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› Stabilising Syria without Reinforcing Authoritarianism: Priorities for Italy and Europe*

- › Nineteen months after Assad's fall, reconstruction financing, diplomatic engagement and commercial partnerships are accumulating around a centralised institutional architecture in Syria.
- › Italy has prioritised trade reconnections with Syria and is seeking to classify it as a “safe country of origin” to accelerate migration returns, but has not articulated what this commercial engagement is meant to achieve politically or what governance benchmarks must be met before market access deepens.
- › Support should prioritise a legislatively established, victim-centred and independent transitional justice framework, to prevent impunity and elite pacts from becoming entrenched in Syria's new political order.



Ministry of Foreign Affairs
and International Cooperation

Nineteen months after the fall of Bashar al-Assad, Syria remains at a critical stage of transition, marked by progress towards institutional consolidation and regional reintegration, but also by persistent political, security and humanitarian challenges. The transitional authorities have expanded diplomatic engagement, attracted financial and political investments from Gulf countries, and taken steps towards restoring state institutions. Yet unresolved questions over inclusive governance, accountability, economic recovery and territorial cohesion continue to shape the transition. As quick international normalisation of the new Syrian leadership advances faster than domestic institutional reforms, economic engagement has increasingly been treated, by European actors as much as by Damascus, as a substitute for political transition rather than as a leverage to shape it.

In line with the broader trend of Arab League countries normalising relations with Assad from 2023, Italy became the first EU member state to explore re-engagement with Syria by reopening its embassy prior to the regime's fall in late 2024. This was motivated primarily by humanitarian considerations and migration management priorities, while Prime Minister Meloni emphasised in December 2024 that the embassy reopening did not constitute recognition of the Assad regime.¹

¹ “Italy's Meloni Defends Choice to Reopen Damascus Embassy under Assad”, in *Reuters*, 17

* This brief was produced in the framework of the research project “Stati Uniti, Italia e il futuro dell'ordine mediorientale”. This paper is realised with the support of the Unit for Analysis, Policy Planning and Historical Documentation - Directorate General for Political Affairs and International Security of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, in accordance with Article 23-bis of the Decree of the President of the Italian Republic 18/1967. The views expressed in this report are solely those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation.



»» *Since the regime change in late 2024, Syria's governance has fragmented considerably*

Following Assad's flight from Syria in December 2024, after an insurgent offensive led by the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham armed group resulted in the capture of Damascus, Italian Foreign Minister Antonio Tajani visited Syria on 10 January 2025.² His visit followed the joint mission by German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock and French Foreign Minister Jean-Noël Barrot, who met the country's new leadership under Ahmed al-Sharaa during a visit to Damascus on 3 January 2025.³

Since then, Rome has pursued a policy of engagement centred on the resumption and strengthening of economic and trade cooperation. It inaugurated an Italian Trade Agency Desk in Damascus in June 2026, facilitated a study tour to Italy for a group of Syrian businesspeople⁴ and participated in the BuildEx reconstruction fair in Damascus. Furthermore, in March 2026, Rome hosted the Joint Syrian-Italian Economic Conference, organised by the Syrian-Italian Council, a bilateral platform established by the Syrian Ministry of Economy and Industry to promote trade and investment cooperation between the two countries.⁵

It has not, however, articulated what this commercial engagement is meant to achieve politically, or what governance benchmarks must be met before market access deepens. Reconstruction financing, diplomatic rehabilitation and commercial partnerships are in fact accumulating around an institutional architecture in Syria that – if not addressed – will harden into a version of governance whose fragility will impose costs on Mediterranean security that European actors like Italy are not currently pricing.

Governance fragmentation and the normalisation dynamic

Since the regime change in late 2024, Syria's governance has fragmented considerably. The transitional authority under President al-Sharaa, constituted through a constitutional declaration drafted by a seven-person committee of presidential appointees and issued in March 2025 following a largely perfunctory one-day National Dialogue Conference, has pushed forward a top-down political transition that moves half-heartedly towards institutionalised power-sharing and popular participation.

The declaration, which identifies Islamic jurisprudence as a main source of legislation, establishes a five-year transition period concluding with elections and a permanent constitution, with an appointed Parliament of 210 members – one-third hand-picked by the President directly. It concentrates executive

December 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/italys-meloni-defends-choice-reopen-damascus-embassy-under-assad-2024-12-17>.

² Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Minister Tajani Meets with the New Syrian Authorities*, 10 January 2025, <https://www.esteri.it/en/?p=129347>.

³ German Federal Foreign Office, *A Reset for Syria: Foreign Minister Baerbock to Travel to Damascus for Talks*, 3 January 2025, <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/en/aussenpolitik/laenderinformationen/syrien-node/baerbock-syria-2692372>.

⁴ Ravagnan, Stefano, "Last November a group of businesspersons went on a study tour", *X post*, 3 February 2026, https://x.com/Ste_Ravagnan/status/2018652727769985207.

⁵ See the official website: <https://syrianitaliancouncil.com>. See also Syrian Business Councils, *Decision No. 62 Issued to Establish the Syrian-Italian Joint Business Council and Expand Cooperation Prospects with the European Union*, 18 March 2026, <https://www.sbcboard.org/en/news/formation-syrian-italian-joint-business-council>.



>> The indirect electoral framework and the President's extensive appointment powers are undermining parliamentary independence

authority, removes institutional counterweights and ensures that no political alternative can compete or obstruct during the transition period. Moreover, no law regulating political parties has been enacted. In early July 2026, President al-Sharaa appointed the remaining 70 members of the People's Assembly, completing the formation of the transitional parliament more than eight months after the process began and allowing it to convene for its first session. The appointments included fifteen women, increasing female representation from six to 21 members, and were presented as an effort to address imbalances in political representation. Nevertheless, the institutional design continues to leave the legislature with limited powers, and while the Assembly can propose and approve legislation during its renewable 30-month mandate, it has no authority to grant or withdraw confidence from the government.⁶

The indirect electoral framework and the President's extensive appointment powers are undermining parliamentary independence and limiting meaningful political pluralism. The General Directorate of Political Affairs, tasked with absorbing former Ba'ath party functions, has expanded its oversight to require prior approval for civic activities in major cities. The Syrian Islamic Council, which had maintained independent religious authority throughout the revolution, has been disbanded in June 2025 at the new government's request.

This architecture of power only partially incorporates the Syrian Defence Forces (SDF), the Kurdish-dominated militias that for years fought against the ISIS in alliance with a US-led coalition and whose gradual integration into Syria's state institutions was set out in the January 2026 agreement with the country's authorities. Islamic State remnants continue to exploit security vacuums in northwest and central Syria. Cells loyal to the former Assad regime were at the centre of clashes in the coastal regions in March 2025. And Iran has reached out to Alawite communities – from which the Assad family hailed – in western Syria alongside a new entity, the Islamic Resistance Front in Syria, which emerged in late December 2024 in opposition to Israel's continued occupation of southwestern Syria. Since December 2024, Israel has conducted more than six hundred air, drone and artillery strikes across the country – including on the presidential palace and Ministry of Defence in Damascus on 16 July 2025 – framed instrumentally as protection of Druze communities in Suwayda.

External legitimisation of the al-Sharaa government has accelerated in parallel with these dynamics. The Syrian president was welcomed in the White House in November 2025 – the first visit by a Syrian head of state since independence in 1946 – and met German Chancellor Friedrich Merz in Berlin in March 2026. The EU reinstated the 1978 Cooperation Agreement with Syria in May 2026 and launched a High-Level Political Dialogue. Syria was reportedly invited to the G7 summit in Évian in June 2026, although al-Sharaa ultimately did not attend. However, following his meeting with US President Donald Trump on the margins of the NATO summit in Ankara on 8 July 2026, Washington initiated the process of removing Syria from its list of state sponsors of terrorism, further accelerating Damascus's international reintegration.

⁶ Dalatey, Feras, "Syria's Sharaa Appoints Lawmakers, Paving Way for New Parliament to Convene", in *Reuters*, 1 July 2026, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/syrias-sharaa-appoints-lawmakers-paving-way-new-parliament-convene-2026-07-01>.



>> Syria's social fragmentation is both the legacy of years of civil war and the result of the way the transition has been unfolding since 2024

This re-engagement has unfolded alongside, and in practice reinforced, the domestic process of territorial fragmentation in which governance arrangements over the country's peripheries are becoming constitutive parts of the transitional state framework. The January 2026 agreement between Syrian authorities and the SDF marked an important step in addressing the future of the country's north-east and of the region. The deal, which followed battles in which Syrian government forces – with Turkish backing and apparent US acquiescence – advanced into SDF-controlled Deir al-Zour and al-Raqqa, establishes a framework for the handover to Damascus of civilian institutions, oil and gas facilities, and the individual vetting of SDF fighters seeking to join the Syrian army. In March 2026, the commander of the Kurdish People's Defence Units (YPG), Sipan Hamo, was appointed deputy defence minister for eastern territories, and the US handed over its last military base to the Syrian army. But other, larger issues remain unresolved, such as the modalities of SDF integration into the regular army, the fate of their weapons, civil administration arrangements and the status of tens of thousands of individuals held in SDF-managed detention camps.

The consolidation of this governance model has come at the expense of political representation and accountability, with important consequences for social cohesion and the credibility of the transitional justice process.

Social fragmentation, gender and the weakness of transitional justice

Syria's social fragmentation is both the legacy of years of civil war and the result of the way the transition has been unfolding since 2024. Local intermediaries have emerged as key actors shaping governance and security, while sectarian and ethnic fault lines continue to impact mobility and trust. The current transition has prioritised the consolidation of executive authority at the expense of the development of inclusive political institutions. The distinction between a governance process that is transitional and one that is using transitional language to institutionalise a centralised distribution of power is nowhere more visible than in the limits around Syria's political representation and judicial accountability.

On representation, the October 2025 "quasi-elections" to the 210-seat transitional legislature excluded the three governorates of al-Raqqa, al-Hasakah and Suwayda⁷ and candidates stood individually because no political party law exists. Moreover, civil society organisations still have to operate under a 1958 law that makes donations subject to government approval, which has led to a public letter of protest signed by 31 Syrian organisations.⁸ The imprisonment of a Hizb al-Tahrir member, a political opponent of al-Sharaa, on a ten-year sentence, together with detention of journalists whose whereabouts were not disclosed, also points to a transition designed to prevent forms of political

⁷ Sadiki, Larbi and Layla Saleh, "A New Syria in a 'New Middle East': Challenges and Opportunities for Democratization", in *Toda Peace Institute Reports*, No. 285 (3 March 2026), <https://toda.org/?p=9881>.

⁸ Justice for Life (JFL) et al., *Joint Position Paper on the Directive from the Minister of Social Affairs and Labor*, 22 October 2025, <https://syriaaccountability.org/joint-position-paper-on-the-directive-from-the-minister-of-social-affairs-and-labor>.



»» On accountability, the Syrian transitional justice process has made little progress too

organisation that can threaten the consolidation of the new configuration of powers from taking shape.

That same logic appears in the treatment of social actors outside formal institutions. Women were central to mediation, community resilience and service delivery during the Syrian civil war and in the early post-Assad period,⁹ yet their access to formal politics remains marginal and institutional responses to gender-based violence weak. Civil society, including think tanks, advocacy groups and feminist collectives, has been kept at arm's length by the new regime. Civic and political activities require prior approval from the General Directorate of Political Affairs, whose oversight is expanding well beyond its original mandate of absorbing former Ba'ath party functions.

The Suwayda assault against the Druze in July 2025 by government forces and the coastal massacres of Alawite people in March 2025 show the cost of a centralised transitional model lacking representation. In Suwayda, government forces supported by Bedouin fighters clashed with Druze militias, leaving hundreds dead and triggering a siege. In the coastal areas, more than 800 people were killed, including revenge killings by newly integrated security forces. These events deepened Druze and minorities' mistrust of Damascus and revived debate over federalism and decentralisation, which the central authorities have treated as threats to national unity.

On accountability, the Syrian transitional justice process has made little progress too. The Atef Najib trial, opened in Damascus on 26 April 2026, with nine defendants including Assad's cousin and former head of Political Security in Daraa, indicted alongside Bashar and his brother Maher al-Assad *in absentia* – is the first domestic judicial proceeding addressing crimes committed by Assad regime officials. The children arrested and tortured in Daraa in 2011 for writing anti-regime graffiti – whose detention triggered the protests that began the revolution – have waited fifteen years for this moment. But the trial is proceeding without a transitional justice law, without codification of international crimes in Syrian domestic law, and without a policy clearly defining who will be prosecuted, on what charges and through what process. Syrian domestic criminal law contains no provision for war crimes, crimes against humanity, enforced disappearance or command responsibility. Charges for enforced disappearance rely on the domestic crime of “kidnapping” as the nearest available substitute. And the application of capital punishment – probable in Atef Najib's case – risks undermining international judicial cooperation on which any broader accountability process will depend.¹⁰

More specifically on transitional justice, two presidential decrees of May 2025 – Decrees no. 19 (National Committee for Missing Persons) and no. 20 (Transitional Justice Committee) – replicate the same executive unilateralism that characterises the transition as a whole. Both were issued without legislative deliberation. In addition, creating a separate Missing Persons committee generates competing jurisdictions and findings on what was, under

⁹ UN Women, *How Syrian Women Navigate Security Risks to Mediate Local Conflicts*, 17 October 2022, <https://www.unwomen.org/en/node/174816>; Ghoutouk, Lina, “Syrian Women's Voices: Legal, Social and Security Realities in the post-Assad Transition”, in *Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung Post*, 22 December 2025, <https://tr.boell.org/en/node/23795>.

¹⁰ Kurd Ali, Obai, “Atef Najib's Trial: Syrians Deserve a Clear Transitional Justice Strategy”, in *Tahrir Institute Analysis*, 29 May 2026, <https://timep.org/?p=44039>.



>> Syria's reconstruction is where the gap between European rhetoric on reform and European practice of commercial engagement is most consequential

Assad, a unified system of arbitrary detention, torture and disappearance. The presidentially appointed committees lack independence, and former regime and militia figures have been informally reintegrated through negotiated arrangements.

The preference for amnesties over accountability risks entrenching impunity and reproducing elite pacts similar to other post-conflict settings in the region. An effective transitional justice framework would require the challenging task of combining accountability, truth-seeking, reparations and institutional reform, considering that partial implementation risks normalising impunity while producing selective or merely symbolic justice. Grievances are currently muted by the urgency of stabilisation, but in a context of widespread protests in Idlib, Aleppo, Hama, Deir al-Zour and Damascus,¹¹ their accumulation constitutes a medium-term threat to social peace and cohesion.

Reconstruction and politics of centralisation

Syria's reconstruction is the primary area in which the normalisation of centralised power structures is being operationalised, and where the gap between European rhetoric on reform and European practice of commercial engagement is most consequential. Syria's estimated 300 billion US dollars reconstruction need has attracted substantial Gulf engagement, particularly from Saudi Arabia and Qatar, preventing economic freefall. Gulf financial flows have enabled Syria's reintegration into the global financial system and have been accompanied by political support: it was reportedly Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan who convinced the Trump Administration to suspend sanctions on Syria in 2025.

Qatar's Emir was the first head of state to visit Damascus after Assad's fall and Doha has positioned itself as a key mediator between Syria and third-party states, reflecting longstanding ties with Syria's opposition to Assad; Saudi Arabia has dispatched senior diplomatic figures, called for the lifting of sanctions and emerged as a central promoter of US-Syria normalisation. These investments reflect economic interests but also regional ambitions to shape Syria's post-conflict order. A key Saudi consideration is preventing Damascus from becoming too dependent on Qatar and Turkey, with al-Sharaa's first foreign visit – to Riyadh rather than Ankara – read as a signal that such dependency may be averted.

Turkey remains a key regional actor with overlapping security and economic interests. Ankara supports the consolidation of a centralised Syrian state that limits Kurdish autonomy, has provided security training and military support to the transitional government and maintains close economic ties through infrastructure projects and cross-border trade. Turkish officials have cautiously welcomed the January 2026 agreement with the SDF but stressed the need for its full implementation, and Turkish airstrikes in northern Syria and Iraq continue alongside diplomatic engagement.

¹¹ al-Issa, Yasser and Hamza al-Badr, "Deir ez-Zor, Spearhead of the Transitional Justice Spring", in *Justice Info*, <https://www.justiceinfo.net/en?p=160711>.



»» *The architecture of reconstruction is highly centralised*

Iranian influence has receded substantially relative to Gulf economic leverage, as with the fall of Assad, Tehran lost its primary channel of influence in the Levant and currently lacks the financial resources to compete with Gulf actors in reconstruction financing. Israel, by contrast, acts against a unified Syrian state and continues to prioritise expansionary territorial policies and the consolidation of its military occupation in Syria. It has also cultivated ties with Druze communities and Kurdish factions as a hedge against an unfavourable centralised Syrian state.

The architecture of reconstruction is highly centralised. Sovereign and development funds operate under presidential oversight, and the assets recovery committee has negotiated extra-judicial settlements with sanctioned tycoons. Such negotiated political and economic trade-offs contrast with the principles of rule-based governance and risk reconstituting crony capitalism under new configurations of power – a pattern comparable to that observed in post-conflict Iraq, where Western investment interests compounded by the cronyism of newly established authorities contributed to the constitution and resilience of a corrupt system.

In this context, reconstruction is both a driver for stabilisation and a mechanism of political consolidation. Syrian businesses face practical obstacles, with unreliable access to banking guarantees, the absence of a digital financial infrastructure and a lack of regulatory frameworks deterring both domestic entrepreneurs and external investors. European private sector engagement has stalled precisely for these reasons, even as key EU member states signal openness to Syria's transition. The main question is whether Italian and other European governments will treat these governance problems as constitutive of the reconstruction model itself or whether they will bypass them in the name of commercial re-engagement.

Italy, the EU and the terms of engagement

The United States keeps significant influence in Syria, especially in the northeast, where its cooperation with the SDF over nearly a decade defined the counter-ISIS campaign, while also expanding its engagement with the country's new authorities after Assad's fall. The Trump Administration's approach has tilted toward security and geopolitical interests over inclusive governance, with US officials ultimately approving the January 2026 SDF-Damascus agreement after initial caution, following Turkish diplomatic pressure and discussions brokered by Kurdish leader Masoud Barzani in Erbil. The Administration's willingness (or reluctance) to sustain engagement will shape the trajectory of territorial reintegration and the viability of the northeast agreement. The suspension of US foreign aid, including to SDF-managed detention facilities housing tens of thousands of suspected ISIS fighters and their families, has already created severe operational disruptions.

For the EU, the priorities are preventing renewed instability, limiting regional escalation and encouraging governance arrangements that support stabilisation and reconstruction. France, Germany and Italy have opened up to Syria and welcome the transition, but acknowledge the need for further



»» *France, Germany and Italy acknowledge the need for further reforms, inclusivity and good governance*

reforms, inclusivity and good governance. The EU has initially suspended sectoral sanctions in the energy, transport and financial sectors in early 2025 and has since sought to align its Syria policy with broader EU initiatives in the Middle East, including the EU-GCC dialogue, the Global Gateway and the Pact for the Mediterranean.¹² In May 2026, the EU reinstated the 1978 Cooperation Agreement with Syria and launched a High-Level Political Dialogue and a 620 million euro financial support package for 2026-2027 has been committed for early recovery and socioeconomic stabilisation.

However, these remain insufficient given the scale of the reconstruction challenge. A persistent gap exists between governmental openness and private sector reluctance to engage in and with Syria as European businesses await the legal guarantees and transparent regulatory frameworks that Damascus has yet to establish. This generates frustration in Syria and risks ceding reconstruction space to actors with less interest in governance conditionality. The decision to lift sanctions was not wrong, as sanctions were punishing Syria's population. But the sequencing and conditionality attached to the lifting are where the policy failure lies as sanctions were lifted without specifying the benchmarks to be met.

Beneath the EU framework, member states have pursued divergent national tracks that weaken collective leverage. Germany has committed over 200 million euros to Syrian reconstruction in 2026, channelled through GIZ, KfW and the Syria Recovery Trust Fund, with projects targeting water supply systems in al-Hasakah, Suwayda and Aleppo and hospital rehabilitation. Chancellor Merz received al-Sharaa in Berlin in March 2026, publicly pressing for inclusion of all Syrians regardless of religion, ethnicity and gender, and a representative parliament. Germany has also partially resumed returns of rejected Syrian asylum seekers following a legal reassessment of protection needs for the over one million Syrians in Germany.¹³

France hosted al-Sharaa for his first official European visit on 7 May 2025, with President Emmanuel Macron urging protection of Syria's multi-confessional communities; it maintains a focus on security dynamics in the northeast, Kurdish rights and minority protection, preferring to coordinate major diplomatic moves through EU frameworks rather than bilateral breakthroughs.¹⁴

Italy, on the other hand, has actively prioritised trade reconnections with Syria (including vocational training and banking access) and is also seeking to classify Syria as a "safe country of origin", a political-legal move that would accelerate migration returns to meet domestic electoral priorities. Syria's stabilisation is closely linked to broader Mediterranean security concerns, including migration, humanitarian stability and regional connectivity. There is growing interest in Italy and Europe in including Syria in inter-regional trade corridors, partly to bypass Arab reluctance to cooperate with Israel following the mass atrocities in Gaza and to address the need for alternative routes from

¹² Council of the European Union, *Council Conclusions on Global Gateway* (10349/26), 15 June 2026, <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-10349-2026-INIT/en/pdf>.

¹³ German Federal Government, *Support for Syria's Stability and Growth*, 30 March 2026, <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-en/news/chancellor-merz-al-sharaa-2417730>.

¹⁴ French Presidency, *Meeting with Ahmed Al-Charaa, Interim President of the Syrian Transitional Authorities*, 7 May 2025, <https://www.elysee.fr/en/emmanuel-macron/2025/05/07/meeting-with-ahmed-al-charaa-interim-president-of-the-syrian-transitional-authorities>.



>> Italy's diplomatic positioning has since focused on acceleration of trade links without a corresponding governance strategy

and to the Gulf. Syria's strategic geography – particularly its potential to open new transport routes as an alternative to existing corridors, including in a post-Hormuz-crisis regional reconfiguration – positions it as increasingly central to EU-Gulf dialogue and to European energy security calculations. Fragmented European engagement would dilute leverage precisely when reconstruction financing and diplomatic engagement can provide the most influence and incentives for a reformed transition. Coordinated European policy remains essential to shaping incentives around decentralisation, transparency and incremental institutional reform.

While Italy's direct leverage in the Syrian arena remains limited, Rome could nonetheless play a constructive role in sustaining European engagement and dialogue with regional actors involved in Syria's reconstruction, building on its diplomatic positioning and its experience in facilitating mediation and dialogue in other regional crises. Italy's early diplomatic positioning following the fall of Assad regime and opening to the new leadership has since focused on acceleration of trade links without a corresponding governance strategy. The question, for Italian and European policymakers, is whether those assets will be deployed to build the coordinated framework pushing for reforms that European engagement currently lacks. Whether European support to the al-Sharaa government produces a Syria that is stable in the near term or durably so will depend in large part on that and on whether Mediterranean security, for which Italy bears strategic responsibility, is shaped by a governance-conscious European approach or by the sum of disconnected national interests.

Conclusion

The apparent stabilisation of Syria's transition should not be confused with progress toward accountable governance. For Italy and Europe, the strategic objective should be to align reconstruction, diplomatic engagement and stabilisation with gradual institutional opening. Stability without inclusion will remain fragile, and inclusion without stability would generate conflict and increase social fractures. The success of Syria's transition will depend on whether centralised consolidation can evolve, incrementally and deliberately, into accountable governance before social, political and security-related tensions harden into a state of consolidated fragmentation.

For Italy and Europe, the priority should be to support the transition on a stabilising path by linking reconstruction support to basic governance benchmarks. Support should prioritise transitional justice to allow the process to move towards a legislatively established, victim-centred and independent transitional justice framework that reduces the risks related to entrenched impunity and the reproduction of elite pacts.

At the same time, the legal and financial obstacles preventing foreign investment and private-sector engagement must be addressed to create conditions that encourage responsible investment while ensuring that reconstruction benefits are distributed beyond politically connected elites. Reconstruction support will remain limited without reliable banking channels, transparent regulatory frameworks, anti-corruption safeguards and clear procedures for foreign investors.



Finally, Gulf states, Turkey and other regional powers will remain essential economic and political partners for Syria, but their engagement should be channelled towards coordinated reconstruction and institutional development, avoiding reinforcing dependency or competing spheres of influence that risk undermining state-building and social cohesion in the country. European diplomacy should, therefore, focus on maintaining a balanced international environment in which Syria's transition is not shaped by the mere interests or militarily expansive policies of external powers, but by the needs of Syrian society and the consolidation of accountable governance.

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ISSN 3103-4071 | DOI 10.82088/IAIbrief2635

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