

Syria in Transition



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Welcome to Syria in Transition (SiT), a monthly delve into policy-relevant developments concerning the Syrian conflict. Crafted by practitioners with a decade-long experience in the field, SiT offers informed perspectives tailored for diplomats and decision makers. SiT goes straight to the point and shuns unnecessary verbiage – just as we would prefer as avid readers ourselves.

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Brussels VII: More than an aid conference

The Brussels conference traditionally serves both as the primary humanitarian pledging event for Syria and the region, and as a platform for Europeans to assert their political roles in the Syrian file. A key theme of discussions at this year's conference is expected to be the momentum of normalisation that the Assad regime has lately enjoyed.

Arab normalisation and Turkish outreach plainly highlight the consequences of Europe's decision to refrain from active political involvement. The crucial question now is how Europeans can effectively blend their essential humanitarian role, their engagement in the peace process, and their vested interests, particularly in managing and mitigating further refugee flows.

A something for nothing deal

Recent Arab initiatives to reengage with the Assad regime have created the false impression that the civil war and the *de facto* division of the country are over, and that the conflict now revolves around establishing a working relationship between the regime and its Arab neighbours. This dangerously overlooks the realities.

The desired outcomes that Arab leaders claim they expect from the regime, such as putting an end to the Captagon trade, facilitating refugee returns, stimulating commerce, fostering stability, and generally promoting a 'pan-Arab spirit', cannot be achieved without tackling the conflict for what it is: a highly internationalised civil war. Lacking boots on the ground, the Arabs' potential for direct influence remains limited.

Despite attempts to showcase initiative and ownership, Arab states have little appetite to get involved in a conflict that could not be controlled and from

which they had consequently disengaged. The situation on the ground, and the overall balance of power, are therefore likely to remain unaffected by the media-effective displays of normalisation.

Nevertheless, the Amman meeting and the return of Syria to the Arab League have managed to shift attention towards three central issues: normalisation, Captagon, and refugee return. Some commentators argue that the Arabs are taking matters into their own hands to mitigate a destabilising spillover of the Syrian war; that, unlike the West, they at least have a dynamic Syria policy. While this policy is neither coherent nor appears properly conceptualised, the recent intra-Arab fence-mending cannot be dismissed as merely symbolic – and anyway even symbolic steps hold a value in themselves.

While Assad is likely to engage cynically on the refugee and Captagon files, he will surely leverage his new Arab friends for material gains. He would want them to lobby the West to ease sanctions, increase Early Recovery assistance on favourable terms, and he would want direct aid and investment from GCC states. Considering the UN's track record and fractures in Western adherence to agreed policy lines, there is a real risk that these efforts might actually succeed.

While Assad's slow-motion normalisation may bring relief to certain communities in Syria in terms of infrastructure rehabilitation, however, there is a clear risk that, overall, it could do more harm than good. As long as the Damascus regime maintains significant influence in the aid industry, deepening regional and international engagement could sharpen its predatory instincts and vindicate its intransigent strategy, thus perpetuating the Syrian crisis.

To uphold humanitarian principles and advance a political settlement in line with UNSCR 2254, the European Union and its partners should take a firm stance on normalisation. This not only means maintaining and establishing necessary policy lines but also pushing for accountability, including at the UN.

Balancing out bad normalisation

The 3–4 June Syrian Negotiation Commission (SNC) “reunification” meeting in Geneva highlighted a potential means of countering the Arab states’ normalisa-

tion drive with the Assad regime. Given that the West has limited practical means to stop regionals re-establishing relations with Damascus, a reasonable response would be to balance it by strengthening the Syrian opposition.

Cultivating an alternative political point of reference is not only crucial for the identities and social cohesion of millions of Syrians who oppose the Assad regime; it is also vital to keep the political process alive given that negotiations require at least two sides. Like all opposition bodies, the SNC has suffered from internal fissures and external meddling; but it continues to be recognised by the UN as the representative of the Syrian opposition and includes a broad spectrum of actors from all three areas of control (regime/opposition/SDF)

UN Special Envoy for Syria, Geir Pedersen, has highlighted the need for confidence-building measures that can be achieved through reciprocal concessions. Until now, this step-for-step diplomacy has been approached as a track between the Assad regime and the international community, almost entirely by-passing the opposition. This has put the SNC in a difficult position. Strengthening the SNC by pushing for intra-Syrian talks on step-for-step confidence-building measures between the areas of control could create low threshold entry points for stabilisation and political progress alike.

The imperative for conflict management

Political progress in line with UNSCR 2254, which stipulates a comprehensive solution to the conflict, remains blocked due to the Assad regime's unwillingness to make any compromises. It is also paralysed by the geopolitical standoff between the United States and Russia. As long as constructive engagement is seen as a weakness, and as long as Turkey feels comfortable playing both sides, substantial political progress will be difficult.

Limited progress can nevertheless still be expected, given ongoing challenges on the ground and stakeholders' political necessities. Europe's priorities include managing refugee flows/returns, an issue that will likely dominate at Brussels VII. Engaging Turkey on Early Recovery efforts in northern Syria to deal with IDPs there, and the possibility of a deal on NE Syria that meets Turkey's security requirements, might therefore be on the cards. President Erdogan's

re-election is likely to narrow policy options available both to Europeans and the SDF; but it also ends the uncertainty over Turkey's future leadership that has curbed engagement with Ankara thus far. Now, smart conflict management appears as one of the few credible courses of action available to the Europeans.

The Astana+ process, which has morphed into the Moscow quad (Russia, Iran, Turkey, Syria), remains the only multilateral format for conflict management that has shaped developments on the ground. Although it has lost some thunder in the aftermath of the Turkish elections because of Ankara ruling out any meeting with Assad in the foreseeable future, and despite it posing a challenge to the UN-sponsored Geneva track, it remains a model of sorts, albeit a flawed one. By endorsing the Astana process when it was established in 2017, the UN gave up its claim (as mandated in UNSCR 2254) to take a leading role in conflict management; but it is not too late to correct course. What is required is a new and enhanced model that takes cues from existing tracks but is owned by the UN. That is the key challenge that now confronts the UN Envoy.

Honesty on UN accountability

Over his more than four-year term, UN Special Envoy to Syria Geir Pedersen has only once raised "accountability" before the UN Security Council – in March 2020, when he cited demands of Syrian civil society. This notable silence on what is a cornerstone of Western policy on Syria also prevails in other UN departments, most notably the office of the Secretary General himself.

It was not always thus. In Ban Ki Moon's day, official statements emphasised the need to refer the Syria file to the International Criminal Court (ICC). The silence since António Guterres took over the position in 2017 arises from fears that talk of accountability could alienate the conflict parties. Such fears lack substance. After all, the most credible negotiations – including face-to-face talks in Geneva – took place in 2014, despite the UN's then urgent calls for accountability.

In reality, this is not a matter of individual preferences. The UN's "Call to Action for Human Rights" actually obliges senior officials to speak out against human rights violations. Introduced as the "Human Rights Up Front" initiative in 2013, the guideline pledges backing from UN headquarters for staff who speak out and

are then declared *persona non grata* by a government or face other difficulties. Informed sources concerned with the matter, however, say that it is not implemented seriously. In sum, there is a lack of support for staff in terms of security and career protection, combined with a lack of any penalties for ignoring the guideline.

This systematic disincentivisation of pursuing accountability results in the depoliticisation of accountability in the UN's discourse on Syria. Given the UN's discursive relevance and its significant *de facto* role in shaping relations between the international community and the Assad regime, calls for a principled and courageous position from the UN, including from the Secretary General and the Resident Coordinator in Damascus, should not be dismissed as high-minded moralising. They are about complying with the UN's own guidelines.

Keeping the UNSCR 2254 flag flying

There has been no shortage of opposition unification meetings in the course of the Syrian war. Over the weekend of 3–4 June, Geneva hosted yet another one. The gathering of the 37-member Syrian Negotiation Commission (SNC) general assembly was the first since 2019 in which all the body's components and constituent "platforms" took part. It is happening now because of a growing realization among oppositionists of all stripes that should UNSCR 2254 be ignored by the Moscow or Amman tracks, they will have no further role to play in political talks. They are engaged in a last-ditch defence of the opposition's right to shape Syria's future.

The SNC's president, Dr Badr Jamous, has made it his mission to reinvigorate the SNC. In the process, he has had to confront one of the opposition's perennial problems: challenges to internal cohesion caused by diverging local and regional agendas. The Moscow platform, for instance, has long called for the UN's Constitutional Committee meetings to be held in Damascus instead of Geneva. The National Coordi-

nation Body, a gathering of mostly Damascus-based leftist and Arab nationalist parties, has tended to view Arab normalisation with Assad as an opportunity rather than a threat. The Cairo platform, meanwhile, has floated the idea of giving representation in the SNC to the Syrian Democratic Council, which is dominated by the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD). These positions starkly contrast with that of the “mainstream” opposition, held notably by the Syrian Opposition Coalition (generally known as the “Etilaf”), which holds the SNC presidency and that has to meet the expectations of the “revolutionary street” while keeping domestic and regional allies on board.

The SNC general assembly’s concluding statement was thus a feat of trapeze artistry. It “took note” of diplomatic efforts in Amman and Moscow without passing any clear judgements on them. In a nod to the civil society conference in Paris it urged “formulating a healthy relationship between political and civil society.” It also called for concerted efforts to secure the “safe and voluntary return” of refugees and for an equitable distribution of aid and development assistance – a first foray for the SNC into this area. The SNC hopes that such an open-minded and “mature” approach to politics will keep options open for exploiting any diplomatic breakthrough, whether at the level of the currently dormant UN Geneva process or the Amman and Moscow tracks that are proceeding independently of the UN.

As things now stand, the UN Office of the Special Envoy (OSE) and the SNC find themselves in the same life raft. Both feel adrift from the main currents of diplomatic activity, and both feel that something needs to be done. Whether they can find a way to reinforce each other around the goal of preserving UNSCR 2254 as a reference point for Syria diplomacy will depend in large part on whether the UN is ready to respect a key tenant of the Resolution: the parity of the SNC and the Syrian regime as negotiating partners. Over the past years, the UN has treated the SNC as an afterthought – something it may come to regret if UNSCR 2254 fades from view, and with it the UN’s relevance.

Fear and loathing in Jeddah

A meeting of the foreign ministers of Syria, Egypt, Iraq, Saudi Arabia and Jordan on 1 May was meant as a landmark breakthrough in Arab diplomacy on Syria. A statement said that the officials had discussed a “step-for-step” approach to addressing return of refugees and tackling drug trafficking. The meeting was followed by Syria’s re-admission into the Arab League and a formal invitation to Bashar al-Assad to attend the upcoming summit in Jeddah.

In Jeddah, however, things did not go to plan. Informed sources say that the Syrian leader was aggrieved by the invitation to Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky, whose show-stopping appearance was kept as a last-minute surprise by the Saudi hosts. Not only did Assad have to sit through Zelensky’s anti-Russia speech; also he had to watch Qatar’s Emir Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani walk out of the session before he had a chance to speak. The only two Arab leaders to welcome him by name were presidents Mahmoud Abbas of Palestine and Qais Saied of Tunisia.

To add insult to injury, Assad’s request for an audience with King Salman was turned down. Instead, he was given a hastily-arranged meeting with Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman that lasted no more than 20 minutes. According to insiders, Assad failed to secure any financial assistance. Meanwhile, Zelensky was given a 1.5 hour meeting with the Crown Prince and walked away with a further pledge on top of the \$400m aid package already announced by Riyadh in February.

Incensed with being upstaged and snubbed, eye-witnesses at Jeddah Airport reported that Assad vented his fury at the Saudi foreign ministry’s protocol official who accompanied him to his plane. He accused the Saudis of “laying a trap”. His close adviser, Luna al-Shibl, piled in and berated the hapless official for Riyadh’s pro-Zelensky media coverage. She went as far as to demand that the Crown Prince visit Damascus “for at least two days” to make up for the perceived humiliation.

The following day, Assad's foreign minister Faisal al-Mikdad appeared on RT to pour cold water on the reciprocal nature of what was supposedly agreed in Amman. "We did not discuss step-for-step," he said, "we discussed steps to reach solutions to the situation in Syria." He then read out a wish-list of concessions that his boss expected from the international community. The Arabs might now be talking to Assad, but it doesn't mean that he's listening.

Staking a claim to space

Thanks to an anti-Assad British-Syrian billionaire philanthropist, civil society organisations (CSOs) are beginning to speak with one voice. Ayman Asfari, an oilman with financial muscle and an impressive contacts book, has persuaded more than 150 CSOs to coalesce under one umbrella and under his chairmanship. The Madaniya ("civil") initiative held its inaugural conference at the *Institut Du Monde Arabe* in Paris on 5–6 June after two years of preparation.

The title of the conference ("The political entitlement of Syrian civic space") suggests that there is no shortage of ambition. The organisers, however, are keen to stress that they are not encroaching on anybody else's turf. "Reclaiming political agency (...) does not imply an intention to replace the existing Syrian bodies engaged in the political processes outlined by UN Security Council Resolution 2254", reads the press release. "Rather, it seeks to complement their efforts." This is code for: 'we do not seek to supplant the Syrian Negotiation Commission (SNC)' – a stance underlined by the invitation to speak extended to the SNC's president; and a sensible position given that Turkey, the US and the Europeans wish to avoid any renewed intra-opposition bloodletting.

The question remains: what exactly is the role that CSOs wish to "reclaim"? Asfari, who is said to have ambitions to enter formal politics himself at some point, says that CSOs, "have the legitimacy to have a voice on the pressing needs of the Syrian people and

their future including supporting any political process." The UN political process is currently stalled but it has existing structures that ensure a role for civil society, including the Constitutional Committee's civil society third, the Women's Advisory Board and the Civil Society Support Room. Western diplomats working on Syria spend half their time meeting and supporting CSOs. There is no shortage of "civil society voices."

Perhaps the reality lies elsewhere. "Asfari is keen on putting CSOs in his pocket so that when he meets a foreign minister he can say 'I speak for these people,'" said one attendee, who asked not to be named. That might not be a bad thing. Having a liberal and pro-Western businessman of Asfari's weight to provide a point of reference for CSOs, and perhaps the wider opposition movement, could be transformative. But the world of CSOs contains its own minefields. The future of Madaniya depends on whether idealistic visions can be translated into a real world action programme that appeals to civil society in diverse communities across the political divide.

SiT thrives on continuous exchange with professionals. We kindly invite you to reach out with criticism, ideas, information, or just to say hello at sit@cms-consulting.co.uk