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Syria’s Transition and Europe’s Strategic Responsibility

Institutional recovery, inclusion and regional diplomacy after the fall of Assad.

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EXECUTIVE JUDGEMENT

> *European engagement with Syria should be conditional but not passive: support must protect civilians, strengthen legitimate institutions and reward observable inclusion while preserving leverage against renewed coercion, exclusion and transnational militancy.*

Key findings

- Behavioural moderation should be judged through institutions and treatment of minorities, not rhetoric alone.
- Early recovery can stabilise public administration without conferring unconditional political legitimacy.
- Fragmented security authority remains the principal threat to a durable national transition.
- Regional guarantees and European support must reinforce one another rather than create competing channels.

A transition of conduct and institutions

The fall of Assad opened political space but did not resolve the distribution of coercive power, the protection of minorities or the legitimacy of national administration. Public language has become more pragmatic, and authorities have shown interest in recognition and recovery. These changes matter, but moderation should be tested against observable conduct: appointments, local participation, property rights, detention practice and the ability of institutions to restrain armed actors.

Conditional engagement

Europe should avoid both premature normalisation and strategic absence. Assistance can support municipal services, documentation, education, health and accountable public administration while remaining tied to transparent delivery and independent monitoring. Conditions should be specific enough to guide decisions and flexible enough not to punish civilians for setbacks beyond their control.

Security and inclusion

The durability of the transition depends on whether armed authority becomes subject to legitimate institutions and whether communities believe those institutions protect them. Security-sector sequencing, local representation and credible investigation of abuses are therefore connected. External actors should not sponsor parallel structures that deepen fragmentation for short-term influence.

Europe's distinctive contribution

European leverage lies in long-term institutional support, recovery finance, education, standards and diplomatic coordination with regional actors. A shared European framework should specify what progress unlocks deeper cooperation and what reversals would pause it. The objective is a sovereign, inclusive and administratively capable Syria, not the management of indefinite dependency.

A staged European engagement framework

European engagement should advance through reversible stages tied to institutional conduct and civilian protection.

The first stage should protect humanitarian access, document property and detention issues and preserve local administrative capacity. A second stage may support basic services, professional administration and economic recovery where authorities demonstrate inclusion and transparent use of resources. Broader political and financial engagement should depend on sustained evidence that national institutions can restrain armed actors and apply rules across communities.

Conditionality should be specific enough to guide decisions but realistic enough to avoid collective punishment. Benchmarks may include access for humanitarian actors, transparent appointments, participation of women and minorities, due process, local consultation and protection against retaliatory seizure. European institutions and member states should share an evidence framework so that different forms of assistance reinforce rather than contradict one another.

- Publish staged benchmarks and identify which authority can advance or suspend each measure.
- Protect local service delivery from political capture through audited channels.
- Coordinate sanctions, recovery support and diplomatic engagement around verified conduct.

Policy recommendations

- Tie phases of engagement to observable institutional and inclusion benchmarks.
- Protect essential civilian recovery through independently monitored delivery channels.
- Support documentation, property rights and local administrative capacity.
- Coordinate European conditions with regional diplomatic and economic incentives.
- Maintain contingency measures against renewed coercion, exclusion or transnational militancy.

Indicators to watch

- Minority participation
- Security-sector consolidation
- Humanitarian and recovery access
- Property and documentation rights

Scope and analytical method

Institutional recovery, inclusion and regional diplomacy after the fall of Assad. The paper tests the issue against institutional authority, delivery capacity, political sustainability and the interests of affected partners. It separates confirmed developments from interpretation and identifies the conditions under which recommendations would need to change.

The analysis is based on a structured review of official institutional material and current primary sources. It distinguishes formal decisions and verified facts from institutional assessment and forward-looking judgement. Recommendations are tested against authority, delivery capacity, timing, political sustainability and the interests of external partners.

Public sources cannot capture classified readiness data, commercially sensitive contracting information or confidential diplomatic exchanges. Time-sensitive figures and legal developments should therefore be refreshed by responsible authorities before an operational decision is taken.

Sources and method

The sources below establish the public evidentiary basis for this paper. Interpretation and recommendations remain the responsibility of the Research Directorate. Principal public sources:

- EEAS, Syria and the EU

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