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Editor's Choice

SYRIA ONE YEAR AFTER THE FALL OF ASSAD BETWEEN EXPECTATIONS AND THE COMPLEX PATH TO STABILITY

DIM Conferences and Events
webinar held on February 26, 2026

Featuring:

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Webinar Description: This second edition of the “Syria After Assad” webinar series assessed major developments in Syria over the past year, revisited the predictions made during the first event, and examined how the country’s reconstruction and governance have evolved amid ongoing social and economic pressures.

I. Introduction

One year after the fall of the Assad regime, Syria’s transitional phase presents a complex and multidimensional landscape marked by fragility and evolving power dynamics. Hosted by the **Centre for International Development and Migration (DIM)**, part of the National University of Political Studies and Public Administration (SNSPA) in Bucharest, this event explored the Syrian transition through multiple academic perspectives.

Against the backdrop of recent media reports suggesting **potential negotiations between Syria and Israel to establish borders in accordance with the 1974 agreement** (Anadolu Agency, 2026), the observations from our webinar contribute to understanding the current situation. This diplomatic attempt to clarify external frontiers aligns closely with the

analysis provided by **Omar Kadkoy** regarding the transitional government's strategy of prioritizing territorial consolidation over political inclusivity. In this context, the Republic of Türkiye has also shifted its regional position, moving towards a pragmatic "middle power" diplomacy focused on security and border stability.

As highlighted in the opening remarks, the discussion moved beyond traditional approaches focused on regime change and comparative politics, incorporating migration as a central analytical lens. What began as a pro-democratic movement evolved into a prolonged civil conflict. The central challenge now in Syria lies in understanding how a fragmented state can rebuild institutions, manage large-scale population movements, and navigate shifting geopolitical alignments.

II. The Governance Paradox: Territorial Consolidation vs. Political Legitimacy

Omar Kadkoy (Heinrich Böll Stiftung, Istanbul) offered a critical assessment of the Syrian transitional government's progress over the past year. His core argument was that the transitional authority has been *"more successful and effective at extending control than at constructing an inclusive political community"*. In essence, Syria is witnessing the *"consolidation of territory without the people"*.

Four key forms of consolidation were identified to describe the transitional government's strategy over the past year. First, institutional consolidation has been marked by the rapid establishment of new security apparatuses and formal executive structures aimed at projecting an image of order and normalcy within the new Syria. Parallel to this is diplomatic consolidation, which encompasses the transitional government's intense efforts to secure external recognition, negotiate with regional powers, and seek crucial sanctions relief. These structural moves are reinforced by narrative consolidation, defined as the deliberate construction of a powerful, state-driven discourse portraying a unified Syria being restored after its collapse. While such a narrative may be

necessary, it often attempts to merely administratively manage away deep and unresolved societal fractures. Finally, the regime has pursued territorial consolidation, characterized by the reassertion of central authority across key geographies, an outcome achieved variably through force, negotiations, or complex hybrid arrangements.

Despite these developments, severe dangers remain associated with a **“map-first transition”**. This approach refers to the temptation, particularly among external actors, to treat territorial consolidation as the primary indicator of progress, equating success simply with reduced front lines, the extension of central authority, and the formation of basic institutions. However, progress measured solely by cartography and partial sanctions relief creates an *“illusion of stability”*. When a transition prioritizes the map over the citizens, consolidating territory without its people, it inherently embeds future conflict. The resulting vacuum is inevitably filled by coercion, patronage, fear, and eventually, renewed insurgency.

This challenge is particularly visible among minority communities: for the Kurds in the Northeast, the core issue extends beyond military control to encompass political status, local governance, and meaningful participation. The lingering question is whether this region can be politically integrated without erasing local agency. In the South, the experience of the Druze in Sweida has demonstrated how local insecurity, distrust, and armed autonomy can rapidly escalate into a wider crisis, proving that central authority is not matched by local legitimacy. Meanwhile, the reality for the Alawites on the coast is characterized by fear, vulnerability, and collective insecurity following violent uprisings and massacres. Under these conditions, the transition is experienced not as a political opening, but strictly as a matter of survival. Ultimately, Kadkoy argued that a transition that sidelines civil society, women and local communities will fail to produce an enduring democratic peace. The state must return as a guarantor of inclusivity and rule of law, not merely as an administrative authority.

III. Humanitarian Realities: Displacement, Returns and Reintegration

Bogdan Dănilă (IOM, Geneva) provided a data-driven overview of humanitarian and migration developments, highlighting the gap between institutional recovery and persistent societal needs.

1. Scale of Need

While state institutions have slowly resumed functioning and the front lines have largely frozen, the scale of humanitarian need remains staggering. Approximately **16.5 million Syrians are projected to require humanitarian assistance in 2026**, representing roughly three-quarters of the population. Furthermore, an estimated 90% of the population continues to live below the poverty line. Access to basic services remains inconsistent, and environmental factors continue to affect agriculture and power generation, leading to food shortages. The humanitarian response plan is critically underfunded, currently standing at less than 6%.

2. Dynamics of Return and Displacement

Internal displacement persists as a critical humanitarian challenge, with approximately 6 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) currently residing in camps and overcrowded shelters. Nevertheless, the enactment of the peace agreement in late 2024 precipitated a substantial opportunity for mobility. Consequently, between December 2024 and January 2026, nearly 3 million Syrian IDPs and refugees reintegrated into their communities of origin. This movement represents a demographic shift of extraordinary magnitude, encompassing roughly 11% of Syria's total population.

Dănilă detailed the IOM's expansive operations, which now include 420 personnel across hubs in Damascus and Aleppo. A vital operational milestone was the reactivation of the Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM) in early 2025. According to DTM data, the primary pull factors for returnees include perceived improvements in security, the ability to repossess assets and properties, and better access to livelihoods.

3. The Community of Return Index Challenges

The **IOM's Community of Return Index**, which draws upon data from nearly 20,000 key informants across more than 3,500 locations, illuminates severe systemic hurdles to sustainable reintegration. Foremost among these are housing, land, and property (HLP) disputes, which are reported in 87% of communities, as a result of overlapping claims and damaged infrastructure.

Intensifying this issue is the widespread lack of access to legal documentation, a critical barrier that scores notably low on the assessment index. Furthermore, pervasive insecurity continues to threaten the stability of the reintegration process; approximately 28% of key informants indicate that individuals may resort to re-displacement within the next six months. This demographic strain is particularly acute in high-volume regions such as Aleppo, where an influx of over 650,000 returnees has placed immense pressure on host communities, underscoring an urgent need for targeted structural investments.

Dănilă stressed that the way forward requires pursuing durable solutions that balance immediate emergency relief with long-term recovery, particularly focusing on livelihoods, transitional justice, and partnerships with the Syrian diaspora.

IV. Turkish Middle Power Diplomacy in Post-Assad Syria

Professor Birgül Demirtaş (University of Ankara) outlined the evolution of Turkish foreign policy toward the new Syrian administration. She characterized Türkiye's approach as an exercise in **"middle power diplomacy"** within a shifting, post-Western global order. Utilizing both hard and soft power, Ankara has adopted a flexible, 360-degree perspective, echoing President Erdoğan's **"compass metaphor"**: keeping one leg fixed in national interests while encompassing the world with the other. Since the fall of the Assad regime, the Republic of Türkiye has rapidly initiated a proactive, multidimensional policy across five main pillars:

1. Security Cooperation

This remains the absolute priority due to the 900 km shared border and historic concerns over power vacuums and terrorist organizations like PKK. Just four days after the new regime took power, the head of Turkish intelligence met with the new Syrian leader. In August 2025, a landmark military cooperation agreement was signed, covering army training, experience sharing, and weapons systems provision. Furthermore, the Republic of Türkiye expressed readiness to assist the Syrian government's recent offensive against the YPG, prioritizing Syria's territorial integrity.

2. Voluntary Returns

The Republic of Türkiye currently hosts around 3 million Syrian refugees. Driven by rising anti-immigration attitudes at home, documented in the "Syrian Barometer" surveys, and the leverage of anti-immigration rhetorics by political parties, the Turkish government urgently launched a voluntary return program. In 14 months, over 500,000 Syrian refugees have officially returned to their homeland.

3. Economic Diplomacy

Economic ties are being actively restored as the "*backbone*" of bilateral relations. Demonstrating immense speed, Turkish Airlines resumed flights to Damascus just one and a half months after the regime change. Notably, bilateral trade increased by 70% in 2025.

4. Cultural Diplomacy

The Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TIKA) swiftly established an office in Damascus. Furthermore, two Turkish cultural centers are now operational; remarkably, the Damascus branch opened on December 18th, 2024, merely ten days after the fall of the Assad regime.

5. Local Diplomacy

Turkish municipalities are engaging directly with Syrian counterparts to aid infrastructure repair and facilitate returns. For example, Hatay established a sister-city relationship with Latakia in May 2025, and Gaziantep renewed its partnership with Aleppo. This

multidimensional strategy reflects a pragmatic approach combining security concerns with economic and political interests.

V. Sectarian Realignment and Minority Groups Insecurity

Fawzia Rehejeh (Arab Cultural Centre, Sibiu) provided a sobering, ground-level account of the situation from the perspective of Syria's ethnic and religious minorities, expressing profound disappointment with the revolution's outcome. Originally founded on principles of democratic liberation, the revolution has alarmingly transitioned into a religious and Islamist movement, a shock to those who envisioned a secular, multiethnic state.

The collapse of the centralized authoritarian state has created a severe security vacuum, leading to **heightened vulnerability for minority communities**. A massive sectarian realignment is underway, shifting political influence from the Alawite-dominated security mechanisms of the Assad era toward Sunni majority actors.

Rehejeh highlighted several critical dangers within this realignment. Foremost is the prevalence of a *"band"* mentality, where the new administration operates more as a fragmented group rather than a coherent government. She pointedly noted that the new leadership stems from former factions with backgrounds akin to HTS or ISIS, bringing zero experience in inclusive statecraft. Compounding this is a profound lack of transitional justice; the promise of accountability remains entirely unfulfilled, while former economic figures and military leaders associated with the old regime are allegedly reintegrating by financially backing the new establishment.

Furthermore, driven by fear, collective blame, and marginalization, various minority groups, including Alawites, Kurds, and Druze, are increasingly seeking autonomy. Rehejeh warned that this fragmentation is highly dangerous; should these groups gain access to weapons, they are likely to organize into militias against the state, potentially precipitating a renewed cycle of internal displacement and large-scale

external migration toward Europe. These dynamics risk further fragmentation and could contribute to renewed cycles of instability if not addressed through inclusive governance mechanisms.

Rehejeh concluded that the international community's normalization of figures like "Mohammed Jolani" completely ignores the perilous reality faced by minorities, prioritizing surface-level stability over true transitional justice.

VI. Gender Security and the Threat of Fundamentalism

Fatma Yilmaz (SNSPA, Bucharest) criticized the Syrian transition strictly through a gender and human security lens, arguing that **peace built without taking women's experiences and voices seriously is merely a "temporary suspension of violence"**. She noted that vulnerable populations, such as women, children, and the elderly, continue to bear the heaviest price of the transition. Yilmaz expressed deep concern over the explicit reconfiguration of the relationship between power and religion under the new leadership of Ahmed al-Shara (formerly associated with the Jolani group). Unlike the formal secularism of the Assad regime, the new authority anchors its legitimacy in conservative, fundamentalist Islamic references.

This *"re-islamization"* poses severe, systemic risks to women's autonomy. Yilmaz analyzed the highly visible public presence of the new leader's wife wearing the hijab, arguing that, beyond personal choice, this functions as a normative symbol enforcing a specific model of femininity tied to religious respectability and traditional roles. Consequently, there is a dangerous shift from individual citizenship toward a model of *"communal remediated citizenship"*, where women are defined primarily through their roles as wives, mothers, and guardians of collective morality, thereby prioritizing conformity over individual autonomy.

In addition to these ideological shifts, women face acute human security threats, including extreme poverty, economic insecurity, and severe labor market discrimination. Furthermore, conservative

reconfigurations of legal frameworks threaten personal status rights, particularly regarding divorce, custody, and legal autonomy. Exacerbating these vulnerabilities, families driven by profound poverty and economic insecurity are increasingly resorting to early marriages as a desperate mechanism of economic protection.

During the Q&A, Yilmaz posed a critical question regarding this phenomenon: *“Is the return of religion to the Syrian public sphere a process with potential for regional ideological diffusion or is it merely a contextual strategy for internal stabilization?”*.

VII. Geopolitical Realignment: Shrinking and Expanding Spheres of Influence

Professor Tuğba Bayar (Bilkent University, Ankara) analyzed the evolving spheres of influence in post-Assad Syria, focusing primarily on the historical competition between two ambitious middle powers: the Republic of Türkiye and Iran.

During the civil war, the historical rivalry between Türkiye and Iran manifested across three primary domains: hard power, soft power, and great power alignments. The Republic of Türkiye initially utilized soft power by supporting the Syrian opposition and implementing an open-border policy for refugees, strategically leveraging its reputation as a successful democratic Muslim model.

Subsequently, Ankara deployed hard power through targeted military interventions, namely Operations Euphrates Shield, Olive Branch, and Peace Spring, to contain ISIS and Kurdish factions, thereby establishing Turkish-protected zones along the border. Conversely, Iran framed the Syrian conflict ideologically as an *“Islamic awakening”* and viewed the territory strategically as a crucial land bridge, necessary for maintaining its broader regional resistance network. To secure these interests, Tehran embedded itself deeply within the pro-regime camp using hard power, specifically by deploying the Revolutionary Guards and the Quds Force, alongside the mobilization of allied Shia militias.

The Post-Assad Reality

In the post-Assad phase, the regional balance of power has undergone a profound transformation. Rather than withdrawing, the Republic of Türkiye is actively consolidating and deepening its de facto zones of influence. Ankara continues to support local networks encompassing councils, security forces, and educational structures, and has recently pledged to train Syrian military and police personnel.

Conversely, Iran has entered this new era with severely diminished freedom of maneuver. Bayar highlighted the devastating impact of the twelve-day war in June 2025, during which extensive Israeli strikes on Iranian military infrastructure forced Tehran to abandon its expeditionary ambitions and prioritize strategic survival. Magnifying this vulnerability is the massive deployment of United States naval and air forces to the region. Consequently, Iran's traditional proxy networks, spanning Hezbollah in Lebanon to various militias in Iraq and Syria, have significantly weakened.

Concurrently, while Russia's hard power has not completely diminished, its strategic posture has adapted considerably. Moscow currently maintains a much lower profile in the region, effectively withdrawing the geopolitical cover it once afforded to Iran.

VIII. Future Trajectories and Conclusions

In the concluding segment, panel moderator Claudiu Crăciun asked the speakers to project the trajectory of Syria over the next six to twelve months.

The consensus among the panelists pointed toward a **slow, pragmatic pursuit of stabilization**, rather than a rapid democratic transformation. Omar Kadkoy posited that stability will become the definitive *"name of the game"*. He argued that, driven heavily by United States economic involvement and investments coordinated with Ankara and the Gulf states, there will be a strategic attempt to overshadow lingering identity politics through economic development. Echoing this

gradualist perspective, Bogdan Dănilă emphasized that in a country devastated by fifteen years of conflict, any structural changes will be strictly incremental. He noted that a key immediate operational target is the **elimination of displacement camps by the end of 2026**, despite the vast and enduring gap between humanitarian needs and available resources.

Furthermore, Birgül Demirtaş anticipated that the current administration will focus primarily on **reestablishing basic state authority**, observing that Syria's historical lack of a democratic tradition will require immense time and sustained international encouragement to overcome.

In contrast, Fawzia Rehejeh maintained a highly pessimistic outlook, warning that if marginalized minority communities acquire the means to militarize, **the nation risks severe internal fracturing and renewed conflict**.

Closing the session, Claudiu Crăciun referenced the work of Dutch political scientist Arend Lijphart on "*consociational democracy*". He noted that **heavily fragmented states can survive if they build consensual, proportional institutions where all component parts have guaranteed representation**. While this model worked for a time in Lebanon and could theoretically work in Syria, democratization literature warns that it is exceptionally difficult to reconcile democratic consolidation with insurgent religious mobilization. If majoritarian or religious institutions dominate, the state remains prone to deep contestation and conflict.

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