 2025, <https://unponteper.it/en/syria-risks-collapse-with-us-cuts/>

14 Jesse Marks and Hardin, "Beyond the Fall: Rebuilding after Assad," Refugees International, May 2, 2025. <https://www.refugeesinternational.org/reports-briefs/beyond-the-fall-rebuilding-syria-after-assad/>

15 Natacha Danoun and Nour al-Omar, "US Aid Freeze Threatens Syrian Civil Society Organizations," Syria Direct, February 6, 2025, <https://syriadirect.org/us-aid-freeze-syrian-civil-society/>

16 Deborah Margolin, "U.S. Funding Cuts Risks Jeopardizing counter-Islamic State Operations," The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, June 4, 2025. <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/us-funding-cuts-risk-jeopardizing-counter-islamic-state-operations>

Armed factions with differing loyalties, varying degrees of autonomy, and external backing also continue to operate across multiple areas of Syria, complicating efforts to establish a unified political and security framework.

territorial reach since Assad's fall, governance and security arrangements remain uneven and contested across the country. In northeastern Syria, the Kurdish-led Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) has exercised de facto control over territory east of the Euphrates since 2012, administering a population of 4.5 million through its own political, security, and economic structures.¹⁷ Although President Ahmad al-Sharaa and Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) Commander Mazloum Abdi signed agreements in March 2025 to integrate the region's civilian and military institutions into the state,¹⁸ and again in January 2026 to implement a ceasefire and phased integration, the SDF continues to administer much of the northeast under a distinct governance framework.¹⁹ The extent to which these arrangements will be preserved, renegotiated, or absorbed into a centralized Syrian state remains one of the most consequential unresolved questions of the transition.

Armed factions with differing loyalties, varying degrees of autonomy, and external backing also continue to operate across multiple areas of Syria, complicating efforts to establish a unified political and security framework.

The transitional government struggled to translate its stated commitment to inclusive governance into practice.²⁰ In February 2025, it convened the National Dialogue Conference to establish a framework for Syria's political transition, but the process faced widespread criticism over its rushed organization and lack of transparency, and meaningful representation.²¹ Organizers excluded key political and regional actors, including representatives from the Kurdish-led Autonomous Administration and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), and appointed a seven-member preparatory committee whose composition reflected close ties to Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS),²² the Islamist armed group that led the offensive that overthrew the Assad government and became the dominant forces in Syria's transitional government. Although the organizers aimed to project an image of inclusivity, it failed to meet its own 20% quota for women's participation and conducted only limited consultation with civil society organizations.²³ The absence of clear procedural mechanisms, limited public consultation, and highly centralized management of the conference further deepened skepticism among Syrian civil society groups and minority communities regarding the transitional government's commitment to inclusive governance.²⁴

Communal violence has further exposed the fragility of the post-Assad order and the persistence of unresolved sectarian and political grievances. In March 2025, large-scale violence erupted in Suwayda following coordinated attacks by pro-Assad insurgents on government security forces, triggering retaliatory attacks and widespread reports of killings

17 Philip Loft, "Syria One Year After Assad: Forming an Interim Government," Research Briefing, House of Commons Library, January 22, 2026, <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-10430/>

18 Jaidaa Taha and Menna AlaaElDin, "Syria's Interim President Signs Deal with Kurdish-Led SDF to Merge Forces," Reuters, March 10, 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/syria-reaches-deal-integrate-sdf-within-state-institutions-presidency-says-2025-03-10/>

19 Maya Gebeily and Jana Choukeir, "Syrian Government, Kurds Agree Integration Deal, US Hails 'Historic Milestone,'" Reuters, January 30, 2026, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/syrian-kurdish-led-sdf-agree-ceasefire-phased-integration-deal-with-government-2026-01-30/>

20 Timor Azhari and Maya Gebeily, "Syrian Leader Sharaa Pledges to Form Inclusive Government," Reuters, January 30, 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/syrian-leader-sharaa-pledges-form-inclusive-government-2025-01-30/>

21 Ghaith AlSayed and Omar Albam, "Syrians express hope and skepticism as national dialogue conference kicks off," Associated Press, February 24, 2025, <https://apnews.com/article/syria-national-dialogue-conference-ahmad-alsharaa-c55b928eaa99b07c3f7d07284c976a5f>

22 "Al-Sharaa Forms Preparatory Committee for National Dialogue Conference," Enab Baladi, February 12, 2025, <https://english.enabbaladi.net/archives/2025/02/al-sharaa-forms-preparatory-committee-for-national-dialogue-conference/>

23 Marie Forestier, "In Landmark Syria Elections, Women Still Face Electoral Hurdles," Atlantic Council, Sept. 17, 2025, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/in-landmark-syria-elections-women-still-face-electoral-hurdles/>

24 Haid Haid, "Missteps in the Making: Syria's Dialogue Risks Failure," Al-Majalla, February 25, 2025, <https://en.majalla.com/node/324473/opinion/missteps-making-syrias-national-dialogue-risks-failure>

targeting Alawite civilians,²⁵ with about 1,500 deaths attributed to the violence. In July 2025, sectarian fighting in Suwayda — triggered by the abduction of a Druze merchant — resulted in an estimated 1,000 to 2,000 deaths and a continued security lockdown of surrounding areas.

Minority communities — including Alawites, Druze, Kurds, and Christians — continue to express concerns regarding political representation, security guarantees, and their role within Syria's emerging transitional order. Although the transitional government has publicly emphasized national unity, it has not thus far established formal constitutional protections on clear power-sharing for non-Arab and non-Sunni communities. In Syria's fragmented postconflict environment, inclusive peacebuilding is not only a normative objective but also a strategic requirement for long-term stability. Communities that remain excluded from political and security institutions are less likely to view transitional structures as legitimate and more likely to rely on sectarian, tribal, or armed networks for protection and representation.²⁶

Unresolved Political Settlements and Security Risks

Negotiations between Damascus and the SDF remain fragile. Although acting Syrian President Ahmad al-Sharaa and SDF Commander-in-Chief Mazloum Abdi signed a ceasefire agreement in January 2026, core political questions — including Kurdish administrative autonomy, resource-sharing, and security integration — remain unresolved. Governance agreements that rely on coercion rather than inclusive political settlements remain inherently unstable and increase the risk of renewed conflict.²⁷

The Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) also continues to pose a threat. U.N. monitoring reports estimate more than 5,000 foreign terrorist fighters remain in Syria.²⁸ In February 2026, U.S. forces targeted 30 suspected ISIS infrastructure and weapons storage sites in Syria with strikes, underscoring the persistence of extremist networks.²⁹ Governance vacuums, economic collapse, and communal grievances create conditions conducive to extremist resurgence.

Strategic Stakes for U.S. Engagement

Syria's transition carries significant implications for U.S. strategic interests. The country's inclusion in the U.S.-led coalition against ISIS in November 2025,³⁰ the repeal of Caesar sanctions,³¹ and the reopening of Syria's Embassy in Washington signal a broader geopolitical realignment.³²

25 Güneş Murat Tezcür, "Understanding the violence Against Alawites and Druze in Syria After Assad," The Conversation, May 15, 2025. <https://theconversation.com/understanding-the-violence-against-alawites-and-druze-in-syria-after-assad-255292>

26 Dania Arayssi and Ava Gilder, "Preventing Another Sectarian Authoritarian System in Syria," New Lines Institute for Strategy and Policy, October 2025. <https://newlinesinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/20250925c-Syria-Minorities-NLI.pdf>

27 Ellen Clarke and Emile Hokayem, "Ceasefire in Syria: A Challenging Outlook," International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), February 18, 2026. <https://www.iiiss.org/online-analysis/online-analysis/2026/02/ceasefire-in-syria-a-challenging-outlook/>

28 United Nations Security Council, Letter Dated 21 July 2025 from the Chair of the Security Council Committee Pursuant to Resolutions 1267 (1999) (2011) and 2253 (2015) Concerning Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (Da'esh), Al-Qaida and Associated Individuals, Groups, Undertakings and Entities Addressed to the President of the Security Council, S/2025/482 (New York: United Nations, July 24, 2025), United Nations Documents Archive. <https://docs.un.org/en/S/2025/482>

29 Ruchika Khanna, "U.S. conducts strikes on more than 30 Islamic State targets in Syria, military says," Reuters, February 14, 2026. <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/us-conducts-strikes-more-than-30-islamic-state-targets-syria-military-says-2026-02-14/>

30 Merissa Khurma and Giorgio Cafiero, "Syria joining the Anti-ISIS coalition is a westward pivot -- with opportunities and risks," Atlantic Council MENASource, November 21, 2025. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/syria-joining-the-anti-isis-coalition-is-a-westward-pivot-with-opportunities-and-risks/>

31 Joe Wilson, "H.R. 3941 -- Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act Repeal, 199 Cong. (2025-2026), introduced June 12, 2025. <https://www.congress.gov/bills/119th/congress/house-bill/3941>

32 Matthew Lee, "U.S. Makes Pivot to Reopen Embassy in Syria After 14 Years," Associated Press, February 20, 2026. <https://apnews.com/article/us-syria-embassy-c181137690b846f49c2af0028f18ec50>

Regional spillover risks further heighten the stakes of Syria's transition. Continued instability in Syria places significant political, economic, and security pressures on neighboring states, particularly Lebanon, Jordan, and Türkiye.³³ Lebanon and Jordan continue to face mounting economic and social strains associated with hosting large Syrian refugee populations, while Türkiye remains heavily invested in developments in northern Syria due to concerns surrounding border security, migration, and Kurdish armed groups.³⁴

U.S. Credibility in Question

Questions of U.S. credibility shape the broader strategic context. A pattern of abrupt disengagement — from the 2021 withdrawal from Afghanistan to the sweeping termination of USAID programming globally in 2025 and significant reductions in security assistance to partners — has reinforced perceptions among regional actors that U.S. commitments carry declining assurance value.

Its withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021 continues to influence regional perceptions of U.S. reliability and long-term commitment to its partners. More recently, the reductions in foreign assistance and the growing uncertainty surrounding long-term support for Ukraine have reinforced broader concerns among allies and regional actors regarding the consistency of U.S. engagement abroad.

In Syria, declining stabilization assistance and uncertainty regarding the future scope of U.S. involvement have intensified perceptions of strategic retrenchment at a particularly fragile moment in the country's transition. A significant reduction in U.S. engagement could create additional opportunities for competing regional and international powers to expand their influence while deepening doubts regarding Washington's long-term role in the region.

The Path Forward

After more than 13 years of devastating civil war that killed an estimated half-million people, displaced more than half of Syria's prewar population of 22 million, and systematically dismantled the country's social, institutional, and physical infrastructure, the question confronting U.S. policymakers is not simply whether to engage in ways that advance the conditions for durable peace, but how and with whom.³⁵

The transitional government has thus far governed through a model that echoes HTS's prior administrative approach in northwestern Syria:³⁶ consulting local notables, religious leaders, and tribal sheikhs while consolidating executive authority with limited transparency and weak checks on power. Without deliberate external pressure and principled partnership, these arrangements risk becoming permanent features of a new Syrian authoritarianism rather than a genuine transition to inclusive governance.

Decades of peacebuilding scholarship, and the specific lessons of Syria's own civil war experience, converge on a fundamental principle: Durable

33 Marvin G. Weinbaum and Naadel Ali, "US Disengagement and New Regional Security Dynamics in Afghanistan's Neighborhood," Middle East Institute, February 28, 2025, <https://mei.edu/publication/us-disengagement-and-new-regional-security-dynamics-afghanistans-neighborhood/>

34 Mohamad Fawz, "The New Struggle for Syria," Dian, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, November 7, 2025, <https://carnegieendowment.org/middle-east/diwan/2025/11/the-new-struggle-for-syria>

35 Christopher M. Blanchard, "Syria: Transition and U.S. Policy," Congressional Research Service, RL33487, September 5, 2025, https://www.congress.gov/crs_external_products/RL/PDF/RL33487/RL33487.174.pdf

36 Lyall and Hanci, "The Way Ahead for Governance in Syria: Imperatives for Domestic Policy and International Engagement," TRENDS Research & Advisory, July 24, 2025, <https://trendsresearch.org/insight/the-way-ahead-for-governance-in-syria-imperatives-for-domestic-policy-and-international-engagement/>



A resident of Homs, Syria, surveys the wartime destruction from the window of her damaged apartment on Feb. 10, 2025. The cost for Syrian reconstruction is estimated at more than \$200 billion. (Louai Beshara/AFP via Getty Images)

peace cannot be imported from the outside or constructed from the top down. Institutions perceived as imposed — however technically sophisticated or amply resourced — fail to generate the legitimacy, voluntary compliance, and broad-based investment that sustained peace requires.³⁷

Aid can improve the perceived authority of local governing institutions, but only when those institutions are organically embedded in the communities they govern rather than identified as vehicles for external political agendas.³⁸ Governance structures built on elite consensus that excludes women, youth, minorities, and the rural poor reproduce the political economy of marginalization that fueled Syria's uprising in the first place.³⁹ Instead, the

37 Marcus Cox, *State Building and Post-Conflict Reconstruction: Lessons from Bosnia* (Geneva: CASIN, January 2001), https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/102385/2001_01_State_Building_and_Post-Conflict_Reconstruction.pdf.

38 Carnegie et al., "Effects of Foreign Aid on Rebel Governance." https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3351392

39 Bilal Mahli, Policy Brief PB-22/25 (Policy Center for the New South, April 2025), [https://www.policycenter.ma/sites/default/files/2025-04/PB-22-25_\(Bilal_Mahli\).pdf](https://www.policycenter.ma/sites/default/files/2025-04/PB-22-25_(Bilal_Mahli).pdf).

United States and its international partners should prioritize partnerships with historically underrepresented local actors, support grassroots participatory peacebuilding initiatives, and address the structural conditions of exclusion and fragmentation that render peace fragile.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations constitute a coherent framework for U.S. engagement in Syria's transitional moment:

- **Redirect U.S. assistance** away from large, centralized implementing partners toward locally embedded, Syrian-led civil society organizations — with direct, multiyear funding and genuine decision-making authority over program design.
- **Condition reconstruction assistance and further sanctions relief** on verifiable transitional government commitments to gender quotas in consultative processes, minority inclusion in governance structures, and adoption of a property rights reform framework.
- **Fund community-based** dispute resolution, transitional justice documentation, and survivor-led truth-telling initiatives that operate outside formal state channels and explicitly require women's participation.
- **Embed explicit peacebuilding objectives** across all U.S. humanitarian and development programming, using community-level delivery models and intercommunal outcome indicators alongside standard humanitarian measures.
- **Address structural drivers of fragmentation** (property rights expropriation, civil documentation gaps, sectarian political economy, and exclusion from constitutional consultations) through targeted diplomatic leverage and technical programming.
- **Invest in the long-term social infrastructure of peace** through peace education curricula, arts-based peacebuilding, and support for independent Syrian media organizations capable of reporting equitably across communal lines.

Prioritize Partnerships with Historically Underrepresented Local Actors

Historically, the most underrepresented communities in Syrian political and economic institutions have been Sunni Arab rural populations — who constitute the majority of the country — and Kurds, who faced systematic political exclusion, denial of citizenship, and cultural suppression under Baathist rule. Women across all communities, alongside religious minorities navigating the post-Assad power transition, also face distinct representation deficits that U.S. programming must actively address.

Reorient U.S. Aid Architecture Toward Locally Embedded Civil Society

The history of U.S. programming in Syria's civil war offers instructive evidence about the conditions under which external support strengthens rather than undermines local governance. Research drawing on USAID's Office of Transitional Initiatives program — which disbursed \$17.58 million in support to local councils and civil society organizations in opposition-held Syria between 2013 and 2016 — found a positive and statistically significant relationship between aid and popular perceptions of local governing institutions, but only in communities where those institutions were organically embedded in local political and social life.⁴⁰ In communities where governing bodies were perceived as externally imposed — most

40 Carnegie et al., "Effects of Foreign Aid on Rebel Governance."

starkly in areas controlled by the Islamic State — increased aid flows had the perverse effect of deepening hostility toward those institutions, effectively amplifying an unwelcome political presence.⁴¹ The policy implication is clear: The source of an institution's authority in the eyes of the community it governs matters as much as its technical capacity or resource base.

Local coordination committees and grassroots civil society networks emerged spontaneously in Syria beginning in 2011,⁴² performing documentation, governance, service delivery, and humanitarian functions that preceded systematic international engagement by many months. These structures represented an organic civic capacity generated by the uprising itself,⁴³ a capacity that the conflict subsequently battered through militarization, sectarian instrumentalization, and the attrition of frontline civic actors to violence, detention, and exile.

In the transitional moment of 2025 and beyond, reconstructing and supporting this distributed civil society architecture is not merely a programmatic preference but a strategic imperative.⁴⁴ USAID, in coordination with congressional appropriators, must resist the institutional pull toward routing assistance primarily through centralized transitional government channels — whose accountability mechanisms remain nascent — and instead prioritize direct, flexible, and multiyear support for organizations operating at the sub-governmental level.

Congressional appropriators should reform the operational and procurement architecture of U.S. foreign assistance to Syria. Current eligibility criteria, compliance requirements, and financial management standards disproportionately favor large international NGOs over small, Syrian-led organizations with deeper community relationships and greater contextual knowledge but fewer institutional resources.⁴⁵ Localization of aid architecture — extending not only to the nationality of implementing partners but also to the locus of decision-making authority over program design, targeting, and evaluation — should be adopted as a binding operational principle rather than an aspirational goal. This approach is consistent with the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness, which calls for ownership, alignment, and mutual accountability as the foundational principles of development assistance, and with the growing body of evidence that community-level initiatives with distributed credit attribution and locally determined priorities are significantly more peacebuilding-amenable than centralized, externally-designed programs.⁴⁶

Center Women in Political Processes and Programming

One of the most significant risks in Syria's current transitional moment⁴⁷ is the marginalization of women from the institutions and processes that

41 Allison Carnegie, Kimberly Howe, Adam Lichtenheld, and Dipali Mukhopadhyay, "The Effects of Foreign Aid on Rebel Governance: Evidence from a Large-Scale U.S. Aid Program in Syria," *Economics & Politics* 34, no. 1 (2022): 41–66, <https://doi.org/10.1111/ecpo.12178>.

42 Doreen Khoury, "Losing the Syrian Grassroots: Local Governance Structures Urgently Need Support," SWP Comment 2013/C 09 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, February 2013), https://www.swp-berlin.org/publications/products/comments/2013C09_kou.pdf.

43 Friederike Stolleis, "The Crushing of Syria's Civil Actors," SWP Comment 2016/C 55 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, December 2016), https://www.swp-berlin.org/publications/products/comments/2016C55_bkp_stolleis.pdf.

44 Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies (CIHRS), "Syria's Transition Hangs in the Balance: CIHRS Report on Civil Society's Struggle for a Voice" (Cairo: CIHRS, 2025), <https://cihrs.org/syrias-transition-hangs-in-the-balance-cihrs-report-on-civil-societys-struggle-for-a-voice/>; International IDEA, "Syria at a Crossroads: Enhancing Inclusiveness in a Highly Centralized Political Transition" (Stockholm: International IDEA, 2025), <https://www.idea.int/publications/catalogue/html/syriacrossroads-enhancing-inclusiveness-highly-centralizedpolitical>.

45 Rana B. Khoury and Emily Scott, "Going Local without Localization: Power and Humanitarian Response in the Syrian War," *World Development* 174 (February 2024): 106468, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2023.106468>.

46 AlGhatrif et al., "Power Dynamics and Health Initiative Design as Determinants of Peacebuilding: A Case Study of the Syrian Conflict."

47 Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF), "New Faces, Old Barriers: Women Locked Out of Syria's Transition" (Geneva: WILPF, November 18, 2025), <https://www.wilpf.org/new-faces-old-barrierswomen-locked-out-of-syrias-transition/>.

One of the most significant risks in Syria's current transitional moment is the marginalization of women from the institutions and processes that will shape the country's political future.

will shape the country's political future. While the transitional government has avoided imposing the most visible restrictions on women's mobility and dress that many feared when HTS consolidated power in December 2024, no women have been appointed to senior ministerial positions, and women's voices are largely absent from the core decision-making bodies overseeing the constitutional consultations and governance reform process.⁴⁸ This is not a marginal issue. The empirical evidence⁴⁹ on inclusive peace processes is robust: Settlements and governance arrangements that substantively incorporate women's perspectives are more likely⁵⁰ to be durable, more comprehensive in their treatment of civilian security concerns, and more likely to generate the broad popular legitimacy that postconflict political institutions require.

International Alert's⁵¹ analysis of women's political participation in postconflict governance identifies the period immediately following a regime transition as a structurally significant opportunity to institutionalize women's political roles before new gender hierarchies consolidate around emerging power arrangements. Women's increased political participation matters not only because representation is a principle of justice, but also because women typically bring alternative perspectives and approaches to policymaking, represent constituencies whose concerns are otherwise systematically underweighted, and can in some cases more easily represent other women in political processes that are otherwise male dominated. Postconflict reform of political institutions, therefore, provides an important opportunity to guarantee more inclusive and representative outcomes — an opportunity that historical experience suggests is fleeting.

The State Department, using reconstruction assistance and sanctions relief as diplomatic leverage, should press the transitional government to adopt concrete measures advancing women's political inclusion. These should include, at minimum: the adoption of gender quotas or reserved representation in any consultative or constituent assembly processes; dedicated and flexible funding streams for women-led Syrian civil society organizations; the mandatory inclusion of women's organizations in the national dialogue process launched by al-Sharaa in February 2025⁵²; and the development of gender-sensitive indicators for measuring progress toward inclusive governance in all U.S.-funded programming. Youth organizations similarly warrant dedicated partnership, both because younger Syrians represent the generation most directly shaped by the conflict's trauma and because they embody the constituency most invested in building a durable future for the country.⁵³

Engage Ethnic and Religious Minorities as Peacebuilding Partners

Syria's religious and ethnic pluralism — encompassing Sunni Arabs, Kurds, Alawites, Christians, Druze, Ismailis, and other communities — was not merely a demographic fact but a complex social reality that Assad's regime systematically distorted through deliberate strategies of divide and control.⁵⁴ Sectarianism in Syria was not primordial but manufactured: The regime instrumentalized communal identities to bind minority

48 Hatahet, "What Will Minority and Women's Rights Look Like in the New Syria?"

49 Jana Krause, Werner Krause, and Pija Bränfors, "Women's Participation in Peace Negotiations and the Durability of Peace," *International Interactions* 44, no. 6 (2018): 985–1016, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03050629.2018.1492386>

50 Agathe Christien and Jeni Klugman, *Advancing Women's Participation in Postconflict Reconstruction* (Washington, DC: Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security, 2020), <https://giwps.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Advancing-Womens-Participation-in-PostconflictReconstruction.pdf>.

51 Ibid.

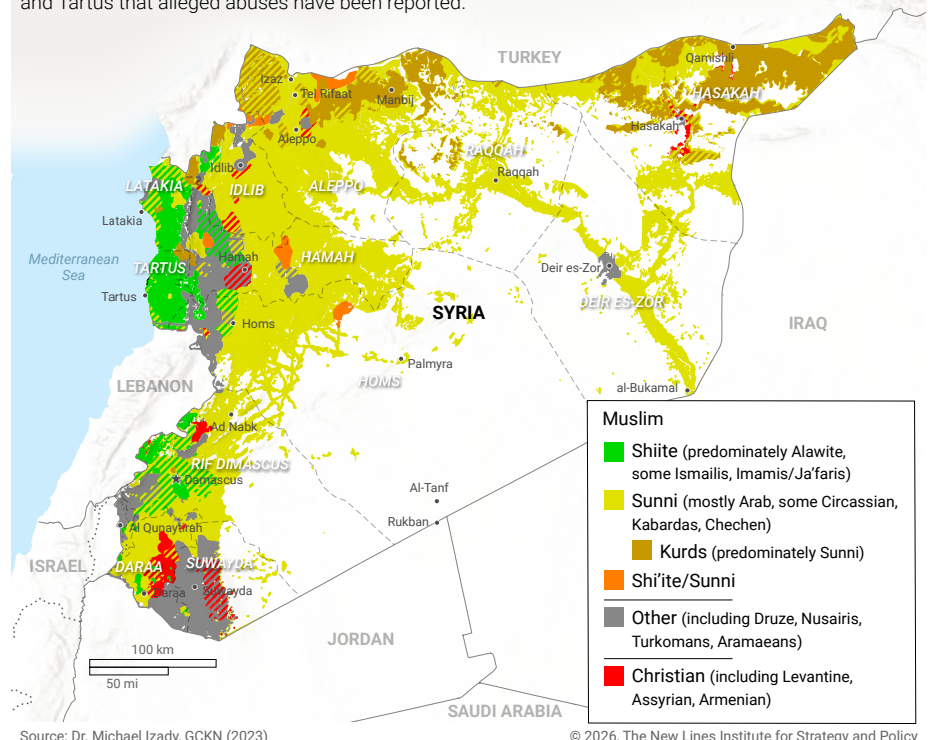
52 Danae Askar, "Syria in Transition Series," *Just Security*, March 24, 2026, <https://www.justsecurity.org/134688/syria-in-transition-series/>.

53 Arab Reform Initiative, *Assessing What Meaningful Syrian Youth Inclusion in Peacebuilding Looks Like in Practice: Policy Dialogue Report* (Arab Reform Initiative, November 2021), <https://www.arab-reform.net/publication/assessing-what-meaningful-syrian-youth-inclusion-in-peacebuilding-looks-like-in-practice-policy-dialogue-report/>.

54 Christopher Phillips, "Sectarianism and Conflict in Syria," *Third World Quarterly* 36, no. 2 (2015): 357–376.

Religious Makeup of Syria

Since the fall of the Assad regime, the interim government and its affiliated militias have led clearing operations in Syria's northwest coastal region. It is within the Alawite-majority governorates of Latakia and Tartus that alleged abuses have been reported.



communities to its survival through manufactured fear of majoritarian rule while simultaneously framing opposition movements in terms that denied their cross-sectarian character. The conflict deepened these identity cleavages as communities mobilized for survival along communal lines, as armed groups organized around sectarian affiliations, and as displacement produced ethnically and religiously homogeneous enclaves where mixed communities had once existed.

The transitional moment has thus far produced disturbing signals for Syria's minorities. Reports from the United Nations Commission of Inquiry document incidents of abduction, arbitrary detention, and sexual violence targeting minority community members — particularly Kurds in the northeast and Alawites in coastal areas — since the transitional government assumed power.⁵⁵ These incidents, if left unaddressed, risk entrenching a new cycle of sectarian grievance that would undermine the transition's legitimacy. At the same time, the comparative lessons^{56,57} from other postconflict contexts are cautionary: Where international actors conditioned engagement primarily on formal minority protection commitments rather than verifiable behavioral change, those commitments frequently remained rhetorical rather than substantive.

The State Department, through bilateral engagement with the Syrian Transitional Government, should establish clear and verifiable benchmarks tied to reconstruction assistance and sanctions relief for the transitional

55 Sinan Hatahet, "What Will Minority and Women's Rights Look Like in the New Syria?" Atlantic Council MENASource, December 20, 2024, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/syria-minority-and-womens-rights/>.

56 Cox, State Building and Post-Conflict Reconstruction.

57 Jelena Subotić, *Hijacked Justice: Dealing with the Past in the Former Yugoslavia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009); Balkan Insight, "Bosnia's Transitional Justice Strategy: Casualty of Post-War Divisions," July 13, 2021, <https://balkaninsight.com/2021/07/13/bosnia-transitional-justice-strategy-casualty-of-post-war-divisions/>.

government's protection of minority communities and their inclusion in governance structures. Beyond conditionality, U.S. programming should fund community-level dialogue and joint service-delivery initiatives that bring members of different sectarian and ethnic communities into cooperative relationships around shared practical needs — water management, market integration, local security, and health access — rather than identity-based political frameworks that tend to reinforce the very divisions they seek to bridge. Research on peacebuilding health initiatives in Syria demonstrates that community-level programs with local organizational leadership, distributed credit attribution across stakeholders, and service-dependent rather than material-dependent programming are significantly more resistant to cooptation by political actors and more likely to produce genuine intercommunal trust.

This approach carries the risk that programming perceived as disproportionately benefiting minority communities can fuel majoritarian resentment and deepen sectarian division. The lesson from postconflict programming in Iraq and Bosnia is that minority-targeted engagement must be embedded within a broader framework of equitable service delivery and community-level intergroup cooperation — not implemented as a parallel track that signals differential treatment. U.S. programming should therefore prioritize cross-community initiatives that distribute benefits visibly across sectarian lines, even when the primary objective is minority protection.

Support Grassroots Initiatives that Expand Participation in Peacebuilding

Invest in Community-Based Dispute Resolution and Local Justice Mechanisms

In the absence of a functioning national judiciary — and given the profound delegitimization of the Assad-era court system as an instrument of political repression — Syria's communities have long relied on a range of informal and customary dispute resolution mechanisms to maintain social order and manage conflict. These responses to state incapacity and distrust provide stability and legitimacy precisely because they derive their authority from community consent rather than coercive state power. Research on community-based dispute resolution processes in Kabul — a context sharing key features with Syria's urban environments — demonstrates that the greatest strength of such systems lies in their adaptability and their rootedness in locally shared understandings of justice and social cohesion.⁵⁸

These informal mechanisms function best⁵⁹ not as substitutes for formal legal institutions but as components of a plural legal system in which each tier handles the types of disputes in which it holds a comparative legitimacy advantage, and in which state- and community-level actors mutually reinforce each other's authority. The U.S. government and its implementing partners should fund capacity-building initiatives supporting Syrian community mediation networks, local reconciliation bodies, and tribal conflict resolution processes — particularly in areas where the transitional government's administrative reach remains limited — while simultaneously working with transitional authorities to develop formal legal frameworks

58 Rebecca Gang, *Community-Based Dispute Resolution Processes in Kabul City* (Kabul: Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, March 2011).

59 Deborah Isser, ed., *Customary Justice and the Rule of Law in War-Torn Societies* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2011); Syrians for Truth and Justice (STJ), "Syria: Alternative Committees for Property and Personal Status Disputes," 2022, <https://stj-sy.org/en/syria-alternative-committees-for-property-and-personal-status-disputes-response-topower-vacuum-or-judiciary-marginalization/>.

Trials, truth commissions, reparations programs, and community-level truth-telling processes each serve different dimensions of the accountability imperative — deterrence, acknowledgment, restoration, and trust-building.

that recognize, regulate, and hold accountable such community-level mechanisms.

These programs must address gender equity within community resolution processes as a nonnegotiable design element. Customary dispute resolution systems in many contexts systematically subordinate the rights and voices of women to communal harmony norms, producing outcomes that may resolve community-level conflict in the short term but entrench structural injustice against women over the long term. Research shows that women's access to dispute resolution processes is a key dimension of their broader political participation and that international support for community-level justice mechanisms must include explicit provisions for women's agency within those processes. Hybrid models that combine the speed, cultural resonance, and social capital of community-based processes with the rights-protection functions of formal law represent the most promising pathway to a legitimate and inclusive justice architecture in Syria.⁶⁰

Fund Inclusive, Community-Driven Transitional Justice

The transitional government's issuance of Decree No. 20 in May 2025,⁶¹ establishing a National Commission for Transitional Justice (NCTJ) to “uncover the truth about grave violations caused by the defunct regime,” represents a meaningful, if structurally limited, step toward accountability. Notably, the NCTJ's current mandate excludes crimes committed by HTS, ISIS, Turkish-backed militias, and other non-Assad actors, raising questions about whether the commission will function as a genuine truth-seeking body or as a political instrument for validating the transitional government's narrative.⁶² The establishment of a separate National Commission for the Missing represents an additional important institutional commitment, though its operational capacity and independence remain to be demonstrated.

The scholarly and practitioner literature on transitional justice is unequivocal that the sequencing, design, and inclusiveness of accountability mechanisms profoundly determine their legitimacy and their actual contribution to reconciliation. Trials, truth commissions, reparations programs, and community-level truth-telling processes each serve different dimensions of the accountability imperative — deterrence, acknowledgment, restoration, and trust-building.⁶³ Syrian civil society organizations, academics, artists, and survivors have consistently articulated⁶⁴ a vision of transitional justice that centers their voices, creates spaces for testimony and mourning, and refuses to subordinate truth to political convenience. These voices should be the starting point of U.S. policy engagement with the transitional justice process.

The State Department's Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor should provide financial support, and U.S. diplomats should press multilaterally, for Syrian civil society organizations conducting independent

⁶⁰ Cox, State Building and Post-Conflict Reconstruction.

⁶¹ International Center for Transitional Justice (ICTJ), “ICTJ Welcomes Establishment of Syria's New National Commissions for Transitional Justice and the Missing,” May 2025, <https://www.ictj.org/latest-news/ictjwelcomes-establishment-syrias-new-national-commissions-transitional-justice-and-the-missing>; Human Rights Watch, “Syria's Transitional Justice Commission: A Missed Opportunity for Victim-Led Justice,” May 19, 2025, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/05/19/syriatransitional-justice-commission-missed-opportunity-victim-led-justice>.

⁶² Roger Lu Phillips, “Syria Embarks on a Transitional Justice Project,” International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, September 1, 2025, <https://icct.nl/publication/syria-embarks-transitional-justice-project>.

⁶³ Lianna Leung, “Trials, Truth, and Trust: A Model for Transitional Justice in Post-War Syria,” Stanford Journal of International Affairs, July 2025.

⁶⁴ Syrians for Truth and Justice (STJ), “Selective and Discriminatory: How Decree No. 20/2025 Failed to Deliver a Comprehensive Approach to Transitional Justice in Syria,” 2025, <https://stj-sy.org/en/selectiveand-discriminatory-how-decree-no-20-2025-failed-to-deliver-a-comprehensive-approach-to-transitional-justice-in-syria/>; Commission for International Justice and Accountability (CIJA), Syria documentation, 2024–2025, <https://www.cija.co/>.

documentation of human rights violations — particularly organizations led by women and by members of minority communities — and should press diplomatically for the expansion of the NCTJ's mandate to cover the full range of atrocities committed during the conflict by all parties. Programming should support the development of community-level documentation initiatives, oral history archives, and memorial spaces that create institutional forms of acknowledgment and witnessing outside formal state processes. Reparations and victim recognition programs, even at modest scale, carry significant symbolic weight: For many survivors, acknowledgment of their suffering by a legitimate authority constitutes a meaningful form of justice in its own right and builds the foundation of trust on which more demanding accountability processes depend.

The Bosnian experience offers cautionary comparative lessons.⁶⁵ When transitional justice institutions are perceived as serving the interests of victorious factions rather than the universal principles of justice, they deepen rather than heal social divisions, generating resentment that persists across generations. Syria must avoid a process in which accountability for regime crimes is pursued selectively while the crimes of other actors are systematically shielded from scrutiny. The United States, drawing on its significant diplomatic leverage in the transitional moment, should insist on the establishment of independent oversight mechanisms involving international legal experts and Syrian civil society representatives for the NCTJ's operations.

Support Peace Education

Decades of Baathist educational indoctrination,⁶⁶ followed by the exposure of an entire generation to mass violence, forced displacement, and intercommunal fragmentation, have produced a crisis of social trust and civic identity in Syria that cannot be addressed by institutional and political reforms alone. Postconflict societies are often scarred by deep-rooted divisions, mistrust, and collective trauma whose transformation requires sustained investment⁶⁷ in the cultural and psychological preconditions of peace — investment that is typically chronically underfunded relative to physical reconstruction and security sector reform.

Research on peace education programs implemented⁶⁸ in postconflict contexts including Afghanistan, Liberia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina demonstrates that when curricula are carefully adapted to local historical and cultural contexts, incorporate indigenous conflict resolution practices, and are implemented with strong community and teacher buy-in, peace education can meaningfully contribute to rebuilding social cohesion, promoting reconciliation and equipping younger generations with the skills and dispositions for nonviolent conflict resolution.

The U.S. government should fund Syrian civil society organizations and educational institutions in the development and implementation of peace education curricula adapted to Syria's specific conflict histories and reconciliation needs. These curricula should prioritize dialogical, participatory learning approaches — grounded in critical pedagogy and transformative learning theory — that create space for students from

65 Subotić, *Hijacked Justice*.

66 Maria Kastrinou and Olaf Corry, "Syria's New Textbooks: The Schooling of Ba'athism," *Middle East Eye*, 2018, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/opinion/syrias-newtextbooks-schooling-baathism>; Human Rights Watch, *A Wasted Decade: Human Rights in Syria during Bashar al-Asad's First Ten Years in Power* (New York: HRW, 2010), <https://www.hrw.org/report/2010/07/16/wasteddecade/human-rights-syria-during-bashar-al-asads-firstten-years-power>.

67 Mario Novelli, Mieke T.A. Lopes Cardozo, and Alan Smith, "A Theoretical Framework for Analysing the Contribution of Education to Sustainable Peacebuilding: 4Rs in Conflict-Affected Contexts," *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education* 47, no. 2 (2017): 137–150.

68 Dana Burde, *Schools for Conflict or for Peace in Afghanistan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014); UNICEF, *The Role of Education in Peacebuilding: A Synthesis Report of Findings from Lebanon, Nepal and Sierra Leone* (New York: UNICEF, 2011), https://www.unicef.org/publications/files/Role_of_Education_in_Peacebuilding_Synthesis_Report.pdf.

different communal backgrounds to hear, acknowledge, and engage with each other's experiences rather than imposing a single nationalist narrative of the conflict. Programs should specifically target youth, incorporate gender equality as a cross-cutting theme, and be designed for delivery in both formal educational settings and community-based nonformal learning environments — recognizing that Syria's displacement crisis has severely disrupted formal schooling for millions of children.⁶⁹

Intergroup dialogue programs, storytelling initiatives, and arts-based peacebuilding also deserve targeted investment. Syrian civil society has produced a remarkable body of documentary film, theater, visual art, and literary work that bears witness to the conflict's violence and complexity and constituting a form of collective truth-telling that formal institutions struggle to replicate. International support for Syrian artists, journalists, and community storytellers working across communal lines can strengthen the social infrastructure of peace in ways that complement more formal programmatic interventions.⁷⁰ Investing in independent Syrian media capable of reporting on the transitional period with accuracy, contextual sensitivity, and accountability to diverse communities is equally essential for sustaining the civic pluralism that durable peace requires.

Leverage the Humanitarian-Development-Peace Nexus

The intersection of humanitarian assistance, development programming, and peacebuilding represents one of the most consequential and most persistently neglected opportunities in the Syrian context. Research on health-sector peacebuilding in Syria⁷¹ demonstrates compellingly that the design features of a humanitarian or development intervention — not merely its technical sector — determine whether it contributes to or undermines peacebuilding outcomes.⁷²

Interventions at the state-citizen level that rely on large-scale international funding and centralized governance structures and award credit primarily to politically connected agencies are significantly more conflict-prone⁷³ than those operating at the community level with smaller budgets, local organizational leadership, distributed credit attribution, and a focus on service-dependent rather than material-dependent programming. The U.S. government should redesign its humanitarian and development programming in Syria to embed explicit peacebuilding objectives in program design rather than treating peacebuilding as an add-on or a separate portfolio.

This means disaggregating aid to the community level wherever operationally feasible, investing in the capacity of local organizations rather than defaulting to large international implementing partners, and developing monitoring frameworks that track peacebuilding indicators — changes in intercommunal attitudes, the establishment of cross-community coordination mechanisms, the reduction of localized conflict incidents — alongside standard humanitarian outcome measures. The U.N. Peacebuilding Commission's frameworks for local peacebuilding coordination offer a template for the multi-actor alignment mechanisms

69 UNICEF, Syria: Every Day Counts — Cost of Not Investing in Education (New York: UNICEF, June 2023), <https://www.unicef.org/syria/media/13381/file/Syria-Every-day-counts-Cost-of-not-investing-in-EducationBRIEF-June-2023-English.pdf>.

70 Antonia Does, "Inclusivity and Local Perspectives in Peacebuilding: Issues, Lessons, Challenges," Policy Paper 08 (Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation, July 2013).

71 Majd AlGhatrif, Mohammad Darwish, Zedoun Alzoubi, and Yusra Ribhi Shawar, "Power Dynamics and Health Initiative Design as Determinants of Peacebuilding: A Case Study of the Syrian Conflict," *BMJ Global Health* 7, Supplement 8 (October 2022): e007745, <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjgh-2021-007745>.

72 Majd AlGhatrif, Mohammad Darwish, Zedoun, and Yusra Ribhi Shawar, "Power Dynamics and Health Initiative Design as Determinants of Peacebuilding: A Case Study of the Syrian Conflict," *BMJ Global Health*, 9 October 2022, <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjgh-2021-007745>.

73 Ibid.

Regime forces systematically destroyed civil registries — the physical infrastructure of property claims and civil identity — during the conflict.

that can help orient humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding programming around shared long-term objectives rather than separate institutional mandates.⁷⁴

Address Structural Sources of Exclusion and Fragmentation

Advance Property Rights Reform and Documentation for Displaced Populations

Among the most consequential structural legacies of the Syrian civil conflict — and among the least addressed in international policy discussions — is the systematic destruction of Syria's legal and documentary infrastructure of property rights. A series of legislative and administrative measures implemented by the Assad regime during the conflict expropriated property from opposition supporters, displaced persons, and communities in areas targeted for “urban redevelopment.” The Anti-Terrorism Act of 2012⁷⁵ provided the legal basis for freezing the assets of those designated as terrorists — a designation applied to individuals who had merely attended demonstrations or distributed humanitarian aid. Decree 66 of 2012 established the legal framework for forced relocation of populations under the guise of planning, while Law 10 of 2018 expanded this framework by creating reconstruction zones in which property owners were required to appear in person within 30 days to register their claims — a requirement that was effectively impossible for the nearly 11 million displaced Syrians.⁷⁶

The documentary dimensions of the crisis compound the legal barriers. Regime forces systematically destroyed civil registries — the physical infrastructure of property claims and civil identity — during the conflict,⁷⁷ particularly in opposition strongholds in Homs, Damascus, Aleppo, and Daraa. A study⁷⁸ of Syrian refugee households found that 70% of refugees claimed property held in a family member's name, only 17% possessed property documents when they fled, and the large majority lacked the civil documentation — birth certificates, marriage certificates, national identity cards — necessary to establish legal identity as a prerequisite to property claims. These barriers fall with particular severity on women, for whom marriage certificates are often the only documentation of their relationship to family assets and who face additional legal vulnerabilities under Syrian personal status law when those documents have been confiscated, destroyed, or never issued.

For Syria's estimated 4.4 million refugees in neighboring countries and beyond, and for the 5.5 million internally displaced, return cannot be meaningful without legal security over the homes and land they left behind. Research on refugee return and reintegration in Syria demonstrates that sustainable return requires not only political guarantees against persecution but also the practical possibility of recovering the material foundation of pre-displacement life.⁷⁹ Barriers under the current

74 Does, “Inclusivity and Local Perspectives in Peacebuilding.”

75 Syrian Arab Republic, Anti-Terrorism Act No. 19 of 2012; see also Amnesty International, “Syria's Anti-Terrorism Law Paving the Way to More Repression,” July 2012, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/press-releases/2012/07/syrias-anti-terrorism-law-paving-way-more-repression/>.

76 Rana Al-Hassan and Omar Khaled Mansour, “Law, Conflict, and Property Dispossession in Syria: Legal Barriers to Restitution and Post-War Return,” *Restitution Law Review* 34, no. 1 (2026): 29–45, <https://restitutionlawreview.co.uk/index.php/r/r/article/view/215>.

77 Alaa Alsamir, Arta Korabi, Rasha Jalabi, Mohamad Khan, and Dolf te Lintel, “Land Registry in Syria after a Decade of Conflict: A Tale of Three Cities,” *Journal of International Development* 35, no. 8 (2023): 2667–2685, <https://doi.org/10.1002/jid.3792>; Human Rights Watch, “Syria: Government Stealing Opponents' Land,” April 8, 2021, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/04/08/syriagovernment-stealing-opponents-land>.

78 Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), *Legal Identity and Housing, Land and Property Rights of Syrian Refugees from a Durable Solutions Perspective: Challenges and Opportunities* (Oslo: NRC, 2016), <https://www.nrc.no/resources/reports/legal-identity-hlprights-syrian-refugees-from-durable-solutionsperspective/>; UNHCR and Norwegian Refugee Council, *Uncertain Futures: Legal and Civil Documentation, Housing, Land and Property (HLP) and Challenges to Return for Syrian Refugees* (2019).

79 World Bank and UNHCR Joint Data Center on Forced Displacement, “*Understanding Refugee Return: Key Findings, Gaps, and Future Research*,” November 2024, <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/1130447>.

legal and documentary situation foreclose that possibility for a large proportion of the displaced population. Without serious legal reform and the establishment of credible, accessible restitution mechanisms, the displacement of millions of Syrians will become permanent, entrenching the demographic restructuring that the Assad regime pursued and eroding the prospect of a genuinely representative postconflict Syria.⁸⁰

Counter Sectarianism Through Political Economy Reform

Addressing the structural drivers of sectarianism established under Assad requires interventions that tackle the political economy of exclusion. In Syria as in Bosnia after the Dayton Agreement, postconflict political arrangements have generated vested interests in the perpetuation of communal fragmentation. Power brokers who derived their authority from controlling patronage networks organized along communal or factional lines have little incentive to support the development of inclusive institutions that would subject their authority to genuine democratic accountability.⁸¹

The United States must design its support for Syrian governance reform with explicit attention to disrupting these incentive structures. Anticorruption frameworks, decentralization policies that devolve genuine resources and decision-making authority to local communities rather than to intermediate power brokers, and transparent procurement and public finance management systems that limit elite rent-extraction are essential structural components of a governance agenda that takes the political economy of fragmentation seriously. Economic development programming should adopt an explicit equity lens, directing investment to communities and regions that were historically marginalized under Baathist economic policy — rural peripheries, predominantly Kurdish and Druze areas, working-class urban peripheries — as a structural peacebuilding measure. Small and medium enterprise development, agricultural rehabilitation, and infrastructure reconstruction in these areas would address legitimate material grievances that, unaddressed, will provide fertile ground for continued radicalization and communal competition.^{82,83}

Economic interdependence across communal lines is itself a peacebuilding resource. Programming that creates cross-communal market relationships, joint infrastructure projects, and shared economic institutions can generate the material foundations for social trust that purely political or symbolic initiatives often fail to sustain. The Global Partnership on Peacebuilding's frameworks for integrating peacebuilding objectives into development programming offer practical guidance on embedding these objectives across sectors rather than treating them as a separate portfolio.

Support Inclusive Transitional Institutions and Democratic Accountability

The constitutional declaration issued by the transitional government in March 2025, establishing a five-year transitional period culminating in national elections, provides a structural framework within which inclusive

80 Eric Leikin, Katherine Khan, Paul R. Williams and Heba Bawaieh, "Reclaiming Syria: Law, Land, and the Politics of Restitution after Conflict," *PILPG Journal of Frontline Scholarship* 2, no. 3 (May 2026): 47-86, <https://doi.org/10.66193/02.03>

81 Phillips, "Sectarianism and Conflict in Syria."

82 Mohammed A. Salih, "Post-Assad Syria: Challenges, Opportunities, and the US Role in Shaping its Future," *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, January 14, 2025, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2025/01/post-assad-syria-challenges-opportunities-and-the-us-role-in-shaping-its-future/>.

83 Charles Lister et al., *Reimagining Syria: A Roadmap for Peace and Prosperity Beyond Assad* (Middle East Institute, March 2025).

Research on postconflict state-building demonstrates consistently that political institutions perceived as exclusive, captured, or unaccountable generate the conditions for renewed conflict rather than durable peace.

governance reform can be pursued.⁸⁴ But the framework's content remains deeply contested. Across Syrian communities, civic organizations, and diaspora networks, concern has been widely expressed about the centralization of executive authority in the transitional presidency, the limited transparency of governance decision-making, the weakness of checks on power, and the insufficient channels for meaningful public consultation and civic participation.⁸⁵ These structural deficits matter not only on normative grounds of democratic representation but also on empirical grounds of peacebuilding effectiveness. Research on postconflict state-building demonstrates consistently that political institutions perceived as exclusive, captured, or unaccountable generate the conditions for renewed conflict rather than durable peace.⁸⁶

The State Department, in coordination with EU partners and multilateral institutions, should deploy diplomatic leverage and targeted technical assistance to press for the inclusion of civil society organizations, minority community representatives, women's organizations, and diaspora voices in the transitional constitutional consultations. Programming should support the development of independent Syrian research institutions, investigative journalism capacity, and civil society monitoring mechanisms capable of providing evidence-based policy analysis and holding transitional authorities accountable for commitments made to the Syrian public and the international community.

At the same time, U.S. policy must be calibrated with careful attention to the risks of overreach. Bosnia's experience under the Office of the High Representative illustrates the paradox of international quasi-protectorate governance. When external actors attempt to control political outcomes — determining electoral results, removing elected officials, imposing constitutional changes — rather than strengthening the rules and institutions within which domestic political competition occurs, they undermine the very domestic ownership of the transition that sustainable peace requires. The appropriate role for external actors is to strengthen the constitutional infrastructure for inclusive governance, to create material incentives through conditioned assistance for inclusive political behavior, and to hold transitional authorities accountable for the commitments they make to their own people — not to design Syria's political institutions from the outside or to substitute international legitimacy for domestic accountability.

Ultimately, the test of U.S. policy in Syria will not be the speed of geopolitical normalization with Damascus or the pace of counterterrorism cooperation but whether the political order that emerges from this transition is one in which all Syrians — across communal, regional, gender, and class lines — can see themselves represented, protected, and invested in sustaining. A peace built on the exclusion of those who suffered most, on the entrenchment of new political elites in place of old ones, and on the suppression of the legitimate grievances that drove the uprising of 2011 will not be durable. The international community has, in the current transitional moment, a rare and time-limited opportunity to help Syria build a different kind of political future. Seizing it will require not only strategic vision but also the institutional willingness to prioritize long-term peacebuilding over short-term stability — and to trust, above all, the capacity of Syrians themselves to build the peace they need.

84 Christopher M. Blanchard, "Syria: Transition and U.S. Policy," CRS Report RL33487 (Congressional Research Service, December 2024).

85 Lyall and Hanci, "Way Ahead for Governance in Syria."

86 Charles T. Call, "Why Peace Fails: The Causes and Prevention of Civil War Recurrence." Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2012.

Conclusion

The collapse of the Assad regime removed one of the primary architects of the country's destruction, but it did not dissolve the structural conditions — elite capture, sectarian fragmentation, mass displacement, and the systematic exclusion of women, minorities, and rural communities from political life — that made the conflict so devastating and prolonged. The transitional government that has emerged carries significant uncertainty about its commitments to pluralism, accountability, and the rule of law. Whether this moment produces a durable peace or merely a reconfigured authoritarianism will depend, in large part, on the choices made now. It will also depend on who makes those choices; Syrian civil society, the transitional authorities, or international actors including the United States.

Those choices must be anchored in a fundamentally different approach to international engagement than the one that prevailed during the civil war years. The conventional toolkit of centralized aid disbursement, elite-level political bargaining, and externally designed institutional frameworks has proved inadequate (and, in some cases, actively counterproductive) in contexts where legitimacy is local, where trust has been systematically destroyed, and where the communities most affected by violence have been the least consulted about the terms of their peace. A reorientation toward locally owned, participatory, and structurally aware peacebuilding is not a counsel of disengagement; it is a counsel of more effective engagement.

The policy recommendations advanced in this report are designed as a coherent and mutually reinforcing framework rather than a menu of discrete options. Progress on any one of them depends on and accelerates progress on the others: Meaningful property rights reform facilitates refugee return, which enables political participation; inclusive transitional justice builds the social trust on which community dispute resolution depends; peace education cultivates the civic identity that sustains representative institutions over time.

The United States enters this transitional period with considerable leverage, through its capacity to calibrate sanctions relief, direct reconstruction assistance, and shape the multilateral frameworks within which Syria's transition will be evaluated. The question is how to use that leverage. Deploying it primarily in service of counterterrorism objectives or geopolitical alignment, while treating governance, inclusion, and accountability as secondary concerns, would repeat the strategic errors of earlier engagement cycles and squander a moment that may not recur. Deploying it instead in sustained, principled support for the Syrian actors (women, youth, civil society, minority communities, local peacebuilders) who have the deepest stake in a genuinely different Syria represents the more difficult path, but also the more honest one. The aspiration of durable peace demands nothing less.

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