Syria's Peace: An Initial Insight into *Disarmament, Demobilisation, Integration* and *Reintegration* Processes in the post-Assad nation

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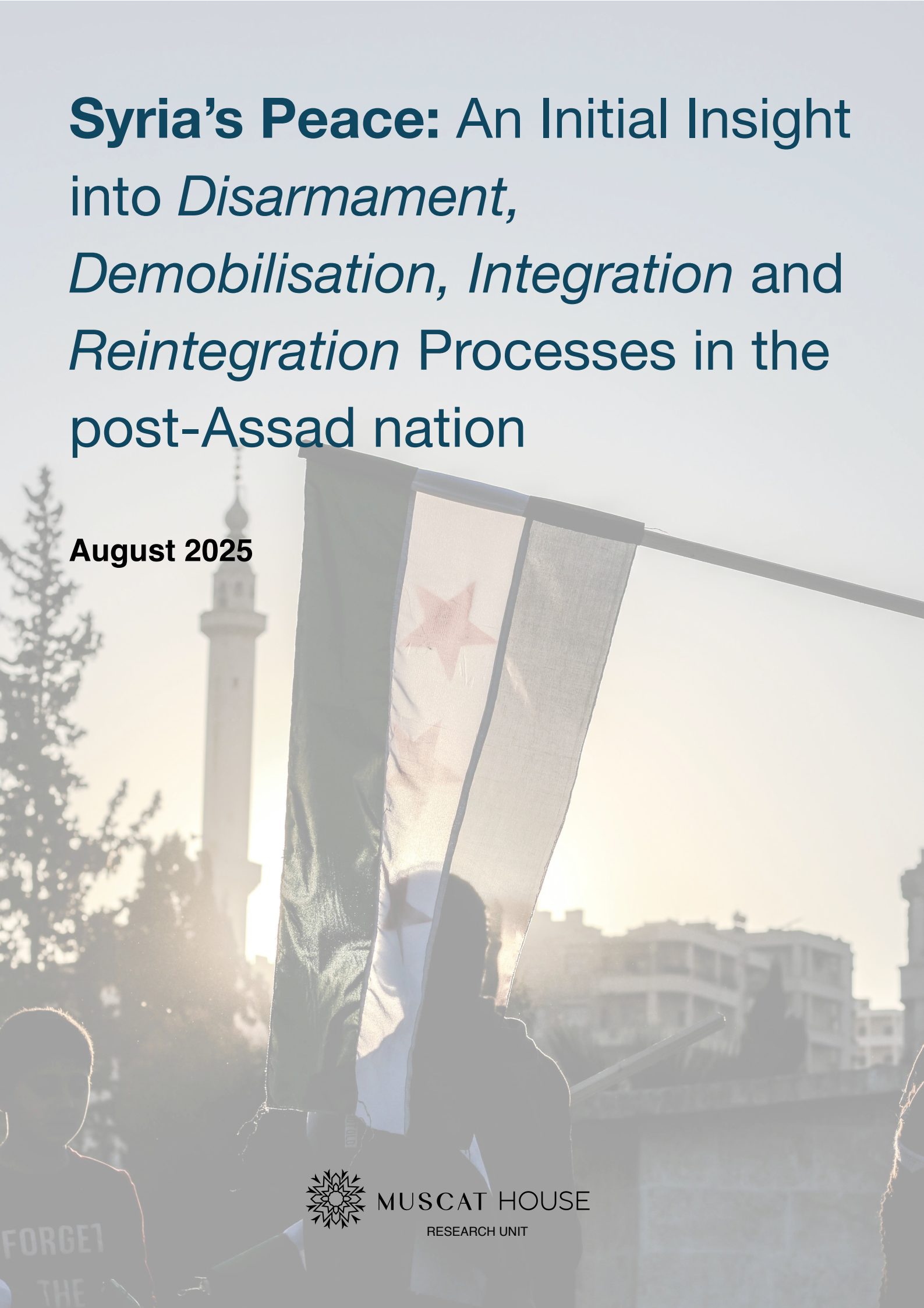

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Executive Summary

After half a century, Syria has rapidly moved from one paradigm – that of the intense division and violence prevalent in the final phase of the Assad dictatorship – into another which offers, at the very least, hope for the beginnings of a peaceful and prosperous future.

The practical aspects of bringing such a future about, however, are deeply challenging. This paper reviews the Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (DDR) efforts – essential for consolidating and sustaining a peace that will enable Syria's recovery – which have been made to date, and argues that they remain underdeveloped and inconsistent. By the same token it suggests that results of an ineffective DDR approach, however, would be severe, and risk the future of the country.

Throughout this piece, we lay out the findings of initial research conducted since March 2025, which cumulatively show that although the GoS does not necessarily have a joined-up DDR strategy, it is carrying out elements of it to a greater or lesser extent. This, however, is necessary but not sufficient to achieving the goal of a sustainable, resilient long-term peace – and to that end, it also proposes a set of strategic recommendations which were identified through the course of the research, and whose achievement will significantly contribute towards achieving such a peace. Key findings include:

- The new Government of Syria (GoS) is undertaking localised DDR initiatives towards the various non-state armed groups (NSAGs) in the country, however does not yet have a coherent, national-level DDR strategy to give it the best chance of success for a long-term, sustained peace.
- Without a representative, popularly-respected political framework, and effective transitional justice processes, DDR efforts will be severely inhibited.
- While the GoS has made active efforts to begin disarming and demobilising NSAGs, these have not yet brought all the country's major groups under its banner, nor minimised them as alternate centres of power.
- Credible reintegration pathways for former combatants, particularly economic, are not yet in place across the country.
- The ongoing economic challenges in Syria are a brake upon DDR efforts, and will need the support of long-term foreign partnerships and investments, and pragmatic domestic leadership and policy-making, to overcome.
- Public psychosocial support is almost non-existence, yet will need to be built up as a priority to aid dealing with the psychological aftermath of the previous 14 years, reintegrate former combatants, and help rebuild Syria's social fabric.

Introduction

1. The Context

The whirlwind offensive of Hay'at Tahrir Al Sham (HTS) burst out of Idlib Province of Syria in late November 2024, sweeping aside the by-now hollow remnants of Bashar Al Assad's regime. A non-state armed group that had previously been one of many, HTS seized the reins of power in the country as the *de facto* ruling authority – though less as the singular dominant force, but rather as *primus inter pares*: first amongst equals.

Recognising this key fact – that HTS's ability to seize power was not as a result of its own predominance and overwhelming force, but rather that it was through navigating a complex, dynamic landscape filled with competing interests, and while marshalling and directing the energies of an array of groups and entities – provides a starting point for understanding the realities of how it now seeks to shape and win the fragile peace of post-war Syria.

The challenges to successful peacebuilding efforts, however, are legion. In Syria's case, many factors conspire to hamper its progress: a ruined and hollowed-out economy; a traumatised, militarised population; powerful non-state actors, with sufficient leverage to inhibit peacebuilding efforts; crippled infrastructure; and a shortfall in governance and administrative capacity, just to name a few.

A key aspect of shaping this peace, particularly as the 'first amongst equals', lies in the success of the interconnected set of activities that has come to be known in international relations and governance thinking as **Disarmament**, **Demobilisation** and **Reintegration (DDR)**. Although by no means always referred to as DDR on the ground (or necessarily carried out in anywhere near the neat sequence suggested by its title), the concept nonetheless creates the ability to holistically view, analyse and ultimately deliver some of the most significant actions that a post-conflict nation can take to begin entrenching an early peace, re-unifying its fragmented parts, and setting the path to recovery.

This research project, therefore, deploys the lens of DDR in order to understand and assess how the HTS-led interim Government of Syria (GoS) is going about some of the most important tasks that circumstances now ask of it: the demilitarisation of Syria, the creation of pathways for combatants out of military structures into civil ones, and the creation and assertion of central government power in a highly fragmented political landscape, in which Syria's regions have taken on a new importance.

2. Methodology

2.1. Research Approach

Beginning in late March 2025, the research behind this paper has sought to build an early picture of the state of DDR across Syria, and in particular around the dynamics and relationships between the GoS and the multitude of Non-State Armed Groups (NSAGs) prevalent in the country.

The research gathered qualitative data, through interviews in Arabic and English with Syrian and foreign officials, civil society workers, researchers and analysts, tribal leaders, and diplomats, predominantly in Damascus.

Given the rapidly evolving situation in the country, however, these firsthand accounts are also combined with additional secondary research, drawing upon an array of current affairs publications and news sources.

The project will continue to observe the emergent themes identified and their development, as well as the appearance of new ones, going forward.

NB: the names of interviewees are withheld by request.

2.2. DDR framework

Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (DDR) is an international relations framework which aims to support the transition from conflict to peace by reducing the means, motivations, and structures of armed violence – particularly through the disbandment of non-state armed groups and the reintegration of ex-combatants into civilian or state-controlled security structures.

From its conceptual 'first wave' in the 1980s it has evolved from a narrow notion of post-conflict security intervention into a broader, adaptive framework which now encompasses an array of activities from peacebuilding, state-building, counterinsurgency, and stabilisation strategies, in diverse contexts ranging from civil wars to terrorist insurgencies. DDR is also deeply connected to political negotiations, the resolution of security dilemmas, and the reconstruction of legitimate state authority and social contracts[1].

The UN's own Integrated DDR Standards[2] give the following definitions for each stage of the process:

- ***Disarmament*** *is the collection, documentation, control and disposal of small arms, ammunition, explosives and light and heavy weapons of combatants and often also of the civilian population. Disarmament also includes the development of responsible arms management programmes.*
- ***Demobilisation*** *is the formal and controlled discharge of active combatants from armed forces or other armed groups. The first stage of demobilisation may extend from the processing of individual combatants in temporary centres to the massing of troops in camps designated for this purpose (cantonment sites, encampments, assembly areas or barracks). The second stage of demobilisation encompasses the support package provided to the demobilisation.*
- ***Reintegration*** *is the process by which ex-combatants acquire civilian status and gain sustainable employment and income. Reintegration is essentially a social and economic process with an open time frame, primarily taking place in communities at the local level. It is part of the general development of a country and a national responsibility and often necessitates long-term external assistance.*

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[1] R. Muggah, C. O'Donnell, '*Next Generation Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration*', 2015

[2] United Nations Inter-Agency Working Group on DDR, '*Operational Guide to the Integrated Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Standards (IDDRS)',* 2010

Integration

Throughout this paper, we presume to draw out one further aspect as its own discrete element: ***Integration***. This relates specifically to the incorporation of NSAGs combatants and units *militarily* into the new state.

Emphasising Integration as its own aspect has proven useful as a way of separating out this critical activity in itself, given that it is ordinarily situated – sometimes confusingly and without sufficient prominence, in the opinion of the author – somewhere between demobilisation and reintegration.

Integration further reflects the idea that it is unlikely that all combatants will be able to be immediately disarmed, demobilised and reintegrated – and instead that it is often likely more expedient, where possible, to merge NSAGs and their members into the country's armed forces. This notion has precedence in cases such as the Dhofar war in the Sultanate of Oman during the 1970s, when defecting guerrilla fighters were merged directly into the irregular *firqat* units of the Sultan's Armed Forces, being neither disarmed, demobilised nor reintegrated into civilian life until after the country was definitively stable and free from hostilities[3].

In Syria, where tens of thousands of NSAG members are still present and not yet aligned with the state, and where the central government does not yet hold sufficient coercive power to compel DDR to take place (especially its first two elements), the option of integration is a useful one. Furthermore, it is also desirable from the perspective of avoiding the rapid, simultaneous demobilisation of such a mass of combatants, many of whom may have little other professional experience, at a point when the civilian economic opportunities do not yet exist. For the purposes of this paper, therefore, we will subsequently refer to DDR as ***DDIR***.

3. Glossary of Terms

AFS	Armed Forces of Syria
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
DDIR	Disarmament, Demobilisation, Integration, Reintegration
Fuloul	Widely-used term for recidivist 'remnants' of the Assad regime
GoS	HTS-led interim Government of Syria
GSS	General Security Service
IDDRS	UN's *Integrated Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Standards*
MOD	Syrian Ministry of Defence
IMOI	Ministry of Interior
NSAG	Non-State Armed Group
SDF	Syrian Democratic Forces
SNA	Syrian National Army
VBIED	Vehicle-Borne Improvised Explosive Device

[3] W. Ladwig III, *'Supporting allies in counterinsurgency: Britain and the Dhofar Rebellion',* 2008

Key Recommendations: DDIR in Syria

➡ **The HTS-led Government of Syria (GoS) must develop and execute an overarching Disarmament, Demobilisation, Integration and Reintegration (DDIR) strategy via a formal government body, within the next 6 to 12 months.** DDIR is a deeply valuable strategic instrument for understanding, then effectively guiding, national responses to the wickedly complex aftermath of conflict. The implications of not following a coherent DDIR strategy – by whatever name it is be called on ground – are, however, numerous: militarised non-state groups outside the central government's control, ongoing fragmentation of the country's politics and power, the continuation of a war economy, issues of government legitimacy, the empowerment of spoilers, limbo for combatants wishing to return to civilian life, the inhibiting of national reunification and reconciliation, and the ability to achieve no more than a partial peace, to name a few.

At present, the GoS is actively addressing a number of the aspects that must be satisfied to achieve the ultimate goal of a viable peace. Yet without a far more joined-up, well-planned and focussed DDIR strategy with defined progress indicators, it risks not effectively confronting many of the challenges which will prevent it from being able to comprehensively achieve its own stated goal of a fully unified, stable and prosperous Syria.

To do so, the GoS should now create a unified governmental mechanism for designing and directing the implementation of a national DDIR strategy. This would potentially take the form of a cross-departmental body, invested with the oversight and authority required to harmonise the massive, multi-disciplinary efforts needed to do so effectively. Such a body could also act as the focal point for foreign technical and financial assistance, to ensure both transparency and unity of effort.

➡ **The new Armed Forces of Syria (AFS) should be constructed along entirely national, rather than sectarian, lines.** The AFS has the potential to play a key role in stabilising Syria, with immense value as a symbol of national unity, and a bulwark against sectarianism. Although in the short term this will be challenging given the fragmented socio-political picture, over the longer period the AFS should be built as both a place for the sons and daughters of every and any ethnic, religious grouping within the country – both in the officer corps, and in the ranks. It should furthermore be seen as an economically important engine, that provides steady employment as well as vocational and technical training to its personnel that will benefit them in civilian life. This representative approach would signal a significant break with the Alawite-majority armed forces of the Assad era, which ultimately became a tool of oppression for the regime.

➡ **The integration of non-state armed groups (NSAGs) into the national military should be phased over 18-36 months.** Absorbing elements of NSAGs' formation and fighters – Integration – is vital to demilitarising the country, yet has also been shown to be a fraught topic: it implies the breaking up of NSAG units and command structures, and a potential loss of control, autonomy and security for their leaders and people – resistance to which will inhibit the wider unification of the country. However, by carefully sequencing the merging and building of new military structures over an extended period, in a manner which gradually – rather than abruptly – gives groups and the AFS time to build a singular identity, Integration has a far greater chance of being successful.

➡ **As a means of aiding reintegration of combatants into civilian life, Syria should create a National Reserve**. While a further key element of DDIR involves the transition of combatants from military to civilian life, an abrupt demobilisation – with the loss of status, belonging and income – has the potential to be deeply problematic. Employing the model of a National

Reserve, in which former full-time combatants become part-time military personnel with, for instance, a 10-year period of liability for service, instead provides a useful halfway house in which they still receive some income as members of formal reserve military units of the AFS. This also minimises the economic burden on the state by reducing the number of more expensive regular (i.e. full-time) military personnel, unifies fighting forces and their standards of training around the country, while still providing a network of units which can be mobilised in the event of a security requirement or disaster response.

➡ **Economic opportunity creation must be prioritised to both rebuild Syria's finances, and as a key element of reintegrating former fighters.** A significant part of Syria's vital infrastructure lays in ruins as a result of the conflict, impacting the ability of industry to operate, and people to establish a decent quality of life – at the same time that much of the population is unable to find employment. Responding effectively to this becomes doubly important when considering the need to provide economic opportunities for tens of thousands of former combatants, who, without clear prospects for a better future as civilians, may resist demobilising fully, or employ their military skills in the service of e.g. organised crime. Large-scale public infrastructure redevelopment schemes, fulsome support to entrepreneurs, provision of vocational training courses, proactive building of trade links, ruthless quelling of any corrupt practices, and projects which position Syria to others as a country of opportunity – while tapping into and benefiting its well-educated, youthful population – will set the conditions for a recovery that will not only give hope to its people, but will significantly minimise the chances of any backslide into conflict. Such schemes and initiatives must be planned, harmonised and sequenced with each other, then commenced no later than the end of 2025.

➡ **Psychosocial support, for both former combatants as well as the communities they return to, must be developed and prioritised as part of a DDIR effort.** The current lack of any significant form of public psychosocial care in Syria – relating in particular to dealing with trauma from the conflict through community and mental health provisions – is a significant issue. Without effectively addressing the legacy psychological impacts of the conflict, reintegration efforts in particular may be undermined, and communities destabilised, by combatants not being able to return to civilian life and employment. The GoS, with the assistance of foreign partners, should instead seek to rapidly address and fund activities to overcome this challenge before too much time passes, and in parallel with its other rebuilding efforts.

➡ **Western nations should work pragmatically with Syria's regional neighbours to enact DDIR activities.** Too often in previous cases, Western nations have sought to carry out DDIR and peacebuilding activities unilaterally in places whose history, politics and societies they do not understand – yet all the while believing themselves to be best placed to do so. This has been shown repeatedly to be a mistake, as evidenced most dramatically in Iraq and Afghanistan.

In the case of Syria and DDIR, these nations should instead recognise that a great part of Syria's ability to stabilise its political, social, security and economic landscapes will be strongly shaped by its regional neighbours, both hostile and friendly. Western governments and organisations should therefore seek to work with and through those positive actors who have a long-term interest as members of the same neighbourhood, to ensure that Syria can recover. By the same token, they should do everything possible to minimise those regional spoilers who seek Syria's re-fragmentation.

Military Aspects of DDIR in Syria

1. The Disarmament, Demobilisation and Dismantlement of NSAGs

The disarmament of Syria's myriad non-state armed groups (NSAGs) remains one of the most critical challenges facing the Government of Syria (GoS) in the post-Assad landscape. With an estimated 1.3 million small arms still circulating outside state control, the GoS confronts a security environment saturated with weaponry, fragmented authority, and competing claims to legitimacy. While efforts to incentivise voluntary handovers have yielded modest results, the enduring presence of heavily armed factions—many of them more powerful than the state in their regions—has forced Damascus into a strategy of pragmatism over enforcement. This uneasy balance underscores a deeper truth: the GoS cannot yet impose disarmament, and must instead negotiate it—often at the expense of its claim to a monopoly on force.

The disarmament of non-state actors is of vital concern to the GoS, which unsurprisingly sees the proliferation of weapons outside of its own structures as a key obstacle to its control of the country[4]. While no comprehensive assessment of numbers of weapons has been carried out for several years, post-regime Syria is believed to have as many as 1.3 million small arms calibre weapons in the hands of non-state actors and civilians. During the war, significant numbers flowed into the country, and following the fall of the regime availability for NSAGs grew even further: weapon prices fell by between 50-70% as significant numbers of small arms were looted from regime armouries, or offloaded by individuals[5].

This proliferation of available weaponry is oxygen to potential insurgencies; and the retention of arms is also potent leverage for those not groups and regional actors whose role in the new Syria is still subject to negotiation, and who may also hold legitimate concerns around their members' security and safety if they disarm.

An early approach to disarming NSAGs was the use of Settlement Centres, which provided an initial pathway for members of the Assad-era military and security services to register with the new authorities, formally demobilise and receive civilian identity papers, and also hand over any weapons held. Yet it is notable that only approximately 30% of those attending the centres handed over any weaponry[6], suggesting that this approach on its own has not been especially effective.

The GoS has also pursued an active policy of seizing weapons. Since the new administration took over, the GoS' paramilitary policing service, the GSS, has been deployed extensively to search for and raid weapons caches across the country, as well as interdicting arms shipments, especially in more restive areas. This activity has targeted regime remnants, criminal gangs, as well as elements of non-compliant armed groups which had sought to avoid being dissolved[7]. Of note, even in strongholds of the former regime, it was local residents who purportedly provided the

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[4] Interview with UK diplomat, 1 Apr 25

[5] K. al-Jeratli, H. Ibrahim, https://english.enabbaladi.net/archives/2025/04/syria-faces-challenge-of-disarmament/?utm_source=chatgpt.com, 30 Apr 25

[6] S. Dadouch, https://www.ft.com/content/00f4636e-5f7a-440f-8459-2430346f333f, 28 Apr 25

[7] Asharq Al Awsat, https://english.aawsat.com/arab-world/5135012-syrian-defense-ministry-begins-reshaping-military-affairs-daraa, 22 Apr 25

information that enabled the authorities to carry out raids[8].

The GoS has, however, permitted certain types of weapons to be retained in some circumstances. In Suwayda for instance, the GoS chose to allow the retention of some personal weapons amongst the Druze community. These 'symbols of dignity'[9] – small calibre, personal weapons – were a point of contention during negotiations to address the violence which erupted in late April / early May 25.

Some heavy weapons were collected[10], however this partial disarmament was regrettably not enough to prevent the violence which occurred in July 25 in the province – in which Druze and Bedouin groups held sufficient armaments to carry out prolonged fighting, that in turn led to the deaths of significant numbers and destabilised the province.

A key linked, reoccurring theme is that **the GoS does not yet hold sufficient power to compel the multiple and sometimes numerically superior NSAG blocs to disarm** – the Kurdish SDF alone is, for instance, estimated as still having as many as 70,000 fighters[11]. This has led to a situation where 'coercive' disarmament must instead give way to a more 'cooperative' model, in which the handing over of weapons comes through agreement and collaboration[12]. While this is an unavoidable reality for the GoS during the early period of its tenure, it comes with a cost in terms of its legitimacy as the sole holder of the monopoly of force in Syria, and the consequent implications for where the balance of power lies within the country.

The reluctance of NSAGs and their members to voluntarily disarm is furthermore linked to an uncertainty around their concerns, which the GoS has not yet fully resolved. Before they lay down their arms, factions are keen to understand what roles and representation they will hold politically and militarily so as to avoid being sidelined and marginalised; yet also how their safety will be guaranteed, especially from ongoing threats such as the Islamic State[13], during a period in which the military and security framework of the new state is not yet fully established. For similar reasons, this is complicated further in certain regions by the sense of vulnerability that stems from the actions of external parties, such as Israel's incursions and land grabs in the south, as well as from a long-standing historical sense of being persecuted, such as that felt by the Kurds in the communities of the north-east.

2. The Integration of NSAGs, and the Rebuilding of Security Structures

Forging a unified national military in post-Assad Syria is both absolutely necessary and deeply fraught. While the GoS has made tactical gains—reflagging units, devolving local security, and selectively integrating fighters—it at present lacks the political clout, financial muscle, and command cohesion to bind Syria's fragmented armed actors into a coherent force. Integration

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[8] Critical Threats Iran Update, https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-update-april-18-2025, 18 Apr 25

[9] Levant 24, https://levant24.com/news/national/2025/05/damascus-and-suwayda-druze-reach-security-agreement-amid-tensions/, 4 May 25

[10] Al Jazeera, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/5/3/israeli-attacks-kill-two-more-as-syria-government-reaches-deal-with-druze, 3 May 25

[11] R. Aldoughli, https://newlinesmag.com/reportage/syrias-new-rulers-are-working-to-unify-military-power, 25 Feb 25

[12] J. Spear, *'Disarmament and demobilization'*, in S.J. Stedman, D.S. Rothchild, et al (eds), 2002

[13] R. Aldoughli, https://newlinesmag.com/reportage/syrias-new-rulers-are-working-to-unify-military-power, 25 Feb 25

remains more symbolic than structural at this point, and without broader trust-building or institutional reform, the military risks remaining national in name only.

The importance for Syria's long term prospects of building integrated, viable national military and security forces cannot be overstated. As in any nation, professional and effective national military and civil security forces are the ultimate guarantor of its sovereign existence. The need for a unified armed forces in Syria, however, becomes even more weighty when viewed through the lens of DDIR. Indeed, "of all the challenges currently facing postwar Syria…integration of the country's numerous diverse armed factions into a single, disciplined post-revolutionary army is among the greatest"[14].

A national military has the potential to be an instrument of representative national unity, integrating and absorbing combatants from an array of factions; it can enable political stability and public safety, by securing borders and being the 'only sheriff in town' with a monopoly over armed force; and it can become a unifying source of national pride, where before factional identities had been pre-eminent.

The military integration of factional units has been challenging. The integration of units has been in many cases either just partial, or in name only. NSAG "units are joining the security forces, but without being disarmed or dissolved…it is quite haphazard and unclear"[15]. Factional and sectarian identities are still strong, funding is provided from other sources, and NSAG members still ultimately operate without accountability under their previous military formations[16]. This has generated tension, however, around loyalty, command structures, and their true absorption into the national system. 'The integration of these groups will be irrelevant unless they answer to the formal chain of command'[17] and "symbolic more than structurally militarily"[18].

This challenge is being felt particularly keenly between the SDF and GoS, who in spite of an agreement in March 2025 to integrate all military and civilian structures and institutions and subsequent ceasefire deals, have continued to clash militarily around strategic locations such as the Tishreen Dam[19], with the GoS even invoking the threat of full-scale offensives to compel the SDF to comply[20]. Notwithstanding these military clashes between parties to the peace process, the deeper concerns around political representation and decentralisation of autonomy have, in turn, impacted upon the willingness of the SDF to fully commit to integration – and the GoS currently doesn't have the leverage to force them to[21]. A similar notion is reflected and evident in the comments of one eastern tribal leader, who emphasised that "although we are happy to be part of the new Syria, we feel no need to

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[14] *Ibid*

[15] Interview with UK diplomat, 15 Apr 25

[16] Dr H. Haid, https://www.arab-reform.net/publication/where-does-syrias-transition-stand/, 24 Apr 25

[17] Critical Threats, https://x.com/criticalthreats/status/1911775764258644157, 11 Apr 25

[18] R. Aldoughli, https://newlinesmag.com/reportage/syrias-new-rulers-are-working-to-unify-military-power, 25 Feb 25

[19] Al Mayadeen, https://english.almayadeen.net/news/politics/heavy-clashes-renewed-between-sdf--syrian-army-in-aleppo, 19 May 25

[20] Critical Threats, https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-update-august-18-2025, 18 Aug 25

[21] Interview with UK diplomat, 1 Apr 25

integrate our armed members" into the national structure anytime soon[22].

Positively, however, President Shara's skill has been credited as a key reason for what success in merging some factions that has been achieved so far – and for at least an acknowledgement of the importance of integration to national stability during this phase[23].

Compounding this further, the GoS is not yet able to properly fund the rebuilding of the national armed forces. A priority of the government has been to regenerate the national armed forces, as means of both consolidating military power in its own hands, but also securing the nation's security.

The difficult state of Syria's national finances and its ravaged economy conspire, however, to minimise its ability to do so: as a prominent Syria analyst notes, "working out how to pay for a unified military…is one of the government's greatest challenges"[24]. While there are plans on paper about how a new military will look, including with commanders designated for various formations, these are not yet able to be realised.

Previous successful military integration efforts were the result of effective diplomacy over several years; however, the speed at which it now needs to take place is complicating matters. Previous moves integrated some SNA factions into HTS, and were "carefully facilitated over the past three years, involving quiet mediation and gradual alignment" – however even this has structural challenges and is not entirely complete[25]. This contrasts with pressing imperatives to integrate a far larger number of organisations and interests, at pace, to create a unified AFS able to provide security and unity to the nation, and minimise the power of non-integrated groups[26].

One of the GoS' approaches to integration has been the establishment of locally-led security forces. In Suwayda, communal tensions between the Druze and other communities led to a flare-up of violence over several days during late April 2025. As part of its approach to the calming the situation, the GoS subsequently concluded a security deal with community leaders which placed the responsibility for local law and order in the hands of inhabitants of the area, providing a level of autonomy. In short order, it was reported that this generated a sizeable local GSS force, with over 700 local men reported as being registered to join the branch by early May 2025[27].

Although at the time it enabled a de-escalation in hostilities between the community and the central government, the rapid deterioration of Suwayda's security situation again in July 2025 – following a period of unrestrained violence between Druze and Bedouin in the province, and a heavy-handed response from security forces – illustrated the issues of this approach. Undoubtedly a pragmatic move at the time given the sensitivities to be balanced, it nonetheless did not ultimately provide the GoS with the solid basis of control required to prevent a security vacuum from emerging, and to minimise the prominence of hostile political actors[28].

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[22] Interview with Sheikh of a major eastern Syrian tribe, 25 Mar 25

[23] R. Aldoughli, https://newlinesmag.com/reportage/syrias-new-rulers-are-working-to-unify-military-power, 25 Feb 25

[24] Interview with Syria analyst, 3 Apr 25

[25] R. Aldoughli, https://newlinesmag.com/reportage/syrias-new-rulers-are-working-to-unify-military-power, 25 Feb 25

[26] Dr H. Haid, https://www.arab-reform.net/publication/where-does-syrias-transition-stand/, 24 Apr 25

[27] Levant 24, https://levant24.com/news/national/2025/05/damascus-and-suwayda-druze-reach-security-agreement-amid-tensions/, 4 May 25

[28] R. Geist Pinfold, H. Hammoud, https://mecouncil.org/blog_posts/how-syrias-new-government-risks-undermining-itself/, 3 Aug 2025

In a somewhat similar approach, the MOD has sought in some instances to 'reflag' local units. By this policy, the GoS enters into agreement with local factional militia forces to resubordinate them to its own forces and extend its reach[29]. In this manner, the MOD gains some immediate measure of control over local units and enables them to be 'claimed' as having been incorporated into the MOD / MOI – a quick political win for the GoS.

While expedient in the short term, this does not, however, represent a full demobilisation or integration activity – with a corresponding lack of clarity around loyalties, and command and control. Levels of quality appear to be varied also, given the lack of formal means to unify standards[30]. These factors reportedly contributed to the coastal massacres in March 2025, when a shortfall in government authority and control over the non-integrated militias led to large-scale retributory killings of Alawites[31].

A key challenge to unifying Syria's military is having to combine units and fighters who previously opposed each other. One particular case has been between the SNA, a Turkish proxy, and the SDF. The enmity of Turkey towards the Kurdish group, which previously provided sanctuary to Turkey's enemy the PKK, has provided a backdrop for rivalry and hostility between the two NSAGs which has continued after Assad's fall[32]. This rancour has complicated the GoS' efforts to stabilise the northern and north-eastern regions of the country – of especial significance given their trade links and natural resources.

The issue of military unification becomes more complex still when considering the antipathy between former rebels and members of the former regime's military. Given the savageness of the fighting, and the numerous atrocities inflicted by regime forces on their opponents, the level of success of the MOD and GoS in managing the military integration of these two groups will be a key indicator of progress more broadly[33].

In the immediate term, however, the antagonisms of formations left only partially integrated create real issues of interoperability – and therefore integration and unity of effort – between military units whose rivalry has continued unabated. It prevents the deployment of particular units to certain geographies, and ultimately leads to a fragmented military which is national in name only.

The MOD is also actively seeking to recruit new AFS service personnel from NSAG strongholds. By bringing newly recruited members of these communities into the AFS, it achieves a form of integration – albeit a different model to that of a directly absorbing former NSAG combatants into its ranks. This is an approach the MOD has employed particularly around Busra Al Sham in Daraa province, which was formerly the headquarters of the Eighth Brigade – an Assad-era NSAG which wielded significant power until it was dismantled in April 2025[34]. By moving quickly to begin recruiting from the heartlands of that formation, it has demonstrated a clear intent to minimise any of its residual power, while concurrently seeking to rebuild the new AFS at pace. This also potentially provides the GoS / MOD a template for use in other regions, as a means to draw in members of the local population – and especially the generation of youth who have not previously been affiliated with a

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[29] Critical Threats, https://x.com/criticalthreats/status/1911775764258644157, 11 Apr 25

[30] *Ibid*

[31] Interview with German diplomat, 7 Apr 25

[32] Interview with UK diplomat, 1 Apr 25

[33] R. Aldoughli, https://newlinesmag.com/reportage/syrias-new-rulers-are-working-to-unify-military-power, 25 Feb 25

[34] Asharq Al Awsat, https://english.aawsat.com/arab-world/5135012-syrian-defense-ministry-begins-reshaping-military-affairs-daraa, 22 Apr 25

NSAG – building loyalties to the overarching state rather than a sub-national identity.

One mooted approach to military unification – the use of a combined military academy and training courses – has met with less enthusiasm from factions. The MOD had previously suggested that serving NSAG members should be brought together in military training courses that unified the training curriculum, and presumably sought to foster a sense of common cause, particularly with the SDF. This, however, did not take root – given the SDF's high standards of training already received from the US military, a lack of immediate funds to establish the academy, as well as some other concerns that there would be particular religious hues to such an establishment[35]. It would appear also that in the absence yet of a persuasive political framework that meets the requirements of the SDF and other factions, that the unstated aims of such training initiatives – namely, to begin subordinating NSAG command structures and co-opting loyalties to national ones – would still be recognised by those factions.

3. The Incorporation of former regime military personnel and foreign fighters

Balancing the integration of foreign fighters and former regime personnel is one of the GoS's most delicate manoeuvres. Keen to harness their combat experience while managing deep political sensitivities, the GoS has opted for pragmatism—rewarding some, sidelining others, and selectively reintegrating defectors. Yet without a credible transitional justice framework or clear path for reconciliation, these efforts risk inflaming old wounds, alienating key constituencies, and undermining both domestic legitimacy and international engagement.

Adding a further layer of complexity to the military integration picture is how the GoS must address the incorporation – or not – of both foreign fighters / NSAGs, and former members of the Assad-era military. By not addressing this element of the process fully, the GoS risks alienating Islamist cadres who played important roles in the success of the HTS-led campaign since the early days of the group; powerful foreign actors calling for the minimisation of those very same foreign Islamist fighters, as a threat and an affront to the West and regional allies; and in the case of the former Assadists, a large proportion of the population with both the potential intent and capabilities to significantly disrupt the stability of the new state.

Until now, the GoS has sought to strike a careful balance between all of these considerations. Critically, it has **sought to control foreign fighters by empowering them in some positions of responsibility and status**[36]**.** This has two main benefits: rewarding them to minimise them as future threats to the GoS, and also to minimise other local pretenders to power. The latter stems from a belief that foreigners are less likely to have designs on power, and are therefore often a safer pair of hands – demonstrated, for example, by the promotion of a former SNA leader, Abu Amsha, to the significant post of commander of the Hama Military Division[37].

Given the GoS' own limited numbers militarily in terms of core HTS combatants, **foreign fighters and former members of the regime also form important potential sources of manpower for the new AFS**. As

[35] Interview with UK diplomat, 15 Apr 25

[36] Interview with Syria analyst, 3 Apr 25

[37] R. Aldoughli, https://newlinesmag.com/reportage/syrias-new-rulers-are-working-to-unify-military-power, 25 Feb 25

one veteran Syria watcher noted, at the downfall of the Assad regime the military and police were not so much dissolved as 'melted away'[38], leaving the security vacuum to be filled by new GoS' existing fighters and those of its allies.

In seeking to reconstitute and rebuild the security forces, the numbers of both matter. As many as 5,000 Uyghur fighters and their families live in Syria[39], of which approximately 3,500 fighters were cleared, with American blessing, to join the new Syrian army[40] – a sizeable figure, approximating to a brigade's worth of troops.

A further key move of the GoS has been to begin accepting those personnel who had previously defected from the regime's armed forces. There are several potential benefits to the GoS in doing so: it gains significant numbers of trained, experienced combatants; and given that an estimated 80% of Assad's military were made up of Alawites, it also enables it to expand its authority into the heartlands of the Alawite community[41]. Given that as many as 4,000 officers, 6,500 non-commissioned officers, and 170,000 enlisted soldiers had defected by 2021, this represents a both a significant manpower pool, as well as significant inroads into the Alawite community[42].

While a policy of also accepting those who did *not* defect was also enacted, this only included enlisted soldiers and NCOs – and deliberately excluded officers[43]. While this is a step short of accepting all members of the former regime's military, it is an initiative that will likely aid in defusing tensions within a sizeable group, at a time when many of its members have already joined the anti-GoS *fuloul*.

The GoS has also begun to minimise the power of foreign NSAGs operating on Syrian soil. Although a somewhat separate question to that of the foreign Islamist fighters who had formerly been embedded with HTS, the GoS' arrest of two senior Al Quds Brigade figures – a Palestinian armed group active since in Syria – indicated a clear willingness to diminish the ability of foreign non-state entities to operate on Syrian soil, while simultaneously removing a non-state actor. This is even more worthy of note given Al Quds Brigade's anti-Israeli stance, which points to GoS' lack of inclination to project itself beyond its borders – in contradiction of those who are concerned about its appetite for international jihad[44].

In attempting to strike the right balance around integrating former regime combatants and foreign fighters, some challenges have emerged to the GoS' endeavours. In notable instances, the MOD has sought to reinstate controversial figures from the regime, such as Fadi Saqr, who had been implicated in atrocities and worked at a high level within the regime[45]. The recurring theme of perceptions of insufficient transitional justice processes emerged, when his appointment sparked an angry response from families of victims, particularly around the lack of transparency over how he able to be brought back into a position of authority with no redress for his alleged crimes.

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[38] Interview with Syria analyst, 3 Apr 25

[39] U. Farooq, https://foreignpolicy.com/2025/04/04/uyghurs-tpd-syria-fighters/#, 4 Apr 25

[40] T. Azhari, S Al-Khalidi, https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/us-gives-nod-syria-bring-foreign-jihadist-ex-rebels-into-army-2025-06-02/, 2 Jun 25

[41] S. Dadouch, https://www.ft.com/content/3203a039-1d94-485d-8ddd-3661b202723f, 28 Apr 25

[42] S. Al-Abdullah, N. Shaban, '*Rebuilding Security in Syria: Challenges and Strategies for Disarmament, Demobilisation, Reintegration (DDR), and Security Sector Reform (SSR)'*, April 25

[43] *Ibid*

[44] Interview with Syria analyst, 3 Apr 25

[45] R. Aldoughli, https://newlinesmag.com/reportage/syrias-new-rulers-are-working-to-unify-military-power, 25 Feb 25

For those former members of the regime's armed forces who did not defect, uncertainty around their own futures – military or otherwise – is creating tensions which may be of future issue. Although somewhat initially addressed by the use of Settlement Centres (which enabled a formal demobilisation, and at least nominal transition to civilian life) the lack of communication from the GoS around this – and indeed around a wider transitional justice mechanism, which would provide "a path forward by balancing accountability with reconciliation" – is complicating efforts to reconcile with the large Alawite minority[46]. This uncertainty has the potential to feed recruitment of the *fuloul*, especially if these individuals only see a future in which they are scapegoated, prosecuted or killed.

[46] R. Aldoughli, https://newlinesmag.com/reportage/syrias-new-rulers-are-working-to-unify-military-power, 25 Feb 25

Political, Economic and Civil Aspects of DDIR in Syria

1. Political & Economic

The political and economic requirements of sustainable peace weigh heavily upon each aspect of DDIR in Syria. Setting the conditions for such a peace, while avoiding a backslide into conflict, is as much the result of a well-built political framework and clear economic opportunities as it is the immediate military elements of disarming and demobilising. Such initiatives must respond to the interests of the myriad NSAGs, while ensuring that GoS has enough central authority to build the nation as a shared and collective endeavour.

A crucial political sticking point for DDIR at the time of writing is the matter of federalism versus centralised control. In a series of statements, the GoS (and significantly, also its close ally Turkey) explicitly denounced the notion of extensive autonomy being devolved to regions, in sharp contrast to the stated demands of organisations such as the SDF in the north-east, and Hikmat al-Hijri's Druze faction in the south.

While some analysts believe the GoS does not ultimately have the ability to prevent more regional autonomy being devolved in the long run[47], the political friction of the GoS casting it as a red line, and the potential harm in doing so – particularly to integration and reintegration efforts – is significant. By the same token, the SDF has resisted a full-scale integration of its forces into the national military, without a secure political basis for doing so. Indeed it has demanded that its units be integrated wholesale[48], and not split up over the SDF as the MOD has sought.

This political friction has not been improved by the GoS seeking to paint the SDF, for their intransigence, as secessionists. While this move is likely intended to ratchet up pressure on the group, it is again counterproductive in building the political unity required for effective peacebuilding– especially when the Kurds have explicitly stated and shown their desire to be part of the new Syria, and not of a transnational Kurdistan[49].

More broadly, the theme of greater regional autonomy looms large, with implications for building the political basis required for Integration and Reintegration. In the view of some commentators, the dynamics of power between the central GoS and regional groupings mean that ultimately, it will be in the interests of the GoS to **"**let local groups take care of their own interests" to a much greater extent that it would perhaps otherwise prefer[50]. Further to this, according to one tribal leader, regions and regional power groupings will be a much more important consideration in this regard than dealing with narrowly-viewed sectarian groupings, given the significant diversity of identities, sects and ethnicities present in almost every part of Syria[51].

The significance of this likely greater, devolved autonomy to the trajectory of DDIR is not fully clear. If handled well over the short to medium term, it will aid in building the political momentum and goodwill required to integrate units, and reintegrate combatants back into society by generating

[47] Aymenn Al-Tamimi, https://www.aymennaltamimi.com/p/syrian-presidency-statement-on-the, 28 Apr 25

[48] Critical Threats Iran Update, https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-update-april-14-2025, 14 Apr 25

[49] Interview with UK diplomat, 15 Apr 25

[50] Interview with Syria analyst, 3 Apr 25

[51] Interview with Sheikh of a major eastern Syrian tribe, 25 Mar 25

the national policies required. However, it appears that the GoS is still far from being ready to fully commit to meaningful, formal devolution that would achieve this. This is borne out, for instance, through GoS' ongoing point blank refusal, as noted above, to acquiesce to the SDF's demands in this regards, and as well with groups such as the Druze and Alawites continuing to be excluded in great part from political processes[52].

GoS' degree of legitimacy as the ruling authority is a fundamental part of the DDIR equation. By acting rapidly and effectively in the aftermath of its victorious military campaign, HTS was able to present itself to the world as the leading source of authority in Syria post-Assad. This legitimacy has indeed stemmed in great part from being more organised than the other groups, gaining the 'first mover' advantage, and building an international support base[53].

The degree to which it remains seen as the legitimate authority, however, impacts greatly upon its ability to compel others to engage with the DDIR process. Without a recognised popular vote to confirm its power, or the overwhelming might to impose its will upon the NSAGs of the country, HTS remains the 'first amongst equals' for having taken on the governing position – with the resulting implication that any DDIR efforts will continue to be a complex web of grinding negotiation, concessions and attempts to leverage pressure on non-state actors through other means.

Further playing into this are the practical aspects of governance, and by extension GoS' legitimacy, being hampered by limited administrative capacity. After the fall of the regime, a significant proportion of the country's civil service did not return to work, leaving ministries almost empty and devoid of their technical specialists and administrators[54]. Managing the immensely complex processes of each element of DDIR – while continuing on the day-to-day routine work of government – has therefore been significantly curtailed. From a military integration perspective, the lack of a professional staff officer corps, and the associated civilian expertise required in the MOD, has slowed progress with rebuilding the AFS and in turn minimising the issues associated with un-integrated NSAGs. Likewise, not having the human and material resources available to develop the social and economic programming needed to support reintegration of fighters civilly continues to be a severe handicap[55].

Finally, its legitimacy in the eyes of all Syrians – especially those of minorities – stems in great part from their perception of its impartiality and fairness when dealing with every part of the country, particularly in times of crisis. The events of July 25 in Suwayda, however, doubtlessly impacted this negatively: notably the Kurds have expressed their alarm at the GoS' seemingly becoming a partisan actor on the side of one minority, the Bedouin tribes, against the Druze who they natural align with as a fellow minority[56]: "soon, the government troops were seen as a faction in the fighting, rather than a mediating force"[57]. This has led to a burgeoning bloc beginning to harden between the Kurds al-Hijri's Druze in particular, as shown by the convening of a 'unity' conference of minorities in August 25 in the north-east, which called for broader representation for minorities in the Syria's

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[52] Interview with Syria analyst, 3 Apr 25

[53] *Ibid*

[54] Interview with Syria researcher, 2 Apr 25

[55] Interview with UK diplomat, 15 Apr 25

[56] N. Danon, https://www.newarab.com/analysis/suweidas-shadow-why-syrias-kurds-may-rethink-their-future, 5 Aug 25

[57] K. Fahim and Z. Zakaria, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2025/08/08/syria-sectarian-violence-sweida-suwayda/, 8 Aug 25

interim constitution[58] – an endeavour which has the potential to further weaken the GoS' credibility as the legitimate ruler of all Syrians.

The tensions emerging between a number of north-eastern Arab tribes and the SDF have the potential to impact upon the vital matter of absorbing the SDF politically into the government. The successful integration of the SDF politically is key to Syria's long-term viability, however at least 25 Arab tribes have been highly critical of the SDF, whose leadership of the region they see as a secessionist movement[59].

This is concerning from a DDIR perspective, as it once more muddies discussions around federalism versus central authority. Given its potential to impact the SDF security-wise, this is a further factor that potentially sets back efforts to encourage the SDF to relinquish control of its military forces via integration into the AFS. Complicating the matter yet more, however, is that an estimated 80% of the SDF's fighting forces are actually ethnically Arab[60]. While they currently remain with the SDF for economic reasons, a disruption to the funding which pays their salaries – funds received in greatest part from the US – has the potential to cause an exodus from the SDF, thereby in turn significantly weakening the SDF's leverage in this regard.

The shattered Syrian economy means that DDIR efforts will be severely hampered for the foreseeable future, without extensive international support, and even with the lifting of sanctions. One painful result of Syria's 14 years of conflict is an economy which has been shaped around the war, and exploited by the depredations and corruption of the Assad regime. One result of this is a severe lack of employment: as one CSO director notes, the "jobs for Syrians are simply not present". According to their organisation's data, only 10% of those completing their vocational training courses are able to find jobs, during the time when such skills and trained workforce are arguably of crucial importance[61].

Particularly around the matter of integrating NSAGs, the GoS does not yet have the means to afford such activities – and with no strong financial incentives and rewards, the leaders of NSAGs will not risk losing legitimacy in front of their people by committing fully to the national project[62].

The also severely hampers reintegration, as those fighters are unable to earn an income – at a point when it is vital to have economic pathways out of their NSAGs. This is in turn is compounded by questions for former combatants of all shades about payment of compensation or pensions[63]. And while foreign support, particularly from regional actors, is currently forthcoming – Saudi Arabia and Qatar, for instance, have already paid off Syria's World Bank debts[64] and invested significantly into infrastructure – the implications of this largesse are yet to be seen, particularly in terms of the influence that such countries will seek to have over Damascus in the coming years. At the very least, however, the lifting of EU and US sanctions will significantly ease the strain upon GoS' finances, unlocking as much as USD 15 billion in currently restricted assets, and enabling an influx of trade and foreign investment[65].

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[58] Rudaw, https://www.rudaw.net/english/middleeast/syria/09082025, 9 Aug 25

[59] Critical Threats Iran Update, https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-update-april-16-2025, 16 Apr 25

[60] Interview with UK diplomat, 15 Apr 25

[61] Interview with CSO director, 27 Mar 25

[62] Interview with Syria analyst, 3 Apr 25

[63] Interview with UK diplomat, 15 Apr 25

[64] World Bank Group, https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2025/05/16/syria-s-arrears-to-the-world-bank-group-cleared, 16 May 25

[65] IOM, https://www.iom.int/news/iom-welcomes-eu-and-us-decisions-lift-sanctions-syria, 27 May 25

2. Civil & Social

Reintegration is possibly Syria's most vital task. Without it, the risk of relapses into violence and criminality remains dangerously high. Yet the process demands more than job schemes and symbolic gestures—it requires psychosocial support, transitional justice, and community-level reconciliation. So far, GoS reluctance to accept external help and delays in launching credible justice mechanisms have stalled progress, leaving a partial vacuum exploited by spoilers and deepening the wounds reintegration aims to heal.

Effectively reintegrating former combatants is of fundamental importance to Syria's peace. Reintegration is possibly the most important factor of the DDIR agenda, given its significance to the longest-term matters of demilitarising the nation, and achieving a manner of reconciliation and societal harmony. It is, however, also expensive, given the burden on public finances, and therefore should be seen as an opportunity for cooperation between the international community – particularly regional Arab nations, and those of the EU – and the Syrian political and social spectrum[66].

The implications of not effectively reintegrating former combatants are severe. As one expert notes, reintegration is "vital to the rebuilding of Syria's national and societal fabric"[67] – yet if not done well, can result in a backslide into violence and criminality as combatants either remobilise or turn to organised crime – critically impacting progress towards sustainable peace[68].

Reintegration must be balanced with a legitimate and meaningful transitional justice mechanism. This mechanism should serve two purposes: to provide some semblance of acknowledgement, redress and/or compensation for the victims of the numerous crimes committed across the arc of the Syrian conflict; but also as a legal, credible way for combatants to move on and shed their prior existence, if possible.

The efforts to undertake a national transitional justice process so far, however, have only recently begun to take shape[69]. Unfortunately, though, a perception has emerged that little is being done to hold especially the former members of the regime to account, while many ordinary people suffer without livelihoods, being able to viably return home, or compensation or justice[70]. This deficiency around a justice process is a shortfall in DDIR terms, given its impact on being able to truly start the processes of reunifying, reintegrating, and reconciling the population.

While in mid-May 2025 the GoS established an independent transitional justice commission, focussed on 'uncovering the truth about the grave violations caused by the former regime'[71], the effects of the delays in doing so have been significant. In real terms this has created a space for acts of retribution, such as vigilante killings of suspected Assadists by NSAGs who are using it to 'exploit real grievances' around a lack of process[72].

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66 Interview with UK diplomat, 15 Apr 25

67 Interview with CSO director, 27 Mar 25

68 S. Al-Abdullah, N. Shaban, '*Rebuilding Security in Syria: Challenges and Strategies for Disarmament, Demobilisation, Reintegration (DDR), and Security Sector Reform (SSR)'*, April 25

69 Critical Threats Iran Update, https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-update-april-25-2025, 25 Apr 25 https://www.arabnews.com/node/2601157/middle-east

70 Dr H. Haid, https://www.arab-reform.net/publication/where-does-syrias-transition-stand/, 24 Apr 25

71 Syria Justice and Accountability Centre, https://syriaaccountability.org/a-first-step-towards-transitional-justice-in-syria/, 29 May 25

72 Dr H. Haid, https://www.arab-reform.net/publication/where-does-syrias-transition-stand/, 24 Apr 25

There is a lack of sufficient psychosocial support measures to enable reintegration. A substantial proportion of the population – not least those members of NSAGs and the military directly involved in fighting – has been subjected to appalling trauma, both physical and mental, over the 14 years of the Syrian conflict. At present, however, there is next to no psychosocial support funded nationally by the authorities, with the gap only being filled minimally by CSOs delivering programming, for example, to train doctors to deal with PTSD. This programming in itself has been deeply affected by the cutting of USAID funding which took place in early 2025[73].

A further matter lies in reversing the level to which combatants have become militarised over such an extended conflict, and habituated to carrying a weapon – as well as the prestige and power it provides them[74]. Without the psychosocial infrastructure and economic opportunities in place to encourage and support former combatants into civilian roles, the allure of the status and power associated carrying a weapon – combined with any lingering grievances – may draw especially vulnerable former fighters back into organisations that value their skills, such as criminal gangs and insurgent groups.

Culturally as well, mental health support is still somewhat stigmatised and misunderstood. According to one student psychotherapist, nobody really understood what she was studying, or its purpose. She noted that amongst those who did have a greater knowledge of mental health support, "people are still reluctant to engage with these services"[75] – making the job of such practitioners ever more challenging to deliver the positive effects so needed by the population.

A final consideration is the psychosocial support needed for the communities themselves that will need to receive and reintegrate those returning individual combatants. From this perspective, such support would ideally be extended to the neighbourhoods, groups and communities that will have to reintegrate them, and who will be the most immediate source of social interaction and aid for those returning members who may have been injured mentally or physically. As per the UN's own Integrated DDR Standards, 'the return of ex-combatants should be carefully planned with the involvement of community leaders, civil society organisations (CSOs) and non-governmental organisations (NGoS)' to prevent the undermining of social cohesion[76].

This also may, for example, encompass processes of both transitional justice and reconciliation, needed to start addressing crimes which have been committed in the previous era. Without such support, however, rebuilding the 'national and societal fabric' will without a doubt be made far more deeply challenging, with the potential for traumas to be prolonged.

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[73] Interview with CSO director, 27 Mar 25

[74] S. Al-Abdullah, N. Shaban, '*Rebuilding Security in Syria: Challenges and Strategies for Disarmament, Demobilisation, Reintegration (DDR), and Security Sector Reform (SSR)'*, Apr 25

[75] Interview with University of Damascus undergraduate student, 1 Apr 25

[76] United Nations Inter-Agency Working Group on DDR, '*Operational Guide to the Integrated Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Standards (IDDRS)',* 2010

Actors and Spoilers, Internal and External

Syria's DDIR initiatives are being buffeted by the competing pressures of foreign interference and unresolved domestic tensions. Israel's systematic degradation of the military, territorial encroachments, and covert support to anti-GoS actors directly undermine demobilisation and integration efforts by denying the GoS the credibility and capacity to guarantee security. Turkey and Iran, meanwhile, are interfering in the DDIR process to serve their own strategic agendas, complicating any unified national approach. Domestically, the failure so far to reintegrate regime remnants—particularly among the Alawite population—has left a latent insurgency smouldering. Without addressing these pressures, DDIR efforts are at risk of stalling, with fragmentation, mistrust, and foreign manipulation impacting to the detriment of Syria's post-conflict security order.

1. External

Israel is doing all possible to de-fang any new AFS. Israel is actively degrading the capabilities of serious security forces by striking heavier calibre weapons and long range capabilities[77]. The Israeli government has been very clear that it sees the HTS as a terrorist organisation still, and therefore a threat to its national security. As such, it has been seeking to destroy any of the more potent and long-range weapons systems still present in the Syrian military's arsenal, especially through air and drone strikes.

Notwithstanding the repeated violation of another state's sovereignty, the destabilising effects of this impact upon the GoS, as it attempts to build its legitimacy in the country and establish peace – especially in the south, where it is seeking to bind the factions together into a unified military and polity, and which has been especially restive[78]. This also arguably improves the prospects for IS and other parties that wish to destabilise the nation post-Assad.

A further implication is that a constant threat of military action from Israel impacts upon the future shape and capabilities of the Syrian military. Without being able to possess heavy weapons and advanced military technology, its functions will be greatly constrained – potentially to the detriment of both national and wider regional security.

Israel is also carrying out other destabilising activities, especially in the South of Syria, which threaten the stability required for DDIR. Israel has made incursions into the area, seizing strategic areas such as key water sources and high ground – which it is highly unlikely to relinquish readily. It has also dismantled or destroyed any significant military capabilities there[79]. Concurrent to this, it is reportedly paying southerners in the South to join anti-GoS factions in order to destabilise the region[80], the most prominent of which is the key Druze Sheikh Al Hijri. Most damaging of all has been its intervention on the side of Al Hijri, which saw it strike both central Damascus and GSS forces as they deployed to Suwayda during the violence of July 25.

In both symbolic and practical terms, this again cuts to the heart of GoS' legitimacy to rule the country and be its stabilising authority. It impacts on its ability to demobilise and integrate NSAGs in the South, given that demobilising and disarming would leave them entirely vulnerable to Israeli incursions still. Even if, however, it chooses

[77] Interview with UK diplomat, 1 Apr 25

[78] R. Aldoughli, https://newlinesmag.com/reportage/syrias-new-rulers-are-working-to-unify-military-power, 25 Feb 25

[79] Interview with UK diplomat, 1 Apr 25

[80] Interview with CSO manager, 27 Mar 25

not to make further advances, all of these actions leave Israel with an 'open door' that it can exploit at any point it wishes, with the attendant impact on long-term stability.

Turkey has actively sought to involve itself in the DDIR process in Syria. Turkey believes that a stable northern Syria in particular is greatly to its advantage, and as such worked with the GoS previously to place pressure on the SNA to integrate into the MOD[81]. More latterly, it has reportedly demanded that it will only implement a ceasefire with the SDF in the event that the SDF fully disarms, demobilises and merges into the AFS[82]. This indicates a readiness of Turkey to project its power and interests into the Syrian DDIR process, and is also perhaps an indication of a willingness to involve itself more and more into Syria's affairs in the future.

This political leverage has also been matched by Turkey physically asserting itself in the country, through the establishment of military bases[83]. The establishment of permanent Turkish posts within the country certainly has implications for GoS legitimacy, but also for the integration of the AFS – in the event Turkish and SDF units come into contact. This highlights the delicate balancing act of the GoS in preserving its own national autonomy and cohesion, while satisfying the geopolitical interests and concerns of Turkey[84]. Accompanying this is the further complication that progress between the SDF and GoS is also linked to progress for Turkey around the PKK– and how far the SDF helps or hinders that[85].

Iran continues to act as a spoiler to DDIR in Syria. In the wake of the March 2025 coastal massacres, Iran did everything possible to inflame the issue and destabilise the situation[86], and has furthermore reportedly begun to cooperate with extremist Sunni groups in Syria in an effort to disrupt and destabilise the country.

Iran's role as a spoiler is not surprising. The fall of the Assad regime deprived it of significant influence, but also of lines of communications to its proxies in Lebanon and elsewhere on the Mediterranean. As such, its role as a spoiler will likely be an ongoing theme until the GoS can introduce enough stability, security and prosperity to minimise the groups that it seeks to use as its instruments of disruption. The fact that it is willing to cooperate with Sunni groups lays bare its realpolitik approach to regional influence over its religious and ideological requirements.

A stable security order in Syria aligns with the security interests of Western countries. For European nations in particular, Syria's stability is linked to preventing the re-emergence of IS. The French foreign minister has recently stated that Syria's collapse would be the same as "rolling out the red carpet for ISIS"[87]. Given the potential for the radicalising impact on Europe's own Muslim populations if a resurgent IS were to regain momentum, this is understandable, and liable to be an element within future EU-Syrian cooperation.

The value provided by security forces able to secure the nation and deter aggression

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[81] R. Aldoughli, https://newlinesmag.com/reportage/syrias-new-rulers-are-working-to-unify-military-power, 25 Feb 25

[82] Critical Threats Iran Update, https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-update-april-18-2025, 18 Apr 25

[83] L Porter, https://www.thenationalnews.com/news/mena/2025/04/04/turkey-sets-its-sights-on-syrias-palmyra-airport-as-a-potential-military-base/, 4 April 25

[84] R. Aldoughli, https://newlinesmag.com/reportage/syrias-new-rulers-are-working-to-unify-military-power, 25 Feb 25

[85] Interview with UK diplomat, 15 Apr 25

[86] *Ibid*

[87] L24, https://x.com/Levant_24_/status/1920050810869694497, 7 May 25

further comes across in demands the US has reportedly made of the GoS, namely in relation to keeping Iranian influence at bay in Syria[88]. This stems in great part from a fear that is security vacuum would enable Iran to again project itself in contested areas, especially those closer to Israel's borders. Ironically, however, the development of such forces has been made significantly more difficult to do with a military heavily degraded by Israel's ongoing military actions.

2. Domestic

The GoS has not yet been able to put out the fires of insurgency from former regime remnants. The *fuloul* have been more organised than expected, with their loyalties and command structures still largely intact – and able to be quickly repurposed as insurgent cells[89]. One factor complicating this is the lack of intelligence-led operations against the remnants, instead relying on more heavy-handed measures, and an ad hoc approach to building a database of suspects.

Furthermore, no clear, joined-up strategy has emerged yet for dealing with the regime remnants in a civil sense, especially as regards reintegrating them back into the nation. Critical societal initiatives that could build bridges – such as engaging effectively with key Alawite community leaders and institutions – have so far been overlooked[90]. By failing to engage, however, the GoS risks not being seen as legitimate in the eyes of the Alawite population, nor being able to effectively build a working relationship with a group that still views a HTS-led government with a great deal of suspicion. And without strengthening these bonds and building these relationships, the GoS will ultimately not be able to undermine the support required by the *fuloul* to sustain their insurgency.

Hand-in-hand with these engagement initiatives is the imperative to provide a genuinely appealing life the Alawites in the new Syria, backed up by action and positive outcomes. As one Syria analyst remarked, 'compounding the issue, poor living conditions and economic decline, exacerbated by mass layoffs, have created a complex crisis on the Syrian coast. This is particularly acute given that Alawites, who constituted over four-fifths of the regime-era army and security forces, were dismissed en masse without a clear plan for their future or a retirement system to support them'[91].

As the Coalition Provisional Authorities discovered to their detriment in Iraq, a mass of disenfranchised, unemployed, and subsequently angry men with military training quickly morphed into a cross-generational insurgency, whose effects are felt more than two decades later, caused great misery, and held back the country's progress significantly. To that end, providing a clear plan for Alawite veterans, for instance – and one which frees them from any stigma – is likely to prove one of the most direct means to nullifying the *fuloul*, and staving off future issues in this regard.

The GoS has managed to contain the vast majority of Islamic State threats, however IS continues to be a concerning domestic spoiler. While the GoS has managed to repeatedly detect and disrupt the majority of IS attacks in Syria, the killing of 22 worshippers in a Damascus church in June 25 by an IS suicide bombers underscored the ongoing threat that the group poses[92] – with as many as 2,500 fighters at large and an assortment of light weapons and explosives. Although not strong enough to face the GoS' security forces in open combat, the impact of such IS assaults by lone attackers who 'slip through the net' cannot be understated – given that every one that does erodes the

[88] Interview with UK diplomat, 15 Apr 25

[89] Interview with Syria analyst, 3 Apr 25

[90] M. Baresh, https://x.com/manhalbaresh/status/1901946164796076099?s=61, 18 Mar 25

[91] *Ibid*

[92] R. Jalabi, https://www.ft.com/content/6389ad73-0c15-41af-8a3c-8999c2f99a29, 23 Jun 25

credibility of the GoS as being able to protect the nation.

Of further concern is the 9,000 detained fighters and nearly 44,000 linked family members in Al Hol and Roj camps, many of whom are likely to be radicalised and therefore pose a threat if released. This is complicated further by the limited resources of the SDF who are guarding the camps, and the threat of further US troop withdrawals from the country[93]. In the event that the running of these camps were to be taken over by the GoS, serious questions would need to be raised about the capacity, structure and control measures it has in place to effectively do so – given how unlikely it is that the issue of the camps and their inmates will be resolved in the immediate or even medium-term.

It is unlikely, given Islamic State's extreme ideology, and commitment to a Caliphate of its own geographical delineation (and by extension, belief that this supersedes present national boundaries) that it will be possible for the GoS to treat it like the other NSAGs within Syria – namely that its units and fighters could be subsumed into the AFS, nor its members (many of whom are foreign, with no affiliation to Syria) be reintegrated into wider Syrian society. As such, it will remain a spoiler to the wider DDIR, until it can be definitively minimised by kinetic military and economic means in the future.

Conclusion

The era that Syria has now entered itself is a complex, yet hopeful one. While the country's political, economic, and social landscapes have been deeply fractured by the effects of the Assad regime and the last 14 years' conflict, Syria finds itself with many external partners who wish to see it flourish, and a widely shared desire domestically for unity and recovery.

The promise of this new situation, however, will only be realised if the national government can field the many interrelated priorities of this post-conflict period, and address them in a systematic way, rather than treating them in isolation.

An effective DDIR-based approach is therefore vital. Doing so considers the critical security aspects of the situation – stabilising, demilitarising, demobilising, taking weapons out of non-state hands, while positively integrating former combatants into the nation's official military – in the same breath as other critical and inextricably linked economic, political and societal factors. Seeing these interrelations, the inherent challenges, and the most possible outcomes – then building a valid strategy to sequence and satisfy them – will be one of the firmest routes towards an enduring and sustainable peace for Syria.

This will not be a straightforward process, given the challenges discussed throughout this paper. However, by creating a national mechanism with oversight of DDIR in Syria, vesting this with the necessary authority, and allowing it to operate with freedom, the GoS has a realistic chance to deal with, holistically, the broad and varied matters that must be addressed – and in doing so, signal a clear way forward to Syria's people and partners.

[93] P. Loft, House of Commons Library: "*Syria After Assad: Consequences & Interim Authorities 2025",* Apr 2025

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