Syria in Transition

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Welcome to the June 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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The Druze Supervillain

Attempts to securitise Suwayda are ill advised

Suwayda compresses many of Syria's key challenges into a remarkably narrow space: decentralisation of governance, minority relations, competing victimhood narratives, a lack of accountability and transitional justice, war-economy networks and Israeli intervention. None of these are unique to the province. How they are handled in Suwayda may prove a revealing indicator of the Syria of tomorrow.

Nearly a year since the central government's attempt to impose control by force over the predominantly Druze province of Suwayda, and the massacres and extensive violations committed against the Druze population, the Damascus government shows no sign of accepting accountability. Rather, pro-government media and analysts are avoiding serious discussion, casting Hikmat al-Hijri and his supporters as the real villains of the story while reframing widespread Druze rejection of central government authority as a transnational security threat. Suwayda is portrayed as a Hijri-run tyranny beset by chaos and controlled by drug-lord-run criminal gangs gathered under the Hijri-endorsed 'National Guard', dominated by 'regime remnants'. Hijri and his supporters are thus simultaneously framed as Zionists and 'Assadists' conspiring with Israel to undermine Syria's transition and unity.

The Bashan current

Of course, there are elements of truth. Hijri and his followers have sought to impose a rejectionist consensus on relations with the central government, promoting the idea of separation and renaming the region

'Bashan Mountain' – a reference to the biblical region encompassing parts of southern Syria. The symbolism is hardly accidental. It gestures toward the idea of alliance with Israel that Hijri and his supporters openly espouse, mirroring to some extent the close identification of many Israeli Druze with the Israeli state.

Although some Hijri supporters portray 'Bashan' as an old historical name for Suwayda, a member of the pro-Hijri 'Abu Ibrahim Commando Forces' told *Syria in Transition* that the name is in fact new in local Druze political discourse, describing the shift starkly: "We were Syrians some time ago, and we have now become Bashan Mountain." Whether the Bashan current represents a genuine secessionist project, however, depends on whom one asks. While Hijri himself has openly spoken in favour of separation, many Druze supporters of autonomy articulate it as a reaction to deep alienation from the current government. In general, many still express the wish to remain part of a Syria in which Druze can live safely and as equal citizens.

Closing the ranks

Local voices calling for Suwayda to remain part of Syria find it increasingly difficult to speak openly against the 'Bashan' movement. This was noted both by a source in Rijal al-Karama – a Druze faction that previously was open to negotiating with the government but formally aligned with the National Guard after the massacres – and by a former activist involved in Suwayda's 2023-2024 anti-Assad protest movement. Both said that publicly opposing the rejectionist line carries considerable risk. Indeed, a close examination of the discourse of Rijal al-Karama's leader, Mazid Khadaj, suggest that he does not support separation from Syria or renaming the area 'Bashan', even as he rejects the current government. This has led to some more hardline Hijri supporters accusing him of betrayal. There have also been cases of torture and killing of those accused of collaboration with Damascus.

Claims made by many of Hijri's supporters that the 'National Guard' represents a real unified force ring hollow. Although some constituent groups have adopted brigade and battalion numbers, these labels do not indicate the building of a coherent professional army any more than corps and brigade numbers did for the Turkish-backed 'Syrian National Army' or Iraq's Popular Mobilization Forces. The formation of 'Brigade 104' within the National Guard, for example, suggests superficially that Rijal al-Karama has been fully absorbed into a unified military structure. Yet the abover-mentioned Rijal al-Karama source stressed that the brigade does not include the entire movement and that the merger exists largely on paper.

He noted also that Rijal al-Karama members receive money, weapons and supplies from a variety of sources, not from the National Guard and its Israeli and Druze Gulf-expat backers. In reality, *fasa'iliya* (factionalism) remains a defining feature on the ground, even if most Druze armed groups are united in opposition to the government. It is also likely that some factions are using the rhetoric of defending 'Bashan' as cover for criminal activity, including drug production and trafficking.

Consensus by fear

There is a difference, however, between a nuanced discussion of these problems and the discourse advanced by pro-government voices at home and abroad, which increasingly veers into exaggeration and seems eager to drum up support for a renewed military campaign. The situation in Suwayda is somewhat analogous to the broad anti-"reconciliation" consensus that was prevalent in rebel-held areas before the Assad regime's fall. There, too, some people favoured returning to the regime's fold for a variety of reasons; yet reconciliation was widely rejected because of the massacres and mass displacement committed by a regime that showed no remorse and no interest in accountability. Those accused of collaboration with Damascus were socially ostracised or arrested.

In Suwayda the anger and trauma surrounding the massacres remain intense. The events engendered a shared sense, amongst Druze from very different political backgrounds, that they could not identify with a government whose forces massacred members of their community on a sectarian basis, occupied dozens of villages in the north and west of the province and burned and looted homes and shrines. At the same time, violations against Druze elsewhere in Syria continue, reinforcing the perception that the government is either unwilling or unable to offer protection. These incidents include the vandalisation of a Druze shrine near Zabadani in April and, more recently, the kidnapping of a Druze family in Damascus, reportedly in retaliation for the National Guard detaining a driver alleged to be affiliated with the Syrian military and implicated in the July massacres.

Dishonest arguments

Alongside accusations of alignment with Israel, pro-government voices usually advance two additional arguments. The first is that "regime remnants" – former members of the Assad regime's military and security apparatus – occupy key positions within the National Guard. It should be stressed, however, that they are not seeking to revive Assadism. Individuals such as Talal Amer, a former Major in the Fourth Division, now the National Guard's spokesman, openly advocate separation from Syria and alignment with Israel, anathema to Assadist ideology. A more reasonable application of the "regime remnants" argument is that former regime figures have found a "safe haven" in Suwayda, allowing them to avoid accountability. That is a legitimate concern; but it is hardly unique to Suwayda. Former regime figures have found protection and reintegration across all of Syria, including within state institutions and military circles linked to the current authorities. Reducing the issue to Suwayda alone – and using a structural problem affecting Syria as a whole to demonise one side in a highly complex conflict – does little to advance any meaningful process of transitional justice.

The second line of argument – intensified in recent months – is that Suwayda has become not only a safe haven for regime remnants, but also a centre for the vast Captagon networks once overseen by the Assad regime. This narrative, however, overlooks that all the access routes into Suwayda are controlled by Damascus. Since the raw materials to produce Captagon originate from outside the province, Captagon trade and production clearly extend far beyond Suwayda and some Druze factions. State media itself recently reported the seizure of 25 million Captagon pills in Homs province, reportedly prepared for export via Syrian seaports. Here again, concentrating structural problems that plague the whole of Syria onto Suwayda serves to give the central government a legitimacy and political rectitude lacking from the *de facto* authorities in the province. It is a destructive framing that obscures the broader national dimensions of the problem. For people in Suwayda, this discourse only reinforces the perception that government supporters no longer regard them as a part of Syria, but as malicious traitors and criminals.

The long game

Damascus' strategy towards Suwayda appears to be long-term. For now, the government seems reluctant to launch a major military campaign against the outnumbered National Guard for fear of renewed Israeli attacks. The frontlines are largely frozen, though intermittent clashes occur, sometimes involving the use of drones by government forces. In the meantime, Damascus appears to be betting that people in Suwayda will eventually grow exhausted by local divisions and by isolation from central state services, and distance themselves from the 'Bashan' current. The government is also likely hoping that regional and international cards will reshuffle sufficiently for Israel to accept formal Druze reintegration under the Sharaa government. As the Rijal al-Karama source skeptical of the Hijri project put it: "The government is playing a long game, and the project will collapse bit by bit until it ends completely."

The logic behind the madness

Why Trump's Middle East strategy is not new – and may even be working

The US/Israel war on Iran is described by some as impulsive, chaotic, and even irrational: a war that the US has already lost. This view might generate clicks, but it overlooks the deeper logic shaping American policy in the Middle East over the past decade and a half. The war in the Gulf is not a rupture from a previous, more enlightened US strategy, but its continuation by harsher means.

In 2011, then US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton declared in *Foreign Policy* that "the future of politics will be decided in Asia, not Afghanistan or Iraq." The statement made explicit what would later become "the pivot": a long-term American effort to reduce overcommitment in the Middle East and redirect attention towards China. Under Donald Trump, the pivot was institutionalised in the 2017 US National Security Strategy. Under Joe Biden, it continued under the softer language of "invest, align, compete."

Regardless of the marketing term, the underlying premise remained constant: reducing the costs of American engagement in the Middle East while maintaining a self-sustaining regional order centred on US-aligned nation states.

The Biden interlude

For Washington, any meaningful drawdown required resolving – or at least containing – two longstanding problems. The first was Israel's position in the region and the perpetual instability generated by the unresolved Palestinian question. The second was Iran's nuclear ambitions, and its ability to project influence across the region through the Axis of Resistance encompassing Hezbollah, Hamas, Iraqi militias, the Houthis and Assad's Syria.

Trump's contribution to the Asia pivot was to accelerate it. Whereas Obama believed diplomacy could moderate Iran and preserve the possibility of a two-state solution, Trump concluded the opposite. His first term was about "maximum pressure" on Iran, withdrawal from the JCPOA and the killing of IRGC general Qassem Soleimani. Trump also greenlit Turkey's incursion into Syria in 2019 and its campaign of assassination against Kurdish commanders who were (nominally) US allies. He embraced the Saudi Crown Prince while simultaneously championing the Abraham Accords that sought to normalise Israel's place within the region while effectively bypassing (and perhaps killing off) the Palestinian issue.

The Biden years paused this Middle East re-engineering. Washington withdrew from Afghanistan, reopened diplomatic channels with Tehran and adopted a more restrained tone. Yet regional actors drew the same conclusion regardless: America wants out.

The rise of the regional triad

Trump effectively placed an early bet on three regional strongmen capable of imposing order themselves on behalf of the US: Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

If Trump's bet succeeds – and arguably it already has in part – the result will be a self-managed Middle East overseen by three dominant powers: Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Israel. It's a Thucydidean vision with little room for high-minded ideals on democracy and human rights.

As a result, Israel has become markedly more assertive militarily, operating across multiple theatres with growing confidence. Turkey has re-emerged as a central diplomatic and security actor, particularly after the collapse of Assad's Syria and Ankara's successful consolidation of influence there. Saudi Arabia has positioned itself as the region's principal Arab hegemon – sponsoring Syria's reintegration into the Arab fold, shaping debates around Gaza, Lebanon and Iran, and increasingly acting as the Gulf's pushy 'older brother.'

This logic explains much of Washington's recent behaviour. It explains the open-door policy toward Syria's new leadership despite unease about its jihadist past. It explains declining American interest in protecting Kurdish partners in Syria and Iraq, and Washington's indifference toward Israeli operations in southern Lebanon, southern Syria and the West Bank.

It may also explain why Trump is willing to talk to – and perhaps even salvage – Iran. Turkey and Saudi Arabia have their own rivalries with Tehran, and neither wants it armed with nuclear weapons. But both have also made clear to Washington that a fractured Iran is not in their interest. For the region to remain stable and for the Strait of Hormuz to remain open, Iran must be contained, not destroyed. Paradoxically, Trump may be using the Iranian threat as a stick to cajole Saudi Arabia into joining the Abraham Accords, thereby normalising Israel's position in the region and drawing the three pillars of the triad closer together and containing Iran in the long-term.

Connectivity and trade

The logic of the regional triad also underpins the region's ambitious infrastructure and connectivity projects. The Israeli-backed India–Middle East–Europe Economic Corridor, Turkey's Iraq Development Road and Saudi Arabia's many railway, energy pipeline and fiber optic projects are geopolitical instruments intended to anchor spheres of influence through trade, logistics and infrastructure.

In many respects, these projects are glossy strategic brochures produced by the regional triad, each of its members seeking to convince Washington of its routes, its ports, its railways and its political geography. Each project offers America the same promise: regional integration and stability without excessive American burden, and of course "economic prosperity."

But glossy brochures are just that. Trade corridors still have to contend with terrorism, weak states and unresolved conflicts. The three powers expected to manage the new Middle East are not natural partners either. Israel, Turkey and Saudi Arabia may all share an interest in limiting Iran, but they also compete for

influence in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, the eastern Mediterranean and the Red Sea. Their connectivity projects are, in part, rival bids for primacy that might create their own cycle of instability.

Threats and opportunities

When US envoy Tom Barrack remarked at the recent Antalya Diplomatic Forum that the region "respects one thing – power," he was simply describing in plain terms the organising principle of the new order.

What this means for small states is that they will need to decide who to align with, and how. Faced with a "near enemy" like Saudi Arabia, the UAE has thrown in its lot with Israel. Syria faces being under Ankara and Riyadh's thumb, so it too has turned to Israel via the UAE. Other smaller states such as Jordan, Kuwait and Qatar may also have to choose one or more sides, or else like Syria, hope to be friends with all three.

Despite its weakness, the emerging regional order offers opportunities for Syria. What makes it a perfect battlefield also makes it a strategic gateway should the regional triad come to an agreement: northwards to Turkey, southwards to Saudi Arabia, westwards to the Mediterranean, and potentially even into future Arab-Israeli trade routes. Connectivity, if handled carefully, could give Damascus leverage and cement the new leadership's claim to be restoring Syria as the focus of a confluence of regional and global interests.

The emergence of a post-Assad Syria is, in many ways, a by-product of America's longstanding desire to exit the Middle East – a process that Trump has accelerated by pushing responsibility onto regional strongmen and encouraging transactional politics.

Against this background, it was no surprise that President Ahmad al-Sharaa was invited to France to attend this year's G7 meeting; or that a Syrian official speaking to Reuters said his country's participation in the talks would likely focus on its role as a "potential strategic hub for supply chains" following the closure of the Strait of Hormuz.

Free the loaves

Syria's bread economy could benefit from gradual market liberalisation

Wheat farmers across Syria are unhappy with government procurement prices. Syria in Transition spoke to some of them. They argue that the wheat, flour and bread sectors should be gradually liberalised to improve incentives for producers, boost productivity and strengthen Syria's food security.

Another week, another protest, another government U-turn. This time it wasn't taxi drivers or teachers but farmers. The dispute began with the Economy Ministry announcing this year's procurement price for wheat: $330 per tonne. According to many farmers this was not enough to cover the cost of seed, fertiliser, pesticide, irrigation, haulage and land rent. The price was also set in the gradually-sliding Syrian pound (at the time of publication it had just crossed 14,000 of old denomination pounds to the US dollar). What made the decision more galling was that farmers had been expecting a bumper crop after plentiful rainfall; and a chance finally to turn a decent profit. The dispute is a test of whether Syria's new free-market rhetoric can survive contact with the country's most politically sensitive commodity.

Price games

In Raqqa, protests were staged outside the Governor's office, with some threatening to withhold deliveries to the state-run General Establishment for Cereals (SEC). In Daraa, the Farmers' Union published an angry letter warning of "severe resentment and anger" and urging an immediate re-think. Many farmers said that wheat may lose out next year to cumin, coriander and other crops with better market returns.

Salvation came with the intervention of President Ahmad al-Sharaa and Decree No. 120 of 24 May, granting farmers a bonus of $80 per tonne delivered to the SEC, albeit set in depreciating Syrian currency and three months after delivery. Assad-era governments also used presidential directives and delivery bonuses to pull wheat into state channels. Keeping bread affordable has long been one of the core functions of the Syrian state.

What is different now is that Syria has a pro-free mar-

ket government, yet it continues to pursue an agricultural policy inherited from a defunct era of state socialism. The fixed procurement price functions as a subsidy to farmers, costing the state as much as $900m a year. Yet even at $400 per tonne after the presidential bonus, many farmers remain in survival mode, barely able to pay off their debts and unable to invest seriously in equipment or expanded production. For comparison, farmers in Iraq receive $540 per tonne – and have considerably lower energy costs.

In effect, this government, like its predecessors, is asking rural producers to "take one for the team" by accepting a consistently low price for their wheat relative to production cost in order to keep bread cheap for urban consumers and the state coffers.

The problem is that bread is no longer especially cheap. A bundle of ten flatbreads from state-run bakeries – now just under 1kg, down from 1.2kg only a month ago – costs about $0.33, still requires waiting in a queue and is often of questionable quality. The same bundle from private bakeries is set at $0.44. At those prices, the claim that farmers must accept low wheat prices to keep bread affordable looks thin. Something in the chain between field, mill, bakery and consumer is not adding up.

Five-year plan

Field research by *Syria in Transition* suggests that the answer is not a sudden free market in wheat. That would expose small farmers and destabilise bread supply. What Syria needs, say farmers, is gradual liberalising reforms over five years, beginning with agriculture and extending into flour milling and bread production.

The first stage should be transparency and protection. The government should this year publish a cost-of-production formula for hard and soft wheat. This should include seed, fertiliser, energy, irrigation, labour, land rent, harvesting, transport and a modest profit margin. It should also recognise differences between rain-fed areas, irrigated land, steppe cultivation and the Euphrates basin. A single national price conceals very different farming realities.

Next year the state should establish a guaranteed floor price. The government would remain a buyer of last resort, protecting farmers from collapse and securing strategic reserves. But licensed private buyers should be allowed to enter the market and purchase growing quantities above that price, giving farmers a route to better returns without removing the state from the market.

The second stage, farmers told Syria in Transition, should be controlled competition. In year three, private mills, pasta factories, cooperatives and private traders should be brought into a regulated and transparent procurement system. The state would still buy for reserves, but it would no longer need to absorb the entire crop. Those farmers that cannot produce wheat at anywhere near competitive prices should be encouraged to try other, more profitable, crops.

The third stage, said informants in the agricultural sector, should be direct support and a more open bread economy. In year four, agricultural support should consist almost entirely of direct production support. The government and donor governments wishing to help Syria rebuild its economy could help farmers by reducing their costs: subsidised seed, credit schemes, solar- and wind-powered irrigation, and modern water-saving systems. A farmer who spends less needs a smaller price intervention at harvest.

By year five, Syria should aim for a mixed wheat economy. The state would still retain oversight of quality, competition and consumer protection. It would also retain a crucial role in shielding Syrian farmers from cheap imports, allowing foreign wheat into the market only when domestic shortages were expected or strategic reserves needed replenishing. Import controls, however, should be rule-based rather than discretionary, or they will simply create a new field for favoured traders. Meanwhile, farmers would sell primarily through cooperative or private channels.

Gradual market liberalisation should extend beyond procurement to the structure of the bread economy itself, urged *Syria in Transition*'s sources. This should include expanding licences for private milling, selling off most state-owned bakeries to small and medium-sized private operators and simplifying the process for opening new private bakeries. A broader cohort of private operators should be able to buy flour through transparent channels, either directly from farmers or through intermediary agribusinesses that supply bakeries on commercial terms.

Liberalisation done right

For too long the bread economy has served as an arm of the bureaucracy, stressed *Syria in Transition*'s informants, insisting that the state does not need to

bake bread in order to guarantee that Syrians can afford it. Burying the cost of cheap bread inside the consistently low price paid to farmers is both unfair and counter-productive. The government should instead create a decentralised market in which wheat, flour and bread prices transmit more honestly along the chain, while consumers are protected through targeted support for the most needy and fair competition policy.

Such a five-year programme could enable Syrian farmers to reach a level comparable to that of their Turkish counterparts. The base wheat price set by Turkey's state grain board is $350 per tonne – in the same pre-bonus dollar range as Syria's. But Turkish farmers operate within a more developed, and more competitive, milling, storage, credit and market infrastructure, and that difference matters as much as the headline price.

Five-star hotels and prestige airports might be more eye-catching; but if the government is serious about free market reforms, it should begin with the humble loaf.

Lessons in obedience

How Syria's schools reproduced authoritarian rule beyond the classroom

School is where children first encounter state authority in a sustained way: through everyday discipline, hierarchy and the regulation of speech and behaviour. In Assad's Syria, this meant taking first steps in a system where violence, corruption and opportunistic spying on others were treated as practical virtues. What's left of it?

If authoritarian rule – and, by extension, the prospects of liberalisation – depend on how people learn to see and interpret the world, then schooling is central to Syria's ongoing political transition. Under the Assads, schools were designed to produce loyal citizens through militarised indoctrination. They also trained young Syrians in navigating life in a *state of corruption (manzūmat al-fasād)* – thereby reproducing it.

Educational reform cannot be reduced to revising curricula or updating teaching methods. The school itself has to be taken seriously as a social institution and interactional space: a place where everyday authority relations are learned, where trust can be undermined or rebuilt and where the basic grammar of social cooperation is rehearsed long before students encounter formal politics.

The classroom as an extension of the security state

Schools in Assad's Syria were tightly woven into the organisational architecture of the Ba'ath Party. Beyond obligatory flag rituals and leader worship, students were gradually integrated into the party structure. Beginning in preparatory school, they were expected to join Ba'ath youth organisations; and by secondary school many were encouraged to become full party members. In return, students could receive up to twenty additional points on their final baccalaureate score – a substantial advantage that could determine university admission and future career prospects – usually in exchange for attending party training camps or carrying out party-related tasks.

After completing the tenth grade, students had to attend a "summer camp." The name suggests tent and campfire atmosphere but these four-week camps usually took place in local school buildings as full-day programmes, with students returning home only to sleep. They combined ideological instruction with basic military-style training. In addition, students were required to attend regular party guidance sessions held after school roughly every two weeks.

Key institutional figures in this system were the military instructor (*futuwaa*), and the more administrative supervisor (*muwajih*). When active military training in schools receded in the early years of Bashar's rule – when he was seeking to project the image of a reform-minded civilian leader to avoid becoming the next US target after Saddam Hussein – many military instructors became supervisors and maintained personal firearms, as one interviewee recounted. Acting as intermediaries between schools and the Ba'ath party and intelligence services, they monitored teachers, disciplined students and served as institutionalised channels for denunciation. Students learned early that words could travel, that classmates might double as informants and that caution was a basic survival skill. This made schools function as orientation spaces for social life. They provided the moral scripts and behavioral cues through which authoritarian order repro-

duced itself from below. The core premises were that obedience was a civic virtue, and that disobedience invited physical punishment.

'The flesh is yours, the bones are ours'

Over time, the culture of disciplinary violence became embedded in society. Interviews conducted by *Syria in Transition* repeatedly point to a societal demand side: some parents actively expected teachers to "raise" children through corporal punishment, and interpreted a lack of physical sanction as a sign of institutional weakness. This expectation could be interpreted simplistically, as a feature of patriarchy; yet the reality appears more paradoxical. Several active and former teachers stressed that families calling for a "hard hand" at school were not necessarily those who used violence at home. For them, violence was delegated to the school and legitimised as preparation for life in an authoritarian social order where bodies had to comply and minds had to endure. One teacher commented that after the "stick" disappeared following Assad's fall, many teachers "lost their authority," because fear of physical pain carried more weight than moral reprimand or psychological pressure alone. After decades of systematic brutalisation in schools, authority appears to have been reduced to the capacity to inflict physical harm. The classroom thus taught a social lesson: status and control are anchored in coercive capability; and legitimacy attaches to those who can credibly enforce boundaries.

Bashar Assad's reported claim that the only way to govern Syrian society is "with the shoe over people's heads" found its classroom counterpart. One teacher told *Syria in Transition* – with a degree of pride – that merely mentioning her shoe size in front of the class was enough for students to obey. Another teacher recounted how, after a student insisted that "the stick is forbidden," the teacher replied that the prohibition applied to the stick, not to punishment – and enforced compliance by striking him with his hand instead. The episode was remembered as a turning point: the teacher's authority in the classroom solidified once coercion had been publicly demonstrated.

Attitudes toward corporal punishment, however, are far from uniform. In a poll conducted by *Syria in Transition* in April 2026 among 900 respondents in Damascus, Rural Damascus, and Homs, 62 per cent said physical punishment in schools was "never acceptable." Another 19 per cent said it was "rarely acceptable," while 11 per cent considered it "sometimes acceptable" and seven per cent "completely acceptable." While corporal punishment remains socially embedded, it is also widely contested.

A culture of cheating

Beyond the regime's overt coercion, the classroom also reflected a deeper logic of social and economic mobility under Assad's highly corrupt, pyramid-like kleptocracy. School was a testing ground where students took their first steps in a system where the abuse of power, opportunistic manoeuvring and strategic rule-breaking were treated as practical virtues – and, for many, as prerequisites for advancement. Exams were therefore arenas in which the skills of transgression were rehearsed within a broader culture of cheating.

Those with money, status, or access to kinship-based networks were given privileged treatment, often in absurd ways where teachers had to tolerate massively disrespectful behaviour because of how powerful a student's family was. The classroom mirrored the patterns of wider Syrian society, where power outweighed formal rules and corruption was part of the operational grammar of everyday life. Syria's educational landscape has long been heterogeneous, spanning public, private and religious institutions; and interviews with teachers and education professionals underline that these practices varied across school types and local contexts. Interviewees consistently opined, however, that corruption was most routine in public schools. Where direct cheating proved difficult, students relied on gifts or informal payments to secure grades. In some accounts, the transactional logic of schooling became almost performative. As Loubna Mrie describes in her memoire *Defiance*, her teacher would write her shoe size on the blackboard ahead of "Teachers' Day," signalling preferred gifts to parents. This was a not-so-subtle code that could translate into hints about exam content or the informal purchasing of marks.

Pervasive petty corruption among teachers was not simply an individual ethical failure. It emerged from a shortage economy in which the teaching profession was intentionally underfunded and structurally de-professionalised. Low salaries and weak investment in teacher training meant that corruption was a means of survival. At the same time, the regime's political expectations narrowed the role of teachers. They were not expected to open cognitive horizons and enable independent judgement. Their primary role was to transmit Assadist dogma and maintain order.

A difficult inheritance for the post-Assad era

With Assad gone, everyday school life has changed. The Ba'ath party, with its obligatory propaganda rituals, is no more, and the *mukhabarat* no longer monitors classrooms and corridors. That has brought a sense of calm and psychological relief to schools. Yet this mood is better understood as part of a broader post-regime "honeymoon" than as evidence of deep institutional reform. In organisational terms, continuity remains striking. Much of the teaching staff trained under the old system have stayed in place. Teachers also point to weak coordination (such as training courses on how to teach the updated curriculum) and opaque guidance from the Ministry of Education, complicating attempts to establish coherent standards across a fragmented educational landscape.

In some areas, the state appears to be trying to compensate for limited institutional capacity by renewed displays of presence and control. Some teachers assert that stricter oversight has reduced cheating and petty bribery. Others strongly dispute this. It is hardly surprising that removing Assad portraits and changing flags does not automatically dissolve behaviours learned over decades, especially when economic pressures and institutional habits that encouraged them remain in place.

The most acute challenge, however, concerns the status and capacity of the teaching profession itself. Many teachers entered classrooms without proper qualification amid wartime staff depletion. Low investment in teacher education and poor economic conditions continue to plague the sector. The result is a profession struggling with basic survival. For many teachers, the central question is whether a salary can sustain their household beyond the middle of the month. Teachers' strikes and protests across different regions since late 2025 and into early 2026 underscore the depth of this crisis but haven't achieved substantial change.

Teachers as trustees of civic maturity

For most children, school is the first sustained encounter with state authority: the place where the state becomes tangible through everyday discipline, hierarchy and the regulation of speech and behaviour. At a moment when Syria is trying to recover from civil war while building a new state and social contract, schooling carries enormous potential for genuine change. It should be treated as a national institution of reconstruction rather than simply another public service to patch up.

The material dimension of this challenge is immense. More demanding teaching methods and the increasingly complex content of new schoolbooks require educators who are professionally equipped and economically secure. Adequate pay, proper training and social recognition are prerequisites for turning teachers into credible trustees of civic maturity who can guide, protect and challenge students.

No less complex is the question of how schools themselves are organised: the routines, incentives and informal practices through which authority is exercised and reproduced in daily life. Neither the Ministry of Education nor the wider state can expect to move on from authoritarianism while preserving the social habits and institutional logic that have structured schools for decades. If Syria is to move beyond authoritarianism, the classroom is a key place to start.

Part III of this research will be published in the July issue and will examine, in more practical terms, how a new educational culture can take root in Syria – and who is capable of nurturing it.

Romance and reality

A review of Robin Yassin-Kassab's book 'The Blood Between Us'

In one of the first book-length attempts to grapple with Syria after Assad, Robin Yassin-Kassab chronicles the emotional experience of liberation and return after decades of dictatorship. Our review examines where understandable revolutionary romance gives way to analytical blind spots, both in the portrayal of the revolution's genesis and in assessing authoritarian continuities.

Syria's transition is a patchwork of unsettling and unresolved issues: provisional institutions, renewed sectarian violence, contested claims to legitimacy and the old question of whether rebel victory can become politics for all. One of the first attempts to make sense of this first year under Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) rule is Robin Yassin-Kassab's *The Blood Between Us: Syria After the Fall of Assad*, published by Saqi Books.

Yassin-Kassab is well known in English-language Syria expert and activist circles. His earlier book with Leila al-Shami, *Burning Country* (2016), became one of the defining English-language entry points to the revolution's civic micro-architecture, foregrounding the Local Coordination Committees, student networks and citizen journalists. *Burning Country* insisted on the crucial point that before Syria became a theatre of militias and foreign patrons, there was a revolutionary civic sphere attempting self-government against a state that had monopolised politics for decades.

Authored by a writer known for sharp criticism of tyranny and oppression in Syria and the wider Middle East, Yassin-Kassab's book arrives with a particular burden of expectation. With the Ahmad al-Sharaa government now into its second year, and showing signs of authoritarian temptations, there is no shortage of subject matter to investigate and critique.

An author at the center of events

Before turning to the substance of Yassin-Kassab's latest book, however, a methodological note is necessary. The author states at the outset that it is written from a personal perspective, as an involved observer who recounts the pain, anxieties and joys of the events he describes while trying to remain focused on the Syrian people as the main protagonist. Perhaps surprisingly, given his Syrian roots and his standing within the revolution's activist sphere, he does not claim to speak as an expert, and admits that the book is "partial and radically incomplete".

What appears humble on a personal level, however, becomes an analytical tension running through the book. The grin Yassin-Kassab describes after being warmly welcomed by a border guard when re-entering Syria is both humanly understandable and revealing of the emotional proximity that gives the narrative both its force and its blind spots. Even allowing for the political bias such writing inevitably carries, however, the analytical discipline fails to reach a level that might be expected from a writer with such knowledge and moral ambition.

The burden of doing too much

Throughout the book, the question of intention and preferred target audience repeatedly presses itself upon the reader. Across 339 pages of substantive text, the author sets himself a formidable task: to introduce inexperienced readers to the complexity of fourteen years of conflict, to illuminate the dynamics of authoritarian social formation after Assad's fall, to reflect on the condition of the economy, and even on the environmental effects of conflict – all under a title, *The Blood Between Us*, that promises a deeper meditation on Syria's burdened legacy and how it is playing out in the present transition. At times, this feels like too much ambition for a single volume. Often, the book reads like a brisk retelling of events, and at times like an extended commentary rather than a fully developed argument. This gives new observers a useful overview of how events transpired, but it also allows inaccuracies and analytical shortcuts. Some are minor, others more consequential for the book's broader claims.

This becomes glaring in the author's assessment of Turkey's role in the November 2024 *Deter the Aggression* offensive that toppled Assad. He suggests that nobody but the revolutionaries themselves truly drove events: that the rest of the world merely reacted as Syrians finally reclaimed ownership of their own history. In many ways, this reflects an understandable longing for Syrian agency. Yet despite reporting, including by this magazine, on Turkey's longstanding plans to expand its northern Syrian "safe zone" to include Aleppo city and its environs, Yassin-Kassab largely dismisses the possibility of behind-the-scenes coordination or longer-term strategic planning between HTS and its regional and international allies. Unconvincingly, he argues that the absence of early, full-scale mobilisation by the Syrian National Army (SNA) shows that Turkish officials, like other actors, were operating purely reactively.

Where the fog of war still hangs thick, it may be wiser to leave such matters to historians than to narrate events as though the archives were already closed.

From the romance of revolution to the trials of transition

While such inaccuracies may partly be matters of political preference in narrative writing, others cut more deeply into the book's analytical core. This is most visible where Yassin-Kassab romanticises the attributes of the early local councils that emerged as the Assad regime's grip on many areas receded in 2012. He describes these councils as democratic or quasi-democratic spaces where "Islamists, liberals and leftists usually worked well together", and as bodies that "tended to be horizontally organised and meritocratic rather than ideological, councillors being elected for their practical skills."

This is overly generous. The councils varied enormously from place to place, and the courage and commitment of many early activists were undeniable. Yet overall, local councils were not islands of horizontal self-rule. In the main they were fragile and dependent for their existence on external actors outside any democratic mandate. Armed groups supplied the muscle needed to police territory, protect logistics and enforce decisions; but that muscle also gave them leverage over welfare, security and legitimacy. Electoral experiments were rare, and mostly failures. Power would revert to the established societal pattern based on familial consensus and local notability. Activists were frequently pushed aside, even before sharia courts and Islamist factions tightened their grip on local administration.

The image of democratic self-organisation under fire is certainly appealing, but what ultimately defined the 'liberated areas' was compromised governance suspended between revolutionary aspiration, social hierarchy, militia power and donor-dependent financing. To say this is not to deny the emancipatory intention of early activists; it is to see how today's failures of democratic consolidation were already incubating in yesterday's institutions.

The regime in society

Yassin-Kassab is similarly imprecise in questioning the civil war character of the conflict and, overall, distinguishing between the Assad regime and the Syrian people without offering the deeper systemic analysis necessary to grapple with the implications of the book's title. From a revolutionary-democratic perspective, this is understandable: it allows for a more inclusive language toward Syrians and shifts the burden of guilt onto an externalised tyrannical regime. Yet this distinction does not help in naming present conditions or in overcoming them.

As post-dictatorial reckonings elsewhere have shown, tyranny is never merely an elite project. It settles within society and works through people as much as over them. Many helped keep the regime's institutions of violence running, including the mundane bureaucratic machinery without which repression cannot function. Others were drawn into tyrannical dynamics economically, socially or informally, at times simply to protect themselves. Some were deeply committed believers. This is not an easy truth to articulate because no one likes to confront their inner Mr. Hyde. But recognising this reality is central to allow movement beyond both victor's narratives and competing hierarchies of victimhood. An honest account on guilt, implication and perpetration is indispensable for reconciling different segments of Syrian society, and, indeed, society as a whole, with the very idea of a state for all.

What outlives the regime

Yassin-Kassab is not blind to the authoritarian legacy that haunts Syria's transition. In the book's more thought-provoking chapters, he identifies dangers embedded in the new elite, its governance and its ideological origins. He also shows how deeply the logic of the violence of the Assads remains anchored in the minds of the new rulers. He traces this logic through the massacres on the coast and in Suwayda, and in early transitional justice efforts and in new forms of identity formation pointing toward Sunni Arab supremacism.

Yet Yassin-Kassab stops short of turning these observations into a systematic critique of Syrian society and the new regime. Instead, he leans toward a narrative where excessive violence is primarily the result of poor discipline among tribal irregulars and militias-turned-army units – forces that al-Sharaa, the stabilising strongman, is supposedly trying to control. What this overlooks is a substantial body of research showing how regimes enable violence without micromanaging each and every death squad. One of the central lessons of Assadist rule was precisely that calculated arbitrariness served as a tool of domination; a pattern that could also have been empirically examined in post-Assad Syria.

This view of a strong centre committed to pacification underpins Yassin-Kassab's assessment of the al-Sharaa government's broader power politics, much of which draws on the questionable analysis advanced in *Transformed by the People* by Jerome Drevon and Patrick Haenni, which the author references repeatedly. The argument is familiar: once HTS consolidated power in Idlib, a limited form of plurality gradually emerged. Yassin-Kassab extends this assumption to Syria as a whole, including the military campaign against the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in early 2026, whose defeat and the unlikelihood of Syria becoming federal he describes as liberating the country from the "existential risk of dissolution," while sidestepping the far broader and more nuanced debates around decentralisation that concern Syria well beyond the matter of the SDF. Once the authorities fully secure victory, Yassin-Kassab's reasoning goes, it is hoped that breath-

ing space will emerge for constitutional rule, pluralism and equal citizenship within a democratic order.

Beyond the victors' peace

Ultimately, this is the logic of emergency rule – of which Syria has disastrous historical experience – and allows authoritarian continuities to take hold. It allows the new rulers to claim, again and again, that the security needed for pluralism and democracy has not yet been achieved; and it legitimises more "blood between us" on the path to achieving it.

This analytical oversight is typical of many post-Assad analyses that, in a deeply exhausted euphoria after an unexpected victory, are willing to grant an almost limitless benefit of the doubt. It reaches an irritating level when the author suggests near the end that all criticisms leveled at the Syrian authorities made in his book could be leveled at Western leaders, too.

The Blood Between Us is an ambitious attempt to document post-Assad Syria. Although appearing to have been written in haste, it offers substantial material for critical debate.