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Abdullah al-Jabassini  
Joseph Daher

Series editor  
David Jackson  
Robert Forster

## **Anti-corruption efforts in Syria: Security sector reform and economic governance**

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Corruption erodes sustainable and inclusive development. It is both a political and technical challenge. The U4 Anti-Corruption Resource Centre (U4) works to understand and counter corruption worldwide.

U4 is part of the Chr. Michelsen Institute (CMI), an independent development research institute in Norway.

[www.u4.no](http://www.u4.no)

[u4@cmi.no](mailto:u4@cmi.no)

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**To create and implement meaningful anti-corruption reform, the Syrian Transitional Government (STG) should focus on strengthening institutional capacity, accountability, and civic participation in the security and economic sectors, where decision-making remains concentrated, transparency is uneven, and public participation is limited.**

## **Main points**

- Despite early commitment to transparency, accountability, and justice, the new Syrian Transitional Government (STG) faces the challenge of translating rhetoric into tangible institutional reform.
  - Our findings highlight trends and practices in reform in the security sector and economic governance.
  - While the MoI has attempted to position civil participation as part of its reform portfolio, the MoD has largely avoided inclusion.
  - In the economic sector, the current concentration of power centralises decision-making in the hands of the president and his close affiliates.
  - While some transparency initiatives have emerged, it remains unclear how to incorporate public input into decision-making. Questions remain about the independence and representativeness of key economic institutions.
  - Patterns of elite capture and favouritism have emerged. There are issues around former regime affiliates and how they have reconciled with the new authorities. Some remaining links to the former regime have seen no legal action and remain unprosecuted for economic crimes.
- New economic institutions concentrate power within the presidency, and limit independent oversight.
  - Other ministerial responsibilities have shifted to the presidency, consolidating decision-making authority in the hands of the president and his close affiliates – including the president’s brother, former Syrian caretaker government ministers, and other individuals linked to the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham network.
  - To enhance the credibility, effectiveness, and sustainability of anti-corruption initiatives, the STG should focus on reforms that strengthen institutional capacity, formalise accountability, and expand genuine civic participation.

# Contents

<b>Establishing anti-corruption measures in transitional Syria</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>1. Assessing anti-corruption initiatives: Transparency and public participation</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>2. Research scope</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>3. Anti-corruption efforts in security sector reform</b>	<b>9</b>
3.1 Transparency and the limits of disclosure	9
3.2 Public participation and accountability mechanisms	13
<b>4. Anti-corruption efforts in economic governance</b>	<b>17</b>
4.1 Transparency in the economic sector	17
4.2 Public engagement in economic policymaking	21
<b>5. Recommendations to enhance the effectiveness of anti-corruption initiatives in Syria</b>	<b>27</b>
<b>References</b>	<b>31</b>
<b>About the authors</b>	<b>37</b>
<b>Methodology</b>	<b>38</b>

# Abbreviations

<b>CBS</b>	Central Bank of Syria
<b>HTS</b>	Hayat Tahrir al-Sham
<b>MEI</b>	Ministry of Economy and Industry
<b>MoD</b>	Ministry of Defence
<b>Mol</b>	Ministry of Interior
<b>SANA</b>	Syrian Arab News Agency
<b>STG</b>	Syrian Transitional Government

# Establishing anti-corruption measures in transitional Syria

For decades, corruption has been deeply rooted in Syria's political and economic systems. During the 24-year presidency of the now-ousted Bashar al-Assad, corruption was a 'systemic and endemic feature' of governance.<sup>1</sup> More than a decade of war has further exacerbated corruption and its impacts. Corruption has thrived under the collapse of state capacity, economic decline, sanctions, international isolation, and the emergence of a war economy – marked by illicit trade, resource capture, and embedded clientelist networks.<sup>2</sup> By 2024, Syria was ranked 178th out of 180 countries on Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index,<sup>3</sup> showing the prevalence of corruption, its structural entrenchment and political utility.

## **The collapse of the Assad regime in December 2024 generated widespread public optimism about the possibility of political change.**

The collapse of the Assad regime in December 2024 generated widespread public optimism about the possibility of political change. But the transition is unfolding under challenging circumstances, and the new authorities are trying to demonstrate their commitment to building a more legitimate, accountable, and representative system of governance. Interim President Ahmed al-Sharaa has emphasised the need for reconstruction of state institutions on the principles of transparency, accountability, and justice, explicitly rejecting 'corruption, cronyism, and bribes'.<sup>4</sup> These commitments were formalised in the Constitutional Declaration issued in March 2025, which affirms in Article 7 that 'the State guarantees the fight against corruption'.<sup>5</sup>

In the same month, the Syrian Transitional Government (STG) formed and positioned itself as the driving force behind Syria Vision 2045, a national strategy

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1. Syrian Legal Development Program 2025.

2. Resimić 2024; Syrian Association for Citizens' Dignity 2021.

3. Transparency International 2025a.

4. Syria in Transition 2025.

5. Constitutional Declaration of the Syrian Arab Republic 2025.

centred on transparent governance, the restoration of public trust, and sustainable economic growth.<sup>6</sup> President al-Sharaa reinforced this agenda through a series of public directives, including orders for officials to disclose existing investments, abstain from private business dealings that might compromise their duties, and avoid allowing personal relationships to influence governance.\* In a gesture to underscore these principles, President al-Sharaa reportedly ordered the closure of his brother's businesses following allegations that family connections were used to advance Jamal al-Sharaa's personal gains.<sup>7</sup>

### **Despite growing international recognition, the country continues to face severe economic hardship.**

Despite these early actions, the STG must translate rhetoric into tangible institutional reform. Its ability to do so, however, is constrained by significant *structural limitations*. The new authorities have inherited a hollowed-out state apparatus with limited administrative capacity and insufficient institutional machinery to implement rapid or comprehensive reforms. These constraints complicate efforts to address the deeply embedded political, social, and economic burdens that have accumulated over decades. Despite growing international recognition and the lifting of US sanctions, including the repeal of the Caesar Act in late December 2025,<sup>8</sup> which reopened avenues for investment and reconstruction, the country continues to experience severe economic hardship. Poverty remains widespread, and more than half of the population remains displaced.<sup>9</sup>

Although reform oriented discourse has intensified, progress in governance and economic recovery has remained limited. Although reform oriented discourse has intensified, actors affiliated with the dissolved Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) networks dominate key positions in state institutions and pursue measures to consolidate their power over political, economic and social affairs. Against this backdrop, actors such as so called “administrative shaykhs” and secret committees reportedly exert influence over decision making in state institutions.

At the same time, political incentives are shaping the anti-corruption agenda. The new authorities operate within a fragile and fragmented state characterized by weak

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6. Vision 2045 2025.

7. Azhari and Dalatey 2025a.

8. While Syria has been subject to US sanctions since 1979, following its designation as a state sponsor of terrorism, the enactment of the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act (the Caesar Act) in December 2019 intensified economic restrictions, imposing sanctions on any engagement with the former regime, and limiting contributions to Syria's reconstruction.

9. As of 2024, United Nations data indicate that 90% of Syrians live below the poverty line, 16.7 million people – nearly three-quarters of the population – depend on humanitarian assistance, and more than half of the population remains displaced. United Nations Development Programme 2025; United Nations 2025.

governance, the continued presence of armed groups outside state control, and the influence of local power brokers. These conditions generate strong incentives to consolidate power and prioritise stability over rapid or extensive reforms, leading authorities to pursue anti-corruption reforms selectively and pace them cautiously. In this context, several initiatives have attracted criticism: the February 2025 Syrian National Dialogue Conference was faulted for limited representation and participation;<sup>10</sup> the Constitutional Declaration concentrated extensive powers in the presidency;<sup>11</sup> and the 2025 parliamentary elections were scrutinized for procedural shortcomings and the lack of inclusive representation.<sup>12</sup>

### **Anti-corruption reforms in Syria are caught in the interplay between structural constraints and political incentives.**

Anti-corruption reforms in Syria are caught in the interplay between structural constraints and political incentives. Structural weaknesses limit the state's capacity to implement comprehensive reforms, while political incentives shape the scope and pace of the measures pursued. Understanding how these two forces interact is critical for assessing the feasibility of the anti-corruption agenda. This research asks:

- Does the anti-corruption agenda reflect genuine systemic change in Syria?
- Are initiatives implemented in line with the authorities' stated commitments?

The first section of this report presents the analytical framework used to assess anti-corruption initiatives. The report then outlines the research scope, and examines anti-corruption efforts in security sector reform and economic governance before concluding with the main findings and policy recommendations.

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10. Salhani 2025.

11. Human Rights Watch 2025.

12. Ethana 2025.

# 1 Assessing anti-corruption initiatives: Transparency and public participation

The Syrian Transitional Government (STG) has inherited a challenging landscape with territorial fragmentation, social divisions, dire economics, constraints on administrative capacity, and the legacies of illicit economies. Therefore, it would be unrealistic to expect the STG to have institutionalised comprehensive good governance and anti-corruption practices. Embedding such measures to influence governance practices typically requires years of building resources, and consistent implementation and adaptation.<sup>13</sup> President al-Sharaa has pledged to rebuild state institutions on the foundations of transparency, accountability, and justice, explicitly rejecting ‘corruption, cronyism, and bribes’.<sup>14</sup> These public commitments indicate the STG’s intention to foster genuine transparency and facilitate substantive public participation.

In this U4 Issue, we define corruption as ‘*the abuse of entrusted power for private gain*’, a phenomenon that undermines trust, erodes governance, impedes economic development, and fuels inequality, poverty, and social division.<sup>15</sup> To analyse how the STG addresses anti-corruption policy, we use a framework built on transparency and public participation, examined across actions, practices, and public communication. We evaluate whether anti-corruption initiatives represent genuine systemic change, and assess how closely official rhetoric aligns with observable practices (see Table 1).

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13. Philp 2008. Pp. 310–27.

14. Syria in Transition 2025.

15. Transparency International 2025b.

**Table 1: Indicators of superficial versus credible anti-corruption measures**

	Superficial change	Credible change
Transparency	Publishing government decisions or outputs without enabling oversight or verification	Processes, decisions, and resource allocations are open, clear, and structured so that citizens can meaningfully monitor, question, and hold officials accountable
Public participation	Token consultations or limited outreach that do not influence outcomes	Mechanisms that actively involve citizens or stakeholders in shaping decisions, policies, and priorities, and extend influence beyond the executive branch

Transparency refers to how accessible and comprehensive government decisions, procedures, and information are to the public.<sup>16</sup> It encompasses the availability of data and insight into the reasoning, processes, and actors behind policy outcomes.

Meaningful approaches to transparency allow citizens to monitor *how* and *why* policies are formulated, identify potential abuses of power, and hold decision-makers accountable. Transparency also builds confidence in state institutions and reinforces their legitimacy and capacity to govern. It is therefore recognised as a core anti-corruption mechanism, but also as a principle embedded in international human rights standards.<sup>17</sup>

**Meaningful participation means more than token inclusion; it requires well-structured, inclusive processes.**

Public participation refers to the various channels that citizens and non-state actors use to engage with state institutions – formal consultation, public debate, community input, or mechanisms of oversight.<sup>18</sup> Meaningful participation means more than token inclusion; it requires well-structured, inclusive processes that are

16. Kohler and Bowra 2020.

17. The United Nations Convention against Corruption emphasises transparency as key for fighting corruption, particularly its article 10, which provides measures such as: (1) establishing procedures by which citizens can obtain information about the public administration; (2) simplifying public access to the authorities; and (3) publishing information, including on risks of corruption in the public administration. United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime 2024.

18. Andersson 2001, pp. 57-67; Global Initiative for Fiscal Transparency 2025.

responsive to the voices of groups most affected by policy decisions. When participation is absent or superficial, governance risks becoming unresponsive, generating public dissatisfaction, leading to protests. In fragile contexts, this can cause destabilisation.<sup>19</sup>

To disrupt entrenched corruption in Syria, transparency and public participation must be strengthened to improve government performance, and ensure that post-conflict reconstruction serves the public interest. If sustainable forms of accountable governance are to emerge as a genuine break from the past, then such change should already be observed in institutional practices and elite behaviour. This includes: a demonstrable commitment to transparency, where decision-making processes are open to scrutiny; and a willingness to foster public participation, where influence over political decisions is broadly distributed rather than monopolised by a narrow executive.

Transparency and public participation are the minimal foundations of credible reform, central to building trust between state and society. By assessing these two indicators, it is possible to distinguish between superficial claims of reform and the early emergence of plausible practices that could reshape governance in Syria.

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19. Abas et al. 2023.

## 2 Research scope

This U4 Issue focuses on anti-corruption practices in the security and economic governance sectors in Syria. To our knowledge, this study is the first comparative assessment of anti-corruption practices in these areas in post-Assad Syria. Our research focuses on these two sectors as they are the most vulnerable to elite capture and least subject to oversight. The security sector wields the state's coercive power: when it operates with opacity and concentrated authority, it can shield corrupt actors, suppress oversight, and entrench abuses. The economic sector is a prime target for corruption because it controls the allocation of reconstruction funds, investment contracts, and public resources – decisions that influence who benefits from recovery, and who is excluded.

The two sectors are also intertwined. In a transition, control over the security sector can provide new elites with access to economic resources, market opportunities, and influence over strategic sectors. In the economic sector, authority can reinforce security influence. Elites who oversee state revenue streams and enterprises can fund security networks, support loyal factions, and shape personnel decisions. By managing critical resources – such as contracts, foreign investment partnerships, or state-owned enterprises – economic actors can secure protection, expand their reach, and strengthen ties to security actors. Control over one sector bolsters influence and opportunities in the other, and the sectors' interplay shapes the emerging political settlement, consolidates elite networks, and embeds structural incentives for corruption.

**Both sectors provide meaningful insight into the STG's anti-corruption agenda because they are central to governance, resource allocation, and public accountability.**

Both sectors provide meaningful insight into the STG's anti-corruption agenda because they are central to governance, resource allocation, and public accountability. However, they may not be fully representative of reforms in other areas, and therefore anti-corruption initiatives in other sectors warrant a separate, focused inquiry.<sup>20</sup>

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20. In sectors such as justice, health, and education, additional factors may influence the design, implementation, visibility, and effectiveness of anti-corruption measures. This includes bureaucratic capacity, public engagement, legal frameworks, donor interests and involvement, and the extent to which a sector is highly politicised or less central to elite interests.

The analysis for this report took place between December 2024 and November 2025, recording nearly a year of political transition. This provides a snapshot of early policy orientations and observable practices, but does not necessarily indicate how institutions will develop over the medium and longer term.

The findings highlight reform practices in the security sector and in economic governance while recognising that broader institutional reform may differ.

# 3 Anti-corruption efforts in security sector reform

The two main security sector institutions – Ministry of Interior (MoI) and the Ministry of Defence (MoD) – have historically functioned with near-complete opacity and embedded systems of clientelism and favouritism.<sup>21</sup> In this sector, transparency and public participation measures represent a ‘high threshold’ case for credibility of the commitment to rebuild institutions ‘on the basis of accountability and transparency’, as stated by President al-Sharaa.<sup>22</sup>

**The two main security sector institutions have historically functioned with near-complete opacity and embedded systems of clientelism and favouritism.**

The newly restructured MoI is responsible for maintaining public safety and national stability, overseeing security and police operations, conducting counterterrorism operations, managing prisons, securing borders, and implementing anti-smuggling initiatives.<sup>23</sup> According to Defence Minister, Murhaf Abu Qasra, the emerging MoD protects state sovereignty, safeguards Syrian territory and its citizens, restructures the military and preserves its cohesion.<sup>24</sup> The MoI and MoD collaborate and coordinate on counterterrorism, weapons control, and implementation of new structural reforms.<sup>25</sup> A comparison of the MoI and MoD reveals differences in how transparency and public participation have been approached in rhetoric and action.

## 3.1 Transparency and the limits of disclosure

The MoI has undertaken actions that appear to advance transparency, including the expansion of digital communication platforms (eg. X), televised press briefings, and public announcements of appointments and institutional reforms. A notable case is the May 2025 televised press conference where the MoI spokesperson publicly outlined key reforms and a restructuring plan, including the creation of the Internal

21. Khaddour 2016; al-Alo 2019.

22. Syria TV 2025a.

23. Al-Jazeera.net 2025.

24. Syria TV 2025b; al-Arabi Akhbar 2025; Qana al- Ikhbariyeh al-Suriyeh 2025.

25. al-Ikhbariyeh al-Suriyeh 2025.

Security Command – a merger of Syria’s formerly separated police and security bodies.<sup>26</sup>

### The MoI has undertaken actions that appear to advance transparency, including the expansion of digital communication platforms.

While this reflects an increase in accessible information in a sector historically defined by secrecy, the depth and quality of disclosure remain limited. When the MoI published names and photos of six new ministerial assistants and the officers appointed to lead internal security directorates in 12 of Syria’s 14 Governorates,<sup>27</sup> it did not reveal selection criteria or appointment procedures. While many appointees have developed security and military experience during the last decade of conflict, no standards have been disclosed regarding their promotion to high military ranks. The MoI’s transparency is partial: the public sees outcomes, but not the logic behind them. This enables the MoI to project reform while maintaining discretion over core decision-making.

Public perspectives on this issue are contrasting: some prioritise accountability and merit; others focus on operational effectiveness. One interviewee from Hama explained that ‘limited transparency is expected, given that the MoI must place trusted individuals in key positions and will naturally turn to familiar figures during this critical period without the need to openly justify its choices’.<sup>28</sup> In contrast, an interviewee from Damascus criticised the appointments as ‘lacking transparency’, emphasising the need to ‘incorporate officers with formal military education, especially those who defected from the Assad regime, to ensure credibility and merit-based selection and interrupt attempts to preserve patronage networks or revert to authoritarian practices’.<sup>29</sup> A third interviewee from Aleppo stated: ‘Why do we [the public] need to know who was chosen and why? It is enough for us to know that they [MoI officials] are doing their job to protect people.’<sup>30</sup>

As part of ministerial restructuring, the MoI began integrating officers who defected from the Assad regime. On 11 September, Minister of Interior, Anas Khattab, met with defected officers to find ways to enhance security, stability, and personnel discipline.<sup>31</sup> Shortly afterward, a committee was formed to reintegrate defected

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26. SANA 2025b.

27. Enab Baladi 2025a.

28. Interview with a civilian from Hama, September 2025.

29. Interview with a civilian from Damascus, September 2025.

30. Interview with a civilian from Aleppo, October 2025.

31. Syrian Ministry of Interior 2025a.

officers into the MoI. By 31 October, the minister announced that the committee had concluded its mandate after meeting with more than 260 officers.<sup>32</sup> On 7 November, the MoI launched an online platform to communicate with defected officers residing abroad.<sup>33</sup>

This process reflects a degree of transparency. The public is informed of the MoI's intention to incorporate experienced personnel, and that reintegration efforts are underway. However, the scope of engagement is only partially visible. Critical aspects remain undisclosed, such as the criteria for and scope of reintegration, internal procedures, and the rationale behind decisions. This pattern of partial transparency is typical in security sector reform. As the MoI must balance transparency with operational security, the public should not expect more than procedural or informational visibility.

For the MoD, one could argue that transparency and public participation are less applicable. Given its security-focused mandate, the political sensitivity of military operations, and potential risks to national security, limited transparency in military decision-making can appear inevitable. However, prominent post-conflict experiences, such as in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Liberia, and Montenegro show that transparency is feasible, even in security-focused institutions.<sup>34</sup>

In Syria, the MoD's transparency can be examined through two major issues:

- Incorporation of armed factions to consolidate fragmented forces, stabilise security, and extend centralised military control.
- Reintegration of defected officers from the Assad regime to address critical shortages in leadership and technical expertise while ensuring that personnel with battlefield experience are incorporated into the ministry.

### **Incorporation of armed factions**

In January 2025, Defence Minister, Murhaf Abu Qasra, launched the ministry's restructuring process, focused on integrating a range of armed factions into a unified military force.<sup>35</sup> A Supreme Committee was created to organise and compile military data,<sup>36</sup> and a Restructuring Committee was tasked with overseeing the incorporation

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32. Syrian Ministry of Interior 2025b.

33. al-Ikhbariyeh 2025a.

34. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the 2005 Defence White Paper established civilian control of the military with parliamentary oversight and full transparency of defence plans and budgets. In Liberia, the 2008 National Defence Act reintroduced civilian and legislative oversight, with the General Auditing Commission publishing its audits of the MoD. In Montenegro, the 2010 Law on Parliamentary Oversight empowered the Security and Defence Committee to access classified information, hold hearings, and review defence budgets. Ministry of Defence of Bosnia and Herzegovina 2005; General Auditing Commission of Liberia 2024; Bajramspahić and Sošić 2014.

35. Syrian Ministry of Defence 2025a.

36. Syrian Ministry of Defence 2025b.

of fighters from various armed opposition factions.<sup>37</sup> However, the identities of committee members, their mandates, and decision-making procedures were not officially communicated to the public. Major milestones, such as the Defence Minister's May 2025 announcement that all factions had been integrated under MoD control,<sup>38</sup> were not accompanied by procedural details.<sup>39</sup>

The incorporation process unfolded through a mix of accommodation and coercion. Some armed factions, such as the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army, were absorbed largely intact, retaining internal cohesion and command structures.<sup>40</sup> Where dismantlement and incorporation were pursued through violence, outcomes diverged. In Suwayda, the July 2025 hostilities weakened state authority across large parts of the governorate while simultaneously consolidating Druze armed groups under the National Guard Forces.<sup>41</sup> In northeast Syria, by contrast, January 2026 armed confrontation was followed by a ceasefire agreement that dismantled the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria and compelled the Syrian Democratic Forces to dissolve and integrate into state structures.<sup>42</sup>

### Reintegrating officers from the former regime

The reintegration of defected officers is an important aspect of MoD restructuring. In October 2024, the Air Force was comprehensively restructured, with defected officers central to the reorganisation.<sup>43</sup> In November 2024, the MoD reopened applications for volunteer officers seeking to rejoin.<sup>44</sup> In April 2025, the ministry started to bring defected officers back into service.<sup>45</sup> Specialised committees reintegrated more than 2,000 personnel<sup>46</sup> and, by August 2025, a further 3,000-plus officers had reportedly applied to return.<sup>47</sup>

The incorporation of armed groups and the reintegration of defected officers reveal a pattern of selective transparency. The MoD communicates reform and operational activity to the public while protecting sensitive military information, preserving command authority, and managing politically delicate arrangements. Public perceptions mirror this delicate balance: some citizens call for greater transparency

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37. Al-Jazeera 2025a; Ali 2025.

38. Al-Jazeera 2025b.

39. The Syrian Democratic Forces in north-east Syria and local militias in the predominantly Druze province of Suwayda in southern Syria have not yet been integrated into the MoD.

40. Enab Baladi 2025b; Syria TV 2023; al-Wasl 2025a; al-Jabassini 2020.

41. Human Rights Watch, "Syria: Accountability Lacking for Sweida Abuses", 15 January 2026, <https://bit.ly/4jMP5qZ>

42. Asharq Al-Awsat, "Al-Sharaa Signs Ceasefire Agreement and Full Integration between the Government and the SDF", 18 January 2026, <https://bit.ly/3Nrc6DM>

43. al-Modon 2025.

44. SANA 2025c.

45. Syria TV 2025c.

46. Shaam News 2025a.

47. al-Ikhbariyeh 2025b.

and insight into leadership decisions; while others prioritise the results, valuing the military's professionalism, discipline, and stability. One interviewee from Homs emphasised the importance of knowing the military leadership: 'As citizens, we need to know who the commanders of our army are, why and how they were appointed. We hope that the Ministry of Defence will make more televised sessions to explain the structure of the new army and the qualifications of its leaders.'<sup>48</sup>

## 3.2 Public participation and accountability mechanisms

Public participation is not traditionally a core principle of the security sector. However, in Syria's transitional setting, enabling civic input and public oversight can help to shift from old practices to greater public accountability. The extent to which the MoI and MoD are open to civic engagement indicates their anti-corruption efforts, and the contrast between the two is revealing. While the MoI has attempted to position civil participation as part of its reform portfolio, (albeit at times symbolically), the MoD has largely avoided inclusion, treating security reform as a sovereign military matter.

### Reform and the MoI

The MoI has framed its reforms in the language of consultation and civic inclusion, portraying itself as responsive to public concerns and open to dialogue. This was evident in two initiatives. The first was in May 2025, when the MoI announced its restructuring plan, claiming it was developed through consultations with a broad range of stakeholders.<sup>49</sup> The meeting, which brought together Minister of Interior, Anas Khattab, legal experts, administrative officials, and former police defectors, was described as 'the first consultative session of its kind in the history of the Syrian MoI', and was presented in official communications as a shift toward 'greater transparency' and 'public participation'.<sup>50</sup> For some Syrians, this represents a positive development. One interviewee from Homs noted: 'At least the MoI is making an effort to include experts and former personnel in discussions. This kind of consultation is something that never happened under the bygone Assad regime.'<sup>51</sup>

For others, significant limitations were apparent. There is no evidence that the meeting was announced in advance to allow broader participation, and neither the

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48. Interview with a civilian from Homs, October 2025.

49. SANA 2025b; Shaam News 2025b.

50. SANA 2025b.

51. Interview with a civilian from Homs, September 2025.

identities nor affiliations of participants were disclosed. No report was published, and there was no formal feedback mechanism incorporated into policy.

For many, the opportunity for civic participation is largely nominal, projecting inclusion without genuinely enabling it. One interviewee from Lattakia explained: ‘The event and its outcomes mean little if public participation is restricted to individuals selected by government officials. It seems more like a staged process, a public relations exercise aimed at external audiences rather than genuine citizen engagement.’<sup>52</sup>

A second initiative – the establishment of an accountability and feedback mechanism – illustrates the MoI’s efforts to formalise civic input and strengthen accountability as part of security sector reform. Minister Khattab acknowledged past violations by security personnel and emphasised that internal security services would now be subject to oversight, inspection, and disciplinary accountability.<sup>53</sup> The MoI established the Security Complaints Office, with its first office open on 15 June 2025 in Damascus,<sup>54</sup> followed by additional offices in Lattakia (October) and Aleppo (November) 2025.<sup>55</sup> The Security Complaints Office is mandated to receive and document complaints related to violations committed by police or security forces.<sup>56</sup>

In July 2025, as part of a campaign to restore public trust, Minister Khattab made a highly publicised visit to the office in Damascus.<sup>57</sup> For many Syrians, the initiative represents an initial attempt to allow for bottom-up feedback and citizen input within the security sector. One interviewee from Rural Damascus explained, ‘for the first time, people are told they can freely submit complaints against security members. In the past, no one would dare to challenge or report such figures. Now whether this system will actually work is unclear, but at least now there is a channel to voice our complaints and concerns’.<sup>58</sup>

However, the procedures are vague and questions remain about whether the office can deliver meaningful accountability. There are no clear feedback mechanisms, no updates to complainants, and no public records of disciplinary outcomes. As one interviewee from Rural Damascus said: ‘All you can do is submit a complaint. We do not know whether the judicial branch is involved or whether any outcome is protected by law.’<sup>59</sup>

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52. Interview with a civilian from Lattakia, September 2025.

53. Syrian Ministry of Interior 2025c.

54. al-Ikhbariyeh 2025c; Syrian Ministry of Interior 2025d.

55. al-Ikhbariyeh 2025d; Yalla Syrian News 2025.

56. Syrian Ministry of Interior 2025d.

57. Syrian Ministry of Interior 2025e.

58. Interview with a civilian from Rural Damascus, September 2025.

59. Interview with a civilian from Rural Damascus, September 2025.

Also, many citizens are reluctant to approach the office, fearing potential retribution from the reported security personnel. Beyond direct reprisals, many were also afraid of being socially or economically marginalised, losing access to employment or public services. An interviewee from Damascus stated: ‘Filing a complaint may endanger you and your family. People fear that, instead of receiving justice, they might lose privileges or access to essential services, face threats, arbitrary arrest, physical harm, or even death by undisciplined members... I think this feeling is quite normal, given that security and military forces have long been a source of fear in our experience.’<sup>60</sup> Another interviewee expressed cautious optimism, noting: ‘The system is still very new; it needs some time to prove its effectiveness. Civilians should fear no one. If an officer commits a violation, they must be reported and held accountable. Filing complaints helps it [MoI] succeed in its reform efforts.’<sup>61</sup>

### Reform and the MoD

In contrast, the MoD has made no claims of civil engagement. There have been no reported consultative forums, no feedback mechanisms, and no public statements acknowledging the relevance of public participation. Where it exists, participation has been confined to:

- Negotiations with armed faction leaders on their integration into the national army<sup>62</sup> – more elite-level security bargains than civic inclusion.
- Limited coordination with civilian state officials on so-called ‘civil peace’<sup>63</sup> – more instrumental than substantive

The MoD has made no other attempt, which suggests an institutional disinterest in promoting public participation, unsurprising, given the MoD’s security-focused mandate. But the absence of participation restricts oversight and accountability, and risks undermining the prospects for more stable and effective security sector reform.

Interviewees broadly agreed that, during this security-sensitive stage in Syria, the MoD should create avenues for civic engagement by opening complaints offices similar to the MoI.<sup>64</sup> Another suggestion was that the existing MoI offices could also handle complaints against MoD personnel.<sup>65</sup> One interviewee explained: ‘A single office can handle all complaints against members of both the interior and military

60. Interview with a civilian from Damascus, September 2025.

61. Interview with a civilian from Damascus, October 2025.

62. Syrian Ministry of Defence 2025a.

63. SANA 2025d.

64. Interviews with civilians in Damascus, Aleppo, and Homs, September – October 2025.

65. Interviews with civilians in Aleppo and Homs, September – October 2025.

ministries. This would provide a single point of reference and enhance coordination between the two ministries in enforcing discipline and accountability.<sup>66</sup>

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66. Interview with civilian in Damascus, October 2025.

# 4 Anti-corruption efforts in economic governance

Since its formation, the STG has pledged to improve economic governance by increasing transparency and engaging the public in decision-making. While procedural improvements have been implemented, significant challenges remain. Critical decisions on contracts, state funds, and public sector management often lack clear oversight or meaningful public input. The concentration of economic power in the presidency limits accountability, and centralises decision-making with the president and his close affiliates.

## 4.1 Transparency in the economic sector

### Reformed procedures

After the fall of the Assad regime, ministries and economic institutions promoted transparency and expanded public access to information. The Minister of Economy and Industry, Mohammad Nidal al-Shaar, stressed the need for transparent, flexible, and effective anti-corruption oversight mechanisms.<sup>67</sup> The STG simplified private company registration and facilitated economic exchanges, reflecting the leadership's openness to a free-market economy and domestic and foreign private investment.

**After the fall of the Assad regime, ministries and economic institutions promoted transparency and expanded public access to information.**

For businesses, changes include the removal of bribes and the end of military-imposed extortion at checkpoints, common practices under the former regime.<sup>68</sup> Company registration is easier, and traders note a reduction in bureaucratic delays and border-related corruption.<sup>69</sup> Trade processes are more efficient and transparent due to the new investment system for Syria's industrial cities introduced by the Ministry of Economy and Industry (MEI).<sup>70</sup> Businessmen in Damascus and Aleppo reported fewer obstacles in importing raw materials and more cooperative conduct

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67. Syria TV 2025d.

68. The Syria Report 2025b.

69. The Syria Report 2025c.

70. MEI 2025a.

from border officials.<sup>71</sup> However, some business owners reported pressure to make large unofficial payments to maintain operations and secure the release of employees detained over alleged past ties to the Assad regime.<sup>72</sup>

### How contracts are awarded

Despite the gains in operational transparency, questions remain regarding accountability in high-value economic agreements. For instance, while memoranda of understanding (MoU) between Damascus and foreign private entities or states are publicly announced, selection processes and criteria for awarding contracts are not disclosed. A Syrian adviser on government economic development emphasised that ‘no regulatory infrastructures, no legislative body, or third-party auditor exists to oversee these MoUs, making these agreements problematic on multiple levels, not to mention potentially illegal under the Constitutional Declaration and previous investment laws’.\* A Syrian economist observed that ‘the vast majority of MoUs and other economic agreements lack transparency in the selection of private companies and are largely influenced by political dynamics and personal relationships’.<sup>73</sup>

Comparable issues appear in the allocation of state funds for domestic projects, where formal review mechanisms are often absent. One example is Taiba Petroleum, which is operating several state-owned fuel stations without public tenders or officially announced contracts from the Ministry of Energy. Taiba Petroleum is a subsidiary of Namaa Investment, an investment company established in late 2020 in Sarmada. According to the Syria Report, Namaa has served as the primary financial and investment arm of HTS, the political entity controlling significant territory in northwest Syria, and has overseen ‘all companies operating in the petroleum sector in Idlib’, under the supervision of former HTS commander Mustafa Qadid (Abu Abd al-Rahman Zirbeh).<sup>74</sup> Other cases illustrate blurred lines between state and private control. A private firm called Zajel – established in 2020 in Idlib to manage public transport lines and also owned by Qadid – took over public bus operations across Damascus and has since been presented as a public company.<sup>75</sup>

Opaque selection processes have awarded contracts to companies that lack the capacity or experience to implement projects. In August 2025, the government concluded a US\$2 billion deal with Ubako-I Srl, an Italian company registered in

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71. Interview with a trader in Damascus, September 2025; Interview with a businessman in Aleppo, September 2025.

72. According to Reuters, one industrialist and two factory managers were forced to pay large sums of cash to well-connected intermediaries to keep their businesses running, or secure the release of detained employees. One manager reportedly paid US\$100,000 for a worker’s release, only to be told that an additional payment would be required for the employee to return to work. Another company paid US\$25,000 to secure an employee’s release. Azhari and Dalatey 2025a.

73. Interview with a Syrian economist in Damascus, September 2025.

74. The Syria Report 2025d.

75. The Syria Report 2025d.

Milan in 2022 with only one employee, an authorised capital of 16,000 euros, revenues of roughly 209,000 euros, and a net loss of 3,316 euros. Public information was limited to a single obscure figure, Giovanni Rossi. Following media scrutiny, Syrian authorities were prompted to investigate.<sup>76</sup> In another case, Turkish company, Polidef – part of a Qatari-Turkish-US consortium – was contracted to redevelop Damascus International Airport, despite the absence of identifiable commercial records or project history. In late August 2025, the governor of Aleppo signed a US\$10 million MoU with the International Organization for Human Rights and Refugee Affairs to rehabilitate roads and restore infrastructure. A fact-checking platform later described the group as ‘an unregistered, paper-thin entity with no legal standing, no recognised offices, and a history of fabricated claims’.<sup>77</sup>

The procedures for implementing many economic projects are also opaque. For example, the Minister of Finance, Mohammad Yasser Barniyah, allocated US\$10 million for infrastructure revitalisation in Daraa province under the Abshari Horan Initiative (August 2025), which appeared to bypass formal budgetary approval by a specialised committee, and suggested that the sole authority over such funds was the minister. As noted by the Transparency Observatory, the absence of procedural safeguards exposes institutional weaknesses and raises concerns over the management of public resources.<sup>78</sup>

## Public sector employment

In the public sector, limited clarity on the criteria and legal procedures affects employment decisions and salary management. In January 2025, Syrian authorities announced plans to dismiss up to one-third of the state workforce, targeting employees allegedly receiving salaries without performing their duties.<sup>79</sup> Some employees were placed on three-month paid leave pending an employment status review, and no official dismissal figures have been released. The STG has yet to establish clear, legally grounded criteria or procedures for layoffs and suspensions, raising concerns about arbitrary dismissals. Syrians for Truth & Justice questioned whether these measures comply with legal safeguards outlined in the Basic Law of Public Employment No. 50 of 2004 (Articles 132–139).<sup>80</sup> Similarly, some state employees were informed via WhatsApp, without any prior knowledge of the decision, that they were transferred to locations far from their initial work and residence. Employees of the port of Tartous for instance staged a sit-in in December

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76. al-Modon 2025.

77. al-Hal 2025.

78. Transparency Syria 2025.

79. Alkousaa 2025.

80. Syrians for Truth & Justice 2025.

2025 in front of the governorate building to protest their transfer to the Jarablus and al-Bukamal border crossings in the eastern governorates.<sup>81</sup>

Persistent shortages of Syrian pound liquidity have also disrupted public and private economic operations. The government increased public employee and retiree salaries by 200%, raising the minimum wage to 750,000 Syrian pounds a month (approximately US\$68 at the official exchange rate) by the end of June 2025. Public wages were estimated to cost between US\$1.2 billion and US\$1.3 billion annually. However, there were conflicting statements about who would fund the increase. Initially it was reported that Qatari and Saudi financial assistance would cover the rise.<sup>82</sup> By early September 2025, Finance Minister Barniyah stated that revenues from import fees would be the primary source of funding, and no financial grants would be used for the salaries.<sup>83</sup> At the end of September 2025, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, (through the Saudi Fund for Development), and the State of Qatar, (through the Qatar Fund for Development), announced joint financial support totalling US\$89 million for Syria as ‘vital budgetary assistance for public sector employees over a three-month period’.<sup>84</sup> However, it was unclear whether the funding was for the salary increase or upcoming payments.

Adding to economic pressures, the Ministry of Education reduced teachers’ salaries in Idlib governorate from US\$150 to US\$90 per month. Teachers denounced the pay cut as unfair and staged protests in response.<sup>85</sup> Education Minister Muhammad Abd al-Rahman Turko justified the reduction as an effort to ensure salary equality across all governorates. The Minister stated that the decision was coordinated with the Ministry of Finance, although there was no prior consultation or communication with educators.<sup>86</sup>

The persistent shortage of Syrian pounds since the beginning of 2025 has not been clearly explained by the Governor of the Central Bank of Syria (CBS) or other government officials. This liquidity constraint has disrupted private enterprises. One businessman in Aleppo noted that ‘the shortage of liquidities in the market has affected our operations and flows of purchase and selling, slowing down

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81. Sham TV, “Sham TV Correspondent in Tartous” (in Arabic), Facebook, 2 December 2025, <https://www.facebook.com/shamfntv/posts/pfbidoK48NocGGjHEamWHPu CZ8HNufinoXBdNtUKyApM4RQszJs2oMTCzKNZSR8ZRDKHHpl>

82. In May 2025, Finance Minister Barniyah stated that Qatar would pay as much as US\$29 million a month for three months to help to pay some public sector salaries, covering wages in health, education and social affairs, and non-military pensions. The Saudi Kingdom also affirmed that it would assist in the funding. al-Awsat 2025.

83. al-Ikhbariyeh 2025e.

84. Saudi Press Agency 2025.

85. In the northwest, the minimum wage is around US\$100, compared to US\$68 in areas formerly held by the Assad’s regime. This wage disparity helps explain why Decree No. 102 – which increased salaries – explicitly excluded civilian and military employees working in ministries, administrations, public institutions, public sector companies, establishments, and all administrative units subject to the Basic Workers Law No. 53 of 2021. This law was issued by the Syrian Salvation Government, which governed Idlib prior to taking power in Damascus. The Syria Report 2025e.

86. Zayid 2025.

everything'.<sup>87</sup> In mid-September 2025, CBS Governor, Abdulkader Husrieh, stated that Syrians would soon have access to all funds in their bank accounts, though no specific timeline was provided.<sup>88</sup>

## 4.2 Public engagement in economic policymaking

### Public engagement and consultation

STG ministers have demonstrated their willingness to engage with the public on the country's economic direction and the rationale behind their decisions. For instance, Minister of Economy and Industry, Mohammad Nidal al-Shaar, publicly invited individuals via social media to schedule official meetings to discuss economic and investment matters.<sup>89</sup> In early June 2025, Finance Minister Barniyah announced the creation of a committee including representatives from chambers of commerce and industry, academics, and independent experts. The committee was required to study tax reform and simplify procedures, leverage technology, reduce taxes and fees, promote competitiveness, transparency and fairness, encourage voluntary compliance, and foster private sector partnerships.<sup>90</sup>

When unveiling the proposed tax system in mid-July, Minister Barniyeh underscored the importance of building strong partnerships by emphasising his commitment to consulting businesspeople, investors, chambers of commerce, industry representatives, and civil society.<sup>91</sup> In September 2025, the Ministry of Finance opened a three-week public consultation to collect feedback on the proposed reforms before drafting a new tax law for early 2026.<sup>92</sup> A draft Law on Sales Tax underwent public consultation from late September to mid-October 2025, with implementation planned for early 2026.<sup>93</sup>

Minister Barniyeh also announced that, by the end of November 2025, the Ministry of Finance would publish a report detailing its financial performance during the first ten months of the year, alongside the ministry's strategy for the next phase. Going forward, such disclosures will be released quarterly and made publicly available.<sup>94</sup> To further enhance transparency and inform economists, researchers, and other

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87. Interview with a businessman in Aleppo, September 2025.

88. Business SNA, Sky News 2025.

89. MEI 2025b.

90. The Syria Report 2025f.

91. Enab Baladi 2025c.

92. Barniyeh 2025a.

93. Barniyeh 2025b.

94. The Syria Report 2025g.

stakeholders, in November 2025, the CBS published a guide to the economic laws and regulations issued by government during the third quarter of 2025.<sup>95</sup>

While these initiatives are positive, public consultation on economic matters continues to be limited and often appears largely superficial. As noted by a Syrian economist: ‘Discourses and speeches around public engagement and stakeholders’ participation are more about the creation of a particular political narrative promoted by the new ruling authorities through media, social networks, and affiliated influencers, rather than a genuine process involving the population or social and political actors in decision-making.’<sup>96</sup>

## Representation and independence

Other actions raise questions about the independence and representativeness of economic institutions. For instance, the STG has restructured the country’s chambers of commerce, replacing most members with appointees and reducing board sizes in key chambers, including Damascus, Rural Damascus, Aleppo, and Homs.<sup>97</sup> Several newly appointed board members have known ties to HTS. Alaa al-Ali, the former head of the HTS-affiliated Idlib Chamber of Commerce and Industry, now presides over the Federation of Syrian Chambers of Commerce.<sup>98</sup> In early July, Minister of Economy and Industry, Mohammad Nidal al-Shaar, appointed new members to the Damascus and Rural Damascus,<sup>99</sup> Aleppo and Homs Chambers of Industry.<sup>100</sup> The Board of Directors of the Federation of Syrian Chambers of Industry was also appointed by the MEI in December.<sup>101</sup>

Official and senior positions in trades unions and professional associations have been filled through appointments rather than elections.<sup>102</sup> A new union council for the Syrian Bar Association was formed with members from the Free Bar Association Council operating in Idlib, prompting Syrian lawyers to petition for democratic Bar Association elections.<sup>103</sup>

This highlights a lack of genuine public participation in selecting representatives, undermining transparency and accountability in economic governance. While economic decisions are typically announced publicly, explanations of the decision-making processes are often absent, and consultations with affected groups are rare.

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95. Central Bank of Syria 2025.

96. Interview with a Syrian economist in Damascus, September 2025.

97. Ministry of Internal Trade and Consumer Protection 2025.

98. al-Wasl 2025b.

99. MEI 2025c.

100. Iqtisad (Eqtsad) 2025; MEI 2025d.

101. SANA, “The Minister of Economy and Industry Issues a Decision to Form the Board of Directors of the Federation of Syrian Chambers of Industry (Arabic)”, 2 December 2025, <https://sana.sy/economy/2342070/>

102. Ibrahim, Darwish and al-Khouja 2025.

103. Syrian lawyers, charities and citizens 2025.

For example, cuts or cancellations of subsidies on essential goods, such as bread and oil derivatives,<sup>104</sup> or services, including electricity,<sup>105</sup> have been implemented without prior dialogue, imposing significant hardship on the population and the agriculture and manufacturing industries.<sup>106</sup>

### Elite capture and favouritism

Patterns of elite capture and favouritism have also emerged. A select committee, including the president's brother Hazem al-Sharaa, has been reshaping the Syrian economy by taking control of assets worth more than US\$1.6 billion from businessmen and companies affiliated with the former Assad regime.<sup>107</sup> Hazem al-Sharaa manages relations with local businessmen, attracts investment from Syrians abroad, and oversees the development funds established by the president.<sup>108</sup> Meanwhile, some former regime affiliates, such as Mohammad Hamsho and Salim Daaboul, have reconciled with the new authorities – evidenced by Hamsho's sons contributing US\$1 million to the Syrian Development Fund. Others have not – for example, Rami Makhlof,<sup>109</sup> and the Katerji family<sup>110</sup> have had their assets absorbed by networks loyal to the new leadership. No legal actions have been taken to prosecute the individuals for economic crimes, or to recover their wealth for the state and its citizens.<sup>111</sup>

### Opaque economic practices

Certain recent administrative decisions further underscore transparency concerns. In April 2025, the Ministry of Finance adopted Cham Cash as the sole method for paying salaries to public employees and retirees.<sup>112</sup> Bank Cham was established by

104. In November 2025, the Ministry of Energy implemented a modest reduction in the price of oil derivatives as part of government efforts to ease the population's cost of living. However, by pegging prices to the US dollar, fluctuations in the Syrian pound and the exchange rate risk generating unintended market effects, including subsequent price increases. Ministry of Energy 2025.

105. Stakeholders in the private sector criticised the lack of consultation surrounding energy pricing decisions. Engineer Muhammad Ayman al-Mawlawi, head of the Damascus and Rural Damascus Chamber of Industry, noted that the decision to raise electricity prices from 1,500 to 1,700 Syrian pounds (US\$0.15) per kilowatt-hour was taken without prior consultation. Mahmoud al-Mufti, Vice President of the Chemical Sector at the Chamber of Commerce, argued that the increase imposes an additional burden on the manufacturing industry and underscores the need for consultation between government authorities and private-sector actors. al-Thawra 2025; SANA 2025e.

106. Daher 2025b.

107. Azhari and Dalatey 2025b.

108. Interview with an adviser on government economic development, September 2025; Interview with a Syrian economist in Damascus, September 2025; The Syria Report 2025a.

109. Before his political and financial decline in 2020, Rami Makhlof, cousin of Bashar al-Assad and Syria's former wealthiest businessman, epitomised the regime's approach to privatisation. His economic empire was extensive, spanning telecommunications, oil and gas, construction, banking, airlines, and retail. Makhlof was the largest shareholder in Cham Holding Company, with more than 300 licences as the authorised agent for major international firms.

110. The Katerji family served as intermediaries in the oil and grain trade, linking the former regime with the Islamic State and the Syrian Democratic Forces. Under the protection of Maher al-Assad's 4th Division, they later expanded their economic ventures into multiple sectors of the formal economy, emerging as some of the country's most prominent businessmen until the fall of the Assad regime. Some assets belonging to the Katerji family's companies have been auctioned off through Iktifaa, a firm based in Idlib. Other properties were reportedly attacked by fighters allegedly linked to HTS.

111. The Syria Report 2025h.

112. The Syria Report 2025i.

HTS in Idlib in 2020 and is registered in Turkey, with very limited publicly available information.\* This decision is particularly troubling because the CBS does not recognise Bank Cham as a licensed financial institution. In the telecommunications sector, companies formerly owned by figures connected to the previous Presidential Palace,<sup>113</sup> such as al-Burj and Opal, resumed operations under the new name Al Mujtahid Technical Company. Registered with a nominal capital of just 50 million Syrian pounds (US\$4,545), the company's ownership remains unclear. Reports indicate that part of its initial profits were used to pay salaries for the Interior Ministry, which is excluded from the Qatari-Saudi salary grant that supports most other public sector workers.<sup>114</sup>

### Presidential power

These opaque practices are compounded by new economic institutions that concentrate power within the presidency. In July 2025, President al-Sharaa introduced a series of reforms to restructure the country's investment framework, including amendments to the Investment Law (Law No. 18 of 2021),<sup>115</sup> the creation of the Higher Council for Economic Development,<sup>116</sup> and the establishment of a Sovereign Wealth Fund and Syrian Development Fund.<sup>117</sup> In each case, substantial powers and responsibilities are concentrated within the presidency, with minimal mechanisms for oversight or accountability – especially given that the Parliament has yet to be established (as of November 2025).<sup>118</sup>

For example, although Article 4 of the Sovereign Wealth Fund states that it 'shall operate based on a strict and transparent governance system', the entity is chaired by the president and managed by a seven-member board, all appointed by presidential decree.<sup>119</sup> External auditing bodies report directly to the president, bypassing Parliament and the judiciary, while the Ministry of Finance – typically responsible for overseeing public wealth – is excluded from the process. This concentration of authority grants President al-Sharaa extensive control over public

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113. Owned by Yasser Ibrahim and his family, these companies served as fronts for the Presidential Palace. They were exclusive providers of technical support, telecommunications towers, spare parts, and development services to Syriatel and MTN Syria. The contracts they held were non-negotiable, effectively stripping the original operators of any control or autonomy. Yasser Ibrahim – often called 'the treasurer of the Republican Palace' – officially holds the position of director of the financial and economic office within the Presidency of the Republic, commonly referred to as the 'secret office'. He is also responsible for collecting money from merchants and industrialists, often under the threat of arrest or asset seizure. Haddad 2022.

114. Daraj 2025.

115. SANA 2025f.

116. SANA 2025g.

117. SANA 2025h.

118. The Syria Report 2025j.

119. The Syria Report 2025k.

assets, enabling him to direct state resources and potentially channel them into patronage networks.<sup>120</sup>

**Responsibilities previously held by established ministries have shifted to the presidency, consolidating decision-making authority with the president and his close affiliates.**

Responsibilities previously held by established ministries have shifted to the presidency, consolidating decision-making authority with the president and his close affiliates. The Supply and Procurement Committee, created under the Secretary General of the Presidency, now oversees all procurement for state institutions – potentially controlling contracts worth billions of US dollars. Although presented as a tool to enhance transparency and efficiency, its placement under the president’s brother, Maher al-Sharaa, raises significant concerns about conflicts of interest and the centralisation of economic power.<sup>121</sup> The establishment of the Syrian Petroleum Company in October 2025, which merged all state-owned oil institutions into a single entity, has further expanded presidential control. The presidency now directs contracting, extraction, refining, and distribution across the oil and gas sector, substantially reducing the Minister of Energy’s authority and oversight role.<sup>122</sup>

In mid-November 2025, the National Committee for Import and Export was created – it is also under the Secretary General of the Presidency’s authority. Some merchants have expressed fears that this committee will favour traders close to the new ruling authorities.<sup>123</sup> In addition, the Syrian Investment Agency, previously managed by the MEI, now reports directly to the presidency, further concentrating the president’s economic power.

These developments indicate that real influence over economic decisions and strategies does not rest with the MEI, the Minister of Finance, nor the governor of CBS, but rather with the Syrian Presidency and its key affiliated figures – such as the president’s brothers, Hazem and Maher al-Sharaa, the Deputy Minister of Economy

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120. In March 2025, the Foreign Ministry established the General Secretariat for Political Affairs to supervise domestic political activities, formulate general policies related to political matters, and manage assets of the dissolved Baath Party. In October 2025, it announced several tenders to purchase or manage some of these assets, as well as those of the political parties within the National Progressive Front that were dissolved in January 2025. Barth 2025.

121. The Syria Report 2025l.

122. The Syria Report 2025m.

123. Araby 2025.

and Industry, Basil Abd al-Aziz Abd al-Hanan,<sup>124</sup> and other individuals linked to the HTS network.<sup>125</sup>

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124. Former Minister of Economy and Foreign Trade in the Syrian caretaker government and previous Minister of Economy and Resources in the Syrian Salvation Government in Idlib.

125. Interview with an adviser on government economic development, online, September 2025; Interview with a Syrian economist in Damascus, September 2025.

# 5 Recommendations to enhance the effectiveness of anti-corruption initiatives in Syria

Under the STG, anti-corruption efforts represent a departure from the practices that prevailed under the former regime, where such measures were largely absent, ignored, or instrumentalised for political control. Since taking power, respective ministries have introduced a range of initiatives in security sector and economic governance reform that signal an intention to respond to domestic expectations and to demonstrate a measure of institutional responsibility to international actors (see Table 2).

**Anti-corruption initiatives are often channelled toward measures that are visible yet shallow, politically motivated, or difficult to operationalise at scale.**

Table 2: Reforms in security and economic sectors

	Transparency and public participation reforms	Limitations
Security sector	<p>Ministry of Interior (MoI):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Expansion of digital communication platforms, televised press briefings, and periodic public announcements</li> <li>An online platform to communicate with defected officers residing abroad</li> <li>Restructuring plan developed through consultations with a broad range of stakeholders</li> <li>Security Complaints Offices established in various cities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The opportunity for civic participation is largely nominal, projecting inclusion without genuinely enabling it.</li> <li>The Security Complaints Office system remains procedurally vague.</li> </ul>
	<p>Ministry of Defence (MoD):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A Supreme Commission was created to organise and compile military data</li> <li>The Restructuring Committee was tasked with overseeing the incorporation of fighters from various armed opposition factions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>MoD largely avoided inclusion, treating security reform as a space of sovereign military matter.</li> </ul>
Economic sector	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Simplifying private company registration</li> <li>Streamlining business procedures</li> <li>Company registration has become significantly easier</li> <li>Anti-bribery enforcement</li> <li>Ministry of Finance would publish a report detailing its financial performance</li> <li>Committee to study tax system reform</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Memoranda of understanding (MoU) with foreign companies still opaque</li> <li>No clear, legally grounded criteria or procedures for layoffs in public sector</li> <li>New economic institutions concentrate power within the presidency, limiting independent oversight</li> <li>Restructured the country's chambers of commerce and senior positions in trades unions through appointments</li> <li>Ministry of Finance adopted Cham Cash as the sole method for paying salaries to public employees and retirees</li> </ul>

The reforms detailed in Table 2 have happened in a context of territorial and political fragmentation, lack of an inclusive and participatory political transitional process, economic collapse, inflation, widespread unemployment, insecurity, weak institutional capacity, and the competing agendas of foreign states. Such structural constraints significantly limit the possibilities for rapid systemic reform. Anti-corruption initiatives are often channelled toward measures that are visible yet shallow, politically motivated, or difficult to operationalise at scale. Likewise, political incentives – such as the prioritisation of stability and consolidation of power – shape the design and selective implementation of anti-corruption measures. The interplay between structural constraints and political incentives produces a landscape where visible reforms are enacted to signal commitment, but deeper systemic changes remain limited.

Transparency has primarily increased at the level of public visibility – through announcements, platforms, and published materials – without extending to the underlying decision-making processes or criteria. Accountability mechanisms mark a formal break from the previous regime's practices, yet they remain largely symbolic in the security sphere, and are selectively applied within the economic field. Public participation follows a similar pattern. Consultative forums, meetings, and invitations to dialogue are positive developments, but they often function more as signals of openness than as substantive channels for influencing policy or institutional behaviour. As such, while current anti-corruption reforms may improve public perceptions, and meet certain expectations of external stakeholders, they have not yet generated the structural transformations required for systemic integrity.

To enhance the credibility, effectiveness, and sustainability of anti-corruption initiatives, the STG should focus on reforms that strengthen institutional capacity, formalise accountability, and expand genuine civic participation. In the security sector, this could involve transparent appointment procedures, clarified disciplinary frameworks, and mechanisms for structured civilian input. In the economic sector, priorities should include transparent procurement, reinforced regulatory oversight, and meaningful engagement with independent civil society actors, business chambers, trades unions, and professional associations. Targeted capacity-building for public officials, auditors, and regulators can help strengthen anti-corruption measures. Enabling participation by local actors can support more inclusive oversight and accountability.

External actors and donors are also critical in supporting the emerging anti-corruption framework. Pragmatic, gradual, and context-sensitive interventions – such as strengthening independent monitoring mechanisms, empowering civil society, and encouraging local media reporting – can reinforce structural and political incentives for reform.

Success depends on political willingness and commitment to transparency, accountability, and civic engagement. Donors can help to create conditions where anti-corruption initiatives are more credible, operationally effective, and capable of producing meaningful impact for Syrian institutions and citizens, therefore contributing to an STG anti-corruption agenda that is more credible, effective, and sustainable.

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# About the authors

## **Abdullah al-Jabassini**

Abdullah al-Jabassini holds a PhD in International Relations from the University of Kent in Canterbury, UK. He is a Postdoctoral Fellow at the Central European University in Vienna, Austria, a Visiting Fellow at the European University Institute in Florence, an Associate Fellow at the Middle East Institute in Washington DC, and an Associate Researcher at the Bonn International Centre for Conflict Studies. Al-Jabassini specialises in research on political violence, wartime social order, authoritarian conflict management, peacebuilding and reconciliation, and security sector reform.

## **Joseph Daher**

Joseph Daher holds a PhD in Development Studies from the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London and a PhD in Political Science from the University of Lausanne, Switzerland. He is an Associate Researcher at the Bonn International Centre for Conflict Studies. Daher specialises in the political economy, with a focus on neoliberalism, development, sectarianism, and political Islam in Syria and the Middle East.

# Methodology

This U4 Issue assesses anti-corruption practices in post-Assad Syria in the security sector and economic governance.

The research draws on a wide range of sources, including official statements, policy documents, public records, and material published on official platforms, X and Telegram accounts, and televised and livestream interviews. This is complemented by media reporting, expert commentary, investigative journalism, and publications from humanitarian, development, and human rights organisations.

In September and October 2025, 30 semi-structured interviews were conducted with ordinary civilians and Syrian experts from a range of socioeconomic and political backgrounds, from multiple Syrian cities.

Purposive sampling was used to ensure variation in age, gender, location, and political opinion. Participants provided informed consent and requested complete anonymity.

The analysis applies triangulation to ensure reliability. Where feasible, specific events, such as policy announcements, institutional reforms, and high-profile incidents, were traced from public commitments to observable implementation and outcomes. This allowed the study to identify where reforms progressed, stalled, or were undermined, showing the mechanisms that facilitated or obstructed anti-corruption measures.

Our methodology has certain limitations that merit acknowledgment. Open-source materials

cannot fully reveal confidential decision-making processes, internal power dynamics, or covert financial flows. And the timeframe does not allow for an assessment of whether initial reforms will be sustained over time. However, this study lays the groundwork for broader research on anti-corruption in Syria, and future research – including beyond the security and economic sectors – will be necessary to assess the impacts of anti-corruption initiatives.

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## Keywords

accountability – citizen engagement – civil society – decentralisation – economic development – public sector reform – security sector – transparency – Syria – MENA – Middle East and North Africa

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U4 is part of the Chr. Michelsen Institute (CMI), an independent development research institute in Norway.

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