Syria | One Year Since the Fall of the Assad Regime: The Transition Cannot Be Consolidated without Truth, Justice, Security Sector Reform, and Protection of Civic Space

Press Releases · Syria · 8 December 2025

Beirut – 8 December 2025

One year after the fall of Bashar al-Assad's regime on 8 December 2024, which ended family rule that had lasted for more than five decades and a devastating war of nearly fourteen years that killed hundreds of thousands and displaced millions of Syrians, HuMENA, as a regional organisation dedicated to protecting civic space and supporting human rights defenders, continues to follow the trajectory of change in Syria and the opportunities and risks it carries for fundamental rights and freedoms.

The rapid takeover of Damascus by opposition forces in December 2024 led to the collapse of the former regime's institutions and the flight of Bashar al-Assad to Russia, as well as the formation of a new transitional authority headed by Ahmed Al-Sharaa, who moved from leading an armed faction to assuming the presidency of a state presented as the beginning of a new transitional phase. Despite the fundamental change at the top of power and in Syria's external relations, human rights monitoring shows that the deeper structures of violence have not yet been dismantled, and that the logic of security rule, discrimination, and impunity remains present in new forms.

During the first year, the new authorities repositioned Syria regionally and internationally, distanced themselves from some of the former regime's core alliances, and secured the easing of certain sanctions and the gradual return of diplomatic representation. However, this external opening has not yet translated into structural reforms at home. Parts of the security and military apparatus that formed the backbone of Assad's state remain in place under new structures or names and are intertwined with armed factions that played a key role in overthrowing the regime, in the context of an interim constitutional order that grants the presidency broad powers and keeps political and party life under the direct supervision of political and security bodies.

In this context, HuMENA considers that Syria has moved from a closed authoritarian regime to a transitional arrangement that still lacks genuine institutional guarantees of non-repetition, and that the shape of the coming years will be determined by the extent to which it is possible to address truth and justice, reform the security sector, protect minorities and those most targeted, and expand and safeguard the independence of civic space.

"One year since the fall of the Assad regime is not enough to judge the course of the transition,

but it is enough for us to say that truth and justice are not a secondary detail. Without clarifying the fate of the missing, holding all perpetrators of violations to account, and protecting civic space, we will reproduce the same logic of repression with different faces."
– Mostafa Fouad, Executive Director of HuMENA

The issue of the missing and forcibly disappeared remains at the heart of this landscape. One year after the fall of the regime, the families of tens of thousands of victims still lack sufficient information about the fate of their loved ones. UN and independent international reports confirm the continued discovery of new mass graves and the large number of people whose fate has remained unknown since the years of Assad's rule, alongside victims of other armed groups. The establishment of a dedicated UN mechanism on the missing in Syria, and the adoption of presidential decrees establishing a "National Committee for the Missing" and a "Transitional Justice Committee," represents an important institutional step. However, the pace of work remains slow, access to security and military archives and burial sites is limited, and transparency vis-à-vis families and the public is insufficient, amid repeated complaints from independent Syrian organisations and family associations about their marginalisation in policymaking and in building reliable national databases.

In parallel, worrying patterns of retaliatory violence and identity-based targeting are being observed, particularly in the coastal region, Homs, and Sweida. During the first year, media and human rights reports documented massacres and large-scale attacks against Alawite civilians in coastal areas, as well as cycles of violence in Sweida and southern Syria affecting Druze, Bedouin, and other civilians, in contexts where victims and adversaries were redefined on the basis of sectarian or political affiliation. These patterns reproduce the logic of collective punishment that shaped the former regime's practices against communities labelled as "opposition," and now transfer it to groups treated as "loyalist" or "linked" to the old regime, which risks entrenching new cycles of violence and discrimination.

At the level of transitional justice, the creation of national committees on civil peace, transitional justice, and the missing, and the initiation of some prosecutions against individuals accused of grave crimes, represents an important shift compared to the total impunity that prevailed under Assad. However, the absence of a comprehensive national strategy for transitional justice that covers truth, accountability, reparation, institutional reform, and guarantees of non-repetition within a clear timeframe, and the focus of efforts on the crimes of the former regime while leaving gaps in addressing violations committed after its fall, risk turning this process into a selective tool that undermines trust instead of rebuilding it.

Security and military sector reform is also an integral part of any serious transitional process. The agencies that for decades were associated with arbitrary detention, torture, and enforced disappearance cannot continue to operate without structural review, and the armed factions that have moved into positions of power or influence need to be clearly brought under the rule of law. The absence of a vision for redefining the mandates of the security services, subjecting them to effective civilian, judicial, and parliamentary oversight, and reviewing the records of leaders

involved in serious violations, leaves the door open to reproducing the logic of the “security state,” even under new names and slogans.

The economic and social burdens of the conflict have a direct impact on the ability of Syrians to exercise their basic rights. Destroyed infrastructure, a depleted economy, and the spread of war economy networks all deepen poverty and inequality and generate new forms of structural violence, particularly against rural communities, areas that have suffered extensive destruction, women heads of households, survivors of violations, and persons with disabilities. Transitional justice that is limited to criminal accountability and does not intersect with people’s rights to services, a decent standard of living, and social protection will remain of limited impact and unable to change the conditions of daily life.

In terms of gender and the most marginalised groups, there is a clear gap between the scale of violations suffered by women, survivors of conflict-related sexual violence, and other marginalised groups, and the extent to which they are included in processes of truth, justice, and decision-making. The absence of gender-sensitive approaches in the work of national committees, the scarcity of safe and secure avenues for accountability for sexual and gender-based crimes, and the lack of adequate representation of women and marginalised groups in transitional justice bodies and in institutions responsible for economic and social policymaking, all expose an essential part of the truth to the risk of exclusion and reproduce the same hierarchies that enabled violations in the first place.

With respect to civic space, there has been a tangible improvement in the scope for public debate compared to the Assad era, with greater ability to criticise violations, the emergence of new civic initiatives, and bolder media coverage of prisons and massacres in local and international outlets. However, this improvement remains constrained by a restrictive legal and political framework. The interim framework governing civic and party work keeps the registration of associations, parties, and peaceful events practically dependent on administrative and security approvals, and makes freedom of association, freedom of peaceful assembly, and freedom of expression rights that operate within shifting margins and unwritten red lines. Independent civil society organisations, human rights defenders, and journalists continue to work in an unstable environment, facing recurrent risks of restriction and pressure.

So far, the trajectory of the transition has tended to concentrate decision-making in the hands of political and security elites, with limited space for the participation of victims, families of the missing, human rights defenders, and independent civil society organisations. From HuMENA’s perspective, excluding these voices from the decision-making table, whether in designing transitional justice policies, security sector reform, or economic and social policies, transforms the transition into an arrangement between de facto powers rather than a societal process in which the relationship between state and society is redefined on the basis of rights and accountability.

On the basis of this assessment, HuMENA calls on the Syrian authorities to:

- Entrench the right to truth in relation to the missing and the forcibly disappeared by ensuring

the effective participation of family organisations and victims' associations in the work of national committees on the missing and transitional justice, adopting a clear timeline for gradual and regulated access to security and military archives, and establishing a transparent programme for opening mass graves and identifying victims under independent judicial and technical supervision, with the results made available to families and the public.

- Confront retaliatory violence and protect minorities and targeted groups by explicitly criminalising collective punishment and identity-based crimes in national legislation, conducting independent and effective investigations into attacks targeting Alawite, Druze, Bedouin, and other civilians, publishing the results of these investigations within reasonable timeframes, ensuring public and fair trials for those responsible regardless of their positions, and adopting dedicated protection policies for communities that have been repeatedly targeted, in coordination with their representatives and organisations.
- Establish comprehensive and non-selective transitional justice by adopting an integrated national strategy that covers both past crimes and violations committed after the fall of the regime and combines truth, accountability, reparation, institutional reform, and guarantees of non-repetition; by reforming the justice system and ensuring its independence from the executive and security authorities and its ability to adjudicate serious crimes without political interference; and by putting in place clear mechanisms for individual and collective reparation, including compensation, rehabilitation, and non-discriminatory commemoration of victims.
- Initiate genuine reform of the security and military sector, including by redefining the mandates of the security services, subjecting them to effective civilian, judicial, and parliamentary oversight, reviewing the records of leaders implicated in serious violations and conditioning their continued service on clear standards of accountability and integrity, and regulating the relationship between the armed forces and the political authorities in a way that guarantees the subordination of the army to an elected civilian leadership and prohibits any armed group from becoming a parallel or supra-legal power.
- Link the transitional justice process to the economic and social rights of the population through clear policies to combat poverty and corruption and dismantle old and new war economy networks, and by directing available resources towards rebuilding basic services in the most affected areas, with priority given to the most vulnerable groups, including women heads of households, survivors of violations, and persons with disabilities.
- Systematically include women and the most marginalised groups in processes of truth, justice, and decision-making by ensuring their meaningful representation in national committees, transitional justice bodies, and institutions responsible for economic and social policymaking; by adopting gender-sensitive approaches to investigating sexual and gender-based crimes; and by providing safe and secure channels for accountability and reparation.
- Protect and expand civic space by aligning legislation governing freedom of association, peaceful assembly, and expression with Syria's international obligations; ending administrative and security practices that require unjustified approvals for civil society

activities; ceasing the use of threats to revoke licences as a tool of pressure; and protecting human rights defenders and journalists from intimidation, incitement, and abusive legal actions, while investigating any attacks against them and holding those responsible to account.

HuMENA also calls on states and international organisations involved in supporting Syria's transition to link any political, financial, or technical support to clear and measurable progress on these issues; to refrain from privileging considerations of "stability" or "reconstruction" at the expense of truth, justice, and the protection of civic space; and to support victims' organisations and Syrian civil society independently, rather than confining channels of engagement to official institutions alone.

One year after the fall of the Assad regime, the seriousness of the transition is not measured by changes in the names at the top of power, but by the extent to which the logic of collective punishment is dismantled, the cycle of impunity is broken, and a state is built that treats victims, human rights defenders, and civic actors as partners in shaping the future, not merely as witnesses to an unaccounted-for past. HuMENA will continue to monitor developments in Syria and to work with its Syrian, regional, and international partners for a transition grounded in truth, justice, and non-discrimination, and in an open and safe civic space that accommodates all those who defend human rights.

Published at https://humena.org/syria-one-year-after-assad-fall/
HuMENA for Human Rights and Civic Engagement · info@humena.org