

Syria after the Al-Assad's Collapse

# Syria: The Uncertain Dawn of a Wounded People

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On 8 December, a wind of hope tinged with bitter nostalgia blew over Syria. After more than half a century under the grip of an authoritarian family, Syrians were finally able to glimpse the end of an era. This long-awaited moment was seen by many as a hard-won victory, the culmination of a popular revolution that began peacefully in 2011. But the regime's brutal repression had, alas, transformed this surge of freedom into a devastating war. Today, the new authorities face a mountain of challenges, between deep internal wounds and persistent pressure from an oft-indifferent outside world.

## The Scars of the Past: Security, Governance and Torn Social Fabric

*The Iron Fist of the Mukhabarat: Security Gone Awry*

For decades under the Hafez al-Assad regime (1970-2000), Syria lived under the constant surveillance of the Mukhabarat, the security services that were much more than a mere force of law and order. They were the heart of a quasi-totalitarian power, an all-seeing eye and an iron fist that controlled every aspect of daily life. The army, despite being the mainstay of many states, was deliberately weakened, relegated to the background in the face of this sprawling repressive apparatus.

The "Palestinian cause," brandished like a banner, was too often used as a pretext. It justified the milita-

rization of the country and, above all, the ruthless repression of any dissenting voice. Daring to speak out, to think differently or simply to exist outside the lines drawn by the regime, could cost you your freedom, your body or even your life. The names of Tadmur (1980) and Hama (1982) still ring out, cold-blooded massacres in which torture, arbitrary imprisonment and murder were commonplace tools for maintaining order. In that Syria, security was not a citizen's right, but a formidable weapon solely at the service of the regime's survival.

*Chaos in the Aftermath: When Violence Becomes Anarchy*

The fall of the regime brought a wind of change, a desire to break with the oppressive past. But the decision to disband the security services and the army, while well-intentioned, has had heartbreaking consequences. We remember the mistakes made in Iraq in 2003, when a similar dismantling plunged the country into chaos. In Syria, it was an explosion. Crimes, kidnappings, violence on all sides. Where violence had previously been centralized, it became anarchic, leaving citizens to fend for themselves as armed factions vied for control. Fear has remained, but its face has changed.

*Toxic Legacy: Religious Divisions and the "Sect of Power"*

The Assad regime has, ironically, succeeded where even French colonialism had failed: to divide the country deeply along sectarian lines. By deliberately fanning the flames of ethnic and religious allegiances, it has sown the seeds of discord, thereby strengthening its grip. The image of an "Alawite" regime is often simplistic. In reality, power was in the hands of a mul-

ticultural “sect of power.” This elite was a complex patchwork of figures from different communities – Alawites, Sunnis, Christians, Druze – but all bound by an unwavering loyalty to the regime and its interests, far more than to their own communities. This structure has enabled the regime to cloak itself in a façade of pluralism while exploiting latent divisions.

## The new authorities face a mountain of challenges, between deep internal wounds and persistent pressure from an oft-indifferent outside world

Recent tensions, such as the community-based reprisals on the coast or in As-Suwayda, remind us just how deep these social fractures run, and just how shattered trust is. The new authorities have promised to investigate, and the Western world is eagerly awaiting the results. For many, this will be the first real test of their ability to heal these wounds and rebuild national cohesion.

### **Economic Wounds and the Cry of the Invisible: When a Nation Collapses**

#### *A Confiscated Economy: The Shadow of the Oligarchy*

The Assad regime inherited a centrally planned economy, which it gradually liberalized in the 1990s and 2000s. But this liberalization had nothing to do with equitable development. Instead, it opened the door to the emergence and unbridled enrichment of an oligarchy closely linked to the regime. Privatization has not revitalized the country; it has allowed a small circle to enrich itself without any oversight or transparency. This system has fuelled systemic corruption, corroding public services and shattering citizens’ trust in the State.

#### *War: An Accelerator of Human and Material Ruin*

The war has acted like a cataclysm, transforming this economic and social decline into a veritable nightmare. Entire cities have been reduced to rubble, land-

scapes of desolation stretching as far as the eye can see. Millions of people have been torn from their homes, creating one of the greatest humanitarian crises of our time. Vital infrastructure – roads, bridges, power grids, water supply and sanitation systems – has been systematically destroyed or severely damaged. The skeleton of a country has been laid bare. The healthcare system has also collapsed. Hospitals were bombed, medical personnel targeted. Thousands of doctors and nurses had to flee or were imprisoned, leaving entire populations without access to the most basic care. Diseases spread, injuries went untreated. The economy, meanwhile, was transformed into a monstrous war machine, fuelled by militias, illicit trafficking (drugs, weapons, human beings), kidnappings for ransom, smuggling, and the use of parallel currencies. This underground, criminal system has undermined any chance of sustainable development, making economic recovery a truly Herculean challenge.

#### *Daily Distress: A People on the Brink*

Today, Syria is not just a country in ruins; it is a nation facing an unprecedented humanitarian crisis. Everyday life is a struggle for survival.

- The currency has collapsed, turning savings into dust and making imports unaffordable. In 2011, one US dollar was worth around 50 Syrian pounds. Today, in June 2025, that same dollar can be exchanged for thousands of Syrian pounds on the black market. It’s a financial haemorrhage that is impoverishing families a little more every day.
- Unemployment is massive, affecting more than 50% of the labour force in many regions, especially young people. Exact figures are hard to come by in all this chaos, but the despair on people’s faces is palpable.
- Food insecurity and malnutrition are spreading at an alarming rate. According to the World Food Programme (WFP), in 2024, more than 12 million Syrians – around 55% of the population – were in a situation of acute food insecurity, requiring urgent humanitarian aid. Child malnutrition in particular is increasing at a disturbing rate.
- The water and sanitation crisis has become a daily reality for millions. Running water is often un-

available, forcing people to rely on unsafe sources or tanker trucks, increasing the risk of water-borne diseases. Only a tiny fraction of the population has regular access to safe drinking water.

- Education is at risk, jeopardizing the future of an entire generation. More than 3 million Syrian children are not in school – more than a third of school-aged children. This is creating a “lost generation,” deprived of the tools to rebuild tomorrow. More than 10,000 schools have been damaged or destroyed, half of them completely unusable, and some have even been turned into shelters or military bases.
- Dependence on humanitarian aid has become a sad reality. Millions of Syrians survive only thanks to this aid, which is often insufficient and hampered by difficult access. In 2024, the UN estimated that 15.3 million people needed some form of humanitarian assistance in Syria.

Reconstruction will require colossal resources, far beyond Syria’s current capabilities. International aid is an absolute necessity, but it is conditional on far-reaching political reforms and credible transitional justice. The Syrian diaspora, several million strong and with considerable financial and intellectual resources, could be a crucial driving force. But these Syrians abroad are waiting for solid guarantees – security, transparency, respect for their rights – before considering investing massively or returning. Their patience is wearing thin, and their disillusionment is palpable.

### **Human and Economic Capital in Survival Mode: Between Devastating Losses and Sparks of Hope**

#### *The Human Haemorrhage: The Flight of Brains and Hearts*

Since 2011, Syria has suffered an unprecedented human haemorrhage, a drain of talent and skills that will have irreversible consequences. It is estimated that over 8 million Syrians have sought refuge abroad, making Syria the nation with the highest number of internally displaced people and refugees in the world. These souls torn from their homeland are mainly hosted by Turkey (approximately 3.3 million), Lebanon

(some 1.5 million) and Jordan (approximately 650,000), but also by many European countries such as Germany and Sweden.

### **Millions of people have been torn from their homes, creating one of the greatest humanitarian crises of our time**

It’s not just a question of numbers; it’s an immeasurable qualitative loss. This diaspora includes doctors, engineers, teachers, skilled craftsmen and entrepreneurs – the very people who formed the bedrock of Syrian development. Their mass departure has emptied the country of an essential part of its human capital, making any prospect of reconstruction complex, even heartbreaking. Rebuilding does not just mean stacking bricks; it also means restoring confidence in institutions eroded by decades of cronyism and corruption. The return of refugees will depend on many factors, each of which is a challenge. Those living in precarious conditions in neighbouring countries might consider returning sooner, even under modest conditions, if a minimum of security and stability is guaranteed. For them, reconnecting with their homeland, even over the ruins of their homes, is a priority. But for Syrians who have settled permanently in Europe or the Gulf States, where they have rebuilt their lives and gained access to education, work and stable prospects, returning represents an immense social and political risk. They will only consider returning if they are offered solid guarantees:

- Lasting security and freedom from reprisals.
- A clear and fair legal framework that protects their property and rights.
- An end to discrimination, and equality before the law for all.
- Transparent and accountable governance.
- Political stability that guarantees the participation of all social and political forces in rebuilding the country.

For this diaspora, returning home is an agonizing choice. In the meantime, their role is often limited to providing vital financial support for their families back

home. Remittances, often informal, have become a lifeline in the country's battered economy.

### *Syrian Industry: A Potential but Wounded Phoenix*

Once a pillar of the economy, Syria's industrial sector has been devastated by the war. Losses are estimated at over \$150 billion. Production has plummeted, and exports have dropped from a respectable \$9 billion in 2010 to less than \$1 billion in 2023. Industrial zones, particularly in Aleppo and Deir ez-Zor, have been reduced to dust. Thousands of kilometres of roads, vital bridges, water stations, and telecommunications and sanitation networks have been wiped out, making recovery even more complex.

Yet despite this massive destruction, Syria still has considerable potential for recovery. Its strategic geographical location, at the crossroads of Europe, Asia and Africa, could make it a commercial hub. Its natural resources, particularly agricultural (cereals, cotton, fruit, vegetables) and mining resources (phosphate, oil, natural gas), are precious assets. The recent lifting of certain US sanctions could also open windows of opportunity, attracting foreign investment and facilitating trade.

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Industrial reconstruction should be structured around several key areas:

- Infrastructure rehabilitation: This is the essential first step – rebuilding factories, roads, ports and airports so that the economic heart can beat again.
- Sustainable use of natural resources: Wise, environmentally friendly management is crucial for long-term development, while learning from past mistakes.
- Making the most of its regional position: Syria must take advantage of its geography to once

again become a commercial and logistic hub, facilitating trade with its neighbours and beyond.

### *Heritage: A Mutilated Treasure, but Valuable for Tomorrow*

Before 2011, tourism was a vibrant economic sector, accounting for up to 14% of Syria's GDP. Today, it lies in tatters. More than 2,500 tourist establishments have been damaged or destroyed, and total losses to the sector are estimated at 50 billion dollars. Only religious tourism, mainly organized with Teheran, survives in fragments, but unemployment in this sector has become endemic, leaving hundreds of thousands of people without any income.

But beyond the numbers, it is the soul of the country that has been wounded. Historic and archaeological sites of inestimable value, listed as UNESCO World Heritage, have been mutilated, looted or destroyed. Palmyra, the Krak des Chevaliers, the old city of Aleppo, Bosra al-Sham... these names echo like open wounds in the collective memory. Protecting and restoring this heritage is not just a cultural issue; it is also a major economic one. Once stability returns, these places could once again become major tourist attractions, generating income and jobs, and restoring Syria to some of its former splendour. The task is immense, requiring international cooperation, considerable funds and the expertise of organizations specializing in heritage conservation.

### **Justice and Reconciliation: The Complicated Roads to Healing**

#### *Transitional Justice: Between Hope for Truth and Political Pitfalls*

After a conflict of such magnitude, the path to lasting peace inevitably involves credible and fair transitional justice. The aim is clear: to establish the truth about human rights violations, acknowledge the suffering of the victims, preserve collective memory, hold the main perpetrators to account and provide reparation. Countries such as post-apartheid South Africa and post-genocide Rwanda have taken these complex paths, proving that balancing justice and reconciliation is difficult but essential.

In Syria, the recent creation of an independent commission for transitional justice could have been a significant step forward. Unfortunately, it was quickly tainted by criticism, casting doubt on its legitimacy. Why did this happen? Primarily because of the absence of credible and recognized Syrian experts on it, depriving it of the confidence of the communities. But also because of the marked influence of figures close to radical Islamist groups, in particular Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), which raises fears of partisan justice.

The fact that this commission focuses exclusively on the crimes of the Assad regime, without examining those committed by the various armed opposition factions, poses a major problem. Variable-geometry justice cannot be seen as restorative; it further divides society rather than bringing it together, undermining the foundations of any national reconciliation. It is crucial to understand that transitional justice is not about punishing every perpetrator. Its aim is not to fill the prisons, but to restore a minimum of trust and recognition among citizens. This involves difficult choices and painful renunciations, such as prosecuting only the most serious crimes, while ensuring the memory of the victims and the promise that such atrocities will never happen again. Only an inclusive and transparent process can prevent the cycle of revenge and lay the foundations for lasting peace.

#### *The Spectre of a New Authoritarianism: Between Fear and the Quest for Identity*

Syria has always been a mosaic of cultures, religions and identities. Despite authoritarianism, a form of social modernity had taken root over the decades, even within the Sunni majority.

But with the rise of certain Islamist factions, a large part of the Syrian population is now expressing a new concern: that of a shift toward another type of authoritarianism, this time tinged with religiosity. Calls for rigorist preaching, restrictions on social freedoms and attempts to impose a more conservative lifestyle are all warning signs. This fear concerns not only minorities (Christians, Druze, Alawites), but also many Sunnis attached to a relatively open way of life and a more moderate interpretation of Islam. There is a palpable risk that this revolution, which sought to overthrow a secular dictator, could result in an equally authoritarian government based on a rigid interpretation of religion, effectively excluding a

large part of the population. Civil peace cannot be based on denial of past atrocities or on impunity. It requires in-depth work on memory, honest and inclusive dialogue, and recognition of collective pain, so that communities can heal and coexist without fear.

#### **The Grand Chessboard: When Syria Becomes a Geopolitical Pawn**

##### *The Geopolitics of Chaos: Syria as a Victim of Foreign Interests*

From the very first days of the uprising, Syria faced a grim reality: the strategic indifference of the international community. The regime, advised in particular by its Russian allies, quickly realized that global attention was limited. As long as casualties did not exceed a certain "media tolerance threshold," major intervention remained unlikely.

A cynical strategy was then implemented: the regime deliberately facilitated the emergence and rise to power of radical Islamist groups, going so far as to release hundreds of extremist prisoners. The aim was clear: to transform a popular and peaceful protest into an armed insurrection with Islamist overtones. This manoeuvre enabled the regime to reposition itself on the international stage as the indispensable bulwark against terrorism, thereby regaining the tacit or explicit support of certain states, while ruthlessly repressing the moderate opposition.

Unfortunately, this ploy has led to the internationalization of the conflict, turning Syria into a veritable battlefield for various regional and global powers. Russia, Iran, Turkey, the United States and even Israel are each pursuing their own geopolitical and security interests, complicating the situation and making any endogenous solution increasingly illusory. Syria is no longer just a nation at war; it is a strategic epicentre where military, religious, economic and ideological interests intersect. This reality compromises any internal solution and makes local dynamics excessively dependent on foreign agendas.

##### *Israel: From Ideological Enemy to Diplomatic and Security Pressure*

For decades, the Syrian regime has wielded the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as a powerful lever for inter-

nal legitimization. The anti-Israeli stance was used to justify the country's militarization and domestic political restrictions. Paradoxically, the borders between Syria and Israel remained the calmest in the Middle East, particularly since the 1974 armistice agreement. There was a precarious status quo, a tacit understanding where both sides avoided direct escalation. Since the partial collapse of the Syrian regime and the disintegration of its army, Israel has stepped up its strikes on Syrian territory, primarily targeting Iranian military bases and Hezbollah positions. The aim is clear: to prevent Iran and its allies from gaining military footholds near its borders.

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But the pressure on Syria is not limited to military matters. Today, the new Syrian regime is being forced by certain international players, notably the United States, to join the Abraham Accords. These agreements, initiated under the Trump administration, have already led to the normalization of relations between Israel and several Arab countries (the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Sudan and Morocco). This demand for normalization comes amid a volatile situation in the Middle East, with Israel waging a murderous war in Gaza. For the Syrians, normalization in such a climate would be perceived as a flagrant betrayal of the Palestinian cause and a repudiation of decades of anti-Israeli rhetoric. It would risk provoking violent internal tensions, rekindling deep historical rifts and triggering a new wave of instability, further jeopardizing an already fragile peace process.

### **Conclusion: Syria, Between a Damaged Past and an Uncertain Future**

Rebuilding Syria cannot simply be a material task, the reconstruction of buildings and infrastructure. It is a much more profound undertaking, a political,

moral and social overhaul. For the country to regain lasting stability and a glimmer of prosperity, several imperative conditions must be met:

- **The dignified return of refugees:** It is imperative to guarantee a voluntary, safe return that respects the rights of the millions of Syrians in exile. This implies offering concrete prospects: employment, housing, and above all, the possibility of participating in public life and regaining their place in the country.
- **Implementing impartial justice:** It is crucial to establish a sincere and fair transitional justice. It must ascertain the truth about the crimes committed by all parties to the conflict, acknowledge the suffering of the victims, and lay the foundations for genuine national reconciliation.
- **Acknowledging collective trauma:** Syrian society is deeply wounded. A healing process will require acknowledging collective pain, promoting genuine intercommunal dialogue and rebuilding the broken trust between the different components of society.
- **Eliminating the logic of exclusion:** It is vital to reject all forms of exclusion, whether religious, ethnic or political. Building an inclusive Syria where every citizen, regardless of their affiliation, feels represented and safe, is the only path to lasting peace.
- **An end to foreign interference:** Foreign powers must stop viewing Syria as a mere pawn on the regional chessboard. A lasting solution requires an approach that respects Syrian sovereignty and genuine support for reconstruction efforts led by the Syrians themselves.

Without this fundamental overhaul, there is a risk that the same mistakes will be repeated, plunging an already fragile, even fragmented country into an endless cycle of violence. Lasting peace will require listening, acknowledging wrongs and an unwavering political will to turn the page on the conflict once and for all – without ever forgetting it. Despite its wounds, Syria has immense potential. But its resurrection will depend on the ability of its leaders and the international community to work together for a future of stability, justice and hope.