

Expert Briefing: ‘Syria’s transition nine months on: Examining frameworks for international justice and accountability’

Key takeaways from a parliamentary panel discussion, 9th September 2025

On 9th September 2025, the Foreign Policy Centre (FPC), the International Bar Association’s Human Rights Institute (IBAHRI) and the University of Lancaster’s Sectarianism, Proxies and Desectarianisation project (SEPAD) co-hosted a high-level expert roundtable exploring Syria’s transition following the fall of the Assad regime, and the future of justice and accountability in the country.

The event was chaired by **Mark Stephens CBE**, IBAHRI Co-Chair, and brought together an expert panel including legal and policy experts, academics and civil society leaders: **Yumen Hallaq**, Senior Researcher at the Syrian Network for Human Rights; **Sana Kikhia**, Executive Director of the Syrian Legal Development Programme (SLDP); **Dr Maria Kastrinou**, Senior Lecturer in Anthropology at Brunel, University of London; **Alan Haji**, Lead for Case Building at the Syria Justice and Accountability Centre (SJAC); **Mariana Karkoutly**, Co-Founder and Board Member of Huquqyat; and **Professor Simon Mabon**, Chair in International Politics at Lancaster University and Director of the SEPAD project.

The roundtable provided an opportunity to assess the state of Syria’s political and legal transition nine months after the fall of Bashar al-Assad. Since the takeover by opposition forces in December 2024, led by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, Syria has been governed by a transitional government under President Ahmed al-Sharaa, operating under a five-year constitutional declaration framework. While the international community has cautiously welcomed these changes and initial commitments to reform, major questions remain about the durability of the transition, the prospects for justice and reconciliation, and the appropriate role for international actors in supporting this process.

This briefing outlines key themes and insights from the parliamentary roundtable discussion, reflecting on legal reform, institutional fragility, humanitarian conditions, and international engagement:

1. **Nine months after Assad’s fall, Syria’s political transition is defined by uncertainty and limited trust.**

Syria’s current landscape remains fragmented. Adoption of the March 2025 interim constitution marked a critical moment, as it intended to provide a five year roadmap of governance during the country’s transitional phase. However, its implementation to date has been uneven and marred by insecurity and political uncertainty. The interim Constitution, implemented after a rushed and restricted consultation process, granted President Al-Sharaa and his transitional government extraordinary authority, including over judicial and legislative appointments without any checks

or oversight.¹ Contrary to the principle of separation of powers, the new Constitutional Declaration grants the President of the transitional government excessive powers beyond his executive functions allowing him to directly appoint members of the Parliament, as well as (all) members of the Supreme Constitutional Court.²

As governance in Syria today continues to be shaped by the legacy of conflict and a contested monopoly on force prevails, panelists cautioned against entrenched authoritarian state control moving forward and shared examples of persisting violence and instability, in many areas, including in southern and eastern Syria.

President Al-Sharaa and his transitional government have positioned themselves as a reformist alternative to the Assad regime and as focused on facilitating a genuine transition for the country. However, the expert panel warned that this rhetoric risks being undermined by ongoing human rights abuses and the exclusion of key actors from the political process. While some opposition groups were formally integrated into the transitional administration, most political parties have been banned, and large parts of Syrian society such as ethnic and faith groups, including Druze and Alawites, women and others, remain alienated, reflecting how the ‘sectarianisation’ of political difference has been used as a means of consolidating power, further complicating prospects for national dialogue.³

Emphasising the need to fully acknowledge and address previous atrocities and hold perpetrators from all parties accountable whilst focusing on Syria’s future, the expert panel explained how guarantees of non-recurrence have a crucial role in preventing future violations of human rights and that reinforcing the rule of law, respect for fundamental freedoms, human dignity and equality will lay the foundation for sustaining peace and development in the country.

2. The interim legal framework exists, but enforcement and institutional safeguards are still missing.

¹ Syria Justice and Accountability Centre (SJAC), ‘A problematic Constitutional Declaration’, March 2025, <https://syriaaccountability.org/a-problematic-constitutional-declaration/>

² Article 24; Article 47(2) of the Constitutional Declaration of the Syrian Arab Republic, Constitutional Declaration, March 2025, <https://constitutionnet.org/sites/default/files/2025-03/2025.03.13%20-%20Constitutional%20declaration%20%28English%29.pdf>; Syria Justice and Accountability Centre (SJAC), ‘Joint Position Paper Regarding the Temporary Electoral System for the Syrian Parliament’, September 2025, <https://syriaaccountability.org/joint-position-paper-regarding-the-temporary-electoral-system-for-the-syrian-parliament/>

³ Maria Kastrinou, Salam Said, Rawad Jarboub and Steven Emery, ‘Sectarianization and the State among Druze Communities in Syria: Case Studies of Jaramana and Golan’, in *Sectarianism and Civil War in Syria*, 1st ed., Routledge, London, 2025, pp. 278–303; Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), ‘Syria: UN experts alarmed by attacks on Druze communities, including sexual violence against women and girls’, August 2025, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2025/08/syria-un-experts-alarmed-attacks-druze-communities-including-sexual-violence-against-women-and-girls>; Rabeh Ghadban, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, ‘Syria’s Druze Stand Alone’, May 2025, <https://carnegieendowment.org/middle-east/diwan/2025/05/syrias-druze-stand-alone?lang=en>

Despite various critical aspects, the March 2025 interim constitution includes several positive provisions, most notably Article 12(2), which affirms that international human rights treaties ratified by Syria are binding.⁴ However, speakers noted that this ‘normative anchor’ lacks enforcement power without deeper institutional reform.⁵ Legal fragmentation remains a major issue, and in some cases leading not only to fragmentation but to the complete breakdown of order, manifesting in sectarian violence and broader geopolitical conflict.⁶

Progress in establishment –by presidential decree– of the National Commission on Transitional Justice, tasked with investigating serious human rights abuses committed during the former Al-Assad regime, and providing reparations to victims, and promoting national reconciliation, as well as the National Commission on Missing Persons, mandated with investigating the missing and forcibly disappeared, establishing a national database to document cases, and providing legal and humanitarian support to affected families, in May 2025, was a historic step forward in acknowledging the demands of victims and their families and formally responding to the widespread violations committed previously.

However, the expert panel highlighted that moving forward, both Commissions need to prioritise their institutional independence, ensure the meaningful inclusion of survivors and those communities targeted in recent and ongoing sectarian attacks and state violence, and demonstrate transparency in their work to foster national reconciliation and genuine accountability. Their exclusion and lack of justice continue to undermine reconciliation and accountability. Limiting the scope of the Transitional Justice Commission’s mandate to Assad crimes, would necessarily deprive victims of crimes committed by other parties not only from criminal justice but also from truth, recognition and possible reparation. Reforming Syria’s legal and institutional frameworks is crucial for establishing the rule of law and preventing future abuses.⁷

Judicial capacity remains limited and the lack of independence in prosecutorial institutions and the weakness of local courts were highlighted as key obstacles to implementing meaningful legal accountability. Speakers also shared serious concerns over the lack of independence of the judiciary, with the most urgent concerns being the arbitrary appointments of judges, executive and religious interference in the judicial system, and the absence of protection for legal professionals who face dismissal and threats. Concerns were also raised about politically

⁴ Constitutional Declaration of the Syrian Arab Republic, Constitutional Declaration, March 2025, <https://constitutionnet.org/sites/default/files/2025-03/2025.03.13%20-%20Constitutional%20declaration%20%28English%29.pdf>

⁵ Syrian Legal Development Programme, Syria’s Constitutional Declaration and International Law: Article 12(2) as Normative Anchor to Guide Syria’s Transitional Phase, May 2025, <https://sldp.ngo/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/English-Syrias-constitutional-declaration-and-international-law.pdf>

⁶ Maria Kastrinou and Salam Said, ‘Suwayda, Syria: Not a Local Conflict, but Geopolitics in Disguise’, Qantara.de, 28 July 2025, <https://qantara.de/en/article/suwayda-syria-not-local-conflict-geopolitics-disguise>

⁷ Syria Justice and Accountability Centre (SJAC), ‘A First Step Towards Transitional Justice in Syria’, May 2025, <https://syriaaccountability.org/a-first-step-towards-transitional-justice-in-syria/>

motivated detentions by the transitional government and the absence of due process in many areas.⁸

The panel called on the transitional government to make amendments to the Syrian penal code to criminalise international crimes and to ensure that all provisions align with the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), particularly upholding the right to a fair trial (Article 14).⁹ Further, the panel underscored the importance of ensuring an independent judiciary and restoring its essential role as the guardian of citizens' rights and the rule of law.

3. Justice, accountability, and the limits of international mechanisms

Recognizing the complexity of violations, the outcome of justice processes can often require long-term monitoring. However, action to pursue accountability for past crimes remains elusive. Despite sustained monitoring efforts by organisations like the Syrian Network for Human Rights and documentation/evidence-gathering by groups such as SJAC, Huquqyat and SLDP, translating evidence into court-ready cases is still extremely difficult. Several speakers noted the tension between the abundance of data collected during the conflict and the scarcity of judicial outcomes. Evidence gathered from conflict zones often fails to meet procedural standards or cannot be used due to security risks or lack of legal pathways.

In addition to institutional reforms, speakers called for transitional authorities to prioritise evidence-gathering efforts and preservation of mass graves and sites of crimes. In order to do this, they urged engagement with survivors and the families of victims who often know exactly who harmed them, who disappeared their loved ones, and where crime sites are located. To signal a serious commitment on this basis and to dismantle structures of inequality embedded in its legal system, the panel emphasised the need for alignment of national legislation with international law. This includes the ratification of relevant international conventions like the Convention on Enforced Disappearances, the Rome Statute, and the Additional Protocol (II) to the 1949 Geneva Conventions, as well as the removal of reservations to some provisions of treaties such as the Convention against Torture and CEDAW, as a matter of priority. Further, speakers recommended that the National Committee on Missing Persons should create and implement a plan for the preservation of mass grave sites.

The lack of a unified domestic justice system has placed pressure on international mechanisms, including universal jurisdiction cases in Europe and the United Nations appointed International,

⁸ Syrian Network for Human Rights, At least 124 cases of arbitrary arrest and detention recorded in August 2025, September 2025, <https://snhr.org/blog/2025/09/02/at-least-124-cases-of-arbitrary-arrest-and-detention-recorded-in-august-2025>; Syrian Network for Human Rights, SNHR's Monthly Report on Arrests/Detentions in Syria 4, July 2025, <https://snhr.org/blog/2025/07/05/snhrs-monthly-report-on-arrests-detentions-in-syria-4/>

⁹ International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, adopted 16 December 1966, entered into force 23 March 1976) <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/international-covenant-civil-and-political-rights>

Impartial and Independent Mechanism (IIIM).¹⁰ While these tools have achieved important breakthroughs, they remain limited in scope and disconnected from Syrian public life. Panelists stressed the need for complementary domestic initiatives that can afford all the fundamental judicial guarantees of independence and impartiality to ensure all victims see justice within their own legal system, not just abroad.¹¹

4. Without gender-sensitive reforms, Syria's transition risks replicating past patterns of exclusion

Women continue to face serious barriers to justice in Syria's transitional phase. Panelists noted that women, particularly those affected by gender-based violence, are often excluded from legal, political and policy-making processes or discouraged from participating due to stigma, lack of protection, or institutional bias.

These challenges are compounded by severe economic hardship, especially in areas outside regime control, where women face disproportionate barriers to employment, mobility, and access to services. As the Syrian Women's Political Movement has documented, the country's de facto partition has exacerbated gendered inequalities and left many women further marginalised from public and political life.¹² Syrian women remain governed by discriminatory laws that deny them equal rights in the most fundamental areas of life, namely, the ability to pass nationality to their children, freedom of movement with their children, and equal guardianship. Many displaced women are unable to return and register their children, leaving them without documentation or equal rights. These structural exclusions are compounded by the fact that Syria has never had a law criminalizing violence against women.

At present, Syria has no legal framework to prosecute war crimes and crimes against humanity, including sexual and gender-based violence. To treat these atrocities as ordinary crimes is to erase their context and significance. Speakers underscored the need to create laws that specifically criminalise such acts and reflect their gravity. This includes recognising the gendered violence inflicted on Alawi and Druze women during recent sectarian attacks, and the continuing ordeal of the women kidnapped from Suwayda at the time of the roundtable—a cry still resonating from Suwayda's women.¹³

¹⁰United Nations International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism to assist in the investigation and prosecution of persons responsible for the most serious crimes under international law committed in the Syrian Arab Republic since March 2011 ('IIIM'), n.d., <https://iiim.un.org/>

¹¹ Amnesty International, Syria: To guarantee atrocities don't repeat, uphold victims' rights, May 2025, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/MDE2492102025ENGLISH.pdf>

¹² Syrian Women's Political Movement, Policy Paper – De Facto Partition and Its Impact on Economic Conditions from the Syrian Women's Perspective, March 2025, <https://syrianwomenpm.org/releases/policy-paper-de-facto-partition-and-its-impact-on-economic-conditions-from-the-syrian-womens-perspective/>

¹³ Syrians for Truth and Justice, 'Geneva, Switzerland: Side Event on the Human Rights Situation in Syria Following the Suwayda Incidents', October 2025, <https://stj-sy.org/en/geneva-switzerland-side-event-on-the-human-rights-situation-in-syria-following-the-suwayda-incidents/>; Daraj Media, 'Killing, Kidnapping, and Forced Marriage: Faces of Women's Subjugation in Syria', August 2025, <https://daraj.media/en/killing-kidnapping-and-forced-marriage-faces-of-womens-subjugation-in-syria/>

The need for gender-transformative approaches to justice was underlined repeatedly. Legal frameworks, reparations schemes, and truth-telling mechanisms must acknowledge and address the specific and often layered harms experienced by individuals across the gender spectrum. Those with lived experience of violence or repression must be active participants in shaping the transition, not only subjects of legal redress. Institutional reform must go beyond ‘inclusion’ and be grounded in protection, empowerment, and accountability.¹⁴

5. Managing sectarian divides is central to building an inclusive Syrian future

The panel emphasised that sectarianism in Syria is not a cultural divide but a political tool, one that has been weaponised through militarisation, conflict, and foreign interference. Geopolitical actors, including regional and Western powers, have long manipulated sectarian identities to serve strategic aims, deepening mistrust and polarisation.¹⁵

Despite the fall of the Assad regime, many communities including the Druze, Christians, Alawites, Kurds, and Bedouins—remain deeply scarred and fearful for their lives. Sectarian violence in places like Suwayda has underscored the dangers of exclusion and fragmentation. Reflecting on the recent conflict in Suwayda, Huquqyat engaged directly with previously trained lawyers and activists to support them in documenting violations in a safe and impartial way, centering survivors’ security. Overall, the academics, lawyers and activists reported that in the aftermath of the sectarian attack in Suwayda, 1,653 have been killed,¹⁶ at least 130 women were kidnapped by groups affiliated with the Syrian transitional government, while around 22 were kidnapped by Al-Hijri affiliated groups. Women and children endured humiliation, verbal abuse, and sectarian abuse, and Druze communities were explicitly targeted because of their sectarian identity.¹⁷

The panel noted that attacks on Suwayda’s hospitals and essential infrastructure have deepened scarcity of water, electricity, and food, pushing the civilian population into an acute crisis.¹⁸ As Dr Maria Kastrinou, an anthropologist specialising on Syrian Druzes, noted, sectarian killings, mass abductions of women, and a siege that has destroyed hospitals and basic infrastructure reveal sectarianisation as both a weapon of mass violence and a means of power consolidation.

¹⁴ Syrians for Truth and Justice, The General Principles for Applying Justice, Truth, and Remedy in Syria From the Perspective of Civil Society and Survivor Groups, September 2025, <https://stj-sy.org/en/the-general-principles-for-applying-justice-truth-and-remedy-in-syria-from-the-perspective-of-civil-society-and-survivor-groups/>

¹⁵ Ussama Makdisi, ‘The Culture of Sectarianism: Community, History, and Violence in Nineteenth-Century Lebanon’, University of California Press, 2020; A. Maria Kastrinou, ‘Power, Sect and State in Syria: The Politics of Marriage and Identity Amongst the Druze’, Bloomsbury / IB Tauris, 2016; Maria Kastrinou and Salam Said, ‘Suwayda, Syria: Not a Local Conflict, but Geopolitics in Disguise’, Qantara.de, 28 July 2025, <https://qantara.de/en/article/suwayda-syria-not-local-conflict-geopolitics-disguise>

¹⁶ Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, ‘New Death Toll | 1,653 People Killed, Including 429 Executed by Defence and Interior Ministry Members in Al-Suwaydaa Massacre’, August 2025, <https://www.syriahr.com/en/367789/>

¹⁷ Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, ‘Syrian Regime Forces Step Up Attacks on Idlib, Killing Civilians’, August 2025, <https://www.syriahr.com/en/367805/>

¹⁸ Abeer Saimua, ‘Over 80,000 Flee Suwayda as Humanitarian Conditions Deteriorate’, Al-Akhbar (English edition), August 2025, <https://en.al-akhbar.com/news/over-80-000-flee-suwayda-as-humanitarian-conditions-deterior>

While Druze communities were a central target of this violence, Bedouin families were also displaced and victimised, highlighting the broader sectarianisation of the conflict. At the same time, Israeli airstrikes around Damascus, ostensibly in the name of protecting the Druze, added another destabilising layer—not merely a perception but a reality of foreign intervention. Previously, on 10 December 2024, Israel breached the 1974 disengagement line, invaded southern Syria, and bombed much of its military infrastructure.¹⁹

Panelists warned that without inclusive governance, long-term trust-building, and recognition of historical grievances, Syria risks reproducing the same patterns of instability. Efforts toward peace and accountability must avoid reinforcing binary categories of majority and minority that have historically undermined social cohesion.

6. The role of the UK and international community

The geopolitical context surrounding Syria's transition remains fraught. Multiple regional powers continue to assert their influence. Russia and Iran seek to protect certain interests, including Russia's military bases in Tartus and Latakia, and Iran's strategic link to Hezbollah. Turkey maintains a significant presence in the north and will watch the Kurdish issue closely, while Arab Gulf states are positioning themselves via financial support and diplomacy to shape Syria's post-conflict trajectory.²⁰ Israel, in particular, has emerged as an active and unpredictable actor in Syria's fragile transition. Over the past year, Israel has conducted frequent air and missile strikes on Syrian territory, ostensibly targeting militias and weapons shipments it deems a threat.²¹ Since Assad's ouster in December 2024, hundreds of Israeli strikes have been reported across Syria—from Damascus and Homs to the coastal regions—and Israeli officials have signalled their intent to maintain a long-term military posture near the Syrian border.

The UK has cautiously welcomed Syria's transitional government, easing sanctions and calling for progress on human rights.²² Speakers stressed that any international support must avoid prescriptive approaches or imposed checklists. Instead, assistance should be aligned with a Syrian-led roadmap, developed by local civil society, legal experts, and transitional authorities in line with the country's international (treaty/customary) legal obligations. Nevertheless, across Suwayda

¹⁹ Reuters, 'Israel launches heavy airstrikes in Damascus, vowing to shield Druze', July 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/clashes-resume-syrias-druze-city-sweida-after-ceasefire-announcement-2025-07-16/>; Al-Marsad, "Al-Marsad Condemns Increased Israeli Military Occupation of the Golan," *Golan-Marsad*, 12 December 2024, <https://golan-marsad.org/al-marsad-condemns-increased-israeli-military-occupation-of-the-golan/>.

²⁰ Middle East Institute, 'The Gulf states in a fluid post-war Middle East', August 2025, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/gulf-states-fluid-post-war-middle-east>

²¹ Al Jazeera, 'Mapping Israel's expanding air attacks across Syria', June 2025, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/6/4/mapping-israels-expanding-air-attacks-across-syria>

²² UK Government, UK building closer ties with Syria, supporting accountability and regional security, August 2025, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-building-closer-ties-with-syria-supporting-accountability-and-regional-security>; Commons Library, Syria after Assad: Consequences and interim authorities, July 2025, <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-10161/>

and Syria more broadly, the sectarian targeting of civilians, hospitals, and essential infrastructure — including water, electricity, and food supplies — has produced a humanitarian crisis that requires urgent international response and accountability.

International engagement must be supportive rather than directive, guided by clear benchmarks: inclusive governance, legal reform, protection of civic space, and mechanisms for accountability. Long-term peace depends on investing in institutional capacity, not short-term fixes. The UK has a constructive role to play, through legal cooperation, evidence documentation, and refugee protection, but must remain alert to geopolitical dynamics, as actors such as Russia, Iran, Turkey, Israel, and Gulf states continue to influence Syria's trajectory.

Ultimately, accountability must be at the heart of any sustainable peace.

In charting a way forward for Syria, justice and accountability must be pursued through mechanisms that foster equal citizenship, political rights and freedoms, and collective trust, rather than reproduce the political processes of division that have fuelled sectarian and gendered violence. Domestic actors, civil society organisations, survivors, and victim's families should be at the forefront of any accountability, legal or institutional reform. The international community can repeat calls and support processes that recognise the suffering of all victims, ensure accountability for the gravest of crimes, and foster genuine reconciliation and respect for the rule of law. Transitional justice processes must be coupled with long-term initiatives and dialogue to ensure that accountability and guarantees of non-reoccurrence of crimes become a foundation for sustainable truth, justice, and reconciliation. By embedding justice within a broader framework of social healing and inclusive governance, Syria can lay the groundwork for lasting peace in which accountability strengthens unity and helps prevent future cycles of violence.