

CONFLICT TRANSFORMATION IN PRACTICE

Supporting Syria's Social Fabric: Mediation, Dialogue, and Durable Peace in a Transitional Context

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**SUPPORTING SYRIA’S SOCIAL FABRIC:
MEDIATION, DIALOGUE, AND DURABLE
PEACE IN A TRANSITIONAL CONTEXT**

*Meg-Ann Lenoble
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Summary

This paper is intended as a forward-looking analytical contribution for international partners. It highlights structural dynamics, emerging opportunities, and areas for preventive engagement in support of social cohesion and conflict transformation, without constituting an assessment of institutional performance or political actors.

Eighteen months into the transition, Syria remains characterized by a complex interplay between evolving institutional arrangements and deeply fragmented social dynamics. While the transition has created space for cautious optimism, patterns of localized insecurity, uneven governance, and persistent mistrust continue to shape community-level realities. These challenges are further compounded by unresolved grievances, displacement, and differentiated experiences of the conflict

and its aftermath, resulting in divergent perceptions of legitimacy, inclusion, and protection across regions.

In this context, this phase of transition presents a critical window for preventive engagement. Field-based insights indicate that willingness to engage in dialogue exists across diverse segments of Syrian society, if processes are inclusive, conflict-sensitive, and sustained. Strengthening locally anchored mediation capacities and supporting credible, protected spaces for dialogue can help mitigate the risk of escalation, while reinforcing the social foundations necessary for a more resilient and inclusive transition. At this stage, civilian-led peacebuilding constitutes a practical and complementary avenue to support broader stabilization efforts.

1. Introduction

Syria stands at a critical crossroads where the consolidation of institutional transition will depend on the ability to rebuild social trust. Eighteen months after the establishment of the transitional authorities, Syrians across regions and communities express cautious hope, reflecting both expectations for change and the complexity of an ongoing transition. While the initial political change raised expectations of a more inclusive and participatory future, the early phase of transition has revealed the depth of structural challenges facing Syrian society. Years of protracted conflict have not only devastated infrastructure and livelihoods; they have profoundly fractured trust between citizens, communities, and governing institutions.

The current transition is unfolding in a highly complex post-conflict environment, shaped by long-standing unresolved grievances, residual insecurity, and large-scale displacement. In this context, patterns of insecurity have continued to evolve, with hybrid and decentralized forms of security governance emerging across different regions. In several areas, overlapping authorities and informal actors, including local armed actors, community-based authorities, and externally supported structures, shape local security arrangements, contributing to uncertainty while reinforcing fragmented perceptions of protection and legitimacy at the community level.

While initial efforts to create neutral and protected spaces for dialogue have emerged, these remain relatively limited in scope, which continues to constrain the potential for broad-based and sustained

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constructive engagement. In such a context, the absence of consistently trusted and accessible mechanisms for managing tensions increases the risk that localized disputes may rapidly escalate into broader tensions or violence. At the same time, it further underscores the importance of strengthening credible, locally grounded mediation capacities capable of addressing tensions before they intensify. These dynamics have contributed to evolving intercommunity trust challenges and to ongoing discussions regarding the social foundations that are expected to underpin the post-conflict order.

In addition, the broader regional environment remains highly dynamic, shaped by the interaction of multiple regional and international actors. Recent escalations across the Middle East—marked by sustained airstrikes, retaliatory missile and drone operations, and the activation of interconnected theatres—have contributed to a more volatile regional context with direct and indirect spillover effects on Syria¹. In this context, the role of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and affiliated networks remains one important dimension of regional confrontation dynamics. At the same time, Israel's sustained airstrike campaigns across Syrian territory, and the United States' continued military presence and partnerships in the northeast, constitute equally structuring components of the regional security environment. Turkey's cross-border security engagements in northern Syria further add to this complex configuration.

Within Syria, although the visibility and configuration of these externally supported structures have evolved following the political transition, residual networks, historical linkages, and patterns of prior military and political coordination continue to shape localized dynamics in certain areas². The coexistence of these influences contributes to differentiated security environments across regions, reinforcing fragmented perceptions of authority, protection, and alignment at the community level.

More broadly, these evolving regional dynamics have reinforced patterns of external engagement within Syria, contributing to the consolidation of overlapping spheres of influence and to differentiated, and at times competing, security logics across regions. In parallel, efforts

¹ April 2026 Monthly Forecast on Syria. Security Council Report. 1 April 2026. <https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/monthly-forecast/2026-04/syria-90.php?utm>

² Exit without departure: What's left of Iran's influence in Syria? Syria in Transition. Issue 34, April 2026. <https://www.syriaintransition.com/en/home/archive/issue-34/exit-without-departure>

by Syrian authorities to avoid direct involvement in the regional conflict, while reinforcing border security and limiting spillover, illustrate both the volatility of the environment and the sensitivity of Syria's position within it³.

These dynamics do not only affect security conditions; they also shape how communities perceive protection, authority, and alignment. In some contexts, they may reinforce identity-based narratives, heighten perceptions of external influence, or contribute to the reactivation of localized tensions. As a result, regional developments increasingly intersect with domestic dynamics at the community level, underscoring the importance of approaches that remain attentive to both internal factors and the indirect effects of regional escalation on social cohesion.

Since 2011, CPI has maintained a sustained and adaptive engagement in Syria through an extensive network of Syrian scholars, civil society actors, and experts. During the post-Assad transition, CPI has remained closely connected to Syrian actors through regular consultations, including a consultative meeting convened in Geneva in February 2025⁴ and follow-up exchanges with a diverse range of Syrian stakeholders in Basel later in 2025⁵, aimed at exchanging perspectives on recent developments and exploring pathways for inclusive national dialogue. Against this backdrop, CPI conducted an exploratory mission to Syria in September 2025, covering Damascus, An-Nabek, Aleppo, and Idlib, and engaging with a wide range of Syrian actors across different regions and societal segments. The mission confirmed both the fragility of the transitional moment and the existence of important entry points for preventive peacebuilding.

While fear, polarization, and trauma remain prevalent, CPI's findings highlighted a consistent willingness among officials, community leaders, civil society actors, women's networks, religious figures, and influential academics to engage in dialogue—if engagement takes place in safe spaces, is facilitated by credible actors and is sustained over time. Over the course of the last mission, CPI conducted exchanges with more than twenty Syrian interlocutors across four regions, spanning political,

³ Conflict in Syria. Center for Preventive Action. Council on Foreign Relations. February 18, 2026. <https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/conflict-syria?utm>

⁴ See CPI LinkedIn post at: <https://www.linkedin.com/feed/update/urn:li:activity:7301164308112039938>

⁵ The Cordoba Update. CPI's Newsletter. January 2026. <https://cpi-geneva.org/the-cordoba-update-january-2026/>

communal, religious, gender, and professional divides. This diversity of engagement reflects CPI's comparative advantage in accessing sensitive social and political spaces that remain largely closed to conventional policy or humanitarian actors.

2. Contextual Analysis: Social Fragmentation as a key consideration

Syria's transition challenge extends beyond institutional reform or political arrangements. At its core lies a *fractured social fabric*, shaped by years of violence, displacement, identity-based targeting, and the instrumentalization of communal narratives. Communities experienced conflict in diverse ways and consequently held divergent perceptions of loss, responsibility, and entitlement. Where reconciliation processes remain at an early stage, these perceptions have yet to fully converge into shared understandings. Emerging economic pressures, increasing competition over resources, access, and entitlement and uneven recovery patterns further contribute to localized tensions. Issues related to access to housing, land, and property—particularly in areas experiencing returns or demographic shifts—have become increasingly salient, often intersecting with pre-existing grievances and identity-based sensitivities.

In the northeast, evolving governance and security arrangements further illustrate the complexity of Syria's transitional landscape. Recent developments point to a fragile but potentially consequential window for de-escalation, centered on ongoing efforts to integrate the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and associated administrative structures into the Syrian state. While these efforts reflect a shared—though differently interpreted—objective of reintegrating the region, they remain shaped by unresolved political questions and differing visions regarding the future balance between central authority and local governance⁶.

In parallel, the gradual transfer of administrative responsibilities from autonomous local authorities to the central government represents a significant shift in the configuration of authority in the region. While this transition may contribute to longer-term institutional consolidation, it also introduces uncertainties at the community level, particularly in areas where governance arrangements have evolved with a degree of autonomy over recent years. These dynamics carry important

⁶ International Crisis Group. Syria page. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/east-mediterranean-mena/syria>

implications for local perceptions of inclusion, representation, and access to services. In this context, the way such changes are communicated and implemented is likely to play a critical role in shaping community responses and in influencing the extent to which these processes contribute to stabilization or, conversely, risk reinforcing existing sensitivities.

The first eighteen months of transition illustrates the importance of accompanying political change with inclusive societal processes, to ensure that emerging governance arrangements foster broad-based participation and social cohesion. Localized incidents underscore how rapid social tensions can escalate in environments where trusted mediation channels are still being strengthened, highlighting the importance of accessible mechanisms for dialogue and de-escalation.

CPI's observations, drawn from continuous exchanges with a wide range of Syrian stakeholders and from its last field mission, confirm that these dynamics are not abstract risks but lived realities. In multiple locations, interlocutors described how rumors, social media narratives, and unresolved grievances had directly contributed to episodes of localized violence or displacement. The evolving information environment plays an increasingly important role in shaping these dynamics. The rapid circulation of unverified information and emotionally charged narratives can amplify perceptions of threat, reinforce polarization, and accelerate the escalation of localized tensions. The need to further strengthen the presence and capacity of credible and impartial actors able to convene across societal divides was repeatedly highlighted.

3. Why Mediation and Dialogue are Strategic Priorities

Mediation and dialogue are increasingly recognized as complementary to political negotiations and economic recovery efforts, and as important enablers of sustainable transition.

Rather than substituting formal political processes, mediation and dialogue contribute to the social conditions that allow such processes to function effectively over time. When designed in a conflict-sensitive manner, dialogue initiatives can complement institutional transition efforts by strengthening societal trust, surfacing community-level concerns, and reinforcing the responsiveness of emerging governance

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arrangements—without becoming politically instrumentalized or substituting for formal authority.

In a context where formal justice and accountability mechanisms remain evolving, dialogue processes can also contribute to addressing perceptions of grievance at the community level, helping to create conditions conducive to longer-term reconciliation efforts without preempting or replacing formal processes.

In a transitional context, mediation and dialogue can serve several key functions:

- *Preventing Escalation*: Early mediation can help manage tensions before they translate into violence, thereby reducing humanitarian and security risks.
- *Strengthening Trust Across Divides*: Structured dialogue can support communities in addressing misinformation, recognizing diverse experiences and gradually rebuilding empathy after prolonged conflict.
- *Supporting Institutional Trust and Responsiveness*: When institutions are perceived as listening to and engaging with societal concerns, confidence in governance can gradually increase, even in the absence of immediate policy outcomes.
- *Fostering Inclusive Ownership of the Transition*: Inclusive dialogue process can enable citizens to view the transition as a shared national endeavor, rather than as a process driven solely by political elites.

In Syria, where polarization remains high and the political space continues to evolve, well-designed, *conflict-sensitive and inclusive dialogue processes* represent an important component of broader stabilization and transition efforts. CPI's added value in this context lies in its ability to combine high-level political literacy with deep societal engagement. Operating at the interface of Track I and Track II processes, CPI translates field-level insights and access to all actors into policy-relevant analysis while maintaining the trust of local actors. This positioning allows CPI to identify emerging tensions, support context-appropriate dialogue architectures, and accompany actors over time.

4. Lessons from CPI's Engagement in Syria

CPI's regular in-depth exchanges with Syrian actors, corroborated by its last exploratory mission in Syria, have highlighted a range of dynamics of direct relevance for preventive peacebuilding. The mission combined confidential multi-track political briefings, community-level listening exercises, and thematic exchanges on governance, identity, and social cohesion. This multi-layered methodology enabled CPI to triangulate perspectives across actors who rarely engage in shared spaces, including officials of the transitional authorities, minority communities, women-led networks, civil society organizations, religious figures, and independent scholars.

Across locations, interlocutors noted that *legacies of fear and mistrust remain present in many communities*, largely shaped by years of violence and prolonged uncertainty. At the same time, the mission observed a growing fatigue with conflict and an increasing aspiration for stability and normalization, suggesting space for constructive engagement.

The mission also revealed *the continued role of local, informal mediation practices* in preventing everyday disputes from escalating. In several instances, disputes regarding property, local authority, or identity-related incidents were managed through ad hoc mediation by respected individuals, often operating with limited institutional support or technical resources. These practices reflect significant endogenous resilience, while also pointing to the importance of enhanced protection, capacity building, and sustained accompaniment for local mediators.

In multiple locations, *women interlocutors described assuming de facto mediation roles* within families, neighborhoods, and professional networks, particularly in contexts where formal or customary mediation structures were constrained or evolving. CPI's engagement confirmed that these women function as important social connectors and represent potential agents of conflict transformation when provided with tailored support and secure platforms.

Finally, interlocutors consistently emphasized the importance of *neutral, protected spaces for dialogue*, settings where conversations are not politically instrumentalized and where participants can engage without concern over exposure or unintended repercussions. The gradual strengthening of such spaces is likely to play an important role in enabling constructive engagement in a context where political sensitivities remain high.

Taken together, these findings suggest that the main constraints to dialogue relate less to willingness among actors than to *protection concerns, limited technical capacity, and the need for more sustained, professional accompaniment*. Addressing these areas in a manner that maintains the confidence of the emerging Syrian leadership offers a realistic pathway, under the interim government, to reinforce social resilience during Syria's transition.

5. Policy Implications: From Political Transition to Social Transformation

Syria's transition raises important considerations for international partners regarding how best to support stabilization and long-term peace. Alongside institutional engagement under the interim government, increasing attention to the social foundations that enable institutions to function effectively and peacefully has emerged as a key area of focus. A growing body of comparative experience suggests that civilian peacebuilding, particularly mediation, dialogue, conflict transformation skills and mechanisms, can play a complementary role in supporting transition processes. In contexts where social relations have been shaped by prolonged conflict, political and institutional reforms are more likely to take place when accompanied by efforts to address underlying societal tensions and to foster trust across communities. From this perspective, social and conflict transformation constitute important enabling conditions for durable peace in Syria. In the context of evolving international engagement, ensuring the sustainability of such peacebuilding efforts has become increasingly important. Approaches that strengthen local ownership, including through support to existing informal mediation actors and community-based structures, and operate through adaptable and resource-efficient models are likely to play a particularly relevant role in supporting long-term social transformation.

A policy approach aligned with this insight emphasizes *early and sustained preventive engagement*, rather than postponing social cohesion efforts until political processes are fully consolidated. Prevention is most effective when treated as a long-term investment, recognizing that rebuilding trust is a long-term process requiring patience and consistent support.

Meaningful progress in social transformation depends *on strengthening the role of local actors* who already contribute to maintaining civil peace at the community level. Community leaders, women's networks, religious

figures, and youth bring legitimacy, contextual understanding, and cultural fluency that are essential for conflict-sensitive engagement. Supporting these actors requires careful attention to conflict sensitivity, to ensure that international engagement does not inadvertently reinforce inequalities, heighten tensions, or expose participants to political risk. In addition, regional dynamics and cross-border linkages suggest that localized peacebuilding efforts benefit from being situated within a broader understanding of interconnected risks and opportunities, while remaining firmly grounded in local realities.

In transitional contexts, civilian-led peacebuilding is most effective when it remains institutionally aware while *preserving its independence*. Alongside engagement with societal actors, maintaining calibrated, conflict-sensitive channels of communication with relevant Syrian governmental and local administrative stakeholders under the interim government will contribute to broader transition coherence. Such engagement supports mutual awareness and confidence-building, while safeguarding the neutrality and protection required for meaningful dialogue.

Within this framework, *gender-responsive approaches* should be understood as integral to peacebuilding efforts. Syrian women have consistently demonstrated leadership in maintaining social cohesion throughout the conflict and transition. Their perspectives, mediation skills, and community networks are indispensable assets for conflict transformation, and should be embedded systematically within all stages of dialogue and peacebuilding design.

Conflict-sensitive Information-sharing—focused on aggregate trends and emerging social dynamics—can further enhance the contribution of civilian peacebuilding to institutional responsiveness. By maintaining appropriate levels of information-sharing with relevant Syrian authorities, civilian-led initiatives can help reinforce the social foundations of governance and align with ongoing efforts.

In a transitional context such as Syria's, CPI focuses on supporting protected dialogue infrastructures, strengthening mediation and conflict transformation capacities, and fostering sustained trust-building with both societal actors and institutional stakeholders. This approach contributes to reducing the risk of instrumentalization, enhancing local ownership, and increasing the durability of peacebuilding outcomes.

6. Conclusion

International experience demonstrates that political transitions emerging from violent conflict require particular attention during their early years. Without deliberate investment in mediation, dialogue, and capacity building for social cohesion, unresolved tensions may persist and complicate longer-term stabilization efforts. In Syria today, this is reflected in the persistence of identity-based sensitivities and in the importance of further strengthening voices that promote inclusive governance within an evolving political and geopolitical landscape. At the same time, the eighteen-month mark of the transition represents a meaningful opportunity: early, civilian-led peacebuilding can contribute to shaping positive trajectories, fostering trust, and supporting social cohesion.

Mediation, dialogue, and social cohesion are not abstract aspirations; they are practical policy tools that can help mitigate conflict risks, reinforce societal resilience, and support the legitimacy of political transitions. Through tailored support in civilian-led peacebuilding, complementary to institutional transition efforts and informed by calibrated engagement with relevant authorities, international partners can contribute to conditions that favor durable peace over renewed instability at all track levels. As the transition continues to evolve, the interaction between local dynamics, regional developments, and evolving socio-economic conditions will remain a defining feature of Syria's trajectory. In this context, sustained attention to the social dimensions of transition—including trust-building, inclusive dialogue, and locally grounded mediation—will remain essential to supporting pathways toward durable peace.

CPI's exploratory mission and continued exchanges with different Syrian actors suggest that credible civilian-led peacebuilding initiatives remain possible in Syria, particularly when grounded in rigorous conflict sensitivity, political realism, and long-term engagement. Building on its experience at the intersection of societal dialogue and policy-relevant mediation support, CPI stands ready to contribute to such efforts at a moment when early preventive engagement can still play a constructive role in shaping transition dynamics.

Cordoba Peace Institute – Geneva (CPI)

CPI is an independent non-profit organisation, working on violence prevention and peace promotion. CPI aims to enhance theoretical and practical conflict transformation resources and has extensive experience in West Asian and African contexts. CPI promotes a methodology adapted to and accepted by local communities, conflict parties and peace actors. Since 2002, it has developed unique access and networks in the countries where it works. CPI's outlook is inspired by the Andalusian city of Cordoba: a renowned medieval centre of inter-faith dialogue, and by Geneva: a modern centre of international dialogue and exchange between peoples. CPI has Special Consultative Status with the United Nations.