

Syria in Transition

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Welcome to the February issue of *Syria in Transition*, a monthly magazine on Syrian politics and society that cuts through the noise. SiT goes straight to the point and shuns unnecessary verbiage – just as we would prefer as avid readers ourselves.

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Live by the sword

Syria's president is using force to unify the country

Syria is being reunited at gunpoint. Ahmad al-Sharaa's gamble may restore the state's borders, but it could also harden minority fears and lock the country into a future ruled by coercion.

Ahmad al-Sharaa has chosen force over dialogue. Working with Turkey, Russia, and the US to crush the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and reassert Damascus's authority over the northeast, Syria's president has made it clear that ambiguous sovereignty will no longer be tolerated. “One state, one army, one flag” is the motto of the hour. His bet is that force, applied decisively and relatively cleanly, can finish what largely performative diplomacy had failed to deliver: a unified Syria.

The approach is Bismarckian. Otto von Bismarck, the Prussian statesman who engineered Germany's unification, did not wait for consensus among German princes; he created facts on the ground and bullied everyone into accepting them. Sharaa appears to be doing the same. If state sovereignty was all that mattered, the logic would be hard to fault. No government can indefinitely tolerate a rival armed authority controlling a third of a nation's territory, including its most resource-rich areas. Given the zero-sum logic of the Middle East (and increasingly, the world), armed autonomy is often treated as the prelude to independence.

Breaking the deadlock

Almost a year of talks between Damascus and the SDF has produced statements of principle but slow progress on the practical question of power-sharing i.e. ‘state integration.’ Meanwhile, the SDF further

entrenched itself administratively and militarily while adopting maximalist demands at negotiations. A short, sharp military campaign of the kind unleashed ended the deadlock. It serves to deter other would-be autonomists, and allows Damascus to dictate the terms of reintegration.

If it works, Sharaa will be credited with restoring Syria's territorial integrity in a way that Bashar al-Assad noticeably failed to do after 2011. Most capitals would welcome that.

But history also suggests a warning. Where unification is achieved through internal war – as in Sri Lanka or Algeria – territorial integrity is restored at the expense of trust and inclusion. Bismarck unified Germany mainly by fighting external wars that strengthened internal cohesion. Sharaa is fighting internal wars against religious and ethnic minorities supported by external powers. This tends to leave enduring grudges that are open for exploitation.

The immediate risks are obvious. A fight to the finish with the Kurds risks drawing in unfriendly neighbours like Israel and Iraq who don't want to see an empowered Sunni Arab government in Syria. Reconstruction would be threatened if pro-Kurd members of the US Congress enact “bone-crunching” sanctions, as they have threatened to do. An even more insidious danger is what a victory against the Kurds would mean for the nature of the emerging Syrian state.

Enduring mistrust

For Syria's Kurds, the SDF was a guarantee – albeit imperfect – against a return to exclusion by a hyper-centralised Arab nationalist regime. Its military defeat will not dissolve that fear, nor the aspiration of Kurdish independence.

Mistrust of Damascus will not be confined to the northeast. Other minorities will be watching closely. For them, the rational response is to keep options open, including external backers and standing militias. The Druze's hardline strategy of decisive break with Damascus and zero compromise stands in marked contrast to the softer Kurdish approach; and ultimately it may be more successful at producing real autonomy.

If all efforts at local autonomy failed, the result could be a country unified on paper but hedged against from within. Coercive unification can succeed, but there is a cost. The 'fierce state' would grow stronger but the

sense of nationhood, love of country, and togetherness would weaken.

This is not to defend permanent fragmentation. A Syria split into armed zones, each backed by a foreign patron, is unacceptable. The question is not whether Damascus should reclaim authority, but whether it can do so without undermining an inclusive national identity and peaceful co-existence among communities.

Bismarck's wars of unification were only the first moves in a longer process of nation-building. What came after – institutions, education, freedoms, social welfare – was what made Germany great. Sharaa may believe he can replicate that sequencing, and perhaps he can. But by choosing force first, and not as a last resort, he has narrowed his room for manoeuvre. Should regional or international circumstances shift, and internal enemies rally, he will have no recourse but to the sword.

Wise after the fact

Three points on SDF integration that don't stand scrutiny

As the dust settles in northeast Syria, a convenient story is taking shape about who refused compromise and why force became “inevitable”. Look closer, and three pillars of that narrative begin to crack.

The battle over who gets to define what happens in northeast Syria has been in full swing since government forces attacked Kurdish-majority neighbourhoods in Aleppo city in late December. Attacked by government forces? That's framing! Wasn't it the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) that escalated first with snipers and suicide drones, followed by what some described as Syria's 9/11: a drone strike on the Aleppo governorate building that left a hole in a concrete slab? That, too, is framing. Here, responsibility is shifted away from the SDF while the limited mandate of the Sharaa government is obscured by omitting that it is a *transitional government*. There is no reporting without framing. What matters is remaining open to critical reasoning and plural interpretation so essential for the reconciliation Syria needs.

There follow three points where dominant narratives do not withstand scrutiny. They are, obviously, open to debate.

The March 10th agreement shouldn't be read selectively

Much of the circulating narrative presents the 10 March agreement as a missed opportunity by the SDF. In this account, the agreement laid out a clear path toward integration, but the SDF rejected reasonable offers from Damascus, failed to meet the agreed deadline at the end of 2025, and thereby triggered the subsequent escalation. This reading, however, reduces the agreement to a narrow question of military integration, often concealed behind technical language of security sector reform. At the same time, it treats the negotiating position of the government in Damascus as self-evidently legitimate, pragmatic, and pursued in good faith.

This version does not withstand scrutiny. Several core provisions of the 10 March agreement were violated by the transitional government itself. Most notably,

Point 3, which calls for a nationwide ceasefire, was breached during the large-scale violence by government forces against the Druze in July 2025. Point 1, which guarantees the rights of all Syrians to representation and participation in the political process and state institutions, is also hard to square with the highly centralised, top-down process dominated by an elite around President al-Sharaa. The March 2025 Constitutional Declaration is a case in point, in both its formation and provisions.

Momentum on military and security integration cannot be generated in isolation. In any negotiation setting, progress depends on credible movement on representation, participation and the rule of law. In contrast, the fourteen-point agreement issued on 18 January further entrenched a model of state formation driven by unilateral presidential decrees, without binding commitments to anchor political rights in a new constitution. The sequencing and specifics of the January 30 agreement will need to be negotiated in what has been a largely performative process in the past.

Underlying much of the dominant narrative is an unquestioned but misplaced assumption: that Syria already possesses a fully legitimate state authority entitled to assert sovereignty over actors labelled as “non-state.” The reality is that Syria remains in a transitional phase in which the contours of the state itself are contested, most visibly in the absence of a permanent constitution. Treating sovereignty as settled mistakes power for legitimacy. State-building, by definition, requires sovereignty to be jointly constituted.

Proto-state consolidation is not state-building

Official statements, media coverage, and lobbying commentary are saturated with references to “integration into the new Syrian state.” In formal international law, Syria retains statehood. Analytically and politically, however, the state itself is under construction. At a basic definitional level, a state is a durable set of institutions that successfully claims a monopoly over legitimate violence, extracts resources, administers territory, and enjoys both internal and external recognition. What exists in Syria is a proto-state: an authority that exercises partial territorial control, performs limited governance functions, and lacks full sovereignty due to fragmented territory, competing armed actors both within and beyond its ranks, weak institutions, external dependencies and reliance on coercion.

President Ahmad al-Sharaa has so far approached this moment as one of proto-state consolidation, not genuine state-building. Within this logic, a strong central authority is treated as the starting point. In the absence of inclusive and demonstrable consent, and without established mechanisms such as a genuinely inclusive transitional government body, the tools available to achieve consolidation are necessarily agreements with the elite and brute force. Genuine state-building, which in Syria's case inevitably intersects with questions of nation-building and identity follows a different logic altogether. There, a strong central authority results from a social contract arising from political participation, representation and consent.

Calling the existing power apparatus a "state" is, in effect, a claim to legitimacy. This explains why many purveyors of the current narrative use "state" and "government" interchangeably, as if they were synonymous. Coercive consolidation is thereby legitimised before any political settlement has taken place, and any form of dissent is recast as "anti-state".

Tragically, this logic is not new. Bashar al-Assad perfected it by framing his regime as the guardian of the Syrian state, deliberately blurring the line between state and government. Louis XIV was more candid when he declared: *L'État, c'est moi.*

SDF and AANES were deeply flawed, but that's not the point

Once government forces crossed the Euphrates and the SDF – and with it the Autonomous Administration – collapsed amid major tribal defections, a wave of commentary portrayed the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) as an illegitimate and normatively flawed entity whose failure had been inevitable. There is no doubt that the AANES was never the democratic and human-rights beacon its supporters claimed. Nor was the SDF the inclusive, multi-ethnic alliance of its marketing. The reality includes authoritarianism, forced displacement and illegal detention. But, with minor variations, the same can be said of every *de facto* authority that has held territory in Syria over the past decade, including Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (remember the year-long anti-HTS protests in its Idlib fiefdom?) and, indeed, the new government in Damascus.

Much of the sudden fixation on the SDF's lack of Arab support is really about justifying a *fait accompli*. Some

argue that the regime's advance was not coercion but liberation. Certainly many Arab communities genuinely welcomed the government forces after years of perceived humiliation at being ruled by Kurds (including foreigners); but the argument is ultimately unconvincing. The offensive against the SDF cannot plausibly fall within the mandate of a transitional government as it will likely reshape the country's political trajectory for generations. A transitional authority's responsibility is to facilitate reunification after years of *de facto* partition, not to impose it by force. The same reasoning would justify a future offensive against Suwayda on the grounds that Sheikh al-Hajari had usurped state power and conspired with Israel. It could even justify a Russian "protective" intervention along the coast under the pretext that Alawites required safeguarding.

Damascus' insistence that all armed groups must integrate before any political settlement can be reached is unreasonable. Kurdish forces have been in open conflict with large parts of the government's current military and security apparatus for years and have understandable trust-issues. Attempts to bolster the delegitimisation of the AANES and SDF by emphasising Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) influence – and by arguing that equating Syrian Kurds with a PKK offshoot betrays non-aligned Kurds – are not without merit. But they do not negate two central realities: the long history of systemic discrimination suffered by Kurds in Syria at the hands of successive Arab nationalist governments; and the credible fear of atrocities by government forces.

Military force should always be the last resort; and this applies especially to a transitional government tasked with rebuilding, and in many respects inventing, a nation and state.

Play hard, trust no one

Lessons from the
General Syrian Congress,
1919–1920

Syria's first bid for statehood was earnest, constitutional and fatally misjudged. The General Syrian Congress trusted principles to offset hard power. A century later, the episode reads as a warning about how nations can fail at birth.

In 1919–1920 Syria attempted for the first time to emerge as a nation state. "Syria" was then still primarily a geographical expression in search of a political form, and encompassed what are now Syria, Jordan, Palestine, Israel, and Lebanon. The ambition to unite these lands under one polity was driven forward by Prince (later King) Faisal, son of Sharif Hussein bin Ali, the British-installed King of the Hejaz, who had helped in the collapse of the Ottoman Empire by launching the Great Arab Revolt.

Faisal was seeking the Syrian throne, and the mainly Sunni Arab soldiers, politicians and notables of Syria supported him. But he was checked by Great Power diplomacy – Sykes–Picot, San Remo, Sèvres – alongside other understandings involving Jews, Turks, Maronites, and Saudis that closed off the possibility of such an expansive state. Syria was reduced to a truncated version of Greater Syria, shorn of its western and southern appendages and occupied by France.

Syrians, however, did not acquiesce quietly. The attempt to resist this imposed settlement, and colonialism more broadly, however brief and unsuccessful, was the beginning of Syria's political struggle to emerge as a nation state. At the heart of that struggle was the General Syrian Congress, a constituent assembly convened by Faisal in Damascus composed of notables and learned men from all corners of Greater Syria, tasked with defining the nation and deciding who should rule it, and how. It was the first time that Syrians had gathered as Syrians to plot their future. The birth of the Congress, its influence on events, and the constitution it agreed resonate strikingly in modern Syria, and offer valuable lessons on what to do and what to avoid when nation-building.

Appealing to the Allies

The General Syrian Congress was originally intended as a marketing tool for Faisal's ambitions. Since he well understood that Syria's fate would be decided principally by the victorious Allies – Britain, France, and the United States – it was conceived as a show of support for Faisal from Syria's elites. The Congress was the brainchild of Rida al-Rikabi, a Damascene ex-Ottoman general and Faisal's military governor (later first prime minister) of Syria, who saw that the post-war order demanded constitutional props to support claims to legitimacy: elected bodies, petitions, "programmes", and basic laws.

The Congress first convened, at the Arab Club in Damascus, on 3 June 1919, just as the King–Crane Commission – America's fact-finding mission to the former Ottoman provinces – arrived to solicit views on self-determination. Faisal opened proceedings with a statement of intent: the duty of the 107 delegates in attendance was to represent the country before the Americans, draft a Basic Law and agree explicit protections for minorities. The appeal was pure Wilsonian.

Its initial output, which later became known as the "Damascus Programme", was adopted on 2 July 1919 and transmitted to King–Crane. It called for independence for Greater Syria, unity of the territories (including Palestine and Lebanon), and government "on broad decentralisation principles." The Programme's fifth article left the door open for an American or British mandate. "If the United States cannot accept our request for assistance, we ask for the assistance to come from Great Britain, on condition that it does not impinge on total political independence and unity." In other words, anyone but France.

At one level, this was good politics. The Congress aimed to exploit American idealism as a counterweight to European colonialism. It framed Syria as a plural polity – embracing "Moslems, Christians, and Jews", as the message to King–Crane put it – thereby pre-empting the standard French claim that only European tutelage could protect minorities. At another level, it was a profound miscalculation. American attention, as today, was fleeting. The commission's findings were slow-walked; America had no appetite for confrontation with France; and the climax of Syria's constitutional experiment, a formal declaration of independence reached on 8 March 1920, prompted a blunt French ultimatum: rescind the declaration or else.

Realpolitik vs ideals

Syria's fortunes as a viable independent state declined precipitately with Britain's withdrawal in July 1919, pursuant to Anglo-French arrangements. With British troops in Syria gone and French forces consolidating in Lebanon and along the coast, the Congress's Wilsonian narrative and appeals to the United States and Britain appeared naïve. Faisal's moderate, deal-seeking approach – essentially a bet on colonial restraint – lost domestic credibility when the San Remo Resolution, passed on 25 April 1920, placed Syria under a French mandate.

At the behest of the Congress – particularly delegates from northern Syria – Faisal requested help from Turkish leader Mustafa Kamal; but he had his own problem with the French, in southern Anatolia, and did not overtly assist. An armed insurgency along Syria's coast against French forces ensued, followed by French invasion of Syria's interior. On 24 July Syrian forces were decisively beaten at Maysalun, north of Damascus. Faisal's war minister, Yusuf al-Azma, died in the battle after making a solemn pledge not to allow the invaders to occupy the capital without a fight. It was all very heroic; but a dismal failure.

The cautionary lesson is that appeals to ideals when not backed by force or other leverage are largely worthless – just ask the Syrian Democratic Forces. Like Faisal then, President Ahmad al-Sharaa today appears to believe that Syria's fate will be decided principally by externals and not the will of the people, and that his best interests lie in an alliance with the US and the UK. Indeed, Sharaa has spent his first year in office seeking regional accommodations and international deals, capped by his visits to Washington and Moscow.

Constrained monarchy

Faisal was reportedly initially unenthusiastic about the idea of a General Syrian Congress, fearing that it would function as a proto-parliament and constrain his room for manoeuvre. As events unfolded, he was not entirely wrong. Much of the Congress's membership comprised committed bourgeois Arab nationalists, many of them veterans of the secret anti-Ottoman Young Arab Society. These were idealists who had little appetite for compromise or accommodation with great power interests.

The more pragmatic wing of the Congress included figures close to Faisal, whose political fortunes were

tied to his, as well as a small minority of openly pro-French delegates. Over time, however, the Congress tilted decisively away from pragmatism. The voices advocating accommodation with France – an outcome Faisal had been quietly pursuing with British support – were steadily drowned out.

This shift proved consequential. Faisal had been engaged in talks with the French prime minister, Georges Clemenceau, who felt a measure of moral obligation towards him on account of his contribution to the Allied war effort. Had Faisal been granted the political space to pursue a gradual pathway to independence under French tutelage, along the lines later embodied in the Franco-Syrian Treaty of 1936, Syria's long-term trajectory might have been very different. It may have been closer to those of Jordan or Morocco: states that have been formally independent, Western-aligned and stable.

As it was, the Congress did see itself as a check on Faisal's power. Its second president, Sheikh Rashid Rida, confronted Faisal after he had attempted to wrest control of the government. "You were just a commander serving under General Allenby. It was the Congress that made you King," the Salafist cleric from Tripoli declared.

On 3 May 1920 the Congress voted to withdraw confidence from prime minister Rida al-Rikabi – a Faisal ally – and replace him with its own president, Hashim al-Attasi. The move did little to improve the situation. By 19 July 1920 Faisal had had enough. He called on the Congress to end its meetings, and signalled to General Gouraud, the French military governor in Beirut, that he was ready to negotiate terms acceptable to France. That day, the Congress issued a strongly-worded statement: "No government has the right to accept in the name of the Syrian Nation conditions that contravene the historic decisions of the Congress." Six days later, French troops swept into Damascus.

The Congress failed to give Faisal the room for manoeuvre that he so badly wanted. It may have been a needed prop for visiting American delegations, and perhaps a useful sounding board, but it did not enable Faisal to conduct a more effective lobbying campaign. On one occasion Faisal was even blocked by the Congress from heading a diplomatic mission. The constant browbeating of the government by the Congress on military mobilisation served only to infuriate the French.

Fast forward to the present, and one can speculate on what might have happened had Sharaa established a genuine and inclusive constituent assembly with powers to oversee the government and draft a new constitution. On paper it sounds good, but it probably would have complicated diplomatic efforts.

Decentralisation as foundational principle

The Congress did prove adept in drafting a Basic Law – a reflection, perhaps, of the number of delegates who were lawyers. A ten-man constitution-drafting committee was elected, and by 7 March 1920 a 148-article constitution was adopted: Syria's first. Article Two states: “the Syrian Kingdom is composed of provinces (*muqata'at*) that are politically unified.” Article Three stipulates: “The provinces are independent administratively as of this Law, and the Congress shall enshrine a Law that will clarify the borders of these provinces.”

The Basic Law stressed the importance of provincial decentralisation. Article 123 affirms: “The provinces will be administered according to extensive decentralisation.” Article 124 declares: “Each province will have its own chamber of deputies to inspect the province's budget, and to pass laws and regulations according to its need, and to monitor the [local] government.” Articles 127 and 128 stipulate a two-year term for local assemblies, and for deputies to represent an average constituency of 20,000.

Subsequent articles go even further, setting out checks and balances between central and provincial authorities:

Article 132 – Laws enacted by the provincial representative councils are submitted by the governing ruler to the King for ratification and order of implementation. The King must ratify them, and they are returned to the provinces within one month.

Article 133 – If laws submitted by the provinces are returned without the King's ratification, on the grounds that they violate the constitution or general laws, the provincial representative council shall reconsider them. If it insists on the original form and the King does not ratify them a second time, the Senate shall rule, and its ruling shall be final.

To many Arabs in Syria today, “decentralisation” remains a suspect term. Granting autonomy to regions or minority groups is often seen as an open invitation to ever-greater demands on the centre, fostering chronic internal tension and exposing the country to foreign meddling. At the moment of Syria's birth, however, decentralisation carried no such stigma. On the contrary, it was widely regarded as a mark of good governance and a practical means of holding together a diverse polity – so much so that it was enshrined in the country's first constitution as a foundational principle.

All this suggests that Syria's founding fathers imagined Syria to be more of a “union of provinces” held together by a central government that retained significant powers over defence, finance, and foreign policy, but that left much of the day-to-day to local governments accountable to local assemblies. It's a model that may now be evolving in Syria: in Kurdish-majority regions and in Suwayda, and possibly other regions that have a “particularity” warranting special status. The precedent is there in the constitution of 1920.

Different type of skills

Liberals instinctively welcome constituent assemblies. They signal consensus, dialogue and inclusion. They are well suited to drafting constitutions and conferring legitimacy. The General Syrian Congress did all of that, and did it with seriousness and intent. It was a “democratic” institution that might have functioned well had there been no existential threat to the new state. At moments when speed, discretion and ugly compromise were required, the Congress imposed deliberation, publicity and maximalism.

Syria's earliest experience of nationhood suggests that building a state in a hostile environment demands a more acute reading of the balance of power and a sharper skillset than that offered by the distinguished gentlemen who gathered at the Arab Club in June 1919.

New Look Shabiha

A Sunni town's uneasy reinvention after years as a regime stronghold

Once dubbed the 'Qardaha of Hama', Qumhane was long held up by supporters of the Assad regime as proof of its supposedly cross-sectarian nature. A Sunni town of around 30,000 residents just north of Hama city, Qumhane supplied hundreds of 'martyrs' who died fighting in the regime's army and auxiliary forces. Today, the town is trying to move beyond that legacy.

To understand Qumhane's relationship with the Assad regime, one must go back to the late 1970s and early 1980s, when an Islamist armed rebellion arose in Hama province and other parts of northern Syria. Members of one family in particular – the Sibabis, who were poor – were rewarded with money and positions for their assistance to the regime in crushing the Muslim Brotherhood. Most prominently, Nibhan Sibabi rose to become head of State Security in Idlib province at around the turn of 1980, remaining in his position for two decades. His son Issam served as a member of the regime's parliament during the civil war. Nibhan was arrested in 2025 but later released on health grounds, sparking outrage among those who had supported the opposition and now feel that he should answer for his complicity.

By contrast, members of other families – such as the Ajaj and Shihab – who helped people escape the 1982 Hama massacre or smuggled supplies into the besieged city were subjected to arrest and torture.

Although memories of violent repression likely deterred many residents of Qumhane from rising up against the regime in 2011, there were nonetheless some protests in the early days of the revolt, documented in video footage. The evidence from the time points to a rapid mobilisation of regime loyalists to suppress the demonstrations.

Revolutionary fault lines

An oppositionist from Qumhane who was in exile in Idlib but returned after the fall of the regime and now works in the new government, offered several explanations to *Syria in Transition* for the widespread support for the regime once the initial protests had been suppressed.

Some residents, he said, remained loyal on ideological grounds, sincerely believing in the Arab nationalist ideas of the Baath Party. Others observed how members of the Sibabi family had gained wealth and status and thought that they might be able to follow suit. Still others saw opportunities from looting the property of oppositionists and insurgents. Finally, there were those who felt that the homeland and authority were one and the same and believed that loyalty was owed to whoever ruled in its name. He noted that this same logic later drove many to become *mukawwi'un* ("those who make a U-turn") following the regime's fall.

Whatever the motives, locals from both the opposition (including a very small number who stayed in Qumhane during the war) and those who supported the regime agree on one point: loyalists in the town consistently outnumbered oppositionists throughout the war. Although reports of 'Shiification' accompanied Iranian and allied militia involvement in many regime-held areas, this was not significant in Qumhane, even though some residents did work with IRGC-affiliated formations during the war. Rather, Shiism in Qumhane predated the war and was largely confined to a local family that had converted through Shia Lebanese influence in the 1990s.

A larger portion of the town's loyalists who took up arms on the frontlines rallied around Haydar al-Na'asan, who was linked to Maj-Gen Suhayl al-Hasan and led a militia called "The Regiment of the Renowned Ones". The group operated under the umbrella of al-Hasan's elite Tiger Forces, which in 2019 were renamed the 25th Special Mission Forces Division and were backed by Russia. One of the regiment's leading field commanders, Ghassan al-Na'asan, fled Syria as the regime collapsed and was recently killed in Lebanon. The regiment, which organised rallies in support of the regime in Qumhane, did not recruit exclusively from the town. Especially during in 2016–2020, when the regime appeared militarily ascendant, it also drew Sunnis from nearby Hama localities such as Tayyibat al-Imam. As the regime began to unravel in late 2024, Qumhane still appeared publicly loyal. In a video clip, Abu Ridha (Ahmad al-Nabhan), one of the town's *mukhtars* (headmen) who was arrested after Assad's fall, stood alongside regime soldiers leading pro-Assad chants. A resident of Qumhane who had worked with the Iranians told *Syria in Transition* at the time that he did not trust insurgent offers of amnesty in exchange for surrender. "They torture and kill those who stood against them," he said, and warned that

they would eventually turn against “states supporting terrorism.” It seemed plausible that Qumhane could become the site of a bloody battle as the regime’s last line of defence just north of Hama city. Instead, rebel forces simply encircled the town and imposed a siege that forced its capitulation.

New sheriff in town

After the regime’s collapse, control of Qumhane shifted decisively to opposition figures. The municipal office is now headed by Eisa al-Ali al-Qadour, a Muslim Brotherhood member who spent sixteen years imprisoned by the regime in Palmyra. Individuals identified as regime loyalists were removed from positions of influence. Several prominent figures and fighters associated with the Assad regime died in reprisal attacks, though most of those at risk have fled to Lebanon or gone into hiding. Rank-and-file soldiers and former *shabiha* (‘ghosts’ – pro-regime militiamen) meanwhile, largely recast themselves as *mukawwi’un* and adapted to the new order.

While Qumhane still has a wider reputation as a *shabiha* town, both oppositionists and the *mukawwi’un* have worked hard to remake its image. Although one can still find the graves of ‘martyrs’ who fought on the side of the regime and its forces, there are now also murals featuring Syria’s new flag and commemorating the day of Qumhane’s ‘liberation’ on 5 December 2024. Along one of the main roads, a large poster lists the names of 108 people from Qumhane and its environs who were detained, arrested or forcibly disappeared by the regime between 2011 and the first half of 2012.

Civil war in the most literal sense

This list of the disappeared – alongside records of Qumhane residents who fought and died on the side of the insurgency – is a reminder of how the Syrian conflict was a civil war in the most literal sense, pitting neighbours, relatives and extended families against each other.

Genuine reconciliation does not appear to be imminent. Sunni pride has emerged as the dominant social tone, but Sunnis who supported the regime feel differently. For many of those unwilling or unable to flee or remain in hiding, becoming a *mukawwi’* has thus become an almost logical – if mentally taxing – choice.

Defiance

A conversation with Loubna Mrie

In her upcoming book **Defiance**, Loubna Mrie, now 34, tells an autobiographical story that is inseparable from the Syrian revolution itself. She is the daughter of Jawdat Mrie, who rose through the Syrian security apparatus to become security chief to Basil al-Assad and was implicated in the assassination of a dissident abroad, before later turning his attention to a small business empire. Though he never attended university, he was commonly known as ‘Doctor Jawdat’. Mrie grows up in the orbit of this patriarch, who is revered and feared. She writes about life inside a totalitarian system and a totalitarian family, from the perspective of a child whose loyalty was once absolute. Her mother, who initially saw her marriage to Jawdat as a privilege, was quickly disabused of that belief by his violence. Trapped by overlapping personal and structural constraints, she nonetheless tries – quietly and imperfectly – to loosen the grip of family determinism on her daughters.

When the revolution begins, Loubna is twenty. A moral curiosity, something like an internal compass, draws her beyond usual boundaries. She joins protests, marches alongside Sunnis and Christians and gradually aligns herself with the victims of a regime whose brutality had until then been largely invisible to her. As a young woman, as an Alawite, and as a member of a powerful family she openly disdains the regime, and becomes known beyond Syria. Her defiance provokes her father. She is disowned. Fearing for her life, she flees to Turkey in 2013. Jawdat attempts to lure her back, and ultimately has her mother killed. Mrie continues working as a journalist, documenting the battle for Aleppo and life in rebel-held areas. With the rise of the Islamic State, the tentative vision of a free Syria collapses. Friends are murdered. Her partner, Peter Kassig, is abducted and executed by the jihadists. A journalism fellowship in the United States intended to last six weeks becomes a permanent exile.

Despite its violent and tragic material, the book avoids theatricality. There is even humour. Mrie writes about unhealthy coping mechanisms and about the naivety of the secular opposition so warmly embraced in the West. She reflects on how she deliberately avoided documenting the uglier aspects of the revolution – arbitrary violence, warlordism, the rise of Islamist

factions – partly to preserve, for herself, a version of Syria that might still justify the sacrifices already made. Defiance captures both the spell of revolutionary momentum and the hangover of a revolution stolen by many thieves. Above all, it asserts the vital need for an inner moral orientation, albeit often obscured. It is this that exposes antagonism as man-made and therefore reversible – a crucial insight for a revolution that, in many ways, is still ongoing.

In your book, you write: “It isn’t just the government that is oppressive, I realise; oppression is deeply embedded in my own family. ‘Good women, like all marginalised Syrians, must follow the rules and never question or challenge the powers that be. In return for total submission, we are led to believe that these authorities – fathers, husbands, dictators – will guarantee our safety.’”

This recalls what Raed Fares once described as the “little Assad” the regime planted inside every Syrian. How can these deeply internalised patterns of obedience and submission be broken?

Mrie: I don’t think these patterns can be broken unless we first understand their roots. For decades in Syria, blind loyalty was rewarded. Justifying the leader’s mistakes and endlessly pledging allegiance were how you proved yourself a “good” citizen. What makes this pattern especially dangerous is that it doesn’t exist only in political life. It begins inside the home. The father figure is treated as the one who knows what’s best for you, and any form of pushback is considered betrayal. Whether in politics, at home, or at school, speaking your mind and questioning authority become associated with treason. You are taught that those in power oppress you for your own protection, and that obedience is the price of safety.

To change these patterns, we have to stop equating safety with obedience, and dissent with punishment.

But the patterns you describe also seem to leave very little inner space – emotionally or intellectually – even to begin examining their roots. That feels like a catch-22: you need awareness to break the cycle, but the cycle itself blocks that awareness. How can people begin to move through this? In your own case, it seems that compassion came before analysis.

Mrie: The government could play an important role here by letting people experience that critical engagement in political life does not invite punishment. Unfortunately, that shift is not being encouraged. Syr-

ians still associate politics with danger. They feel that if you talk about politics, you end up being punished.

Think about the journalists with roots in the opposition who framed the massacres on the coast as fake or exaggerated. The language is disturbingly familiar from the Assad era. What is especially frightening is that the government rewards these voices. Loyalty remains the main gateway to access, privilege, and power.

When it comes to transitional justice, narratives of victimhood seem overwhelming on all sides. That feels like a recipe for polarisation, given that reconciliation requires grappling with being both victims and perpetrators. How do you see this dynamic within the Alawite community?

Mrie: Many still dismiss the Caesar photos as fabrications and refuse to acknowledge the use of barrel bombs or chemical weapons. Atrocities that cannot be denied because they were witnessed directly are often relativised: violence committed by rebels is framed as equal to, or worse than that of the regime. The dominant narrative becomes one of self-defence: “we were protecting our homeland.” This propaganda runs so deep that it becomes difficult to distinguish between conscious denial, internalised belief and psychological self-protection.

I believe that anyone who played a role in the regime’s security apparatus or army must be held accountable. This is why transitional justice matters so much, including for Alawites themselves. Without accountability, Alawites will remain exposed to collective punishment. The massacres in March were also the consequence of the new government’s failure to address transitional justice early on – even symbolically, even through public communication. That vacuum allowed rage to fester and revenge to appear legitimate to some.

Accountability, of course, must go hand in hand with reconciliation – and reconciliation is only possible within a state governed by law that protects human rights and opens political space to everyone.

In your book, you describe how, as a journalist, you buried stories of arbitrary violence and crimes committed by rebels – both psychologically and through your camera – so that the Syria you documented could still justify your losses: “A promising new version of Syria, one that can justify my staggering loss-

es.” Do you see a similar pattern at work today?

Mrie: Yes – because at the time, I needed the story to make sense of my losses. Like many others, I clung to the hope that the future would be brighter, that it would somehow justify what had been taken. That’s why I understand how this logic repeats itself – and why it feels so familiar now.

Over time, the longing for a Syria many believed they would never see again began to overpower political judgment. Al-Sharaa came to embody the possibility of belonging and return. This shift cannot be separated from years of witnessing Assad’s crimes – and by witnessing, I don’t mean only those physically present. Millions experienced this violence through screens, from exile, until brutality became ambient. The moral bar for what counted as unacceptable violence has collapsed. Perhaps that’s how we arrived at a moment where anything less than Assad seemed tolerable.

Does this dynamic also apply to foreigners?

Mrie: Of course. There is understandable excitement that Syria is now open to the West – that one can go to Damascus and tour the Presidential Palace. I understand that access matters for careers of journalists and experts. But access also creates responsibility. When journalists or experts gain and protect their access by turning a blind eye to human rights violations or authoritarianism, they do Syrians no service.

In your book you recall an episode of 2013, writing: “I just want to be normal, even though I don’t know what normal truly means.” What is your relationship to “normality” today?

Mrie: I think I stopped trying to be normal. In the last chapters of the book, I describe how, when I first learned about seasonal depression, part of me almost longed for it – to be sad because of yellow leaves and drizzle, rather than loss and displacement. At twenty-three, when I immigrated to New York, I felt cursed for carrying so much grief. Now, as I approach thirty-five, my relationship to normality has shifted. I’ve learned to accept my wounds instead of trying to hide or outgrow them. I no longer measure myself against an idea of “normal” that was never designed to hold a life like mine.

In the epilogue, I write about letting go of the idea that belonging has to be tied to a single place. Over time, I’ve learned that stability – and even a sense of home – can come from within.

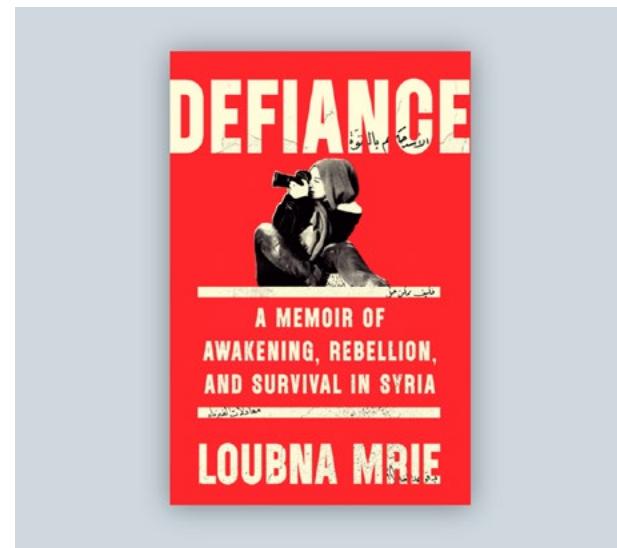
With the onset of the Arab Spring, your book shifts from past tense to present tense. Why did you make that choice?

Mrie: It was a structural decision as much as an emotional one. The early sections are written in the past tense to create distance from childhood. Those events are filtered through memory; they are already interpreted and contained.

When the Arab Spring begins, the narrative moves into the present tense because I am no longer reflecting – I am moving through events as they unfold. The present tense brings the reader into immediacy, into uncertainty, into a moment where perception is still forming rather than resolved. Craft-wise, it signals a shift from remembered life to lived life, from retrospection to witnessing.

Now that some time has passed since you finished the book – and in light of rapidly unfolding events in Syria – are there parts of the story, or of Syria, that have moved for you from witnessing into a more settled understanding?

Mrie: Exile doesn’t have to be geographical. You can be exiled within your own country, your community, even your family. But in one form or another, becoming your authentic self sometimes requires exile.



The Great Humanitarian Recession

Blended finance may offer help beyond grants and without illusions

The humanitarian sector is facing a reckoning. For decades, assistance to the most vulnerable populations relied on a single, fragile mechanism: annual grant mobilisation. That model is now under severe strain: global humanitarian funding contracted by around 35 per cent in 2025 and is expected to decline further in 2026.

The Great Humanitarian Recession is already a reality. This is no longer about temporary funding dips or cyclical shortfalls. The volume of grant capital available is unlikely ever again to match the scale of global needs. In other words, the era of fully grant-funded aid is over. The consequences for Syria are stark. Almost 65 per cent of the 2025 humanitarian funding requirement remains unmet. Two-thirds of Syrians depend on some form of aid, and millions continue to live in camps and informal settlements. For many, the funding cliff threatens to sever basic life-lines altogether.

The humanitarian sector in Syria should be pushed into new territory. The challenge should no longer be just how to prioritise shrinking grants, but to determine whether parts of the system must move from grants to financing to sustain critical interventions. Blended finance may offer tools to extend reach and durability – but only if deployed without illusions about what it can, and cannot, replace.

A drop in the ocean is not too little

Blended finance is not a new pot of free money. It is a way of using public or philanthropic capital to take on risks that private investors will not. By sharing losses, offering guarantees or lowering expected returns, it makes projects possible that would fail on commercial terms alone. An oversimplified example might involve donors working with local NGOs and Syrian solar firms to install off-grid power in isolated communities: grants cover part of the upfront infrastructure costs and early losses, while private operators invest alongside them and commit to affordable prices. Public capital carries part of the risk for the private actors to invest in the services.

Globally, blended finance deals total \$15 – \$18 billion annually (including both concessional and non-concessional capital). This compares with World Bank Group commitments of \$100 – \$120 billion annually. Most of these deals involve climate mitigation and large infrastructure projects and most are in stable, middle-income countries.

In contrast, Fragile and Conflict-Affected Situations (FCS) receive roughly \$1 billion annually, mostly for conventional projects such as infrastructure development. Only a very small portion of this \$1 billion is linked to exclusively humanitarian objectives. The difference between stable middle-income countries and FCS is also underlined by the ratio of non-concessional capital leveraged per \$1 of concessional capital. There is no set standard but this averages \$2 and \$4 per \$1 of concessional capital, although \$1 – \$10 is not unheard of. In FCS contexts, this ratio drops as low as \$1 to \$1. That is not bad news for Syria. In oversimplified terms, it means that the same project can be undertaken for almost half the price.

Is it applicable? Is it risk-free?

Blended finance is complex; but complexity does not make it unsuitable for countries like Syria. On the contrary: complex problems often require complex tools. While blended finance remains rare in humanitarian settings, where it has been used it has most often supported the provision of essential services. In the early 2010s, for example, it was applied in Somalia and Kenya to sustain water and electricity services in low-income areas amid insecurity and the collapse of public utilities. This does not mean blended finance is inherently limited to essential services; rather, it reflects how little exploration has taken place in other sectors.

In Syria, such exploration has already begun—if only tentatively. In 2024, a group of Syrian NGOs, anticipating severe funding cuts, held a series of discussions and workshops on financing healthcare. Although these talks did not translate into concrete projects, engaging the private sector and considering instruments such as blended finance emerged as key priorities. The fall of the regime, the scramble to re-establish operations in Damascus and a temporary surge in grants and donations brought these discussions to a halt. Given current funding trajectories, however, it is likely that such debates—whether collectively or within individual organisations—will soon resume.

Like almost everything else in Syria, blended finance is not without risk. Where incentives are misaligned and accountability weak, financing arrangements can end up socialising failure while privatising success: public or donor capital suffers losses while profits accrue to private investors. In the Syrian context, this raises the spectre of figures akin to Rami Makhlouf benefiting from protected investments under blended structures – a risk that applies equally to humanitarian and development projects.

Even with well-intentioned actors and sound incentives, another pitfall looms: de-risking projects that would have gone ahead anyway. For this reason, blended finance was widely criticised in the 1990s and early 2000s as little more than a subsidy in disguise—even when directed at the “right” actors.

Ethical considerations

Ethical tensions are unavoidable. Humanitarianism is based on need while financing introduces ability to pay. In settings where household incomes are decimated, even modest cost recovery can create barriers to access. The challenge is preventing financial viability from overriding humanitarian purpose. How can a family in a camp or a destroyed neighborhood afford to pay for services? And how can an investor be persuaded to risk money they can only recover through subsidies? Another ethical concern is how to determine who gets subsidised and who does not? And, more generally, how to preserve humanitarian principles, given Syria’s record of weaponising aid and exploiting humanitarian actors?

Governance is critical. Such complex transactions require clear terms, roles, responsibilities, and risk allocation. Who absorbs losses, who captures returns, who decides what and who enforces agreements are fundamental questions.

Finally, institutional culture matters. Humanitarian mandates emphasise neutrality and process; private actors prioritise speed and cost control. Blended finance brings these cultures into direct conflict. That said, the biggest hurdle to adopting any type of alternative financing is the dominant NGO culture, that resists any shift from annual appeals. While humanitarian principles are non-negotiable, NGO’s internal systems, practices, and partnership structures must change. Financial literacy is no longer a luxury.

Designing for equity

Any discussion of blended finance as an instrument for the humanitarian provision of essential services in Syria must start from present realities. The population’s ability to pay for basic services is extremely limited. Investing in infrastructure in areas hosting the most vulnerable populations, such as camps, rural areas, and heavily damaged or poor urban neighborhoods, is not attractive for service providers and often exceeds the government’s capacity. At the same time, structuring blended finance transactions for large infrastructure projects is itself costly. It requires sophisticated studies covering engineering, environmental impact and urban and rural planning, as well as complex financial structuring that demands highly specialised expertise.

The viability of blended approaches, however, rests increasingly on who is involved. It should therefore be seen as part of a broader effort to engage the private sector differently. Central to this are Syrian businesspeople and high net-worth individuals, both within the country and in the diaspora. Many are not motivated solely by profit or financial returns. They can bring affinity, responsibility and a willingness to contribute.

Since the fall of Assad, Syrian business actors have financed the rehabilitation of hundreds of schools and hospitals, maintained water wells, provided solar power systems and supported a wide range of other essential interventions. If these same activities had been implemented by NGOs, they would have generated pages and pages of impact reporting and documentation. Misinterpreting such engagement simply as charity is a mistake. Rather, it reflects a genuine interest in investment and in giving back to the country. Humanitarian organisations should not approach these actors primarily as sources of funding, but as partners. Blended finance might be an ideal means of structuring such partnerships responsibly and at scale.

Blended finance is neither a solution to the aid shortage nor a substitute for aid. Its relevance depends on careful design, the right actors, and governance arrangements that do not disguise subsidies or fully shield investors from risk. When used as a shortcut to Syria’s structural realities, blended finance will fail the very people humanitarian action is meant to serve. Where used narrowly and deliberately, it may rescue essential services that otherwise could collapse.