

# Italy's Limited Engagement in Syria, and How to Boost It

by Dario Cristiani

More than six months after the collapse of the Assad regime, Italy remains a relatively marginal actor in shaping the post-conflict trajectory of Syria. Unlike other European countries such as France or the UK, the Italian government has taken a low-profile approach, offering limited political engagement and sending mixed signals about its priorities in the country's fragile transition.

Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni has rarely addressed the Syrian issue in public. Her only notable statement came during a short speech in Parliament in the immediate aftermath of Assad's fall, in which she denied any intention of normalising relations with Damascus<sup>1</sup> – despite the fact that several moves by her government suggested otherwise.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Italian Chamber of Deputies, *Aula, Seduta 399 - Consiglio europeo, approvata risoluzione su comunicazioni Meloni* (video and transcript), 17 December 2024, <https://webtv.camera.it/evento/26964>.

<sup>2</sup> Stefano Feltri, "Perché Giorgia Meloni stava con Assad", in *Substack - Appunti di Stefano*

This early intervention did little to clarify Italy's strategic position and has not been followed by meaningful political initiatives at the highest level.

Foreign Minister Antonio Tajani has played a more visible diplomatic role, at least initially. On 9 January 2025, exactly one month after the regime's collapse, he hosted the first meeting of the so-called Transatlantic Quint – comprising Italy, the United States, the United Kingdom, France and Germany – devoted entirely to the Syrian question.<sup>3</sup> The following day, Tajani went to Damascus, where he became the first European foreign minister to meet the interim Syrian leadership, holding talks with newly appointed President Ahmed Al-Sharaa and publicly reaffirmed Italy's commitment

Feltri, 10 December 2024, <https://appunti.substack.com/p/perche-giorgia-meloni-stava-con-assad>.

<sup>3</sup> Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, *Quintet Meeting on Syria*, 8 January 2025, <https://www.esteri.it/en/?p=129286>.

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to Syria's territorial unity and social cohesion.<sup>4</sup>

However, this early activism has not translated into sustained engagement. Meloni has not held any direct talks with Syrian authorities, nor has she taken part in high-level European coordination on Syria. Rome's diplomatic presence has been largely symbolic since, and its policy position remains ambiguous.

Italy's limited diplomatic presence was once again evident during the Paris Conference on Syria held on 13 February 2025. While several countries dispatched their foreign ministers or even heads of government, Italy was represented by Undersecretary for Foreign Affairs Maria Tripodi. During the conference, Tripodi reaffirmed Italy's humanitarian commitment to the Syrian population, highlighting Rome's role in providing assistance across all regions and critical sectors, particularly healthcare. She pledged that humanitarian aid would continue through 2025 and reiterated Italy's openness to supporting reconstruction efforts.

Yet these statements were not matched by a broader strategic initiative. Beyond humanitarian assistance – which has long been a pillar of Italy's engagement in conflict-affected areas – Rome has remained largely reactive, and has offered little in terms of political vision or diplomatic leadership in

shaping Syria's future, while European engagement with Damascus's new leadership steadily increased in recent months, signalling a cautious but growing recognition of the al-Sharaa government.

On 7 May, President Macron hosted President al-Sharaa in Paris – his first official visit to a European capital – urging him to protect all communities in Syria's multi-confessional society.<sup>5</sup> The visit came amid rising concerns over sectarian clashes that have left hundreds of dead.<sup>6</sup> Just two days later, on 9 May, the Council of the European Union lifted all remaining economic restrictive measures on Syria, describing the decision as part of a broader strategy to support "the Syrian people in reuniting and rebuilding a new, inclusive, pluralistic and peaceful Syria".<sup>7</sup> Italy welcomed this decision,<sup>8</sup> yet there was little political action after that.

<sup>5</sup> "Macron Meets with Syrian Leader Sharaa, Telling Him to Protect Rights of 'All People'", in *Le Monde*, 7 May 2025, [https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2025/05/07/macron-meets-with-syrian-leader-al-sharaa-telling-him-to-protect-the-rights-of-all-people\\_6741029\\_4.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2025/05/07/macron-meets-with-syrian-leader-al-sharaa-telling-him-to-protect-the-rights-of-all-people_6741029_4.html).

<sup>6</sup> Katya Alkhateeb and Faten Ghosn, "Syria Faces Renewed Sectarian Violence as Government Fails to Deliver Inclusivity", in *The Conversation*, 12 May 2025, <https://theconversation.com/syria-faces-renewed-sectarian-violence-as-government-fails-to-deliver-inclusivity-255974>.

<sup>7</sup> Council of the EU, *Syria: EU Adopts Legal Acts to Lift Economic Sanctions on Syria, Enacting Recent Political Agreement*, 28 May 2025, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2025/05/28/syria-eu-adopts-legal-acts-to-lift-economic-sanctions-on-syria-enacting-recent-political-agreement>.

<sup>8</sup> "Italy, Poland Welcome EU Decision to Lift Sanctions on Syria", in *Syrian Arab News Agency*, 21 May 2025, <https://sana.sy/en/?p=356436>.

<sup>4</sup> Mario Giro, "La visita di Tajani e il ruolo dell'Italia nella ricostruzione della Siria", in *Domani*, 9 January 2025, <https://www.editorialedomani.it/politica/mondo/siria-antonio-tajani-visita-ruolo-italia-ricostruzione-al-jolani-hts-go12byep>.

## Explaining marginality

Specifically, Italy's limited political engagement in post-Assad Syria can be explained by a mix of lack of strategic preparedness, narrow and sectoral goals, and inadequate resources. More broadly, this marginality reflects a general lack of strategic vision toward the Levant and the Middle East. While the Meloni government has been more active in specific areas – such as Algeria, the Gulf countries and Türkiye – its approach to the Levant has been largely passive and reactive. Rome's engagement with Syria exemplifies this absence of vision, further compounded by the peculiarities and contingencies of the Syrian context.

The sudden collapse of the Baathist regime caught Rome off guard, and the government has since struggled to articulate a coherent response. This political absence has, however, been partially offset by the activism of Italy's diplomatic mission in Damascus.

Italy was, in fact, the first EU member state to explore re-engagement with Bashar al-Assad's regime when it had seemingly consolidated control during the early 2020s. At the time, Rome's primary concern was the return of Syrian refugees, an issue that continues to shape its approach. Officials hoped to re-establish migration management channels through bilateral agreements with Damascus. Beyond these practical considerations, there was also an ideological element. Within parts of Italy's ruling coalition – particularly among far-right figures – there has long been a degree of tacit sympathy for Assad, seen as a bulwark against

both jihadism and Western liberalism.<sup>9</sup> In earlier years, Giorgia Meloni and Brothers of Italy openly said that "being on the side of Assad was in Italy's national interests".<sup>10</sup> Matteo Salvini also openly expressed support for Assad remaining in power.<sup>11</sup>

The collapse of the regime forced Rome to adapt, but the core priorities have not changed. The return of refugees remains Italy's overriding objective, followed by concerns over the potential resurgence of terrorism, which it shares with its European and Transatlantic partners.<sup>12</sup> A third concern – more visible under the Meloni government – is the protection of Christian communities in Syria, often framed as part of Italy's broader defence of religious minorities in crisis zones. Finally, Rome has expressed interest in participating in Syria's reconstruction, though its role remains ill-defined and contingent on broader EU frameworks.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>9</sup> "Suprematisti bianchi love Assad", in *Il Foglio*, 14 August 2017, <https://www.ilmfoglio.it/esteri/2017/08/14/news/suprematisti-bianchi-love-assad-148691>.

<sup>10</sup> Fratelli d'Italia, *Focus Hezbollah. Documento di posizionamento*, 13 December 2018, p. 4, <https://www.fratelli-italia.it/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/DOC-POSIZIONAMENTO-Focus-Hezbollah.docx>.

<sup>11</sup> Massimo Bordin, "Così la difesa di Assad tiene insieme Salvini, Gino Strada, Vauro e CasaPound", in *Il Foglio*, 17 April 2018, <https://www.ilmfoglio.it/bordin-line/2018/04/17/news/cosi-la-difesa-di-assad-tiene-insieme-salvini-gino-strada-vauro-e-casapound-189746>.

<sup>12</sup> Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, *Quintet Meeting on Syria*, cit.

<sup>13</sup> Fortunato Pinto and Jeremiah Fisayo-Bambi, "Italian FM Tajani Meets with Head of Syria's New Government in Damascus", in *Euronews*, 10 January 2025, <https://www.euronews>.

Yet even if Italy wanted to play a more active role, it might lack the necessary capacity. The Meloni government has placed increasing diplomatic and financial emphasis on Africa, particularly through the so-called Mattei Plan, potentially limiting Rome's ability to exert sustained influence in the Syrian context too. Faced with competing priorities and limited bandwidth, Syria has likely fallen into the category of "low-intensity" engagement, where Italy maintains a basic presence and humanitarian commitments, but does not seek a leadership role.

### *Could the US shift represent an opportunity?*

In recent weeks, the United States has significantly recalibrated its approach to Syria. President Donald Trump initially declared that the US should avoid entanglements in Syria following the fall of the Baathist regime.<sup>14</sup> However, Washington has since reviewed its position, recognising the risks of state collapse and regional instability, but also eyeing the potential normalisation of Syria's relations with Israel in the framework of the Abraham Accords.<sup>15</sup>

In a notable shift, President Trump signed an executive order lifting most US economic sanctions on Syria,

[com/2025/01/10/italian-fm-tajani-meets-with-head-of-syrias-new-government-in-damascus](https://www.nytimes.com/2025/01/10/italian-fm-tajani-meets-with-head-of-syrias-new-government-in-damascus).

<sup>14</sup> Tom Bateman, "Trump Says Syria 'Not Our Fight'. Staying out May Not Be So Easy", in *BBC News*, 13 December 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c0j1z5ylgjj0>.

<sup>15</sup> Allison Minor, "Three Abraham Accords Goals Trump Should Raise with Netanyahu", in *MENASource*, 3 July 2025, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/?p=857787>.

while targeted measures remain in place against Assad and individuals directly associated with the former regime. This easing of restrictions signals a departure from the previous US strategy of maximum pressure.<sup>16</sup> The Trump administration has also formally endorsed the leadership of al-Sharaa, despite residual scepticism linked to his past associations with Islamist armed groups.<sup>17</sup> Concurrently, the US reviewed its counterterrorism designations and has recently removed Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) from its list of terrorist organisations.<sup>18</sup>

As part of a broader realignment, the US has begun facilitating preliminary negotiations between Syria and Israel, aimed at establishing a security framework that could eventually pave the way toward diplomatic normalisation. These talks remain tentative, especially given Israel's unwavering position on the Golan Heights, but they reflect a willingness to reconfigure the regional order.<sup>19</sup> However, the talks might have already being jeopardised for good as Israel bombed central Damascus, hitting the Presidential Palace and

<sup>16</sup> "Explainer: Which US Sanctions on Syria Were Lifted and What Comes Next?", in *The New Arab*, 1 July 2025, <https://www.newarab.com/node/5649165>.

<sup>17</sup> Michael Crowley, "Trump Lifts Sanctions on Syria, Tightening His Embrace of Its New Leader", in *The New York Times*, 30 June 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/06/30/us/politics/trump-syria-sanctions.html>.

<sup>18</sup> "US Revokes 'Terrorist' Designation for Syrian President's Former Group HTS", in *Al Jazeera*, 7 July 2025, <https://aje.io/es8018>.

<sup>19</sup> "Preliminary Israel-Syria Talks Begin under Trump's Watch: Report", in *The New Arab*, 1 July 2025, <https://www.newarab.com/node/5648895>.



the Ministry of Defence, on 16 July, intervening officially to “protect” the Druze communities under attack in Suwayda.<sup>20</sup>

Yet, despite the Meloni government's pronounced Atlanticism, this American shift towards Damascus is unlikely to have a substantive effect on Italy's Syria policy. As noted, Italy has shown limited appetite for engagement and has to deal with limited resources. Moreover, in Syria, the role of “Transatlantic driver” of the relationship with Syria is already taken by Ankara,<sup>21</sup> so that Rome cannot aspire to play it.

### *Can soft power be a tool of engagement?*

Despite its limited geopolitical role, Italy retains valuable soft power tools to reengage with Syria, particularly through cultural diplomacy and academic cooperation. These longstanding ties – especially in archaeology – offer a constructive and low-risk avenue for jumpstarting bilateral relations. On 15 April 2025, Ambassador Stefano Ravagnan met with Syria's new Minister of Culture, Mohammed Yassin Saleh, to reflect on how Italy “can better contribute to the safeguard and relaunch of the huge Syrian cultural heritage”,<sup>22</sup> given the

longstanding ties that exist between the two countries in the cultural preservation sector. Universities like La Sapienza, L'Orientale and Ca' Foscari have led archaeological missions in Syria for decades, and many of their alumni now occupy senior positions in Syria's cultural institutions, such as Anas Haj Zidan, the recently appointed Director of the Directorate-General of Antiquities and Museums (DGAM).<sup>23</sup>

This cultural link intersects with urgent economic and security priorities. The war devastated Syria's heritage sector and triggered an education crisis: UNICEF said that over 2.4 million children are out of school, with illiteracy and dropout rates soaring.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, over the past ten years, the education sector was specifically targeted by Iran, as Tehran sought to establish itself as the dominant actor in shaping Syrian curricula and programmes,<sup>25</sup> creating conditions favourable to its long-term strategic goals.<sup>26</sup> Iran's withdrawal from Syria has left a vacuum that the new Syrian government is struggling to address. In this context, Italy could

on our deep historical and academical relations, how can [Italy] better contribute to the safeguard and relaunch of the huge Syrian cultural heritage?”, *X post*, 15 April 2025, [https://x.com/Ste\\_Ravagnan/status/1912165030885495219](https://x.com/Ste_Ravagnan/status/1912165030885495219).

<sup>23</sup> Ghiath Rammo, “Il soft power italiano in Siria passa attraverso l'archeologia”, in *Artribune*, 1 February 2025, <https://www.artribune.com/?p=1133760>.

<sup>24</sup> UNICEF website: Syrian Crisis, <https://www.unicef.org/emergencies/syrian-crisis>.

<sup>25</sup> “Iran's Influence over Syrian Higher Education: An In-Depth Analysis”, in *The Syrian Observer*, 5 August 2024, <https://syrianobserver.com/?p=91781>.

<sup>26</sup> Dana Saqbani, “Iran's Soft War in Syria: Exerting Influence through Arts and Education”, in *IranWire*, 17 February 2020, <https://iranwire.com/en/features/66713>.

<sup>20</sup> “Israel Launches Heavy Airstrikes in Damascus, Vowing to Protect Druze”, in *Reuters*, 17 July 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/clashes-resume-syrias-druze-city-sweida-after-ceasefire-announcement-2025-07-16>.

<sup>21</sup> Dario Cristiani, “Success, with Caveats. Ambivalent Transatlantic Views of Türkiye's Victory in Syria”, in *GMF Insights*, 17 January 2025, <https://www.gmfus.org/node/23850>.

<sup>22</sup> Stefano Ravagnan [@Ste\_Ravagnan], “Based

provide support through restoration activities, academic partnerships and educational programmes – a strategic form of engagement that aligns with Rome's strengths, avoids overextension and complements broader Mediterranean stability goals. With Rome's diplomatic attention increasingly focused on Africa, this kind of targeted cooperation may be Italy's most feasible and impactful option in Syria.

However, even though Italy clearly has several options to boost its engagement in Syria's cultural and educational sectors, as well as with the country's civil society, the lack of a coherent vision for the region – combined with limited financial and human resources dedicated to the Near East – will inevitably limit the effectiveness of these soft power tools, which alone cannot make a systemic difference. Moreover, while the current Italian government has been active in deepening bilateral ties with several actors crucial to Syria's future – Türkiye, Saudi Arabia and the UAE – these ties have, in many cases, remained confined to bilateral issues and business opportunities. They have not yet evolved into opportunities for cooperation on Levantine challenges. To turn the tide in Syria, Italy should first develop a new vision for its engagement in the Levant, transforming its deepening bilateral relations with key regional actors into tools of greater regional strategic influence. Second, in the specific case of Syria, there is a clear lack of financial resources and political capital – so significant in its current magnitude that it cannot be offset by an active and highly competent diplomatic mission or vibrant people-to-people

relations, such as cultural cooperation. To enhance its engagement in Syria, Rome must therefore focus on two key factors: crafting a new regional vision and dedicating more targeted resources to the Syrian context.

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- 25 | 40 Gabriele Abbondanza, *The Case for an EU-NATO Hybrid Centre of Excellence in the Indo-Pacific*
- 25 | 39 Leonardo Gallo, Sakurako Maki and Italo Parrilli, *Bridging the EU's Innovation Gap: Supporting Hubs for Academic-Powered Enterprises*
- 25 | 38 Nicoletta Pirozzi, *Securing Ukraine's Path Towards the EU: Status and Perspective*
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