



Eva Ziedan

› Negotiating Heritage: Local Mediation and the Reconstruction of Social Space in Today's Syria^{*}

- › Peacebuilding in Syria requires heritage to become a space for negotiating memory, identity and belonging.
- › Local mediation rooted in shared heritage can rebuild trust and strengthen social cohesion.
- › Women are central actors in inclusive peacebuilding in Syria.



Mobilised as a key process in local mediation, cultural heritage can build the everyday trust that allows diverse groups to live and work together. Heritage is understood as a selective process through which societies determine what from the past is worth transmitting to the present and future. Hence, it is a *living social practice: a shared space to negotiate identity, justice and belonging*. For heritage to contribute to local mediation in post-conflict contexts, state institutions should support the efforts of local actors involved in these processes and recognise historically marginalised roles, particularly those of women. Conversely, when authorities invoke a selective memory that excludes certain communities and erases their narratives, heritage becomes a tool of exclusion.

In societies emerging from war, Syria being a clear example, mobilising cultural heritage means engaging with local memories and their narratives, even when they are contradictory or at times conflicting, as potential spaces for dialogue. Yet Syria's current transitional authority has from the outset been unable to build a shared national framework, within which a clear transitional justice plan could be placed, capable of accommodating different memories emerging from an authoritarian regime and from bloody wartime violence.

^{*} This brief is published with the support of the Mediterranean Women Mediators Network (MWMN), an initiative launched by the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation and implemented by Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) and Women in International Security (WIIS) Italy. The views expressed in this report are solely those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Network or the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation.



»» At a time when formal political tracks were largely blocked, local actors developed initiatives outside institutional frameworks, yet with clear political effects

As a result, space was left, deliberately or not, for different communities, groups and individuals within them to invoke their own narrative of the past, often in competition with each other. This has further fragmented the public sphere. Such fragmentation weakens civic peace and risks turning unresolved memories, wounds and exclusions into the ground for future violence, whose early signs we have already seen in the massacres that took on a sectarian dimension in Latakia and Tartous in March 2025 and Suwayda in July 2025.

Since the fall of the Assad regime in December 2024, international discussions on Syria have shifted toward reconstruction and heritage revival, with UNESCO¹ and supporting states playing a visible role. Yet, by approaching heritage through top-down frameworks detached from its political dimension, these interventions risk reproducing the very mistakes that helped fuel the conflict.² This approach reflects a broader post-2025 political shift toward stabilising Syria,³ even at the risk of sidelining deeper questions of justice, accountability and public participation.

Heritage as mediation in a context of prolonged conflict

To get past the imprecise “conflict and post-conflict” divides, it is essential to look back at the years leading up to the fall of former President Bashar al-Assad. At a time when formal political tracks were largely blocked,⁴ local actors developed initiatives outside institutional frameworks, yet with clear political effects. These initiatives approached heritage as a social resource for negotiation and mediation, rooted in local knowledge, community needs and relations of trust, and embedded in everyday economic, political and social life.

The southern region between Suwayda and Daraa illustrates how shared cultural practices can help rebuild trust in communities divided by years of political manipulation and conflict. Social and economic ties coexisted with a heavy legacy of tensions, which successive authorities had exploited to deepen divisions. After 2011, the regime and de facto authorities further inflamed these tensions by recruiting local armed gangs, exploiting old disputes, reframing them along sectarian lines, demonising the “other” through media narratives and targeting activists who worked to sustain solidarity between the two regions against hate speech. This contributed to the fragmentation of social relations and the erosion of traditional solidarity networks.

Within this context, locally driven initiatives began to revive shared practices rooted in agricultural life, including the restoration of a grain mill in the

¹ UNESCO, Syria: UNESCO Resumes Operations with a First Initiative at the National Museum in Damascus, 10 June 2025, <https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/syria-unesco-resumes-operations-first-initiative-national-museum-damascus>.

² Munawar, Nour Allah, “For Whom the Bell Tolls? Heritage Reconstruction as Hope in Post-Assad Syria”, in *CHS Insights*, 19 February 2026, <https://chs-doha.org/en/Insights/Pages/For-Whom-the-Bell-Tolls-Heritage-Reconstruction-as-Hope-in-Post-Assad-Syria.aspx>.

³ Speidl, Bianka and Hanga Horváth-Sántha, “Can Europe Still Matter in Syria?”, in *Strategic Europe*, 17 February 2026, <https://carnegieendowment.org/europe/strategic-europe/2026/02/can-europe-still-matter-in-syria>.

⁴ Alzoubi, Zedoun et al., *Emerging from the Ashes: A Snapshot of Syria on the Eve of Regime Collapse*, Beirut, Issam Fares Institute and LUGARIT, December 2024, <https://www.lugarit.com/insights/insights-emerging-from-the-ashes-syria-on-the-eve-of-regime-collapse>.



»» The negotiated character of heritage reveals a crucial dimension

village of al-Duwaira,⁵ which before the war served communities living along the Suwayda-Daraa border, and the documentation of oral traditions, songs and stories linked to farming and rain rituals in villages on both sides of the governorate boundary. Young men and women who had grown up during the war participated in documenting these narratives and negotiating their meanings, as these stories themselves carried the imprint of people shaped by the discourse of violence.

These initiatives, many of which spread across a fragmented Syria,⁶ shared a common denominator: they did not treat heritage as folklore or as a cultural activity detached from everyday life. Rather, they approached it as a means of rebuilding trust among communities, relying on local knowledge and on their capacity for mediation and gradual engagement within a sensitive political and security environment.

What these initiatives did was select from the past what could be activated in the present to build a future for the country. That act, not the “object,” defines heritage as a resource for peacebuilding. Living heritage resides first and foremost in *networks of exchange, solidarity and trust* that extend into the countryside and across regions, enabling the reactivation of social and economic life. This holds true even in “outstanding” sites listed by UNESCO, such as the souks of Aleppo and Damascus or classified traditional crafts.⁷

Reshaping gender roles in the context of peacebuilding

The negotiated character of heritage reveals a crucial dimension: heritage as a space where gender identities are shaped, reinforced and renegotiated. The years of prolonged conflict have shown that women played a central role in maintaining networks of solidarity and managing social relations within conflict-affected communities. With the collapse of many state institutions during the war, women engaged in community work, assuming essential roles⁸ in relief efforts and in organising local initiatives aimed at preserving a minimum level of social cohesion.

For example, women were the main driving force of the initiatives in Suwayda and Daraa previously mentioned. They designed the project, negotiated the necessary approvals and implemented activities despite the pressure of state-supported hate campaigns. They also communicated with other areas that shared the same heritage and invited them to join. This experience shows that women in Syria have developed significant expertise in designing participatory processes. In this sense, women's participation became an essential part of

⁵ Qamh wa Sahriat, “Returning to the opening day of the wheat and evening mill...” (video in Arabic), in Facebook, 6 June 2024, <https://www.facebook.com/61559236936448/videos/379947391201421>.

⁶ Ziedan, Eva, “Souls of Homes: Heritage as a Manifestation of Community Relationships through Space and Time”, in Al-Harithy, Howayda, *Urban Recovery. Intersecting Displacement with Post War Reconstruction*, London/New York, Routledge, 2022, p. 320-342

⁷ Ziedan, Eva, “This Bridge Is Not Enough for Peace”, in *Syria Untold*, 23 March 2026, <https://syriauntold.com/?p=80362>.

⁸ Hijazi, Thuraya et al., “Peacebuilding Initiatives and Alternative Forms of Women's Political Participation in Syria”, in *Arab Reform Initiative Reports*, August 2023, <https://www.arab-reform.net/?p=29575>.



»» *The new authorities in Damascus have so far failed to honour the commitments to political inclusion and women's participation*

the peacebuilding process itself: it helped challenge exclusionary narratives without denying their existence, by recovering alternative social memories and practices that could support a more just future.

Today, this role should not be seen as an additional contribution to public life, nor as a symbolic representation or formal compliance with international standards. Rather, it must be recognised as a fundamental element in any effort to rebuild society. Designing reconstruction or peacebuilding initiatives without involving women in leadership positions risks reproducing the same patterns of exclusion that weakened communities before and during the war.

Power and the limits of participation in today's Syria

Under Assad's rule, memory and heritage were politicised to serve a discourse of state domination and the exclusion of numerous social groups. Women also lived for decades within a deeply unequal system that confined them to traditional roles, excluded them from decision-making and legally restricted their rights in matters of personal status, work, inheritance and beyond.

More than a year after the fall of the Assad regime, and fifteen years after the outbreak of the anti-regime uprising, Syria has entered a new political phase, but the new authorities in Damascus have so far failed to honour the commitments to political inclusion and women's participation that they made after taking power in December 2024.⁹ Instead, their policies have contributed to the exclusion of large segments of the population and to the reaffirmation of the masculine character of political and public life. This can be seen from the outset, including for example in the limited presence of women in emerging transitional institutions: only one woman minister out of 22,¹⁰ and women's representation in the People's Assembly not exceeding 5 per cent.¹¹ More importantly, it has contributed to the creation of a broader public climate that does not protect women's presence in political and public life.

In practice, the current structure of power does not possess, and it shows no intention of developing, the institutional mechanisms necessary for meaningful social participation or for recognition of the roles of women, who constitute more than half of Syrian society. This absence of trust and infrastructure constitutes a structural weakness, not a secondary issue.

The exclusion of those who should have been at the negotiation table and involved in shaping the country's future produces tangible outcomes. Using a heritage lens is important to reveal the symbolic dimensions of this exclusion and the ways gendered and national identities are currently being produced. The exclusion of women capable of articulating inclusive national narratives

⁹ "Syrian Leader Sharaa Pledges to Form Inclusive Government", in *Reuters*, 30 January 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/syrian-leader-sharaa-pledges-form-inclusive-government-2025-01-30>.

¹⁰ Syrian Women's Political Movement, *Statement of the Syrian Women's Political Movement on the Constitutional Declaration and the New Ministerial Formation*, 3 April 2025, <https://syrianwomenpm.org/?p=8833>.

¹¹ Karam Shaar Advisory, "The Syrian People's Assembly 2025: Electoral Results and Representation Gaps", in *Syria in Figures*, No. 15 (26 January 2026), <https://karamshaar.com/?p=616563>.



leaves this space open to exclusionary discourses and closed memories. As a result, hate speech comes to occupy the very public space in which new generations are socialised: it denies the possibility that women can articulate shared memories and narratives, discredits their role in society and consequently their ability to contribute to cultural heritage, pushes some of them to adapt to the roles imposed by the new political reality and attacks others as traitors in order to intimidate and deter them from continuing their public work.

A notable example is an initiative led by women activists from across Syria aimed at supporting peacebuilding and reconnecting the fragmented parts of the country immediately after the fall of the regime. That moment reflected a widespread collective desire among Syrians to act and find hope in the regime's fall as a means of repairing fractures. These women, coming from diverse contexts, gathered together, each carrying the grievances of their region and their aspirations. They worked with local communities across multiple areas to rethink narratives of victim and perpetrator, and to restore the humanity of the "other" within a framework of genuine transitional justice. They also revisited key moments in Syrian history by highlighting the experiences of marginalised social actors, such as Syrian women, and by reviving alternative practices.

However, what followed – massacres on the coast and in Suwayda, political settlements driven not by state-building but by external pressures, as well as tolerated policies of exclusion and hate speech – undermined these initiatives and led to their social isolation. Many cross-regional efforts retreated into protective local environments, operating within narrow geographic circles, with shrinking space for debate confined to the limits of local or sectarian frameworks, in an attempt to ensure their survival. These actors have been excluded from meaningful participation in decision-making, along with their capacity to provide careful, context-sensitive analysis and shape a vision of transitional justice that enables all Syrians to feel a sense of belonging to a single country.

The ways in which exclusion is being reproduced and gender identities are being reconstituted in Syria warrant further study by scholars and peacebuilding practitioners. This requires early attention to how visions are framed and how thinking is structured. It also calls for close scrutiny of both declared and undeclared public policies as part of the broader political process. Addressing the legacies of past and ongoing violence cannot be postponed in the name of stability, nor can it be managed by a non-participatory authority. It requires a genuine national dialogue among Syrians, in which memory becomes an object of social negotiation rather than a tool of retaliatory mobilisation. As we have seen, heritage can function as a lever for peacebuilding only when it is grounded in genuinely participatory processes – which meaningfully engage those who have long been active in local mediation, and that recognise women as central, not peripheral, actors.

The Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) is a private, independent non-profit think tank, founded in 1965 on the initiative of Altiero Spinelli. IAI seeks to promote awareness of international politics and to contribute to the advancement of European integration and multilateral cooperation. Its focus embraces topics of strategic relevance such as European integration, security and defence, international economics and global governance, energy, climate and Italian foreign policy; as well as the dynamics of cooperation and conflict in key geographical regions such as the Mediterranean and Middle East, Asia, Eurasia, Africa and the Americas. IAI publishes an English-language quarterly (*The International Spectator*), an online webzine (*AffariInternazionali*), two book series (*Trends and Perspectives in International Politics* and *IAI Research Studies*) and some papers' series related to IAI research projects (*Documenti IAI*, *IAI Papers*, etc.).

Via dei Montecatini, 17
I-00186 Rome, Italy
T +39 06 6976831
www.iai.it



Latest IAI Briefs

Interim Editor: **Riccardo Alcaro** (r.alcaro@iai.it)
ISSN 3103-4071 | DOI 10.82088/IAIbrief2643

26 43	Eva Ziedan, <i>Negotiating Heritage: Local Mediation and the Reconstruction of Social Space in Today's Syria</i>
26 42	Nazanine Moshiri, <i>From Recognition to Alignment: The Next Challenge for European Climate, Peace and Security Policy</i>
26 41	Eulalia Rubio and Cinzia Alcidi, <i>Merging Cohesion Policy and CAP: What Does It Take for National and Regional Partnership Plans to Deliver?</i>
26 40	Eulalia Rubio and Cinzia Alcidi, <i>The European Competitiveness Fund and the New InvestEU: How to Make Them Transformational?</i>
26 39	Luca Barana and Luca Cinciripini, <i>Ukraine and the Next MFF: The Strive for Predictability</i>
26 38	Matteo Bursi, <i>MFF 2028-2034: Designing EU External Action in the Global Disorder</i>
26 37	Nicoletta Pirozzi, <i>Shadows of Unanimity: Rethinking Decision-Making in EU Foreign and Security Policy</i>
26 36	Sara Čabarkapa, <i>Italy and Montenegro: Bilateral Cooperation and Montenegro's EU Accession</i>
26 35	Akram Ezzamouri, <i>Stabilising Syria without Reinforcing Authoritarianism: Priorities for Italy and Europe</i>
26 34	Luca Barana, <i>Vertical and Multi-level: A Coordinated EU Governance for Technological Competitiveness</i>