



الشبكة السورية لحقوق الإنسان
SYRIAN NETWORK FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

Reintegrating and Reforming Armed Groups in Transitional Phase in Syria:

Pathways to Sustainable Stability

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The Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR), founded in June 2011, is a non-governmental, independent group that is considered a primary source for the OHCHR on all death toll-related analyses in Syria.

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I. Introduction: The Challenge of Armed Groups in Syria

The popular uprising in Syria in March 2011 escalated into an internal armed conflict by early 2012, due to the international community's failure to protect peaceful protesters and the Assad regime's use of the most brutal methods of violence. The protracted armed conflict has led to the emergence of hundreds of armed factions with differing ideologies and loyalties, controlling various areas.

The presence of numerous armed groups—from pro-regime militias and opposition forces to the autonomous administration led by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), armed opposition factions, and extremist organizations—has created a complex network of military authorities operating outside the framework of a unified state. These groups have developed their own command structures, sources of income, and systems of governance over more than a decade of conflict.

As Syria moves toward a political transition, the question of how to reintegrate these diverse armed forces into a unified national military structure becomes unavoidable. The success or failure of this reintegration process will directly determine whether Syria can achieve long-term stability. Without addressing this challenge, any political settlement risks being undermined by continued armed competition, parallel military structures, and the potential for renewed fighting.

Failed reintegration efforts in other post-conflict contexts have led to the resumption of civil wars, the emergence of criminal networks of former combatants, and continued instability that hinders economic and social recovery. Conversely, successful reintegration can contribute to sustainable peace, promote national reconciliation, and create the security conditions necessary for reconstruction and development. This report addresses the multifaceted challenges of reintegrating armed groups in post-transition Syria and analyzes the impact of this process on the country's long-term stability. Based on field research, interviews with members of various armed factions, and an analysis of the Syrian context, the report identifies the main obstacles to successful reintegration, including legal complexities, operational challenges, regional interference, ideological divisions, and deep-rooted mistrust between former adversaries.

The report also assesses the potential consequences of successful and failed reintegration efforts, examining their impact on national security, social cohesion, governance, economic recovery, and regional stability. Based on this analysis, it provides practical recommendations for Syrian stakeholders, the international community, and civil society organizations to facilitate a reintegration process that contributes to achieving lasting peace.

Fadel Abdulghany, director of the Syrian Network for Human Rights, says:



Moving forward requires extraordinary courage from all sides—armed group leaders risking their personal power for the sake of the national interest, fighters replacing familiar military structures with an uncertain civilian future, communities opening up to former enemies, and international actors prioritizing Syria’s stability over parochial interests. These demands are daunting, but the alternative of accepting permanent fragmentation condemns Syria to endless division and regional instability.

Success will open new horizons for transformation: unified security forces that protect all citizens regardless of their background, national reconciliation that prevents intergenerational cycles of revenge, redirecting economic resources from parallel military structures toward reconstruction, and reestablishing Syria as a sovereign state that contributes to regional stability.



Key Terms:

In the Arabic version of the report, the term disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) is abbreviated as “integration or reintegration,” and security sector reform is abbreviated as “reform.”

Disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) is a comprehensive post-conflict peacebuilding strategy aimed at facilitating the transition of former combatants to civilian life. It consists of three interconnected phases: disarmament, which involves the collection and disposal of weapons; demobilization, which entails the formal disbanding of armed groups and the demobilization of combatants; and reintegration, which supports the long-term social and economic integration of former combatants into society. DDR aims to reduce the risk of conflict recurrence, promote security and stability, and lay the foundations for sustainable peace by addressing the physical, psychological, and social needs of individuals formerly involved in armed conflict.

Security sector reform (SSR) is a multidimensional, rights-based framework that aims to transform institutions responsible for national security—such as the military, police, and intelligence services—particularly in post-conflict and transitional contexts. SSR seeks to establish democratic oversight of security institutions, ensuring they are run by civilian authorities and operate within the rule of law. It emphasizes professionalism, transparency, and accountability, and aligning security operations with international human rights standards. Since the 1990s, global bodies such as the United Nations and the OECD Development Assistance Committee, and regional organizations such as the African Union, have developed normative and operational frameworks to guide SSR, making it a cornerstone of peacebuilding and sustainable development strategies.

II. Key Challenges to Reintegration

The reintegration and reform of Syrian armed groups into a unified national military structure faces profound and interconnected challenges that go beyond simple military reorganization. These obstacles, rooted in more than a decade of conflict, threaten to derail any transition process if not properly addressed.

2.1 Legal and Structural Obstacles

Accountability for Violations

Accountability is one of the most complex obstacles to successful reintegration. Following Assad's fall, the new authorities allowed regime members to negotiate settlements in exchange for surrendering their weapons. However, fear of prosecution has been a crucial factor in deterring thousands from responding, especially given that the Assad regime is the most prominent perpetrator of violations in Syria, accounting for nearly 90% of all violations, according to the Syrian Network for Human Rights' database.

Therefore, they chose to keep their weapons and regroup in the Sahel region, where they declared their rebellion against the new government, undermining efforts to control weapons possession by the state.

On the other hand, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) have been among the main actors involved in the conflict over the past years. They have refused to integrate into the Syrian Defense Forces and insisted on maintaining their own military structure.

This legal complexity goes beyond criminal accountability. Protecting the human rights of former combatants during their reintegration poses another challenge. Combatants face the risk of social stigma and denial of basic rights, as local communities view them as security threats or moral outcasts. This dual dynamic—the need for accountability alongside protection from discrimination—creates a delicate balance that must be maintained throughout the reintegration process.

The situation becomes more complex when considering how domestic laws are exploited for revenge or political settlements. Authorities may issue selective amnesty decrees that exempt some combatants while excluding others based on their previous political loyalties, rather than the severity of the violations. Such selective justice violates international law and could reignite conflict by creating new grievances among excluded groups.

Personal vendettas pose another serious risk. In the post-conflict phase, former combatants may seek personal revenge under the guise of legitimate authority, undermining the rule of law and threatening fragile stability. Without effective legal frameworks and oversight mechanisms, the reintegration process could degenerate into cycles of revenge that undermine peace efforts.

Competing Command Structures

Some factions have adopted hierarchical structures resembling those of conventional armies, with clear chains of command and standardized procedures. Other factions operate through informal, decentralized systems based on personal loyalties or local networks. This structural diversity makes unified integration extremely difficult.

These structural contradictions extend to core military functions. Different groups have developed different operational doctrines, communications systems, and tactical approaches over years of independent operations. Reconciling these differences requires not only administrative reorganization but also fundamental changes in military culture and practices—changes that may be resisted by commanders accustomed to independent decision-making.

Standardization of Equipment and Training

The proliferation of weapons and military equipment from diverse sources has created a logistical nightmare for any unified effort. Armed groups have acquired weapons from multiple countries, ranging from Soviet-era systems to modern Western equipment, often mixed within the same units. This diversity extends to types of ammunition, communications systems, vehicles, and support equipment.

Achieving interoperability between forces using incompatible systems requires a massive investment in new equipment or comprehensive modification programs. Training presents significant challenges. Fighters have been trained according to different doctrines—some by Western special forces, others by Turkish military advisors, the Iranian Revolutionary Guard, or through informal field experience. Unifying these disparate skills and tactics requires comprehensive retraining programs that many fighters may find degrading or unnecessary.

The challenge goes beyond technical standardization to include fundamental military concepts such as rules of engagement, treatment of civilians, and adherence to international humanitarian law. Groups operating with limited oversight or accountability may resist adopting formal military standards that restrict their operational freedom.

2.2 External Interference

Regional powers have invested heavily in Syrian armed groups as extensions of their geopolitical strategies, creating proxy forces that serve foreign interests as much as Syrian ones. This external manipulation significantly complicates reintegration efforts, as these powers are unlikely to abandon their investments without achieving their strategic objectives.

The involvement of global powers adds another layer of complexity. The Syrian armed conflict has become an arena for competing international agendas that extend far beyond Syria's borders. Russia seeks to maintain its Mediterranean military presence and regional influence. The United States aims to counter Iranian expansion and prevent the resurgence of ISIS. European countries are focused on preventing the flow of refugees and combating terrorism. These divergent priorities place conflicting pressures on any reintegration process.

2.3 Identity and ideological divisions

Sectarian and ethnic tensions

The long-standing internal armed conflict has entrenched sectarian and ethnic divisions, which armed groups reflect and reinforce. Many militias are explicitly formed along sectarian lines, transforming military service into an expression of sectarian identity rather than national loyalty.

Reintegration requires fighters to subordinate their sectarian and ethnic loyalties to a Syrian national identity, a concept severely weakened by years of sectarian violence. The challenge lies not simply in integrating the various groups within military units, but in creating a new institutional culture that transcends entrenched sectarian ideology.

Armed groups also embody divergent visions for Syria's political future, from secular nationalism to Islamic rule to ethnic federalism.

These conflicting visions extend to fundamental questions: Should Syria be centralized or federal? What role should religion play in governance? How should minority rights be protected? Should Syria join Iran's "axis of resistance" or seek Western partnerships? Without consensus on these fundamental questions, creating unified military forces that serve a cohesive national vision becomes nearly impossible.

Historical Grievances

The current conflict has added new grievances to historical ones, creating multiple layers of resentment that complicate reintegration. Kurdish forces recall decades of discrimination and denial of basic rights under Syrian governments. Sunni communities in areas like Hama harbor memories of brutal crackdowns in the 1980s. Alawite communities fear retaliation for their perceived association with the Assad regime's violence.

These historical grievances have been exacerbated by the protracted armed conflict. Communities that have suffered sieges, bombardments, chemical attacks, mass arrests, and displacement cannot easily accept former perpetrators as colleagues in unified security forces. The personal nature of much of the violence—victims know their perpetrators—makes institutional reconciliation even more difficult.

Armed groups have become vehicles for expressing and addressing these grievances, providing protection for threatened communities and a means of revenge. Dismantling these functions without addressing the underlying grievances puts communities at risk and drives them into resentment, potentially fueling future cycles of violence.

2.4 Trust Deficit

Among Armed Groups

Years of shifting alliances, betrayals, and direct fighting between various armed groups have created deep mutual mistrust, perhaps the greatest obstacle to reintegration. Opposition factions have fought numerous battles among themselves, and some groups have shifted allegiances, assassinated rival leaders, and competed for resources and territory.

The history of failed unification attempts reinforces the lack of trust. Numerous efforts to integrate opposition groups have collapsed amid accusations of betrayal, hidden agendas, and external manipulation. This mistrust exists at multiple levels: between individual leaders with personal rivalries, between factions with long histories of conflict, and between broader coalitions representing different ideological or ethnic camps.

With Local Communities

Armed groups' relationships with local populations vary widely, ranging from genuine popular support to rule by fear and extortion. This disparity creates complex reintegration dynamics, as communities may protect their preferred armed groups or demand justice against abusive groups.

In some areas, armed groups provide essential services and protection and enjoy genuine loyalty from residents who fear their departure. In other areas, armed groups are viewed as occupiers who impose harsh rules, plunder resources, and commit abuses with impunity. Many communities have experienced both dynamics, with control shifting between different forces.

The loss of community trust extends to any unified forces these fighters may join in the future. Communities that have suffered under the rule of armed groups may reject the legitimacy of security forces that include perpetrators of past abuses. This social rejection can undermine security provision, intelligence gathering, and basic governance functions that require popular cooperation.

Towards Future Government Structures

Various groups fear that reintegration is a trap—a means of disarming and then marginalizing or eliminating them. This fear is rooted in past conflicts, where peace agreements led to the targeting and persecution of former combatants.

This lack of trust extends to the technical aspects of reintegration. Who will vet the new forces? How will positions be distributed? What safeguards are available against post-reintegration purges? In the absence of credible answers to these questions, armed groups choose to maintain their independent capabilities rather than risk exposure.

2.5 Economic Facts

The Collapse of the Syrian Economy

Syria's economic collapse poses a **severe obstacle** to any reintegration effort. With nearly 90% of the population living below the poverty line and vast areas of infrastructure destroyed, the country lacks the basic resources needed to support a large-scale military transformation. This economic collapse is unlikely to improve in the near future, **necessitating reintegration while the difficulties persist**.

- The destruction extends beyond physical infrastructure to include the collapse of productive sectors, currency devaluation, and the loss of human capital due to death and forced displacement. Syria's GDP has contracted by more than **60%** since 2010, with entire industries destroyed and agricultural production sharply declining. This economic context means that reintegration resources—training facilities, salaries, equipment, and support services—must compete with urgent humanitarian needs.
- The economic situation also influences fighters' calculations regarding reintegration. In a collapsed economy, maintaining control over revenue-generating assets, such as border crossings, oil wells, and commercial areas, provides critical income that fighters are reluctant to surrender. Joining armed groups has become a form of labor in the absence of civilian alternatives, making disarmament both an economic and a security decision.

Lack of Alternative Livelihoods

- For hundreds of thousands of young Syrians, participation in armed groups has become their primary source of income and identity. Many joined as teenagers and have known no other life than war. The skills they acquired—combat tactics, weapons use, and checkpoint operations—are not applicable in a peacetime economy.

- Finding alternative livelihoods requires massive investment in vocational training and job creation, which the collapsed Syrian economy is unable to meet. Even with international support, the scale of the needs exceeds available resources. Demobilizing fighters without providing economic alternatives effectively means many resort to crime or are re-recruited into new armed groups when the opportunity arises.
- This challenge poses a significant challenge for fighters whose families depend on their military salaries. These fighters cannot simply abandon their membership in armed groups without securing alternative means of supporting their families.

Financing Reintegration Programs

Conservative estimates indicate that effective reintegration programs will require billions of dollars—resources that neither Syria nor the international community appears prepared to provide. The costs include not only training and equipment, but also sustainable support for former combatants during transitional periods, psychological services, community reconciliation programs, and economic development in areas affected by reintegration.

Even if political obstacles are overcome, donor fatigue after years of the Syrian crisis makes mobilizing sufficient resources difficult.

The funding gap creates a vicious cycle: Without resources, reintegration programs cannot offer credible alternatives to fighters, but without support for fighters, donors are reluctant to invest in programs that may fail. This resource constraint forces difficult prioritization decisions that may exclude certain groups or regions, potentially creating new grievances that undermine the entire process.

2.6 Social Integration

Societal Rejection and Stigma

Communities that have experienced violence, displacement, and loss cannot easily accept the return of those they hold responsible, whether directly or indirectly. This social rejection extends across multiple levels, from individual interactions to systematic exclusion from economic and social opportunities.

Former fighters face stigma that extends beyond their personal actions to include their membership in the group. A fighter who committed no violations may be ostracized by the communities that suffered under their faction's rule. This collective stigma makes individual atonement difficult and motivates former fighters to maintain group cohesion for mutual protection.

The stigma can extend to fighters' families, who are ostracized by their communities. This extension of stigma to innocent family members places additional pressure on fighters to maintain their membership in armed groups as a form of protection. Breaking these cycles of social exclusion requires comprehensive community reconciliation efforts, for which many traumatized populations are ill-prepared.

Social media and modern communications amplify these dynamics by making combatants' histories constantly accessible. Videos of abuses, lists of operational participants, and records of group memberships are circulated endlessly, making it impossible for former combatants to escape their past, even if they sincerely seek atonement. This digital immutability of conflict-era acts poses new challenges to reintegration that previous post-conflict societies have not faced.

Psychological Trauma

- Many fighters suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, anxiety, and other mental health disorders that impact their ability to transition to civilian life. Years of violence have normalized aggressive responses to conflict, creating a state of hypervigilance that makes peaceful social interaction difficult.
- Syria lacks even the basic mental health infrastructure to meet the needs of civilians, let alone specialized services for former combatants. The country's few remaining mental health professionals lack training in dealing with combat-related trauma. The cultural stigma surrounding mental health issues leads many fighters to refuse treatment, even when it is available, viewing psychological difficulties as a weakness incompatible with their combat identity.
- The trauma extends to communities hosting former combatants, as civilians suffering from conflict-related psychological trauma may be re-examined by the presence of former combatants. This reciprocal trauma creates volatile social dynamics, where minor conflicts can quickly escalate. Without systematic psychosocial support for both former combatants and their host communities, reintegration risks creating new cycles of violence rooted in unaddressed trauma.

Cycles of Revenge

- Perhaps the most dangerous social dynamic is the potential for cycles of revenge, which reintegration may ignite rather than resolve. In communities where everyone has lost a loved one, the return of fighters may reignite latent conflicts.

- The hallmarks of the Syrian conflict—including systematic torture, sexual violence, and attacks on civilians—have left grievances that extend beyond conventional warfare. Families whose members disappeared into detention centers, women who were sexually assaulted, and communities exposed to chemical weapons cannot simply forgive and forget.
- These revenge dynamics operate individually and collectively. Individual families may seek to kill specific fighters they hold responsible for their losses. Communities may collectively reject forces associated with particular atrocities. Armed groups may maintain target lists of their rivals to eliminate when the opportunity arises. Without addressing these vengeful motivations, reintegration postpones future violence rather than preventing it.
- The interconnected nature of Syrian society means that cycles of revenge can quickly spread across familial, tribal, and sectarian networks. A single revenge killing can spark escalating retribution. This social fragility means that reintegration must include robust protection mechanisms for former fighters and accountability measures that meet community demands for justice—a balance that may be difficult to achieve given the scale of the grievances involved.

III. A Practical Framework for Reintegration and Reform

Achieving successful reintegration and reform of Syrian armed groups requires a comprehensive framework that addresses the multifaceted challenges identified in this report. This framework must be ambitious enough to address deep-rooted problems and flexible enough to adapt to the complex Syrian reality. The following components, while intertwined, must be implemented as mutually reinforcing elements of an integrated strategy.

3.1 Comprehensive Process Design

Stakeholder Engagement

- The foundation of any successful reintegration process lies in the genuine inclusion of all stakeholders from the earliest stages of planning. This inclusion must go beyond mere symbolic representation to include active participation in the decision-making process that shapes the reintegration framework.

- Representatives of armed groups must be involved not only as participants in the reintegration process, but also as partners in its design. This requires establishing formal mechanisms for their participation, such as joint planning committees that include representatives from various factions. These committees should have real authority over key decisions, including eligibility criteria, classification systems, and integration timelines. Without such support from the armed actors themselves, any reintegration process risks being perceived as imposed rather than negotiated.
- The business community and economic actors need to be involved to ensure that reintegration supports economic recovery rather than hinders it. Chambers of commerce, farmers' associations, and labor unions can identify opportunities for economic integration and highlight potential overlaps between reintegration programs and local economic needs. Their involvement helps design programs that create sustainable livelihoods rather than temporary solutions.
- Although international stakeholders are not the primary decision-makers, they need systematic engagement to align their support with Syrian-led operations. This includes not only donor governments but also international organizations, regional bodies, and specialized agencies with relevant expertise. Establishing consultative mechanisms that enable international input without dominating Syrian decision-making requires careful institutional design.
- Youth representatives deserve special attention, given that many fighters joined their ranks as teenagers, and young adults represent Syria's future. Youth councils, which include both former fighters and civilians, can help bridge gaps and develop programs to address intergenerational trauma. Their participation helps ensure that reintegration processes address or break those who are likely to perpetuate cycles of violence.
- The participation process must be carefully structured to prevent it from becoming another arena for conflict. This requires professional facilitation, clear rules of engagement, security guarantees for participants, and deadlock-breaking mechanisms. Sequential participation may be necessary, beginning with separate consultations before bringing the conflicting parties together. Modern technology enables the participation of those unable to attend in person for security reasons.

Power-sharing Mechanisms

Effective reintegration requires formal power-sharing arrangements that ensure effective representation of diverse groups within unified security structures. These mechanisms must balance competing claims for influence, while maintaining military effectiveness and preventing any single group from dominating.

Leadership positions should be distributed according to a transparent formula that takes into account several factors: the relative size of the various armed groups, geographical representation, professional qualifications, and the need for inclusive leadership. This may include agreeing to rotate leadership positions among representatives of different groups or requiring leadership teams to include mandatory representation from multiple factions. These arrangements, while less effective than selection based solely on merit, are essential for building trust and preventing exclusion.

Forces should be blended to prevent any one group from gaining exclusive control over specific areas, but this blending must be carefully managed to prevent historical enemies from converging too quickly. A gradual approach might involve deploying mixed units first in less contentious areas, building on success stories before embarking on more difficult integration operations.

Intelligence and special units require special attention in power-sharing arrangements. These sensitive positions carry the risk of coups or political manipulation, making appropriate representation essential. Establishing overlapping intelligence structures with mandatory information sharing among representatives of different groups can prevent any one faction from gaining exclusive information privileges.

Promotion systems require transparent criteria that prevent discrimination, taking into account the diverse experiences of different ranks. This may include creating multiple promotion paths that value different types of military experience—such as conventional operations, guerrilla warfare, and administrative competence—allowing fighters from diverse backgrounds equal opportunities for advancement.

Veto mechanisms may be necessary to protect minorities from majority domination. Key decisions affecting specific communities or former armed groups may require consensus or supermajority approval rather than a simple majority. While such protections can lead to gridlock, they are essential to maintaining the support of groups that fear marginalization.

Transparent Procedures

Transparency in all aspects of reintegration is essential to building trust and preventing manipulation. This requires not only making information available, but also effective communication about how decisions are made and implemented.

Clear and publicly established criteria for eligibility, classification, and benefits should be established and applied regularly. These criteria should be developed through the comprehensive processes described above and widely disseminated in multiple languages and formats. Regular public reporting on how the criteria are applied, including statistics on admission rates across different categories, helps build confidence in fairness.

Audit procedures require special transparency due to their sensitivity. While some security information must be kept confidential, the entire process—who is conducting the audit, the criteria used, and the available appeal mechanisms—must be made public. Establishing mixed audit committees that include representatives from various groups and independent observers can enhance credibility. Regular review of audit decisions also helps identify and correct biases.

Financial transparency prevents corruption and builds confidence in the efficient use of resources. This includes public budgets for reintegration programs, periodic financial audits conducted by independent bodies, and publicly available spending reports. Establishing oversight committees with civil society participation helps ensure that resources reach the intended beneficiaries rather than being wasted through corruption.

Timeline transparency helps manage expectations and maintain momentum. Public roadmaps that outline reintegration stages, milestones, and consequences for delays enhance accountability. Regular progress reports that honestly acknowledge setbacks and achievements build trust more than unrealistic promises.

Complaints and appeals mechanisms must be accessible and transparent. Former combatants and local communities need clear channels to raise concerns about unfair treatment, with transparent procedures for investigation and resolution. Publishing anonymous summaries of complaints and their resolutions helps build confidence in the system's ability to address problems.

Communication strategies must ensure transparency for all stakeholders. This requires multiple channels, including radio programs in areas with limited internet access, social media for youth, community meetings for traditional communities, and written documentation. Information must be provided in all relevant languages and adapted to suit different literacy levels.

3.2 Justice and Reconciliation

Addressing Past Violations

Accountability for conflict-era violations is perhaps the most sensitive aspect of the reintegration process. We detailed this in [the Syrian Network for Human Rights' vision for transitional justice in Syria](#). Ignoring atrocities undermines the rule of law and victims' rights, but pursuing comprehensive prosecutions could derail fragile peace processes. Therefore, a nuanced approach that balances these tensions is crucial.

Differentiated accountability recognizes that not all violations are equal, and that perpetrators do not bear equal responsibility. Clear hierarchies of violations—from crimes against humanity to less serious violations of international law—can guide differentiated responses. Those bearing the greatest responsibility for systematic atrocities may face prosecution, while lower-level perpetrators may be eligible for alternative justice mechanisms.

Conditional amnesty programs, while controversial, may be necessary for certain categories of combatants. Such programs should not cover the most serious international crimes; rather, they may apply to ordinary combat activities or minor violations. Importantly, such amnesty should be conditional on full disclosure, participation in reconciliation processes, and guarantees of non-repetition. Victims should have meaningful input into the terms of amnesty.

Traditional justice mechanisms can complement formal legal proceedings. Many Syrian communities have customary dispute resolution systems that, while not appropriate for serious crimes, can address less serious grievances and facilitate reconciliation. Supporting and modernizing these mechanisms—while ensuring they respect human rights and are inclusive of women—offers additional avenues for addressing past wrongs.

Reparations programs acknowledge harm without requiring full criminal proceedings. These programs may include individual reparations for specific violations, collective reparations for affected communities, symbolic acknowledgments of suffering, and guaranteed services for victims. Linking participation in reintegration programs to a contribution to reparations—through community service or rebuilding efforts—can help transform perpetrators into contributors to recovery.

The timeframe for accountability must be carefully considered, and we have defined it in our vision to include violations committed between March 2011 and December 8, 2024. While justice requires addressing all violations, practical constraints require prioritization.

Community Reform and Healing Initiatives

Alongside formal justice mechanisms, community-based recovery initiatives are essential for repairing the social fabric torn apart by years of conflict. These initiatives must be designed and implemented locally, taking into account the diverse needs and capacities of communities for reconciliation.

Facilitated dialogue programs bring together former adversaries in structured settings that allow for the safe expression of grievances and the gradual building of relationships. These programs require skilled facilitators trained in conflict resolution and trauma awareness. Beginning with indirect dialogue—where parties communicate through intermediaries—can pave the way to face-to-face meetings. Success requires patience, as programs span months or years rather than expecting quick reconciliations.

Community rebuilding projects that bring together former adversaries in joint efforts can create practical cooperation that builds trust. Rebuilding schools destroyed during fighting, with the efforts of former combatants from diverse backgrounds, creates a shared investment in the future of the community. These projects must be carefully designed to ensure equal participation and prevent re-traumatization of victims forced to work alongside perpetrators.

Truth-telling forums allow communities to build shared narratives about their experiences. This may include public testimonies, community documentation projects, or artistic expressions of loss and hope. Creating safe spaces for multiple perspectives—including those of perpetrators expressing remorse—helps communities process trauma collectively rather than individually.

Youth programs deserve special attention because of their role in perpetuating or breaking cycles of conflict. Mixed youth groups, including children of victims and perpetrators, carefully facilitated to prevent re-traumatization, can build relationships that transcend divisions. Sports programs, arts collaborations, and educational initiatives also contribute to creating positive interactions that challenge inherited biases.

Women's reconciliation initiatives recognize their unique roles as victims and peacebuilders. Women's circles across conflict boundaries can address gender-related trauma while building reconciliation networks. Their roles as mothers and community leaders also give them a special influence in preventing or facilitating the reintegration of former combatants.

Mental health support must be a foundation for all community recovery initiatives. Training community leaders in basic psychosocial support, establishing referral networks for severe cases, and normalizing the discussion of trauma are all factors that help communities build resilience. Integrating mental health awareness into religious and cultural practices makes support more accessible in conservative communities.

Reform and Legal Frameworks

Developing appropriate legal frameworks for reintegration and reform requires balancing international obligations with local realities. These frameworks must be comprehensive enough to address complex situations, while remaining clear enough to ensure consistent implementation. These provisions may include temporary clauses allowing special arrangements for former combatants, guarantees of non-discrimination in government employment, and transitional justice frameworks. Constitutional legitimacy helps protect reintegration programs from legal challenges or political manipulation.

Legislative packages should address multiple aspects of reintegration within coherent frameworks. Laws regulating amnesty conditions, veterans' benefits for former combatants, property restitution for displacement victims, and amended criminal procedures for conflict-related cases need coordination. Partial legislation can create inconsistencies that lawyers can exploit to undermine reintegration.

Regulatory frameworks translate general legal principles into enforceable procedures. Detailed regulations governing audit procedures, eligibility for benefits, appeals processes, and coordination among stakeholders prevent arbitrary implementation. These regulations must be developed through transparent processes and take into account stakeholder input to ensure buy-in from implementing agencies.

Compliance with international law requires careful attention throughout the framework development process. Syria's obligations under international humanitarian law, human rights treaties, and UN conventions constitute standards within which domestic frameworks must operate. Early engagement with international legal experts helps design frameworks that meet international obligations and local needs.

Special judicial mechanisms may be necessary to address the volume and complexity of conflict-related cases. Specialized judicial chambers within existing courts, staffed by judges trained in international law and transitional justice, can develop expertise and enhance consistency. Mobile courts may be necessary to reach remote areas where former combatants are concentrated.

Legal aid programs for ex-combatants and victims ensure ease of navigating complex legal procedures. Many combatants lack the education necessary to understand their rights and obligations under the new frameworks. Providing accessible legal support—through legal aid programs as well as lawyers—helps prevent confusion and manipulation. Legal aid should include victims to ensure their rights are protected throughout reintegration processes.

3.3 Security Sector Reform

Unified Command Structure

- Building an effective unified command structure across multiple armed groups requires careful institutional design that balances integration with effectiveness. This transition must be gradual enough to build trust and rapid enough to prevent the entrenchment of parallel structures.
- Integration should begin with joint operations centers, where representatives from various groups coordinate activities while maintaining a separate chain of command. These centers enable practical cooperation in addressing immediate security challenges, such as the threat from ISIS or criminal networks such as the remnants of the Assad regime, while building working relationships. Success in joint operations creates momentum for deeper integration.
- Unified command structures must be built systematically from the bottom up rather than imposed from the top. Starting with mixed platoons in less sensitive areas, successful units can be scaled up to company and battalion levels, all the way up to brigades. Each level requires modified command arrangements to reflect the increasing complexity. This bottom-up approach creates proven models rather than theoretical structures.

- New military doctrines must bring together valuable expertise from across the spectrum, while establishing professional standards. Establishing doctrine development committees that include representatives from diverse backgrounds ensures a comprehensive approach that values diverse expertise.
- Communications systems require standardization to enable unified command. Various groups currently use incompatible radio systems, encryption methods, and operational languages. Technical standardization must be coupled with language training to ensure all forces can communicate effectively. This includes not only Arabic but also Kurdish and other minority languages in appropriate contexts.
- Unifying military ranks presents delicate challenges due to the different classification systems of military groups and the political implications of the military hierarchy. Establishing parity scales that account for different types of military experience, while establishing clear authority relationships, requires extensive negotiations. Temporary dual rank systems may be necessary during transition periods, during which officers retain their original ranks and new positions in the unified system.
- Regional leadership must carefully balance representation with effectiveness. While mixed units are essential for integration, leadership positions must ensure that no single ethnic or political group dominates particular areas. This may require innovative arrangements, such as rotating leadership or ensuring minority deputy positions in their regions.

Professional Standards

- Establishing professional military standards represents both a technical necessity and a cultural shift. Forces accustomed to irregular warfare, political loyalty, and limited accountability must adopt the basic professional standards of legitimate state forces.
- Professional military education programs should be comprehensive and mandatory for all ranks. These programs should not only cover tactical skills but also include ethics, the law of armed conflict, civil-military relations, and human rights. Establishing military academies that bring together officers from diverse backgrounds for broad-based training contributes to building skills and relationships.
- Codes of conduct must be established and consistently applied. These codes should address conduct on and off duty, setting standards for the treatment of civilians, the handling of detainees, and personal conduct. Clear disciplinary procedures, applied fairly across all backgrounds, enhance confidence in professional standards.

- Technical standardization extends beyond weapons to encompass all aspects of military operations. Standard operating procedures for checkpoints, searches, detention, and the use of force must be developed and trained globally. These procedures should incorporate best practices from various entities while adhering to international standards. Regular exercises that bring together forces from diverse backgrounds reinforce unified approaches.
- Professional development systems should provide opportunities for career advancement based on merit, not political loyalty or group membership. Transparent promotion boards with diverse members, clear criteria for career advancement, and regular performance evaluations contribute to building a professional culture. Educational achievements, technical competence, and leadership effectiveness should determine career paths, not party affiliations.
- International training partnerships can accelerate professionalization by introducing Syrian forces to established military traditions. Carefully selected partner nations can provide training in specific areas—such as counterterrorism, peacekeeping, and logistics—that complement local programs. These partnerships must be balanced to avoid reliance on any single foreign military tradition.
- Ethics training deserves special attention given the history of violations by all sides. In addition to legal compliance, forces require a deep ethical education that establishes internal controls against violations. This may include partnerships with religious leaders, philosophical discussions on just war principles, and case studies of ethical dilemmas in military operations.

Civilian Control

Establishing effective civilian control over integrated military forces is essential to preventing future coups or military domination of politics. This requires institutional mechanisms and cultural change within military forces accustomed to operating independently.

- Parliamentary oversight committees with effective powers should be established, including the authority to investigate military activities, approve budgets, and confirm senior appointments. These committees need a diverse membership that reflects the affiliations and technical expertise of Syrian communities to effectively address military issues. Regular public hearings on military affairs, within appropriate security constraints, also enhance transparency.
- The structures of the Ministry of Defense require careful design to ensure civilian control by the presidency. A clear separation between civilian policymaking and military implementation must be established, with mechanisms for civilian oversight of military activities.

- Independent oversight bodies complement parliamentary oversight by providing specialized monitoring of sensitive issues. Human rights ombudsmen empowered to investigate alleged violations, inspectors general who monitor financial integrity, and civilian review boards for detention centers provide multiple channels of accountability. These bodies require independent budgets and protection from military interference.
- Involving civil society in security sector governance contributes to public accountability for military forces. Regular consultations with human rights organizations, policy research centers, and community bodies ensure a diversity of perspectives influence security policies. Establishing formal consultative mechanisms that enable civil society to systematically contribute to military policy enhances legitimacy.
- Freedom of the media to cover military affairs, within reasonable security constraints, establishes the principle of public accountability. Training journalists on responsible security reporting, establishing clear operational security guidelines, and establishing a system of military spokespersons that provide accurate information contributes to balancing transparency with security needs. Protecting journalists who investigate military misconduct is essential.
- Budget transparency and civilian financial oversight prevent military forces from developing independent resource bases that enable them to be autonomous. Detailed military budgets subject to parliamentary approval, periodic audits by civilian bodies, and restrictions on military commercial activities ensure financial subordination to civilian authorities. Such financial oversight represents one of the most effective tools for maintaining civilian sovereignty.

3.4 Economic Integration

Job Creation Programs

The enormous challenge of providing alternative livelihoods for hundreds of thousands of former combatants requires comprehensive **job creation strategies** that go beyond traditional employment programs. These reform initiatives must create real economic opportunities that provide dignity and sufficient income to compete with continued military service.

- Public works programs focused on reconstruction provide immediate job opportunities while simultaneously rebuilding Syria's destroyed infrastructure. Former combatants can be organized into construction teams to work on roads, schools, hospitals, and housing. These programs should not only provide employment opportunities but also include training in construction skills, contributing to the transfer of expertise to civilians. Incorporating workers from various armed groups into reconstruction units can also enhance practical cooperation and prevent any group from dominating specific projects.

- Agricultural rehabilitation programs can absorb large numbers of rural fighters, while restoring Syria's food production capacity. These programs may include land reclamation, repairing irrigation systems, and establishing agricultural cooperatives that provide equipment and marketing support. Former fighters can receive grants or loans to establish farms, along with technical training in modern agricultural methods. Given the rural origins of many fighters, agricultural programs provide culturally appropriate transition opportunities.
- Small and medium-sized enterprise development targeting former combatants can provide sustainable employment opportunities beyond direct programs. Providing microfinance, business training, and mentoring helps combatants establish businesses ranging from workshops to retail stores. Group projects that bring together former adversaries in business partnerships can build economic incentives for cooperation. Success requires not only initial capital but also sustained support through business development services.
- Industrial rehabilitation provides opportunities for combatants to transition into productive industrial jobs. As factories are rebuilt, targeted employment programs can ensure that former combatants find industrial jobs. This requires coordination with private sector employers, who may be reluctant to employ former combatants. Tax incentives, wage subsidies during training periods, and security guarantees can encourage private sector participation.
- The expansion of the service sector, particularly in security fields where military experience is an advantage, offers additional opportunities. Private security companies staffed by experienced ex-combatants can provide legitimate employment opportunities while leveraging military skills. Similarly, emergency services, firefighting, and civil defense organizations can absorb ex-combatants into paramilitary structures that meet civilian needs.
- Green economy initiatives represent future opportunities that can attract international support. Renewable energy projects, environmental restoration programs, and climate adaptation programs provide new job opportunities without any historical barriers. Training former fighters as solar panel installers, wind turbine technicians, or environmental monitors provides skills for emerging economies while contributing to sustainable development in Syria.

Skills Training

- Comprehensive skills training programs should transform combatants with limited civilian experience into productive members of the economy. These programs must be practical, accessible, and aligned with actual labor market needs, not just theoretical possibilities.
- Literacy and basic education programs address significant gaps that prevent many fighters from accessing other opportunities. Years of conflict have interrupted the education of many who joined armed groups in their youth. Accelerated learning programs that respect the dignity of adults and address educational gaps are therefore crucial. These may include evening classes, mobile learning modules that reach remote areas, and digital learning platforms accessible via smartphones.
- Market-aligned vocational training requires a careful analysis of economic opportunities. Training fighters in outdated skills wastes resources and causes frustration. Periodic labor market assessments, which identify growth sectors, should guide program design. Partnerships with employers committed to hiring program graduates clearly pave the way for the transition from training to employment.
- Digital skills training prepares former combatants for modern, increasingly technology-driven economies. Basic computer skills, mobile phone repair, social media marketing, and basic programming skills are all opening up new opportunities in Syria's growing digital sector. Online job platforms allow skilled individuals to access global markets, providing income opportunities that transcend local constraints.
- Entrepreneurship training goes beyond business fundamentals to address the psychological transition from a military to a civilian mindset. Former combatants often struggle to adapt to civilian workplace cultures after years of working within hierarchical military structures. Programs should focus on communication skills, nonviolent conflict resolution, and adapting to civilian power structures. Mentorship from successful business owners who are themselves former combatants can serve as role models.
- Certification and accreditation systems ensure that training translates into employability. Recognized certifications for various skills, which may be supported by international organizations, help ex-combatants demonstrate their competencies to skeptical employers. Establishing equivalency systems that recognize military experience with relevant civilian credentials—such as logistics experience that counts toward supply chain certifications—values military service and facilitates transitions.
- Continuous Learning Support recognizes that individual training programs are rarely sufficient for career transition. Providing career counseling services, refresher training opportunities, and professional development programs helps ex-combatants advance beyond their entry-level positions. This sustained support prevents the frustration that can drive them to return to military activities when initial opportunities are insufficient.

Supporting Ex-Combatants

In addition to employment and training, comprehensive support systems address the multiple challenges faced by ex-combatants as they transition to civilian life. These systems must be sustainable, accessible, and responsive to diverse needs.

- Financial assistance during transition periods prevents desperate choices driven by immediate needs. Monthly stipends, conditional on participation in training or job-search activities, provide an opportunity for adaptation. These payments should be sufficient to support families, but limited in time to encourage effective transitions. Payment mechanisms should be transparent and accessible, with the potential for mobile payment systems to reach remote areas and limit opportunities for corruption.
- Providing healthcare, including specialized combat trauma care and mental health services, addresses immediate needs while demonstrating community commitment to former combatants. Many combatants suffer from chronic illnesses resulting from injuries or exposure to harsh conditions, limiting their options for civilian employment. Establishing specialized clinics staffed with personnel trained in combat trauma care ensures appropriate care. Mental health services must be stigma-free and culturally appropriate, potentially integrating religious guidance for conservative communities.
- Housing assistance helps former combatants build stable civilian lives. Many combatants lost their homes during the conflict or never established independent families. Programs may include housing support in mixed communities that prevent settlement in slums, or assistance in purchasing a home conditioned on maintaining a civilian job. Stable housing provides the foundation for other aspects of civilian integration.
- Family support services recognize that successful reintegration depends on family acceptance and stability. Programs that support spouses' economic activities ensure that family income does not depend solely on former combatants. Support for children's education addresses the intergenerational effects of military service. Family counseling helps address family tensions caused by the stresses of reintegration. These services should include families of deceased combatants, who may compel survivors to continue fighting.
- Legal aid helps ex-combatants navigate complex legal situations in the post-conflict period. Many face property disputes, documentation issues, or legal consequences arising from actions committed during the conflict. Providing accessible legal aid helps resolve these issues without resorting to violence or continued reliance on the protection of armed groups. Legal aid programs that train ex-combatants to assist their peers can multiply their impact by providing employment opportunities.

- Peer support networks formalize mutual assistance among ex-combatants transitioning together. Regular meetings facilitated by trained counselors allow for the exchange of experiences and solutions. Successful transitions can also mentor new participants. These networks should expand across former enemy lines whenever possible to build peace through shared experiences in civil adaptation. Digital platforms enable geographically dispersed networks to connect, which is crucial for isolated individuals.

3.5 International Support

Technical Assistance

- International technical support can accelerate Syrian reintegration efforts by sharing global expertise while respecting Syrian ownership of the process. This assistance must be carefully structured to strengthen rather than replace local capacities.
- Sharing comparative experiences from other post-conflict societies offers valuable lessons, taking into account the unique Syrian context. Countries such as Colombia, Northern Ireland, and Sierra Leone offer different models for reintegrating combatants, with varying degrees of success. Study visits, expert exchanges, and detailed case study analysis help Syrian planners understand the available options while avoiding the mistakes of others. Such exchanges should include not only government officials but also civil society representatives and former combatant leaders, who can assess their suitability for implementation.
- Experience in security sector reform helps design institutional frameworks that balance integration with effectiveness. International experts can assist in developing unified command structures, professional standards, and civilian oversight mechanisms appropriate to the Syrian context. This support should include developing a theoretical framework and assisting with practical implementation. Embedded advisors who work alongside their Syrian counterparts for long periods are more effective than short-term consultations.
- Technical support for disarmament and demobilization addresses the practical challenges related to weapons collection and combatant registration. International organizations with expertise in disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration can provide secure weapons storage solutions, biometric registration systems that prevent multiple registrations, and database management to ensure comprehensive tracking. This technical infrastructure should be transferred to Syrian control with appropriate training, rather than remaining under international management.

- Legal and judicial expertise contribute to developing frameworks that balance justice and reconciliation. International legal experts can assist in drafting legislation that complies with international standards while maintaining its applicability in Syrian contexts. Supporting the establishment of special judicial mechanisms, training judges in transitional justice, and developing case management systems also contributes to addressing the volume of legal cases related to conflicts.
- Developing training capacity ensures that Syrian institutions can continue reintegration efforts independently. Rather than providing direct training to all former combatants, international support should focus on training Syrian trainers capable of continuing programs indefinitely. This includes developing curricula, training methodology, and establishing training institutions. Master trainer programs generate multiplier effects that go beyond initial international investments.
- Monitoring and evaluation systems designed with international support and implemented by Syrians ensure that programs achieve their intended impact. Establishing baseline data, developing indicators to measure outputs and outcomes, and establishing feedback mechanisms for program adjustments requires technical expertise that many post-conflict communities lack. Building Syrian capacity in evidence-based program management ensures continuous improvement beyond international intervention.

Financing Mechanisms

- Mobilizing and effectively distributing the billions required for comprehensive reintegration requires innovative financing mechanisms that ensure resources reach the intended beneficiaries while maintaining accountability.
- Multi-donor trust funds pool resources from diverse international sources while providing standardized governance structures. These funds can reduce transaction costs, ensure coordinated approaches, and provide more predictable funding compared to bilateral arrangements. Governance structures should balance donor oversight with Syrian leadership, perhaps through Syrian-majority boards that grant donors veto power over financial decisions. Clear frameworks for fund management, procurement procedures, and audit requirements also enhance donor confidence while respecting sovereignty.
- Direct financial support to Syrian institutions implementing reintegration programs provides maximum flexibility and accountability. This requires robust financial management systems and periodic audits to ensure donor confidence. Gradual increases in budget support ratios, along with demonstrating the capacity of Syrian systems, enhance progress while maintaining safeguards. Budget support should be accompanied by technical assistance to strengthen public financial management.

- Results-based financing links funding disbursements to the achievement of agreed-upon objectives, rather than simply expenditures. Programs may receive initial funding to establish a program, then receive additional disbursements based on the number of people successfully reintegrated, job opportunities created, or communities reconciled. This approach incentivizes effectiveness while allowing for flexibility in implementation. Care must be taken to avoid inappropriate incentives that prioritize quantity over quality or exclude difficult cases.
- Engaging the local private sector through blended finance mechanisms leverages limited public resources. Guarantees for companies employing ex-combatants, subsidized loans for businesses in conflict-affected areas, and risk insurance for investments in reintegration programs can help mobilize private capital. Development finance institutions can also provide sustainable capital for long-term investments in economic reintegration. Creating investment vehicles specifically focused on economic reintegration helps channel diaspora resources.
- Community-based funding directs resources directly to the local levels where reintegration takes place. Small grants provided to community-based organizations implementing reconciliation programs, local economic development initiatives, including those targeting ex-combatants, or social services that support reintegration can be more effective than large, centralized programs. These mechanisms require streamlined procedures made available by community-based organizations while maintaining adequate oversight.
- Innovative financing mechanisms, such as peace bonds and diaspora bonds, can mobilize additional resources. Syrian diaspora communities may purchase bonds to finance reconstruction and reintegration at below-market returns, as a form of national investment. Carbon credits from environmental programs that employ former combatants can generate sustainable financing. These innovations require careful structuring to ensure their legitimacy and effectiveness.

Monitoring and Evaluation

- Strong monitoring and evaluation systems ensure **that international support achieves the desired impact**, while identifying necessary adjustments. These systems must balance accountability requirements **with avoiding excessive bureaucracy that hinders implementation**.

- Independent monitoring bodies, comprising international and Syrian members, provide reliable oversight while building local capacity. These bodies should have access to program sites, the authority to interview beneficiaries in strict confidence, and the resources to conduct investigations. Regular public reporting ensures transparency while protecting sensitive security information. Rotating international members prevents capture while preserving institutional memory.
- Real-time data collection using digital technologies enables rapid program adjustments. Mobile surveys of former combatants, tablet data collection at program sites, and automated analysis systems provide continuous feedback. These systems must protect individual privacy while generating actionable insights. Building Syrian capacity to manage sophisticated surveillance systems ensures sustainability beyond international intervention.
- Impact evaluation goes beyond simply measuring outcomes; it assesses the extent to which programs achieve their transformative goals. Longitudinal studies that follow ex-combatants over time determine the sustainability of initial gains. Community surveys assess the impact of reintegration on security and social cohesion. Economic analysis examines broader development impacts. These evaluations require sophisticated methodologies, but they provide essential lessons for program improvement.
- Participatory evaluation methods involve beneficiaries in assessing program effectiveness. Ex-combatants can identify issues overlooked by external evaluators and suggest practical improvements. Community members can assess the extent to which reintegration programs address their security concerns. This participation improves evaluation quality and enhances stakeholder accountability for outcomes. Training local evaluators in participatory methods contributes to building sustainable capacity.
- Learning and adaptation mechanisms ensure that evaluation findings translate into program improvements. Regular review meetings are held, bringing together implementers, evaluators, and stakeholders to identify necessary adjustments. Learning processes are documented and provide insights for future programs. Flexibility in program design allows for evidence-based adjustments rather than strict adherence to initial plans. Building organizational cultures that value learning rather than blame encourages honest evaluation.
- Regional and international learning networks share Syrian experiences while making global knowledge available. Participation in international communities of practice focused on disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR), security sector reform, and post-conflict reconstruction provides access to cutting-edge best practices. Syrian contributions to these networks, based on unique experiences, help other communities while building international recognition of Syrian expertise. These exchanges should be reciprocal, rather than limiting Syria to a knowledge recipient.

IV. Consequences of Failed Reintegration

Failure to reintegrate Syrian armed groups will generate new cycles of instability with dire consequences for Syria and the region as a whole. Understanding these potential outcomes is crucial to understanding why reintegration, despite its enormous challenges, remains a key priority.

Continued Fragmentation and Conflict

Failure to achieve reintegration will entrench Syria's territorial and military fragmentation. Without successful integration into unified national forces, armed groups will maintain their independent military capabilities, territorial control, and sources of income, effectively creating multiple competing power centers within Syria.

This fragmentation goes beyond mere administrative divisions. Each armed group will continue to develop its own governance systems, economic networks, and international relations, gradually transforming into armed entities outside the state framework. The multiplicity of armed forces will inevitably lead to continued military confrontations. Competition over resources—whether border crossings, oil fields, or agricultural land—will lead to regular clashes. These conflicts may remain local at first, but they can escalate into broader confrontations, especially when supported by external powers pursuing their own agendas.

Moreover, the failure of reintegration will create security vacuums that extremist groups could exploit. ISIS and similar groups thrive in disputed areas where no one group controls the other. The persistence of fragmented authority will provide these groups with operational space to rebuild their ranks, recruit, and launch attacks. The desert areas between competing areas of control will become a safe haven for criminal networks and terrorist cells, creating chronic security threats that no group can effectively address.

The psychological impact of the division cannot be underestimated, as the identities of the region's residents are shaped by the faction controlling their area. This generational entrenchment of the division will make future reconciliation more difficult, as young people who grew up in factional contexts will lack any experience of a unified Syria.

Undermining State Legitimacy

Failure to establish a monopoly on legitimate power—a fundamental characteristic of a modern state—would undermine the credibility of any Syrian government. A state that cannot control its territory, secure its borders, or protect its citizens lacks the basic elements of sovereignty, and this legitimacy crisis will manifest in multiple, interconnected ways.

- **At the local level**, citizens will continue to rely on armed groups rather than the state to provide security, services, and resolve conflicts. Why pay taxes to a government that cannot protect us when a local armed group provides more effective governance? This dynamic creates a vicious cycle: as citizens withdraw the state's legitimacy, its capacity weakens further, pushing more people to rely on non-state actors. The state becomes just one actor among many.
- **Internationally**, other states will continue to engage directly with any armed group controlling territory or relevant resources, further undermining the authority of the central government.

Communities that have suffered under the yoke of various armed groups will view any government unable to control these forces as complicit in ongoing abuses.

Economic Stagnation

Failure to achieve reintegration will condemn Syria to an economic deficit, preventing the reconstruction and development necessary for recovery. The continued presence of multiple competing authorities will also make integrated economic planning impossible, as each armed group will pursue its own economic policies in the areas under its control.

The fragmentation of the economic space poses significant obstacles to recovery. Businesses cannot operate efficiently when they must negotiate with different parties to transport goods between Syrian regions. Furthermore, the transportation costs imposed by multiple checkpoints—each of which imposes a fee—make local trade unfeasible for many products.

Foreign investment, essential for reconstruction, will remain minimal in such an environment. No serious investor will invest their resources in a country where property rights depend on whichever armed group controls an area, and that control could change violently. The legal uncertainty alone—which laws apply, which courts have jurisdiction, and which currency is used—creates risks that only the most exploitative investors would accept. These are often entities focused on resource extraction rather than sustainable development, further damaging Syria's economic prospects.

The war economy that has emerged around armed groups will be permanently entrenched. Leaders who have amassed wealth through taxing checkpoints, smuggling, and protection rackets will have no incentive to support transitions that would eliminate these sources of income. This criminalized economy crowds out legitimate state businesses, as entrepreneurs cannot compete with armed actors who use violence to maintain their market monopolies. Young Syrians will continue to view joining armed groups as the most viable economic opportunity, perpetuating cycles of violence.

Regional Instability

The continued fragmentation of Syria could inflame an already volatile region. The continued presence of multiple armed groups with external support could turn Syria into a permanent battleground for regional rivalries, with dire consequences for neighboring countries and the stability of the Middle East as a whole.

Border security will remain complex, with various armed groups controlling multiple crossing points. These gaps allow for a constant flow of weapons, fighters, and extremists across the border. Regional powers will deepen their involvement in Syria, rather than reduce it.

V. Recommendations:

The following recommendations by the Syrian Network for Human Rights stem from an analysis of the challenges and opportunities facing the reintegration of armed groups in Syria. These proposals are designed to be practical and comprehensive, taking into account that successful reintegration requires coordinated efforts among various stakeholders.

To the Syrian government:

- **Establish an inclusive national reintegration committee:** The Syrian authorities should establish a high-level committee comprising representatives from all major armed groups, civil society, religious leaders, women's organizations, youth representatives, and victims' groups. This committee should have the authority to design and oversee the reintegration process. Its composition should reflect Syria's diversity, with transparent selection processes and rotation of leadership positions to prevent the dominance of any one group over another. The committee should be empowered to make decisions on reintegration frameworks, timelines, and resource allocation.
- **Establishing a legal framework for reform and reintegration:** Priority should be given to drafting and adopting legislation that addresses aspects of reintegration within a coherent framework. This includes laws regulating conditional amnesties (except for atrocity crimes), veterans' benefits for reintegrated fighters, property restitution mechanisms, and revised judicial procedures for conflict-related cases. The framework must be consistent with international humanitarian law while remaining practical under Syrian circumstances. Broad consultation during drafting, including with armed groups and local communities, will enhance its legitimacy and enforceability.

- **Establishing hybrid operational units as a confidence-building measure:** Initiate integration through joint operations against common threats, such as ISIS remnants, the Assad regime, or criminal networks. These hybrid units, which bring together fighters from diverse backgrounds under a unified command, can demonstrate the practical benefits of cooperation. Start with less sensitive operations in neutral areas before expanding to more complex missions. Document and publicize successes to build momentum for broader integration. Ensure equitable representation in leadership positions and equal access to resources among participating groups.
- **Establish transparent vetting and accountability mechanisms:** Design vetting procedures that monitor serious violations while avoiding collective punishment or political persecution. Establish mixed vetting committees that include representatives from various armed groups, civil society monitors, and technical experts. Publish clear criteria and establish appeal mechanisms. Link vetting to accountability processes that differentiate levels of responsibility and types of violations. Those who committed less serious violations should be offered alternative justice mechanisms, such as community service, rather than being excluded from reintegration.
- **Prioritize economic reintegration:** Recognize that without economic alternatives, combatants will not be demobilized sustainably. Launch immediate public works programs focused on reconstruction, which can generate significant employment while building peace dividends. Establish partnerships with the private sector to create jobs and provide incentives to businesses that employ qualified ex-combatants. Establish entrepreneurship programs with available microfinance and sustainable business support. Ensure economic programs are equitably distributed across former conflict zones and frontlines.
- **Building professional military educational institutions:** Establishing military academies and training centers that bring together officers from diverse backgrounds for comprehensive professional development. Developing a unified military doctrine that integrates valuable expertise from various ranks while adhering to professional standards. Making graduation from these institutions mandatory for advancement, this contributes to building shared corporate cultures. This includes intensive training in ethics, international humanitarian law, and principles of civilian protection. Collaborating with international military educational institutions to develop curricula and train instructors.

- **Implementing gradual geographic integration:** Avoid complete separation or imposing immediate full integration. Develop a gradual plan that begins with joint operations in neutral areas, progresses to mixed units in less contested areas, and ultimately achieves full geographic integration. Each phase should include clear benchmarks for progress and mechanisms for addressing problems. Ensure that no single ethnic or political group dominates any area, taking into account community security concerns during transitional phases.
- **Addressing psychosocial needs holistically:** Recognizing that psychological trauma affects both combatants and communities, requiring systematic support for successful reintegration. Training religious and community leaders on basic psychosocial support. Establishing referral networks for severe cases requiring professional intervention. Integrating mental health aspects into all reintegration programs rather than treating it as a separate issue. Addressing social stigma through public awareness campaigns that promote psychological support as a strength, not a weakness.
- **Ensuring Women’s Effective Participation:** Go beyond token representation to ensure women’s substantive influence in reintegration processes. This includes female fighters who require special reintegration support, female community leaders who shape local programs, and women’s organizations that monitor implementation to prevent gender-based violence. Providing safe spaces for women to express their concerns about security arrangements. Ensuring that economic programs consider the needs of female fighters’ families, who often bear the hidden burdens of conflict.
- **Developing effective civilian oversight mechanisms:** Establish parliamentary committees with effective powers over military affairs, including budget approval and the appointment of senior officials. Establish independent oversight bodies to monitor human rights, financial integrity, and detention facilities. Ensure media freedom to cover security issues within reasonable operational constraints. Build civil society capacity to participate in security governance through training and resource support. These mechanisms must be effective—the power to investigate, expose problems, and impose corrective actions.

For the International Community

- **Coordinating Diplomatic Action for Comprehensive Processes:** Major powers and regional states must align their diplomacy to support genuine reintegration, rather than pursuing narrow factional interests. This requires difficult compromises, as international actors pressure their local allies to engage constructively. Establish international contact groups to coordinate diplomatic messages and prevent armed groups from exploiting external powers against each other. Emphasize that international recognition and support depend on comprehensive reintegration, not on a factional victory.
- **Providing sustainable technical assistance:** Committing to long-term technical support that builds Syrian capacity rather than creating dependency. Engaging international experts in Syrian institutions for long periods rather than relying on short-term consultancies. Focusing on training trainers and building institutions that can continue after the end of international intervention. Sharing comparative experiences from other contexts while respecting Syrian responsibility for adaptation. Ensuring that technical assistance covers all aspects, from weapons management to financial systems to psychosocial support.
- **Establishing protection mechanisms for the reintegration process:** The international community should ensure the security of reintegration processes by monitoring their presence and the consequences of violations. This could include the presence of international monitors in key locations, rapid response mechanisms to address threats to participants, and clear consequences for actors who attempt to obstruct reintegration through violence. This protection should be temporary and transitional, enhancing Syrians' ability to ultimately provide for their own security.
- **Addressing regional security concerns constructively:** Regional powers have security concerns that must be addressed in the reintegration process. Initiate regional security dialogues that develop mutual confidence-building measures. Design reintegration processes that prevent armed groups from threatening neighboring countries while respecting Syrian sovereignty. This may include border control mechanisms and restrictions on the deployment areas of certain units.
- **Supporting transitional justice mechanisms:** International support for documenting, investigating, and prosecuting the most serious crimes contributes to breaking the cycle of impunity, while avoiding fragile and cumbersome transitions. This includes funding for evidence preservation, technical support for special judicial mechanisms, and legal training. International actors should resist pressure for blanket amnesties, while remaining realistic about overall restrictions on prosecution. Alternative justice mechanisms that meet international standards while taking into account local contexts should also be supported.

- **Facilitating the return of refugees and internally displaced persons, taking into account reintegration:** Displaced Syrians cannot return to areas controlled by hostile armed groups.
- **Maintaining the arms embargo on non-state groups:** As the reintegration process progresses, a strict embargo must be enforced to prevent the flow of weapons to groups outside official procedures. This requires strengthening border controls, sharing intelligence on arms smuggling, and holding accountable states that facilitate violations. At the same time, monitored military assistance must be provided to the transitional government forces.
- **Independently support Syrian civil society:** Maintaining direct support for Syrian civil society organizations working on reintegration issues contributes to ensuring accountability, providing alternative perspectives, and protecting civic space. Support should be flexible and responsive to civil society priorities, rather than imposing international agendas. Building a strong civil society contributes to sustainable monitoring and advocacy that goes beyond international intervention.

For Civil Society Organizations

- **Bridging the Gap Through Sustainable Dialogue Initiatives:** Develop long-term dialogue programs that create safe spaces for expressing grievances and building relationships. Start with indirect dialogue through mediators before moving to face-to-face meetings.
- **Monitoring and documenting reintegration processes:** Establishing independent monitoring initiatives that track reintegration implementation, identify problems early, and recommend appropriate solutions.
- **Advocating for Victims' Rights:** Ensure that reintegration processes do not prioritize the needs of combatants over victims' rights and community safety. Amplify the voices of those affected by armed group violence who might otherwise be marginalized. Advocate for effective reparations, recognition of suffering, and guarantees of non-repetition. Reject proposals that sacrifice justice for expedient political bargains. Provide platforms for victims to safely express their views on acceptable reintegration arrangements.

- **Providing direct services to support recovery and reintegration:** Providing practical services that may be overlooked by government and international programs. This includes psychosocial support using culturally appropriate methods, legal assistance in navigating complex reintegration procedures, and economic support for community-based reintegration initiatives. Focusing on gaps and vulnerable populations overlooked by larger programs. Building referral networks that connect beneficiaries to comprehensive support beyond the capacity of individual organizations.
- **Building social cohesion through community initiatives:** Designing programs that bring together diverse communities through shared activities. Rebuilding community facilities with a mixed workforce, organizing youth sports leagues with integrated teams, and establishing women's economic cooperatives that transcend conflict boundaries. These practical cooperatives build relationships that support broader reintegration.
- **Countering hate speech and discrimination:** Combating rhetoric that collectively demonizes former combatants or incites retaliation against specific groups. Launch public awareness campaigns that humanize former combatants while acknowledging their legitimate grievances. Collaborate with religious leaders to promote tolerance based on spiritual traditions. Monitor and counter hate speech on social media that could incite violence. Build cultures that enable atonement while maintaining accountability.
- **Promoting women's participation and protection:** Ensuring that women's perspectives influence the design and implementation of reintegration programs. This includes supporting women's organizations to participate in security discussions that have traditionally been dominated by men. Addressing the specific needs of female ex-combatants who face double stigma. Monitoring reintegration processes to avoid risks of gender-based violence and advocating for preventive measures. Building women's economic empowerment as a foundation for sustainable peace.
- **Establishing platforms for youth engagement:** Recognizing that young people have disproportionately participated in combat and should be central to reintegration. Establish youth forums that voice their specific concerns and aspirations. Design programs that address the educational gaps of young ex-combatants and their identity-building needs. Create positive leadership opportunities for youth that utilize their energies constructively. Bridging the gaps between young people who have fought on different fronts through joint, future-oriented activities.

- **Developing local conflict resolution mechanisms:** Strengthening traditional and innovative local mechanisms for resolving conflicts arising from reintegration. Training community leaders in mediation skills appropriate to post-conflict contexts. Establishing local peace committees with diverse membership and real authority. Establishing early warning systems to identify emerging conflicts before they escalate. These mechanisms provide available alternatives to violence to address inevitable tensions.
- **Building networks for sustainable engagement:** Establish alliances of civil society organizations working on various aspects of reintegration to share experiences and coordinate advocacy efforts. Involve organizations from different regions and communities to ensure a diversity of perspectives. Develop common positions on key reintegration policies while respecting the autonomy of organizations. These networks provide political protection for individual organizations and enhance impact through collective action.

For Donors and Development Partners

- **Commit to Flexible and Long-Term Funding:** Recognize that reintegration is a long-term process, requiring sustained support beyond traditional project cycles. Enhance flexibility to adapt to changing contexts, rather than rigidly adhering to initial designs. Accept higher risk tolerance in a complex environment, while maintaining appropriate fiduciary safeguards. Fund process support and institutional development, not just direct programming.
- **Prioritizing Syrian ownership and capacity:** Structuring support to build Syrian institutions and expertise rather than parallel international systems. Channeling increasing proportions of support through Syrian organizations that demonstrate their capabilities. Investing in developing Syrian cadres rather than relying on international cadres. Supporting South-South learning that positions Syria as a knowledge producer, not a mere recipient. Ensuring sustainability planning from the outset, not as an afterthought.

- **Coordinating donor approaches:** Establish formal donor coordination mechanisms that go beyond information sharing to include joint strategic planning. Develop common frameworks for reintegration support, which individual donors can adapt to rather than creating competing systems. Pool funding for key initiatives that require a scope beyond the capacity of individual donors. Standardize reporting requirements to ease administrative burdens on Syrian partners. Resist the temptation to create donor-specific programs that fragment Syrian capacities.
- **Investing in Economic Transformation:** Recognizing that sustainable reintegration requires economic opportunities beyond traditional assistance programs. Supporting market development initiatives that create large-scale jobs. Investing in infrastructure that enables economic integration across former conflict lines. Supporting private sector development with patient capital and risk mitigation. Focusing on economic sectors with growth potential rather than ghost work programs. Linking economic assistance to reintegration progress without creating perverse incentives.
- **Strengthening monitoring and evaluation systems:** Supporting longitudinal studies that track reintegration impacts over time. Building Syrian capacity on advanced evaluation methods. Ensuring that evaluation findings translate into program improvements through adaptive management.
- **Preparing for setbacks while maintaining commitment:** Recognizing that reintegration will face crises and setbacks that require consistent support rather than withdrawal. Develop contingency plans for various scenarios, including renewed conflict, political unrest, or economic downturn.

VI. Conclusion:

- Successful reintegration of Syrian armed groups would open transformative prospects that go far beyond security improvements. While the road ahead remains difficult, developing a vision for what can be achieved through reintegration is a key driver of this difficult work.
- A unified Syrian army, emerging from successful reintegration, would restore the state's fundamental ability to provide security for all its citizens, regardless of their background, and enable normal lives—children walking safely to school, businesses operating without extortion, and families planning for their futures without fear of displacement.
- National reconciliation, built through reform and reintegration processes, will begin to heal wounds. While complete tolerance for the most serious violations may remain impossible, establishing frameworks for accountability, acknowledgment, and the gradual rebuilding of relationships prevents cycles of revenge from blighting Syria's future. Communities that learn to live together despite past conflicts build resilience against future manipulation by those seeking to exploit divisions.
- Restoring Syria as a sovereign state capable of governing its territory would restore its standing within regional and international systems. This would enable it to participate in international trade, access development financing, and contribute to regional stability. A stable Syria would be able to reclaim its historical role as a bridge between regions and cultures.

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