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Peace and Conflict Resolution Evidence Platform

Introducing the Series

Syria in Transition: Comparative Lessons and Implications for International Engagement

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Since the fall of the Assad regime in December 2024, Syria has entered a fragile yet transformative phase, marking a decisive break after close to 14 years of devastating conflict and fragmentation. The formation of a transitional government under Ahmed al-Sharaa has opened a new chapter – one that presents immense challenges and deep uncertainty, but also significant opportunities. Rebuilding state institutions, restoring basic governance, and navigating deeply entrenched divisions will take time, resources, and nuanced approaches grounded in local realities.

This series, released one year after these pivotal events, offers a critical assessment of Syria's stabilization efforts to date. It seeks to provide forward-looking insights into key challenges and potential trajectories in the Syrian transition. While specifically intended to inform the UK government's engagement – as a committed political and development partner – this series also addresses a broader international audience concerned with fostering sustainable peace and supporting meaningful transitions in Syria and the region.

Purpose and Approach

The series offers a predictive and comparative analysis of Syria's transition, informed by analogous experiences in Afghanistan (post-2001), Iraq (post-2003), and Lebanon (post-1990). These cases, while not identical, help illuminate the complex dynamics that tend to accompany post-conflict transitions in the wider Middle Eastern region – particularly in contexts shaped by violent upheaval, foreign involvement, and fragmented governance.

Rather than adhering to rigid models of peacebuilding or predefined templates for institution-building, this series advocates for a more adaptive, people-centred understanding of transition. It highlights the importance of daily governance practices, local power dynamics, and the incremental negotiation of legitimacy. In doing so, the series offers a fresh perspective on how post-conflict statecraft can unfold in complex and evolving contexts – recognizing that sustainable peace is rarely linear, often improvised, and shaped by those with the capacity to act within moments of crisis.

A core purpose of this series is to bridge the gap between the international community's understandable expectations for a peaceful and sustainable transition and the pragmatic realities on the ground.

It is important to acknowledge that a transitional period is inherently dynamic and "messy". It is a time when new leadership and governance structures require space to establish themselves, typically relying on trusted networks and informal alliances to build initial strength. These are often essential for immediate and basic functionality. The challenge, and the opportunity, lies in ensuring that such arrangements do not solidify into long-term elite capture, but instead, that they evolve over time into more accountable, transparent, and representative governance structures.

Global Context

Syria's transition is also unfolding in a uniquely difficult global environment. International aid budgets are contracting, multilateral institutions are fragmented, and humanitarian principles are under strain as aid becomes politicised and securitised. At the same time, the effects of climate change are becoming acute; Syria's water systems are collapsing, agricultural production has fallen sharply, and food insecurity and displacement are on the rise. New frontier technologies – from social media shaping mobilisation, to crypto and blockchain moving money outside state channels, to AI enabled tools influencing security and service delivery – further complicate governance. These dynamics intersect with broader global shifts such as great power competition, migration politics, economic volatility and increasing disinformation; but in Syria they are converging with exceptional intensity, magnifying risks for both the transition and regional stability.

A uniquely critical test for Syria will be how minorities and vulnerable groups are treated. In particular, Kurdish communities, Palestinian Syrians, the Druze, Alawites, Christians, and Ismailis all sit at the intersection of domestic vulnerability and regional politics; each has faced marginalisation or carries legacies of contested belonging inside Syria, while also holding symbolic weight and cross-border linkages that magnify their importance to international actors. The Kurds' position is shaped by dynamics across Turkey, Iraq, and Iran, making their integration a regional security concern as much as a domestic one. Palestinian Syrians embody the regional salience of the Palestinian question, particularly as UNRWA funding collapses and instability in Gaza reverberates into Lebanon and Syria. The Druze, concentrated in Suweida, have already demonstrated both the risks of unrest and the capacity of local actors to contain escalation, dynamics closely watched by neighbouring states. The Alawites, the former sect of the Asad presidency, now face fears of retribution and exclusion, which, if realised, could drive cycles of violence or displacement with wider repercussions. Christian and Ismaili communities, though smaller in number, are acutely concerned about protection, representation, and the preservation of religious and cultural freedoms, concerns that resonate with international partners and diaspora networks. Unlike Lebanon, Iraq, or Afghanistan, where the critical test centred on a single sectarian balance or the integration of one dominant insurgent bloc, Syria's challenge is broader; it must integrate multiple vulnerable communities at once. Failure to do so would not only undermine the legitimacy of the transitional government but also risk fuelling instability that could spill across borders and threaten regional balances.

Overlaying these dynamics is the enduring threat of transnational jihadist networks. Although former HTS members within the transitional government claim to have separated their interests from ultra extremist movements, recent violence in Suweida and the coastal region raises doubts about the durability of this separation. The continued presence of foreign fighters inside Syria underscores lingering risks that jihadist elements could re-emerge as spoilers, threatening not only domestic stability but also regional and transnational security.

For the transitional government under Ahmed al-Sharaa, this means navigating a hybrid governance landscape where informal networks, contested elections, minority inclusion, shrinking resources, and the containment of extremist groups will dominate in the near term. For international partners, especially the UK, it demands adaptive support that invests in public financial management, transparent local compacts and reconciliation, climate adaptation, frontier technology governance, and conflict mediation, while ensuring the meaningful inclusion of vulnerable groups as both a humanitarian imperative and a marker of legitimacy at home and credibility abroad. For the UK and its partners, these challenges map directly onto core national security concerns, migration pressures, and the defence of normative cooperation in an increasingly contested international system.

Theoretical Underpinning

Our analysis is informed by a growing body of academic literature on peace processes and post-conflict transitions, including PeaceRep's long-standing work in this field. We draw on the concept of the "messy timeline", which captures the reality that peace processes are rarely clean, sequential affairs. Instead, they unfold through repeated rounds of negotiation, partial agreements, and strategic pauses. small, sequenced steps being the norm rather than a single decisive leap. As evidenced by historical examples in and beyond the Middle East – such as Bosnia or Afghanistan – peace is often a process of crisis management that takes place, sometimes simultaneously, at multiple levels – local, national, and international.

This series also adopts a pragmatic view of peacebuilding – not as a destination but as a continuous process shaped by local responses to shifting power dynamics. This view is partially grounded in the analysis of 108 written and publicly available peace agreements made throughout the conflict and recorded on PeaceRep's PA-X Peace Agreements Database. In Syria, these agreements have often functioned less as tools of peacemaking and more as mechanisms to manage warfare or preserve temporary advantage. Recognizing this ambiguity is crucial to understanding both the potential and limits of such arrangements, including in the transition period. This series will build on these insights, recognizing that the new Syrian government, partially comprised of former military figures, possesses a pragmatic, tactical, and negotiation-based skill set that is invaluable for short-term crisis preparedness but may prove less compatible with the demands of long-term institutional development and inclusive governance. It is crucial to acknowledge and address this tension through external support strategies.

Why Afghanistan, Iraq, and Lebanon?

The selection of Afghanistan, Iraq, and Lebanon as comparative cases is driven by their relevance to the specific characteristics of Syria's ongoing transition. While no post-conflict context is identical, these three cases offer instructive parallels in terms of political restructuring, security sector dynamics, international engagement, and the challenges of building legitimacy in fragmented and polarized societies.

Commonalities with Syria

These three contexts provide a robust framework for comparative analysis because they share several critical characteristics with Syria's post-2024 transition:

- **Violent internal conflict and external intervention**: Each country experienced a devastating internal conflict with significant external involvement. Afghanistan's post-2001 transition was shaped by the US and its allies' intervention and subsequent withdrawal. Iraq's was defined by the US-led invasion and the ensuing political vacuum. Lebanon's transition was marked by the end of its civil war and the subsequent period of political reconfiguration under external influence. Syria's current context, similarly, is a result of a multi-sided conflict with various international actors. The presence of foreign powers and proxy groups in all these cases adds a layer of complexity to governance and security sector reform.
- **Sectarian and ethnic divisions**: All three countries, like Syria, are characterized by deep-seated sectarian or ethnic divisions that were exacerbated by conflict. In Iraq, the post-2003 political system was largely structured around sectarian power-sharing, leading to continued instability. Lebanon's confessional system, solidified by the Taif Agreement, enshrined sectarianism into its governance structures. Afghanistan's conflict also had a significant ethnic dimension, particularly between the Pashtun-led Taliban and other groups. This makes them ideal for examining how a new Syrian government might navigate its own diverse ethnic and religious landscape to prevent future fragmentation.
- **Disintegration of state institutions**: The conflicts in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Lebanon led to the collapse or severe weakening of central government authority and the rise of non-state armed actors. In Iraq, "de-Ba'athification" dismantled the old state apparatus without adequately replacing it, creating a security vacuum. Similarly, in post-civil war Lebanon, powerful militias, most notably Hezbollah, remained a dominant force outside state control. Afghanistan's government-building efforts after 2001 were hampered by the influence of warlords and the Taliban's enduring power. These experiences provide valuable lessons for Syria on the challenges of reforming security institutions, disarming and integrating armed factions, and re-establishing the state's monopoly on force.

Specific Lessons from Each Context

Beyond these commonalities, each country offers a specific, instructive example:

Afghanistan (Post-2001): Afghanistan provides insight into transitions led by non-state armed actors who evolved into governing authorities. Like Syria's emerging leadership, Afghanistan's post-Taliban structures were dominated by military figures with limited bureaucratic experience, often relying on informal networks and localized power-sharing. The Afghan case illustrates both the immediate effectiveness and long-term limitations of militarized governance, especially when international support focuses on short-term stability over institution-building. This offers a cautionary tale about the challenges of consolidating power when state institutions are weak.

Iraq (Post-2003): Iraq offers a cautionary example of externally influenced regime change followed by the attempted imposition of a new political order under conditions of deep sectarian fragmentation. The dismantling of the former state apparatus, rapid institutional reform, and reliance on elite bargains resulted in protracted instability and widespread disillusionment. Iraq's experience underscores the risks of premature or exclusionary political processes and the unintended consequences of over-securitized international engagement.

Lebanon (Post-1990s): Lebanon represents a transition that occurred through a negotiated political settlement between domestic factions, heavily influenced by regional actors. The resulting governance system – characterized by sectarian power-sharing and elite pact-making – helped end overt violence but institutionalized clientelism and weakened state capacity. Lebanon's case offers valuable lessons on the trade-offs between peace and reform, and the long-term impact of informal power structures that resist accountability and public inclusion.

Together, these three contexts shed light on different pathways out of conflict, the enduring influence of wartime actors, and the challenges of balancing immediate stabilization with sustainable state-building. Importantly, they also demonstrate how international actors – whether in a direct, supportive, or merely observant role – can shape outcomes in both intended and unintended ways. These comparative cases allow us to place Syria's unique transition within a broader set of regional experiences and to draw actionable lessons for more adaptive and context-sensitive policy responses.

Structure of the Series

This series identifies a set of recurring challenges that are likely to shape Syria's transition in the short- to medium-term. These include issues related to political governance, financial restructuring, conflict resolution and local political settlements, social cohesion, and the role of international programming and aid delivery. These themes have been chosen because they reflect the areas where the new Syrian government is under the greatest immediate pressure, where failure has fuelled instability in previous regional transitions, and where international engagement can make the most tangible difference. For the international community, each is a priority; political governance determines the legitimacy of the transition, while financial restructuring is critical given the country's historic role in regional licit and illicit financial networks. Transparent systems are needed to prevent diversion, and build confidence among Gulf and diaspora investors, stabilise the economy, and deliver tangible benefits to Syrian citizens. Crisis management, social cohesion and local level political settlements directly influence risks of displacement, refragmentation and regional spill over, while programming and aid delivery test the ability of donors to act effectively in a contested environment. Any new programming will require robust fail-safes, the transitional authorities have demonstrated pragmatism but retain complex connections to armed and extremist actors. While the question of reconstruction is acknowledged, it falls beyond the immediate scope of this one-year assessment.

Each section (corresponding to a challenge) begins with a brief situational analysis of how the issue is emerging or likely to intensify in Syria. It is followed by a comparative examination of how these challenges played out in the transitions of Afghanistan, Iraq, and Lebanon, to assess whether Syria represents a unique case or fits within broader regional patterns. Each section concludes with relevant lessons, and policy recommendations for action, aimed at supporting Syrian-led solutions while informing more adaptive, context-sensitive engagement from international partners.

Our analytical lens rests on four central considerations: the skills and capacities of Syrian actors managing the transition; the nature and depth of each challenge within its local context; the tools that can be leveraged by policymakers and the international community; and the types of engagement that are most likely to deliver meaningful and lasting stabilization.

Throughout the series, particular attention is given to the roles of women and youth, both as critical actors in Syria's political future and as stakeholders often marginalized in transitions elsewhere. These cross-cutting dimensions are addressed across all thematic areas and, where appropriate, in their own dedicated analysis.

Ultimately, this series seeks to contribute to a deeper, more realistic understanding of the opportunities and limits of Syria's transitional moment. By grounding our analysis in comparative experience and a recognition of local agency, we aim to support international actors – particularly those invested in Syria's long-term stability – in making informed, flexible, and constructive policy decisions during this pivotal period.

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About PeaceRep

PeaceRep: The Peace and Conflict Resolution Evidence Platform is a research consortium based at Edinburgh Law School. Our research is rethinking peace and transition processes in the light of changing conflict dynamics, changing demands of inclusion, and changes in patterns of global intervention in conflict and peace/mediation/transition management processes.

Consortium members include: Conciliation Resources, Centre for Trust, Peace and Social Relations (CTPSR) at Coventry University, Dialectiq, Edinburgh Law School, International IDEA, LSE Conflict and Civicness Research Group, LSE Middle East Centre, Queens University Belfast, University of St Andrews, University of Stirling, and the World Peace Foundation at Tufts University.

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