Syria in Transition

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Welcome to the March 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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Why we poll

Measuring public opinion is a political necessity

If Syria's new order is to avoid the fatal insulation of the past, it must learn to listen. The launch of *Syria Poll* marks a first attempt to anchor power in public sentiment and to make accountability a habit that can become a constitutional guarantee.

Syria is not a democracy. Yet if the country is to move towards even a quasi-democratic future it should start by behaving as though public opinion matters. That conviction underlies *Syria Poll*, the first recurring, face-to-face, in-the-street survey of Syrian opinion.

The inaugural phase, conducted by *Syria in Transition* in Damascus, Rural Damascus and Homs in early February 2026, involved the interview of 900 respondents across age, gender and income groups. In the coming months, we shall gradually expand our geographical scope to allow results that are fully nationally valid.

Syria Poll does not segment respondents by sect or ethnicity. After years in which identity categories were politically weaponised, we judged it neither useful nor desirable to reinforce them. Instead, we focus on structural factors such as class and political orientation. In other words, we are less interested in default identity labels than in people's lived circumstances and the ideas they hold.

The results are somewhat reassuring for the government. 63 per cent of respondents – nearly two-thirds – believe Syria is heading in the right direction. A smaller majority, 56 per cent, say they trust the government to achieve transitional justice. Approval of the government's performance reaches around 90 per cent among those who identify as high-income, but falls to 65 per cent among low-income respondents. That is broad support, but not a plebiscitary mandate.

Such distinctions are precisely why polling matters. For much of its modern history, Syria's political culture was highly elitist and did not involve public consultation. In that environment rulers inevitably came to rely on curated information and loyal intermediaries who told them what they wanted to hear. As policy drifted from the lived experience of the many, discontent accumulated until it exploded.

In the coming months Syria's parliament is expected to convene. However limited its authority might be, legislators and ministers will have to make decisions on economic reform, public services, foreign policy and reconciliation. Legislating without systematic knowledge of public attitudes would be to operate in partial darkness.

Opinion data should not, however, become the private property of think tanks and donor workshops. Survey results often circulate only within narrow policy cliques where they are cited selectively and debated only behind closed doors. That blunts their democratic potential. If public opinion is to shape governance, it must itself be public. Media outlets should analyse and interrogate findings; politicians should respond to them; citizens should see their views reflected in the national conversation. Publishing the findings in a manner easily digestible by the layperson normalises the idea that government is principally accountable to the society it serves, rather than just to allies and regional patrons.

Polling has obvious limits. When asked about transitional justice, some may respond cautiously, or may not even understand what is meant by the term. Polls are snapshots, and require repetition, methodological refinement and complementary qualitative work. Over time, as familiarity grows and fear recedes, the accuracy will increase.

Scepticism about polling, though healthy, should not turn into disdain for public judgement. This is especially a risk among Islamists who often regard the views of *al-'ama* ('the masses') as inherently flawed because they lack the necessary learning to form a considered opinion. Islamic tradition, however, recognises a form of collective wisdom: "My community will not agree upon error" is a Prophetic saying that affirms the principle that dispersed judgement often corrects the blind spots of narrow elites. Societies often develop a collective sixth sense for what is and is not tolerable.

That insight matters now. Fourteen months after the Assad regime's collapse, satisfaction with basic public services is mixed: 49 per cent say they are satisfied; 35 per cent are neutral. Economic hardship is palpable, and support for the new authorities is clearly stratified by income. Discontent is increasingly evident, including within wide segments of the government's own Sunni base.

For President Ahmad al-Sharaa's administration, the lesson should be straightforward. The Assad regime's downfall owed much to its insulation from inconvenient realities; and legitimate authority rests on maintaining a two-way conversation with the people. Polling is a critical element in that conversation.

View results of the first wave of Syria Poll.

Autonomy under siege

Kurdish leaders face increasing polarisation at home as they attempt to hold back an emboldened Damascus

As Damascus advanced and retook control of Arab-majority territories, the Kurdish-led administration retreated to its core heartlands in Rojava. Defiance, disillusionment and a narrowing vision of self-rule are the forces now shaping the administration's de facto capital of Qamishli.

The rapid changes that swept north and east Syria in January were experienced very differently at different political levels. Ordinary Kurds underwent a disorientating return to the early days of Kurdish-led autonomy. A surge of nationalist fervour gripped Qamishli as weapons flooded the streets and young Kurds mobilised to defend their traditional territories. Committed activists and frontline combatants optimistically interpreted the 30 January integration deal as preserving the bulk of their hard-won economic, military and political gains – even if under a different flag. Meanwhile, both Kurdish and Syrian government leaders promised their bases variously-favourable iterations of a more comprehensive national integration deal. These divergent interpretations will not easily be reconciled.

Return to Rojava

January's rapid advance brought Syrian government and allied tribal forces to within five kilometres of the crucial arterial road between Qamishli and the Semalka border crossing. The loss of the Arab interior has forced a return – both physically and politically – to 'Rojava', or Syrian Kurdistan. Speaking to *Syria in Transition* in Qamishli as he waited for the terms of the 30 January agreement to be clarified, senior Democratic Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (DAANES) politician Abdulkarim Omar put it clearly: "North and East Syria doesn't exist any more… The Arab regions are gone, and we're back to the Kurdish regions… The people of these regions have to administer their own affairs, and defend themselves."

Protest chants and speeches at martyrs' funerals repeated the same basic, widely-felt point, with declarations that "Qamishli is not Deir Hafer" – a reference to a formerly SDF-held Arab town that fell amid mass defections to the government side. The implication was clear: the chaotic retreat must end at what Women's Protection Units (YPJ) spokesperson Ruksen Mohammed described to this publication as the "red line" of Rojava proper.

How the DAANES will ultimately reconstitute itself remains uncertain. Some of the broader governing and civil-society structures that operated from the Iraqi border to the Euphrates were thrown into disarray by the withdrawal. Some offices, archives, and computers were abandoned or burned, while Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) cadres with technical and administrative responsibilities are among those leaving Syria. The possible transfer of Semalka to government control, re-routing of humanitarian operations through Damascus and full exodus of the US military would only aggravate the chaos.

In these straitened circumstances many Arab DAANES employees spent January at home, waiting cautiously for clarity. "Maybe the DAANES will not remain as an administration for all of North and East Syria," Omar acknowledged. "But we will continue our efforts until those who administer the Kurdish regions are Kurds."

The immediate consequence of recent events was a return to political conditions similar to those of an earlier 'Rojava' project. Local communes resumed coordinating humanitarian relief for Kurdish IDPs moving into Qamishli and the border strip in fear of revenge killings by government forces. The DAANES' vision of municipal governance was forged in crisis and was always best suited to conditions of war and popular mobilisation, with long-established local networks of 'patriotic' Kurds handling security and administrative tasks at neighbourhood level. Local commune members nostalgically recalled 2012-2015 clashes with the progenitors of today's Syrian government. As they organised the distribution of donated blankets, they debated whether local Arabs should be disarmed.

The contraction of DAANES-controlled territory was coupled with a dramatic, well-attested surge in Kurdish-nationalist sentiment. Deep tensions between the Kurdish-led administration and Arab communities, long evident in Deir Ezzor and Raqqa, are now more apparent than ever. Pro-DAANES activists are careful to continue highlighting the role of Arab SDF members still present in small numbers at the border, checkpoints and frontlines. *Syria In Transition* spoke

with Arab SDF veterans recuperating and well-looked after in their Qamishli hospital beds, and a DAANES-aligned Arab sheikh of the Jabour who showed videos on his phone of crude death threats sent by other wings of his tribe. But these exceptions only proved the rule. The broader mood has shifted. Kurdish fighters repeatedly emphasised they were now fighting for the Kurdish YPG/J, not the US-sponsored, multi-ethnic SDF.

Northern Syria is increasingly polarised between two competing nationalisms: a religiously conservative Sunni Arab current and a reactive and anti-Islamist Kurdish nationalism. Both use the US-inflected language of counter-terrorism. The Syrian government disparages the SDF as cowardly terrorists skulking in tunnels, while many Kurds view Damascus as ruled by illegitimate Islamist thugs. YPG rank-and-file on the Hasaka frontlines openly mock the DAANES vision of a "brotherhood of peoples" between the region's ethnic groups as what one fighter called a "brotherhood with al-Qaeda".

Behind the front, thousands of weapons have been distributed through local communes and the PKK's militant Revolutionary Youth organisation. Young Kurdish men spend sleepless nights patrolling Arab neighbourhoods in pursuit of what they call "ISIS sleeper cells", making arrests on sometimes scant evidence amid very real tensions. Damascus relies on tribal armed groups to pressure the evolving ceasefire deal in plausibly-deniable coordination with Turkish intelligence. Armed Kurdish youth will test the ceasefire's durability at street level.

Contrary to the familiar narrative that hardline PKK cadres are the primary obstacle to integration, it's ordinary Syrian Kurds who express the deepest scepticism about peace with their Arab neighbours, even as their political commissars enjoin them to trust the integration process. Likewise, it's precisely anti-PKK, pro-Barzani Kurds who are the loudest voices belittling "brotherhood" with Damascus – despite the Barzani-backed Syrian Kurdish National Council (ENKS) having itself sat with al-Sharaa in hopes of regaining political relevance as the ceasefire agreement takes shape.

Business as usual?

However deep their dissatisfaction, neither YPG units nor the Revolutionary Youth would directly fire on government forces against orders. A likelier trigger for the resumption of hostilities would be Kurdish security patrols clashing with semi-organised Arab tribal forces, with each accusing the other of firing the first shot. Tensions peaked in early February, when small contingents of government personnel entered city-center administrative districts in Qamishli and Hasaka. The SDF imposed a tough curfew intended to dissuade either pro-government forces or the Kurdish youth from sparking any confrontation. The entry of these forces into the "security squares" previously held by the Assad regime was felt as a humiliation by many pro-DAANES Kurds. Yet the moment passed without major incident, perhaps turning the corner toward a gradual reduction of tensions.

The initially limited scope of the deployment lent some credence to optimistic claims by DAANES representatives that the return of formal government control would not mean the substantive loss of political or military autonomy. For now, Qamishli's municipality is administering city-wide functions much as before. But Kurdish leaders have often promoted maximalist interpretations of ceasefire deals as both negotiating posture and propaganda tactic. "There will be no change. Even if there is integration, our [all-female] battalions will remain in our regions," YPJ spokesperson Mohammed said, even though the YPJ's continued existence isn't referenced in any published integration deal. Such assurances trickle down to the grassroots. Young Kurdish fighters could be heard assuring one another that the new arrangement might ultimately resemble the broad autonomy enjoyed by Iraq's Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG).

The new reality under negotiation is, however, less favourable to Kurdish aspirations than many hope. The PKK network in Syria extends well beyond individual cadres and will likely retain broad support and organisational connections throughout Kurdish society even as non-Syrian personnel are withdrawn. The system it built, however, now faces structural constraints. Guarantor battalions that are expected to deter further aggression from Damascus may soon find themselves paid by the very government they are meant to balance. Women's organisations are dependent on the same contested oil revenues, their future newly subject to negotiation. Kurdish media outlets and DAANES-linked aid and civil society NGOs are expected to register formally in Damascus, where they will be closely scrutinised. In short, a PKK-constructed ecosystem of governance and activism must find ways to reconcile itself to Damascus' creeping hegemony.

Superficially, the new arrangement resembles the prior uneasy co-habitation between Assad and the SDF, which enabled the latter to retain effective autonomy for years. But the balance of power has shifted in Damascus' favour.

A polarised, militarised future

The DAANES has navigated similar arrangements before. Various formal changes of insignia and personnel allowed the SDF to retain military control in Manbij in 2018, across much of north and east Syria in 2019 and in Sheikh Maqsud following the Kurdish neighbourhood's 2025 handover to the SDF-linked Asayish security forces. But those precedents also suggest that superficial transitions rarely endure. Locals in Qamishli thus fret about a repeated "Sheikh Maqsud" scenario: a phased encroachment in which Damascus justifies further advances along impossible-to-defend roads denuded of heavy weapons and dotted with Arab villages, easily argued to fall outside the 30 January agreement's ill-defined "Kurdish areas". A settlement that envisions Kurdish governance in Kurdish regions and Arab-dominated governance elsewhere makes little sense on the hyper-local level of Hasaka governorate's fragmented geography, where historic circumstance and the Ba'athist-era "Arab belt" policy means there is no truly contiguous "Kurdish" territory.

The DAANES' re-interpretation of Abdullah Öcalan's envisaged "brotherhood of peoples" was originally built around that demographic reality. The SDF formed pragmatic alliances with local Arab power-brokers and minority communities, achieving a significant degree of inter-communal cooperation. But as the SDF extended into the conservative Arab hinterland at Washington's behest, that vision was pushed past breaking-point. What was possible in 2012–2015 is no longer realistic today, with the SDF's regional collapse working to deepen pre-existing tensions.

Those tensions are rooted in the securitisation of north and east Syria along war-on-terror lines, especially the DAANES' exclusion from UN-sponsored political negotiations and the SDF's status as long-term gaoler for thousands of primarily-Arab ISIS affiliates alongside other Arab detainees. "A state like Syria can't be controlled through military means," Kurdish representative Omar warned. Yet Raqqa's January 2026 return to government control was ultimately achieved through battlefield advances, not negotiation. That Damascus used violence to force the issue has further deepened mistrust between Arabs and Kurds.

The resulting suspicion means that any continued Kurdish autonomy can only be guaranteed through the presence of permanent armed patrols hunting for "sleeper cells" or brooding in semi-isolated bases. Though sought by both Kurds and Arabs, continued formal or informal population transfers will only harden the divide, making it difficult to envisage a future beyond multiple nested layers of perceived occupation, of both Kurds by Arabs and Arabs by Kurds. Future violations and mutual recrimination will easily fester into fresh casus belli.

Northern Syria's future will be defined not by the "brotherhood of peoples", but a harsher reality of "Kurds-for-Kurds" and "Arabs-for-Arabs." Tensions on Qamishli's streets have simmered down for now, but, as one young combatant joked, this fragile peace may last only long enough for the Kurdish youth to find fresh supplies of tyres to burn.

Small Town Syria

Syria's governance is marked by HTS factionalism rooted in provincial loyalties

The men who now govern Syria did not rise through formal institutions but through kinship groups rooted in Idlib, Hama and Deir Ezzor. Those provincial loyalties, once useful tools of insurgency, have been transplanted wholesale into the state. What held together in wartime may become harder to manage in peace.

It is not easy to decipher the structure of power within Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) simply by scanning ministerial titles or reading government communiqués. The visible façade obscures a far denser accumulation of relationships: marriages, provincial loyalties, and patronage networks built painstakingly over years. To understand the regime now led by President Ahmad al-Sharaa, one must look back to the earliest days of Jabhat al-Nusra, at its consolidation of authority in Idlib, and into the transition that followed Assad's fall. The organisation's formative years fixed patterns of influence that continue to define Syria's power structure.

The foundation: a family business

From the outset, Jabhat al-Nusra was more than just another armed group seeking battlefield supremacy. It was a project led by rural elites seeking to grow their power and influence. Its Salafi creed emphasised strict obedience to the leader – a useful creed for such a group – but its recruitment method was more sociological than doctrinal: attract men whose standing within their communities was already secure, and allow their authority to serve as a bridge for HTS into their community.

The town of Shuhail in eastern Syria was the first proving ground. There, the al-Hajers – a leading family of the Bukamil clan of the Ugeidat tribe – played a pivotal role in entrenching HTS in Deir Ezzor. A young Sharaa, in fact, first established Jabhat al-Nusra in the eastern province, and resided at the home of one of its co-founders, the late Ali Hussein al-Mukhlef (aka Abu Mohammed al-Shuhail), a leading figure in the Al-Hajer family. Around that household formed the early nucleus of relationships that would extend into the machinery of state today: Dr Yusuf al-Hajer, a senior foreign ministry official; Ahmed al-Hajer and Bilal Khader al-Hajer, heads of the Political Affairs Secretariat in Deir Ezzor and Damascus respectively; and their cousin Hussein al-Salama (aka Abu Musab al-Shuhail), head of Syria's General Intelligence Directorate.

The logic of HTS recruitment was simple: secure the loyalty of a conservative, well-rooted family with broad tribal backing and you acquire an entire social base. The model was replicated in rural Idlib, Hama, Aleppo, Homs, and Daraa. Figures were selected not only for ideological commitment but for lineage, local respect and the ability to mobilise kinship networks. They became the "hardcore" through which the organisation penetrated society without provoking the sort of backlash that doomed more brutal rivals like Islamic State.

Idlib years: rise of the blocs

When Jabhat al-Nusra entrenched itself in Idlib, the process of social climbing by rural elite families became more sophisticated. Individual recruitment gave way to the mobilisation of kinship-based blocs capable of performing military, security and economic roles simultaneously.

In Binnish, a rural town in Idlib, Qutaiba Badawi (aka al-Mughira) and his brother Hudhayfa (aka Abu Hafs) emerged as central figures. Qutaiba, a dentist by training and the son of a notable of the town, evolved into overseer of border crossings and *de facto* economic emir of Idlib. Hudhayfa rose from military responsibilities to security command, eventually serving as deputy to Anas Khattab (now Interior Minister) in Idlib's security apparatus. Khattab himself, though from the town of Jayroud in rural Damascus, became tightly allied with the Binnish bloc, as was the senior cleric Abdul Rahim Atoun, now Presidential Adviser for Religious Affairs.

In Idlib city, the al-Sayed Issa family became a vehicle for HTS entrenchment. Key figures who helped win for the Salafist group public-service credentials included Dr Qusai al-Sayed Issa, who oversaw one of the largest hospitals in the province, and Qutaiba and Muslim al-Sayed Issa, both heavily involved in relief work. In the town of Taftanaz, Abu Saleh Tahhan defected to HTS in 2016 because he wouldn't take orders from the Ahrar al-Sham leader who hailed from the same town but from a much smaller and less prestigious family.

Resistance from prominent families was deftly managed. In the town of Jarjanaz in Idlib, the large al-Dughaim family, led by Hasan al-Dughaim and his seven brothers, aligned with anti-HTS factions and resisted co-option. Before the two sides reconciled in 2020, HTS countered by empowering the town's smaller families. Today, Hasan al-Dughaim is the most ardent pro-government TV pundit.

Two identifiable blocs, the Binnish and the Shuheil, crystallised from the Idlib experiment. The third town to gain a significant bloc was Hilfaya in rural Hama, from which emerged "Abu Hasan 600" – better known now as Murhaf Abu Qasra, Syria's Minister of Defence. From the town next door is Ali Nour Eddin al-Naasan, the army's Chief of Staff.

Less influential but noteworthy blocs also exist. There is the northern Aleppo bloc, led by Abdul Rahman Salama (aka Abu Ibrahim) who is from the town of Anadan and is now Governor of Raqqa; the southern Aleppo bloc, under Abu Ahmed Zakour, now Presidential Adviser for Tribal Affairs; and the Jabal al-Zawiya grouping associated with Ahmad Issa al-Sheikh, now a Major-General in the army.

After Assad: blocs grow wings

With the fall of the Assad regime and the emergence of a new HTS-led regime, the various blocs formed into the "wings of the state" overseen by Sharaa's immediate circle. They were given sectors of the state to run – at times with one bloc dominating an entire sector. With greater responsibilities come greater rewards, but also greater rivalries, which were once contained in Idlib but have now extended to every corner of government.

The economic "wing" has emerged as the most formidable. Hazem al-Sharaa, the president's brother, assumed control of the Sovereign Fund and the Investment Authority. Qutaiba Badawi took charge of land crossings, overseeing imports, exports and taxation. Abu Mariam al-Australi and Abu Abdul Rahman al-Zarba became key players in banking and currency management. Together, these four key figures have constructed a tightly layered economic hierarchy that grips the country's finances.

The political wing, under Asaad al-Shaybani, comes a close second, controlling the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Political Affairs Secretariat and provincial political offices. It also has oversight – formal or informal – of ministries tied to international cooperation, including health, education, local administration, higher education, culture, and media.

The military wing remains anchored in the Hama bloc, with many of its members still occupying the commanding heights. After costly campaigns on the coast and in Suwayda, however, Idlib's veteran commanders agitated for recognition and were appeased through appointments: Fadlallah al-Hajji as commander of the central region, Abu Saleh Tahhan in the west, and Ahmad Issa al-Sheikh in the south.

The regime's ideological dimension is represented by Abdul Rahim Atoun and Justice Minister Mazhar al-Wais, though both face criticism from harder-line elements unhappy with their increasing pragmatism.

The security wing, which gathers Anas Khattab, Hussein al-Salama and Marwan al-Ali – the latter recently appointed security chief in Hassaka – helps to maintain a balance between the wings.

Managing nepotism

Today, the HTS veterans from Idlib, Hama, and Deir Ezzor are making demands. Economic power has accumulated disproportionately around the president's immediate circle, fuelling resentment by some. Hence reports circulating in Damascus that the president is contemplating a cabinet reshuffle with a broader distribution of portfolios; and that his brothers may retreat from the most visible posts.

Elite management goes with the territory in a country where sub-national loyalties run deep. The test facing President Sharaa is how deftly he shuffles portfolios among comrades; and whether a loyalty system established in insurgency can submit to the demands of state governance. HTS's rise to power began as a tale of Small Town Syria, but kinship networks do not usually generate transparent and effective administration. While a negotiated balance among blocs whose leaders share a revolutionary past may hold for now, it remains a precarious substitute for institutional order built on merit.

Handarat after the fall

A shattered refugee camp becomes emblematic of the Palestinian ordeal in Syria

Once a frontline in Aleppo's war, the devastated Palestinian camp now faces a new reckoning over militias, reconstruction and the question of Syrian citizenship.

On a hill in northeast Aleppo, overlooking the Queiq River waterfall where families gather in summer to swim and picnic, lies the Handarat Palestinian refugee camp. The extent of the destruction in the camp is reminiscent of the ruins of Gaza, though it is not unique. Similar devastation can be found in other Palestinian camps such as the better-known Yarmouk camp on the outskirts of Damascus. Handarat in many ways typifies the broader Palestinian experience of Syria's war.

Unlike Yarmouk, Handarat had a relatively small pre-war population, estimated at between 6,000 and 8,000. Many traced their origins to villages in what is now northern Israel. Today, however, most of that community is absent. The camp's streets are largely empty, and even with the fall of the Assad regime few have returned. According to Ibrahim Abu Hashim, liaison officer with the government and head of the camp's Development Committee, around 280 families have returned out of roughly 1,500 that had lived in the camp before the war. These returns did not begin after Assad's fall, but started slowly and sporadically from 2017.

The primary reason for the scale of destruction is that the camp and the surrounding area became a front line between 2012 and 2016. The Syrian army and Russian forces frequently bombed the camp. Unlike Yarmouk, however, Handarat did not witness the rise of a local Syrian-Palestinian insurgency that drove regime forces out. The rebels who entered the camp largely came from elsewhere in the northern Aleppo countryside, including factions such as Liwa al-Tawhid, an Aleppo-based Islamist group that was one of the best known factions in the early years of the war. The key moment was the 'liberation' of the camp as part of an insurgent offensive dubbed the 'Battle to Liberate the Prisoners' in April 2013. The fighting that followed turned Handarat into an open conflict zone, prompting much of the civilian population to flee.

Conflicted loyalties

It may be tempting today to portray the camp as uniformly sympathetic to the uprising but Ibrahim Abu Hashim stresses that most Palestinians in Handarat initially adopted a position of neutrality. Nevertheless, some local men joined the pro-Assad Liwa al-Quds ('The Jerusalem Brigade'), which was originally founded in 2013 by Palestinians in the al-Nayrab camp, also located in Aleppo province, as an anti-rebel force. Initially part of the Iranian-backed Local Defence Forces network, Liwa al-Quds grew to become one of the most prominent pro-regime militias. While nominally affiliated with Military Intelligence, its primary loyalties shifted to Russia, from which it received training and salaries even as it maintained some links to the Iranians.

Syrian-Palestinians who joined the militia did so for varied reasons. Some genuinely believed that the regime and its foreign backers represented hope for the Palestinian cause, imagining that a regime victory would ultimately strengthen prospects for the defeat of Israel. Others joined from more immediate concerns: the promise of a salary, or fear of repercussions should they be seen as sympathetic to the opposition. Within the Handarat camp itself, some Palestinian factions - Fatah al-Intifada, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, Hamas and the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine - were active prior to the war. In contrast to Yarmouk and parts of Damascus where some Hamas members supported the insurgency, the factions in Handarat largely aligned with the regime and channelled their involvement through Liwa al-Quds. No Hamas-linked armed group emerged in the camp to support the rebels. Those who supported the opposition instead left. A former commander in the Hamas-linked Aknaf Bayt al-Maqdis group in Khan al-Shih camp in the Damascus countryside told *Syria in Transition* that some opposition-leaning Palestinians linked up with his faction and established a training centre in Idlib to support the rebellion.

Liwa al-Quds became a crucial auxiliary force in the regime's campaign to retake Handarat and the wider area. By 2016, as regime forces consolidated control over Aleppo and expelled rebels from eastern districts of the city, the camp was firmly back under regime authority. Security control of the camp was delegated to Liwa al-Quds, but apart from a few symbolic acts such as installation of solar lighting by a Palestinian Islamic Jihad-linked charity backed by Iran,

and the opening of 'Return Square' in 2023, the regime and Liwa al-Quds did little by way of reconstruction and there were scant political gains for the Palestinian community. Indeed, much of the remaining infrastructure and property was looted – as happened in other depopulated areas retaken by the regime. When the rebel offensive swept through Aleppo province at the end of 2024, the Liwa al-Quds garrison within the camp simply melted away without resistance.

Today, much of Handarat remains in ruins. The most visible exception is a local school and administrative building run by UNRWA, the United Nations agency responsible for supporting registered Palestinian refugees. UNRWA has provided some limited services in the camp, reopening a primary school in 2024; just before the fall of the regime; establishing a small health centre; assisting with cleaning services; and, in cooperation with an NGO, installing a transformer and electricity poles in 2025 to supply power to a small section of the camp. Most of Handarat camp lacks electricity. The water supply system remains heavily damaged and provides water only two or three times a week. As elsewhere in Syria, some modest renovations – such as repairs to a local mosque – have relied on donations from Palestinians in exile.

Right to belong… and return

Three issues will shape the Palestinian community's future in Syria: the status of Palestinian armed factions in the country, the new government's relations with Israel, and the legal status of Palestinians themselves within Syria. Both Washington and Tel Aviv have stressed that Syria should not become a hotbed of Palestinian militancy. At least within the Handarat camp, the Palestinian factions once overtly active now seem to have melted away. This partly reflects a crackdown and de facto ban on Palestinian factions that very overtly supported the Assad regime, such as Fatah al-Intifada and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine - General Command (PFLP-GC). Indeed, with the fall of the Assad regime, Palestinians who stood behind the regime have either fled the country, accepted or even embraced adapt to the new order or are simply keeping a low profile.

Other groups whose political positions were more complex see little incentive to resume activity in a camp that remains small, depopulated and largely destroyed. Some of these groups, however – and especially those seen as less 'problematic' politically from the viewpoint of the government – do have an overt presence in Palestinian communities elsewhere in Syria. Fatah, for example, continues publicity activities in the Yarmouk camp and among Palestinians in Latakia. In contrast, Palestinian Islamic Jihad and Hamas, though active, find themselves constrained, either out of fear of Israeli strikes or pressure from the new regime in Damascus.

Asked about the prospect of a security agreement with Israel (something that enjoys pragmatic support among Syrians), Handarat Development Committee head Ibrahim Abu Hashim says he does not categorically oppose such a step for the sake of "neutralising an enemy", and encouraging economic recovery and reconstruction. At the same time, he argues that any agreement of such significance should be subject to parliamentary debate and public approval.

Following the recent government decision to grant nationality to Syria's remaining stateless Kurds, speculation has grown that a similar step could apply to Palestinians. Certainly there would be significant practical benefits. Not least, Palestinians would again be able to own property, a right they had been given under Law 260 of 1956 but which had been nullified by a regime decision in 2022.

Ibrahim supports the idea of Palestinians acquiring Syrian nationality so long as it would not impede the right of return to Palestine. For now, however, he says there are only rumours about citizenship.

No quick fix

Oil, wheat and the limits of economic recovery in northeast Syria

Government control over oil and wheat in the northeast is framed as the missing piece of Syria's economic revival. The numbers tell a different story.

The 30 January settlement between the government and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) was one of the key political events following the fall of the Assad regime. Beyond its security and governance implications, it has triggered intense debate about the economic reintegration into the state of areas in the northeast formerly under the control of the SDF.

Talk shows, social media influencers, government affiliated newspapers and even regional media outlets portray the northeast as the missing piece of the Syrian economic recovery puzzle. Certainly northeast Syria accounts for a significant share of Syria's hydrocarbons and agricultural production. But like the rest of the country, it has endured years of violence, destruction, displacement, infrastructure decay, institutional erosion, climate stress and severe drought. What, then, can reasonably be expected from the economic integration of this region?

Wheat: a subsidy blackhole

Syria's wheat production has fallen significantly since 2011. Before the war, annual output averaged around 4.1 million tonnes. Over the past five years, it has fluctuated between roughly 2.8 million and 1 million tonnes. Agricultural production in Syria has always been politically managed from the centre and depends on an intricate network of subsidies, extension services, state procurement, and financing. That system crumbled piece by piece during the war.

Producing wheat in Syria is expensive, and so is buying it. Production costs remain high and productivity is low. Degraded soils, weak seed systems, irrigation pump fuel costs and shortages, pest attacks, outdated machinery and methods and climate volatility are all major challenges. In 2024, farmers in northeast Syria estimated a wheat production cost of around USD 270 per ton, while the global average selling price was about USD 201 per ton. Under current conditions, importing wheat is cheaper than growing it domestically.

The state, however, does not operate purely on market logic. It purchases wheat from farmers at an administratively-set procurement price, typically above production cost, to guarantee incomes and secure domestic supply. In recent years, procurement prices have ranged between USD 310 and USD 450 per ton. Assuming, conservatively, an annual production of 2 million tonnes would be some USD 620 – 900 million – 80 percent of which would go to farmers in the northeast. That is only the procurement cost. It does not include storage losses, milling, transport, bread subsidies or operational costs of the public system.

The dilemma is straightforward: does the government have the resources to sustain wheat procurement from the northeast at these levels? Paying a lower price risks discontent among farmers and further production declines. Paying a higher price increases fiscal pressures in an already constrained budget at a time the government is already taking steps to move away from subsidies. What happens if the government decides to pursue its free market approach to the point where it does not buy the wheat from Syrian farmers anymore?

Oil: rivers of imaginary cash

The images that circulated in January of people standing next to open oil pools, even swimming in them in celebration of liberation from SDF control, revived a familiar image in the Syrian imagination: rivers of oil - and money - just waiting to be reclaimed for the state. Translating barrels into budget surpluses, however, is not that simple. Production volume remains uncertain but most estimates place output from the mature fields of Deir Ezzor and Hasakah at 80,000 - 100,000 bpd (barrels per day). Officials in Damascus have stated that output could stabilise at around 100,000 bpd within months. Even if achieved, however, that would not automatically translate into transformative fiscal relief.

A useful reference point is the published financial reports of the Kurdish-run Autonomous Administration. In recent years, oil revenues fluctuated between roughly USD 600 and USD 700 million annually, which formed the backbone of the Administration's revenue base. These figures likely reflect recorded and captured revenues rather than the full value of oil marketed. The difference suggests substantial discounts, operating costs, and possible leakages and/or off budget transactions. An important caveat is that these revenues were generated under sanctions and

through informal marketing channels, with crude oil reportedly sold at discounts that in some cases were up to 35 per cent below international benchmarks.

Restoring the sector would demand significant capital investment, and officials have acknowledged that rehabilitation will take years. Some companies, such as Gulfsands Petroleum, which held rights in Block 26 in the Rumeilan oil field, have expressed interest in resuming work conditional on legal reform, sanctions relief and a stable operating environment. At the same time, however, legacy operators such as Shell, which suspended operations in 2011, have moved to withdraw from remaining interests rather than expand them. The reality is that the sector remains plagued by uncertainty, with revenue projections tied to conditions that have yet to materialise. In practical terms, this suggests revenue outcomes closer to those previously generated by the Autonomous Administration, possibly improved by higher realised prices, slightly higher production and – it is hoped – fewer off book transactions.

A reordering of constraints

Wheat and oil serve here as proxies because they reflect the fiscal structure of the northeast. Oil formed the backbone of revenue generation, while wheat procurement constituted for decades one of the largest civilian expenditure commitments by the Syrian government. Together, they illustrate where expectations about integration can go wrong. The narrative of "newly captured resources" may be convenient, but what has happened is a transfer of control over existing revenues – together with related obligations. Higher revenues must be weighed against the costs of security and of health, education, infrastructure and other essential services in the newly integrated areas.

That does not mean there are no net gains. Reintegration reduces fragmentation, lowers transaction costs and restores a unified regulatory and customs framework. Producers in the northeast gain formal access to regional and international markets while producers elsewhere in Syria regain unhindered access to markets in the northeast. While these are real gains, however, they are incremental. They will not, by themselves, generate new wealth at scale.

Oil production will likely remain limited in the near term. Even if foreign investment materialises, it typically involves significant concessions that constrain the state's net revenue. In wheat, domestic production has historically fluctuated, and even in good years Syria remained a net wheat importer. Local production affects the size of the import bill but won't eliminate it. Should wheat markets be liberalised further, food security would become even more directly tied to external suppliers, particularly Russia, which in recent years has been the dominant exporter of wheat to Syria.

There are no easy answers to the multiple challenges facing the north east's economy and its national integration, and many of the key constraints will persist. Overall, there will likely be real benefits, at both local and national levels; but expectations should be tempered by the realities.

This analysis was provided exclusively by Syrian Ventures Alliance, an investment and economic advisory platform.

The demise of Conflict Studies

Who benefitted from a field tied to Western power?

An entire industry specialising in mediation, peacekeeping, disarmament, and transitional justice has become largely obsolete. Wolfram Lacher and Yvan Guichaou take stock: was conflict studies, perhaps from the very beginning, an imperial science?

Ethiopia's Tigray, Sudan, Gaza. In the 2020s, civil wars and counterinsurgencies have caused death and displacement on a scale not seen since the Cold War. Yet the academic field dedicated to studying such wars has never been less relevant to their resolution. Conflict studies is the child of a bygone era: a world in which Western scholars studied wars in faraway places, and Western states intervened in those same wars.

Just how closely the study of violent conflict was linked to the unique international moment that gave rise to it has only become clear since that moment passed. In a world where the UN rarely brokers settlements and Western states' role in enforcing them is reduced to the Trump administration's performative antics, who needs to understand how civil wars end or how armed groups behave? An entire industry specializing in mediation, peacekeeping, disarmament, or transitional justice has become largely obsolete. As the sway of Western armies and international organizations has diminished across war zones worldwide, researchers have found that their ground access is increasingly restricted, and the demand for their output is drastically receding.

But the crisis of conflict studies runs deeper. For three decades, its proponents generally assumed that Western governments were actors with the power to effect change for the better—at times misguided, but fundamentally well-intentioned. Brutal counterterrorism interventions, indifference to mass atrocities in Syria and Yemen, and hardening asylum policies gradually eroded this minimal consensus. Then came Gaza: an unprecedented shock to scholars' widespread belief that policymakers shared their values. Worse, instead of speaking out as other disciplines did, the field morally collapsed from within, by remaining overwhelmingly silent in the face of Western-backed mass killing in Gaza. What, then, was conflict studies for? And what can its travails tell us about how wars have changed?

Conflict studies in its current form—a field exploring the drivers and the outcomes of civil wars and political violence by drawing, often comparatively, on country-level analysis—was born in the 1990s. During the Cold War, insurgencies had been studied by sociologists of revolutions and by theorists of social movements and anticolonial struggles. But mainstream political science and security studies were preoccupied with competition between superpowers and the threat of nuclear war. Civil wars were a marginal topic. With the end of the Cold War, studies of civil wars suddenly proliferated, receiving growing attention from Western publics. The prevalent sentiment was that "much of the underdeveloped world" was witnessing "the withering away of central governments, the rise of tribal and regional domains, the unchecked spread of disease, and the growing pervasiveness of war," as the pundit Robert D. Kaplan put it in 1994. The following year, a group of Western politicians, humanitarians, and think tankers alarmed by "an explosion in the number of crises in the world" created the International Crisis Group, seeking to harness research to prevent conflict across the globe.

Yet the perception of an abrupt surge of civil wars was not borne out by the facts. The demise of the Eastern Bloc did have far-reaching, destabilizing ripple effects, from conflicts in former Soviet republics and the violent dissolution of Yugoslavia to the collapse of regimes in countries that were suddenly deprived of Soviet or U.S. aid, like Afghanistan and Somalia. But the passing of the Cold War also spelled the end of proxy wars between the superpowers. The number of civil wars actually peaked in 1991 and declined throughout the following decade. And with the notable and horrific exception of the genocide in Rwanda in 1994, such wars were not becoming deadlier.

During this period, the UN and the Western states—what was then called the "international community"—mediated peace agreements that ended decade-long wars in Cambodia, El Salvador, and elsewhere. UN peacekeeping missions more than doubled between 1988 and 1994, and their head count increased sevenfold. The gravitational pull of humanitarian interventions and state-building operations was essential to the growth of conflict studies. Questions of whether and how to intervene prompted fervent debates, whose protagonists became public figures. Participants and close observers of these interventions sub-

sequently produced textbooks and articles. A body of work emerged that examined the conditions under which multilateral peace operations were likely to succeed or fail.

A major theme throughout the 1990s was so-called ethnic conflict. Western academics were at pains to present rational explanations for what the media often portrayed as atavistic, irrational hatreds. A leading voice was Mary Kaldor, a British political scientist and peace activist who returned from visits to the Balkans and the Caucasus with the idea that the conflicts of the post–Cold War era were categorically different from earlier ones. According to Kaldor, "new wars" were about identity politics and plunder rather than ideology: they were "a kind of mixture between wars … massive violations of human rights … and organized crime."

Kaldor's argument was symptomatic of the field's widespread tendency to adopt a condescending, reprobatory attitude toward the causes non-Western belligerents were fighting for. This view was even more blatant in the hugely influential econometric analyses of Paul Collier and Anke Hoeffler. The two scholars portrayed rebels as motivated above all by greed, not politics. Conflicts were the result of non-state actors cynically weighing the costs and benefits of going to war; Collier and Hoeffler simply ignored the possible role of governments in initiating violence. The argument was not of mere academic interest: Collier headed the World Bank's research department at the time, and the policy recommendations he and Hoeffler drew from their analysis reinforced incumbent governments as well as the bank's own prescriptions for market liberalization.

In the academy, Collier and Hoeffler's papers unleashed a torrent of regression analyses linking the risk of civil war to everything from poverty to the presence of mountains or forests. That body of work took the field's distance from its object of study to an extreme. Up-and-coming scholars wishing to contribute did not even need to have ever visited a country at war; it was enough to crunch numbers from a U.S. campus. Still, even as such perspectives became dominant, they were fiercely contested, particularly by scholars who drew on field research.

Conflict studies grew with the rapidly expanding scope of peace operations. By the late 1990s, justifications for intervention were taking on messianic tones. Proponents of the "Responsibility to Protect" bestowed upon Western governments the duty to save poor countries from barbaric wars. From Bosnia to East Timor, interventions turned to social engineering: transitional justice, security sector reform, constitutional design in divided societies, and nation-building. Every aspect of these operations spawned entire sub-literatures.

The onset of the War on Terror further illustrated how closely developments in the field were linked to Western policies. Interventionism received a boost that went far beyond Afghanistan and Iraq. Policymakers scanned what they labeled "weak" or "failed" states from which the next attack might emerge. Faraway conflicts that once might have been seen as mere humanitarian problems became potential national security threats, and development assistance became heavily securitized as a result. Some (typically Muslim) communities across the globe were seen as prone to violent extremism and in need of special attention.

As Western states shifted from peacekeeping and humanitarian interventions toward counterinsurgency, the field followed. Scholars began seeking to understand insurgents' success in winning popular support and the effects of state repression. This scholarship was highly diverse, much of it written from a critical vantage point, often pointing to the counterproductive consequences of Western interventions and questioning their underlying assumptions. Even so, the quest for policy relevance shaped the field as a whole, even on its fringes.

We were part of this intellectual drive in our relatively specialized areas (conflict dynamics in Libya and the Sahel, respectively). In the shadow of revered figures in our field, there was room to further our understanding of the places we had chosen to study before they received much international attention, to join fascinating comparative discussions with scholars working in other regions, and to share our research in prestigious policy circles. Our employers were thrilled to use our work to claim "research impact." Powerful people seemed keen to hear the views of a plethora of professionals: researchers, investigative journalists, humanitarians, mediators, civil society representatives from both the Global North and South, and human rights activists were all offered a say in these debates, making it seem as if foreign policy choices were the products of a value-driven, knowledge-based industry.

From a strict scholarly perspective, the pushback against the unsophisticated approaches to violent conflicts developed by Collier and Hoeffler and Kaldor

generated lively academic conversations. Researchers began considering political violence as a phenomenon in itself, rather than merely a higher "temperature of conflict"—a theoretical breakthrough that paved the way for new scholarship. Analytical tools were developed to unpack insurgent behaviors from every possible angle: the nature of their violence, their governance systems, their transnational connections, their ability to remain united or propensity to fragment, their competition with rivals, their transformations over time. We felt like detectives solving topical puzzles: why are insurgents looting here but not there? Why is this group engaging in sexual violence while the other is not? Through granular, context-specific analysis, we could transcend the gross generalizations and probabilistic models of our predecessors and help establish the causes of political violence. And there was money available to pursue our research agendas.

Perhaps the most intriguing aspect of our conversations with policymakers in Paris, Brussels, Berlin, London, and Washington was that they did not necessarily need to be polite. Our expert advocacy against one-size-fits-all solutions in countries subjected to Western interventionism could take the form of confrontational critiques without necessarily putting an end to the exchange.

We were not totally naive. We questioned the kind of knowledge we were producing. We were awkwardly placed between the policy world and the societies we were studying, which were not our own. We recognized that our presence at high-level meetings in the Global North was often just a box-ticking exercise that did not imply much concern for the substance of our messages. International policy conferences—or at least the public plenary sessions—were theaters where generals in charge of counterinsurgency operations would say that military campaigns depended on the cooperation of local populations, and where scholars and activists would warn against the dangers of state-sponsored militias or illiberal EU migration policies and receive an approving nod in return.

Even in places where participants shared genuine reciprocal interest, we learned that real foreign policy decisions were made elsewhere, at echelons far above us and the cheerful bureaucrats we talked to, and according to rationales that had little to do with the knowledge exchange we were part of. President Emmanuel Macron's choice to continue the French intervention in the Sahel he had inherited from his predecessor on taking office in 2017 was a perfect example of decision-making secluded from the inputs of diplomats and civil servants from the French Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs. Macron unnecessarily prolonged the French military presence and committed countless, easily preventable patronizing diplomatic blunders. Still, opportunities for sharing research findings with policymakers abounded. The assumption that such exchanges could eventually trickle up and influence decision-making was central to the development of conflict studies. That assumption unraveled quickly.

Just as conflict studies came into full bloom, a widespread disillusionment took hold in the West regarding the lofty ambitions of worldwide interventionism. The failure of externally imposed state-building in Afghanistan and Iraq mired militaries in endless wars, right up to the chaotic withdrawal from Kabul in 2021. Bloated multidimensional UN missions at best froze conflicts and often did not even achieve that. Intervention at arm's length became the new favored model. Under Obama, the United States preferred conducting drone strikes to sending troops and backed Kurdish forces to fight the Islamic State. Europeans, meanwhile, paid African states to undertake some of the riskiest peacekeeping tasks in Mali and Somalia. Proponents of this approach were triumphant when the NATO-led air campaign in 2011 in Libya encountered swift success in toppling Muammar Qaddafi. But Libya's subsequent descent into chaos left that model discredited too.

Western states were also simply running out of opportunities to get involved in crises in the Global South. Worsening relations with Russia after the start of the war in Ukraine in 2014 paralyzed the UN Security Council, disrupting longstanding patterns of multilateral conflict management. Both Russia and Middle Eastern powers, rattled by the 2011 uprisings, began intervening in regional conflicts.

In August 2014, an obscure event signaled the start of a new era: the United Arab Emirates covertly sent fighter jets to bomb local militias in Libya's civil war. Though ostensibly a U.S. ally, the UAE had not so much as informed the Americans about its intervention on another continent. Over the following years, UAE and Egyptian support for the Libyan warlord Khalifa Haftar persistently thwarted UN-led and Western-backed efforts to broker a political settlement. This was followed by Russia's intervention in Syria in 2015 and the Wagner Group's adventurous forays into Sudan in 2017 and the Central African Republic in 2018. Soon, Rus-

sian, Emirati, and Turkish interventions multiplied across Africa.

Meanwhile, Western states' humanitarian posture toward wars in the South changed quickly. As Bashar al-Assad and his foreign supporters killed hundreds of thousands in Syria, Western priorities in the country shifted toward counterterrorism and containing refugee flows. U.S.-backed offensives to capture Mosul and Raqqa from the Islamic State wreaked an unprecedented level of urban destruction, mirroring the results of Russia's bombing of Aleppo. In Yemen, the United States and United Kingdom supplied weapons to a coalition led by Saudi Arabia that bombed hospitals and water infrastructure and used starvation as a weapon of war. Western commitment to the so-called rules-based order had always been subject to the caveats of realpolitik, but even the pretense of such an order became increasingly difficult to maintain.

The last bastion of Western interventionism was in the Sahel, where France led a quixotic quest to prop up weak governments against mounting jihadist insurgencies through a "holistic" stabilization package and UN and EU peacekeeping missions. From 2020 onward, a series of military coups toppled those governments. In one country after another, the putschists expelled the French as well as the peacekeepers, while turning to Russian military instructors and Turkish weaponry for support. Further to the east, in Sudan, Western states looked on as the UAE, Egypt, Turkey, Iran, and Russia backed opposing sides in the civil war. Neither the United States nor Europe considered the world's largest displacement crisis to be worth straining relations with allies such as the UAE. The days of UN-brokered settlements and Western-backed stabilization efforts were gone, while atrocities against civilians were on the rise again.

Conflict studies absorbed the new zeitgeist haltingly and reluctantly. We ourselves encountered it in interlocutors from Western policy circles who began expressing support for the ruthless methods employed by the newly interventionist non-Western powers. This was a time when Macron described Russia as a partner in fighting "Islamist terrorism." Off the record, some European military officials would lament Western reluctance to deliver what Sahelian armies wanted (and found with their new Russian partners): lethal equipment and ammunition, with no human rights strings attached. For two decades, a consensus held among both political scientists and military strategists that winning hearts and minds was key to counterinsurgency, and that indiscriminate violence was counterproductive. That consensus broke down, including in conflict studies itself. Looking back at Russia's war in Chechnya and Western-backed counterinsurgencies in the Cold War, some scholars began arguing that using brute force against civilians could work.

Disagreements at meetings with officials could take a nasty turn, and we saw the intrusion of arguments alien to the world we thought we were jointly inhabiting, including far-right fantasies like the Great Replacement Theory. Pervasive anti-intellectualism in the political class sometimes transformed occasions to exchange ideas into wasteful, absurd dialogues, as one of us experienced during an official online hearing where a French MP, who joined while driving her car, seemed to manifest disinterest and disdain for the not particularly controversial claims we made. It was hard not to see this awkward moment as the symptom of a sea change. A gap had opened between our intellectual community and the institutions that helped establish it.

The erosion of the liberal interventionist order also meant researchers had rapidly shrinking access to conflict zones. Field research had disproportionately focused on conflicts with a large Western presence. This was partly driven by public interest. Consultancy jobs for organizations associated in one way or another with interventions offered a way of getting access and funding. Even where no such direct link existed, researchers often managed to hop on UN flights to get to remote places. Western states' influence and close relationships with local authorities also furnished us with a degree of protection: security services were typically cautious in how they dealt with nosy foreigners.

As that order broke down, many war zones became no-go areas. The infrastructure of multilateral interventionism receded. Jihadist insurgencies expanded. Places where the Wagner Group became the new foreign security provider, or where the UAE armed local militias, were hostile environments for field research. Even authoritarian states that were considered Western allies showed growing assertiveness in their contempt for scholars from the North. Egypt's security services allegedly tortured and killed the Italian doctoral student Giulio Regeni in 2016; the UAE held a British doctoral student for several months in 2018 on espionage charges. Meanwhile, universities introduced increasingly rigid bureaucratic processes to decide whether scholars could conduct research in risky settings.

Our discipline responded by outsourcing data collection in the field to local researchers—even though they often faced greater risks than their Western colleagues and, as subcontractors, did not enjoy the same duty of care as the employees of research institutions—or by using technologies for research from afar, like social media analysis or remote sensing. But these techniques, even when creative and meaningful, could hardly compensate for the inability to immerse oneself in a society living through war. They turned the people at the center of conflicts into figures on a spreadsheet. In a post-Western world, an essentially Western social science discipline was rapidly losing depth.

Such haphazard adaptation aside, conflict studies carried on largely as before, tackling many of the same questions, with little comment on the decay of the international order that had birthed it. This was also the field's response when faced with the hitherto biggest challenge to the worldview that underpinned it. This time, the challenge came not from newly interventionist authoritarian powers, but from within the West itself, in the form of Western governments' support for Israel's genocidal campaign in Gaza.

The call to prevent mass atrocities, which was foundational to the emergence of conflict studies in the 1990s, assumed a clear distribution of roles. The villains were warlords in the former Yugoslavia, African and Middle Eastern dictators, or bearded, fanatical terrorists. Western governments were there to end or prevent the massacres—even if they were often sluggish and needed to be jolted into action. Now, these same governments backed Israel's war of annihilation while pretending that nothing had changed. Nobody personified this role switch better than Samantha Power, who had been among the International Crisis Group's first analysts and subsequently emerged as a leading proponent of the Responsibility to Protect. Even then, critics had decried Power's tendency to lambast U.S. inaction over mass killing by foreign states, while ignoring cases where the United States had actively aided or perpetrated atrocities. Such hypocrisy now became glaringly obvious when, as the Biden administration's head of USAID, Power publicly defended her government as "the single largest provider of aid to the Palestinian people" even as it was funding and arming Israel's destruction of the Gaza Strip.

Blatant normative double standards by Western leaders should not necessarily have come as a surprise, given an increasingly illiberal and overtly racist political climate in the EU and North America. More shocking to us, even if less consequential globally, was the deafening silence of our discipline about Gaza. With a few exceptions, the field's most prominent scholars have remained mute. This is a marked departure from how the same luminaries engaged with previous wars of major public concern, such as the U.S. War on Terror or Russia's invasion of Ukraine. After losing touch with one of their primary institutional audiences, conflict studies scholars are now losing touch with their core professional ethics.

Since the beginning of the war in Gaza, cancellations, dismissals, and defamation have been effective in repressing criticism of Israel at universities and encouraging self-censorship, especially in the United States and Germany. Conflict studies, however, has remained conspicuously quiet in contrast with two adjacent disciplines where debates are raging: genocide studies and international law. In genocide studies, a group of scholars have denounced what they see as their colleagues' silence, declaring their discipline to be futile after failing to see Gaza for what it was. Scholars of international law have recognized Gaza as a fatal blow to their discipline's raison d'être, while mocking their own tendency to carry on unperturbed ("there is always another conference to attend"). Nevertheless, in both fields, many leading voices did speak out to try to shape public discourse and to grapple with the unsettling implications for their respective academic areas. In conflict studies, by contrast, the rare attempts to do so have been made by relatively junior scholars, with others—including ourselves—resorting to social media to make their consternation known individually.

Intimidation and career considerations, therefore, cannot by themselves explain the silence in conflict studies. That silence also appears to reflect the discipline's ingrained worldview, in which mass atrocities are committed by bad people in faraway places—not by, and with the full support of, liberal democracies. Abandoning that worldview would call into question the field's relation to policy and, ultimately, its overall purpose. It is already profoundly undermining our credibility in the field: why study atrocities in Africa but not in Gaza? And it would raise a question that now haunts us: Was our work just a prop for advancing Western hegemony? Was conflict studies, even if inadvertently, an imperial science?

What happens next for conflict studies is somewhat moot. Our space is shrinking. Academic jobs and research funding are vanishing, and so is the demand for fine-grained country-level expertise in policy circles. Many of us will not survive professionally. Some will recalibrate research agendas to meet the policy priorities of the day. They will focus on great power competition, hybrid threats, and the changing nature of warfare between technologically advanced armies, while processing large datasets of material harvested online with AI tools. Others will retreat into the ivory tower. Ultimately, those still cherishing the study of bumpy social dynamics and the idea that "a theory of war must be sourced from where it is lived and not from worlds far removed from the action," as the anthropologist Munira Khayyat recently wrote in a remarkable study of southern Lebanon, will have to think hard about how to salvage their relevance.

Assuming autonomy from bigoted policy circles appears imperative, but comes quite literally at a high cost. Those hoping to make an impact on policy may have to accept that whispering in the ears of diplomats no longer offers a valuable way of doing so—if it ever did. The logical conclusion would be to spend more time cultivating informed, progressive agendas with wider audiences. But this involves challenges that go way beyond the need to use engaging research dissemination formats. It means pushing into an increasingly embattled public discourse, an informational space already saturated with domestic crises and culture wars. That environment forces not only conflict studies, but also the social sciences more broadly, to reflect on how to survive and make meaningful contributions to public debates.

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Assadism as lived experience

A review of Rime Allaf's book *It All Started in Damascus*

What does dictatorship do to people's inner lives? Our review of Rime Allaf's chronicle examines how Assadism seeped into language, memory and conscience, taking root in social habits shaped by fear and scarcity. The book argues that Syria's reckoning cannot stop at dismantling institutions; it must also confront what the regime made of its citizens, and what still lingers in the country's socio-political culture today.

Amid the many analyses of unbounded prison violence, institutional dysfunction and the kleptocratic lifestyle of the elites around the Assad family, it is easy to lose sight of a simpler fact: Syria's dictatorship was also a theatre of lived experience. It left deep traces in emotional worlds, behavioural habits, and in the way people speak or, just as often, in the way they do not.

The Kafkaesque reality of this social space – where a personality cult was omnipresent, scarcity was not only material but socially organised, and participation in everyday repression became a civic virtue – remains underexplored in much of the scholarly literature. Yet this is precisely where a decisive yardstick lies for judging a tyranny: for assessing not only what a regime does, but what it makes of people.

Rime Allaf, daughter of a diplomat and long-time fellow at Chatham House, offers in her chronicle, published shortly after the fall of the Assad regime, an account that illuminates precisely these zones of everyday existence. It is not scholarly work in the narrow sense, but an anecdote-driven narrative best read as a contribution to oral history. Precisely because Allaf writes from within lived experience, the book cannot be "worked through" according to the criteria of academic processing. Yet it remains analytically productive. It surfaces dimensions of Assadism that either still await systematic study or, by their very nature, can only be captured through memory and narrative.

In what amounts to a form of literary fieldwork, Allaf reveals a deep structure that tends to disappear in technocratic regime analyses, and nudges the reader toward an unsettling question: whether describing

Assad's Syria as merely "authoritarian" is analytically sufficient – or whether that label, while accurate, fails to capture the extent to which this system penetrated thought, language, and conscience.

Total control of the mind

While many analyses of Assad's violence default to sectarian antagonism as the primary explanatory frame, Allaf moves in a different direction. She places the consequences of personalised rule at the centre. Drawing on her experience of Syria under Hafez al-Assad and later Bashar, she redirects attention to what is most obvious yet often analytically flattened: the mechanics of a finely woven infrastructure of compliance, held together by the tight corset of a triad of army, security services, and party.

Through synchronised mass organisations in schools, workplaces, and social life, this architecture extended deep into everyday existence. It comes close – if not fully – to meeting institutional features commonly associated with totalitarian regimes.

For this system to work, the regime relied on a cult logic that recalls Lisa Wedeen's *Ambiguities of Domination* (1999). Wedeen famously interpreted the cult - the familisation of the nation through Hafez as the "father" of all Syrians, the iconography of murals, and the public performance of loyalty - as a social "as if": a form of opportunistic conformity. Allaf takes this account a step further, asserting that these claims to authority were not merely performed but became lived reality for many in her social environment.

Her recollections of her aunt's grief at Hafez's death, the weight carried by family names as markers of hierarchy and privilege, and the subtle linguistic codes through which power was recognised and navigated all point to a political theology that hardened into social-psychological normality.

The Everyday Gospel of Assadism

Allaf's excursion through Syria's recent history makes clear that it was not Baathism alone that held the system together. It was the patrimonial logic of the Assad family, which translated the state into a web of personal dependencies. The cult operated like an everyday gospel: it did not merely set political boundaries, but regulated the social life and penetrated the private sphere. The familiar authoritarian bargain - political passivity in exchange for a measure of personal quiet - worked only imperfectly in Assad's Syria. As family rule hardened into something approaching deification, sovereign discretion expanded. The boundary between the "political" and the "unpolitical" was systematically dissolved. Nothing was entirely outside power's reach.

Beyond the ritual demand to accept the leader's absolute authority, Allaf shows how social mobility depended on proximity to the ruling pyramid. Even modest material advantages were contingent on personal connections and tacit concessions. In what might be called a civitas Assad, the cult defined the horizon of the possible. Sometimes it manifested as performative loyalty; at other times as genuine submission. In both cases, it structured expectations, compelling reactions, and set the limits of interaction.

The arbitrariness she describes - appointing and dismissing ministers at will, monopolising sectors of the economy through cronies such as Rami Makhlouf, or turning mourning for members of the Assad clan into a national injunction under threat of being branded a heretic - ultimately rested on organised violence. Through the politics of scarcity in the 1990s, through Syria's occupation policy in Lebanon, and eventually through the deliberate brutalisation of what began as a civil uprising, Allaf traces a recurring pattern: the Assads presented themselves as saviours from crises they had themselves helped create.

Within this logic, society itself became corroded. Syrians were drilled into exploiting and surveilling one another. Over time, a bleak anthropology took hold — the regime's own claim that "these people" could only be governed "with the shoe over their heads." It was a self-fulfilling prophecy, manufactured and then invoked as justification.

Disciplined conscience

Perhaps Allaf's strongest case for the Assads' totalising reach emerges where she describes what might be called a regime of conscience, built patiently over decades. It begins in school. Classrooms functioned as apparatuses of indoctrination: pedagogies that replaced understanding with rote memorisation were designed to choke off independent thought at the root and to drill compliance with propagandistic red lines as a civic virtue.

Her account of Syria's cultural industry further reveals where the regime's sovereignty over "truth" resided. Criticism was permitted but rationed. The boundaries of what could be said shifted with the political weath-

er and the security mood. In tense phases, the security apparatus exploited this elasticity to the full, demanding public professions of loyalty and forcing those who crossed invisible lines to recant on camera.

Allaf also captures how this manipulation of language permeated everyday life. Syrians learned to speak in codes, to decipher "Baathese," to navigate a dense *mamnou'* — a landscape of prohibitions. Conversation required calibration: adjusting one's position in the social hierarchy, reading each interlocutor as a possible *zalamet al-amn* ("security guy") – and pre-emptively adjust speech and behaviour accordingly.

What endures?

Allaf's account ends with Assad's flight and a somewhat hurried sketch of the new balance of power. Since the book never claims to offer a systematic analysis of the present, the epilogue keeps its focus on a more fundamental question: what remains after a form of rule that did not merely govern, but permeated life, language, and relationships?

Beyond brief remarks on the challenges of transition, Allaf allows a different kind of gravity to surface that is less political than existential. How does one mourn after a system that shaped perception, reordered reality, and normalised violence for decades? The tone at times borders on the therapeutic, but as recognition that such a history cannot simply be "closed". It leaves traces in bodies, in speech, in habits of fear and accommodation.

One can only hope the book encourages other Syrians to write down their lived experiences. Such material rarely finds its way into formal scholarship with comparable density. Yet a further question lingers after the final page: what if this long socialisation continues to operate within people themselves long after the dreaded regime is gone?

Allaf's narrative makes clear that Assad's Syria cannot simply be equated with the current power configuration under al-Sharaa. But that recognition carries its own burden. A genuine transition requires more than institutional reconstruction. It demands an awareness of the full dimensions of a totalitarianism that reached deep into the national psyche and whose social afterlife persists.

It is a sobering conclusion that hints that the revolution's completion may yet fall to generations to come.