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Welcome to the November issue of Syria in Transition, a monthly magazine on Syrian politics and society that cuts through the noise. SiT goes straight to the point and shuns unnecessary verbiage – just as we would prefer as avid readers ourselves.

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Arabs of the North, unite!

As war exposes the Gulf's vulnerabilities, Iraq and Syria have an opening. Seizing it will require binding economic ties and a political accommodation across the sectarian divide



In Seven *Pillars of Wisdom*, T.E. Lawrence described the Arabian Peninsula's conveyor belt. Population pressure pushed weaker clans from the highlands of Yemen into the deserts of Najd and the Hijaz and drove them northwards, towards the river valleys and fertile plains of Iraq and Syria. There, herders became farmers and joined the settled populations whose lives the new arrivals would disturb.

This centuries-old south to north traffic ended with oil. From the 1950s, the Arabs of the north began travelling south in search of work, as their teachers, engineers, doctors and businessmen helped build Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states whose wealth would soon dwarf that of their homelands. Iraq and Syria, meanwhile, were progressively wrecked by coups, dictatorship, wars, foreign occupation and terrorism, while the Arabs of the south, with the sole exception of Yemen, accumulated wealth and influence, and increasingly determined what passed for an 'Arab position'. Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 gave this southern ambition its fullest expression, promising international stature and prosperity beyond oil.

Then, the Gulf states were mugged by geography.

Resilience and fragility

The Gulf's geographic and strategic vulnerability was laid bare by their inability to contain Iran or even its proxies. Their dependence on a fickle US, and the precedence Washington gives to Israeli interests over their own, has come as something of a shock. Perhaps their greatest weakness, however, lies in how little disruption their societies are able to absorb. The comforts and commercial attraction of the Gulf depend on total stability, at home and in the region, and an uninterrupted supply of electricity and desalinated water from plants that are conspicuous targets. So far, the war in the Gulf has cost $15.1bn in lost oil revenue for GCC states and an estimated $58bn in damage to infrastructure. Loss of trade and investment is likely to be even higher. Even before the war, the Gulf's appetite for skyscrapers and luxury apartments had raised questions about such projects' economic viability; NEOM is a case in point.

In contrast, the Arabs of the North have acquired, through repeated catastrophe, a capacity to endure disruption and scarcity that their southern neighbours have hardly had occasion to develop. Years of conflict have

taught Syrians and Iraqis to keep businesses running through power cuts and closed borders. Such experiences create resilience and resourcefulness, qualities that count for much in an increasingly volatile Middle East. Cooperation would allow them to put those hard-earned qualities to more profitable use.

> The Arabs of the North have acquired a capacity to endure disruption and scarcity that their southern neighbours have hardly had occasion to develop.

Lost opportunity

The Gulf's troubles alone will not draw investors north. Iraq and Syria must work together to offer safe and reliable trade routes and a larger shared market if they are to make the most of the opening.

That understanding gave particular significance to Iraqi Prime Minister Ali Faleh al-Zaidi's visit to Damascus on 28 October, where he met President Ahmad al-Sharaa to discuss energy, investment, and border security. SANA reported that the talks covered "ways to shield Syria and Iraq from the repercussions of potential conflicts through closer coordination", alongside plans to revive the oil pipeline linking Iraq to Syria's Mediterranean coast.

The history of the Kirkuk–Banyas pipeline is a barometer for relations between the two countries. Built in the early 1950s as a vital route for Iraqi crude to reach global markets, it was shut by Syria in 1982 after Hafiz al-Assad sided with Iran in its war against Iraq, and spent most of the following two decades out of service. Relations deteriorated so badly that Syrian passports were printed with "Valid for all countries except Iraq and Israel", with the restriction on travel to Iraq remaining in place until 2001. The pipeline was re-activated as both countries sought common cause against a menacing post-9/11 US. In 2003 it was shut again, this time by US forces in Iraq. Today a new pipeline is being discussed.

It is one of the geopolitical tragedies of the Middle East that Iraq and Syria have so rarely got on. Syrian hostility towards the British-backed Hashemite monarchy in Baghdad helped thwart schemes for union with Iraq in the 1950s, leaving Damascus to pursue its ill-fated union with the more distant (and less compatible) Egypt. The rise of juntas and presidents-for-life in both countries then left relations hostage to rival geopolitical alignments, with Hafiz al-Assad and Saddam Hussein's mutual loathing adding a personal bitterness to the estrangement.

Freed from the legacy of Saddam and the Assads – and of US occupation – Syrians and Iraqis are now free once again to pursue a common cause. The bargain is that Iraq gets access to the Mediterranean and alternative export routes while Syria gets investment, energy and a substantial consumer market.

What needs to be done

US Presidential Envoy for Syria Tom Barrack has done much to encourage al-Zaidi's visit to Damascus, with an eye, perhaps, to its commercial as well as diplomatic possibilities. Iraq for its part views cooperation with Syria as a security requirement first and foremost. A 2025 Iraqi National Security Advisory estimate seen by *Syria in Transition* proposes that Baghdad should "approach Syria from a pragmatic security and strategic perspective, balancing essential cooperation with the need to avoid becoming embroiled in regional conflicts. Cooperation with Damascus should rest on the principle of 'security first, sovereignty always'."

For the relationship to have a chance of enduring and blossoming, economic agreements should be accompanied by measures that make initially modest ties more binding and open to expansion.

Economic cooperation should be institutionalised in ways that benefit more than a few well-connected businessmen and politicians, with a customs union as the ambition and arrangements allowing frictionless trade as a starting point. Iraq offers a large consumer market and competes less directly with Syrian producers than Jordan and Lebanon, whose exports overlap considerably with Syria's.

People-to-people contacts should also be intensified to bring the Syrian-Iraqi relationship to life. University exchanges, civil society partnerships, cultural programmes and sporting events would give young Iraqis and Syrians reasons to learn about each other. Easier travel would benefit everyone from small traders to families and pilgrims. Visa-free travel should be the goal.

> Closer cooperation works best when parties recognise a common threat, as European integration demonstrated.

Then there is the sectarian question. Sunni-Shia differences should be parked, with clear prohibitions on sectarian incitement and the belittling of other people's beliefs. Syria's Charter for Unity in Islamic Discourse offers a precedent for containing the Sufi-Salafist schism within the Sunni fold, establishing rules under which competing traditions can coexist. A similar approach could advance a Sunni-Shia *modus vivendi*, and without the theological contortions that have accompanied previous (and mainly Gulf Arab-led) attempts to paper over doctrinal differences. An Iraqi-Syrian attempt would be a political measure pursued at a state-to-state level, treating sectarian de-escalation as a matter of good government. That it was Syrians and Iraqis who bore the brunt of sectarian warfare makes reconciliation efforts all the more compelling.

Some of the gestures accompanying al-Zaidi's visit to Syria suggested an appreciation of this opportunity, beginning with Ahmad al-Sharaa's decision to meet him at the airport, an honour withheld from some visiting Sunni leaders. Foreign Minister As'ad al-Shaibani's visit with him to the Sayyida Zainab shrine conveyed respect for Iraq's Shia community, while al-Zaidi reciprocated with $5m towards the refurbishment of the Umayyad Mosque, despite the Umayyads' familiar role as the historical bad guys in Shia discourse. The silence from some of the extreme PMF factions, who would have been expected to condemn al-Zaidi, was notable.

Northern powerhouse?

The Arabs of the North should draw closer, starting with the two largest players: Iraq and Syria. Closer cooperation works best when the parties recognise a common threat, as European integration demonstrated with its twin fears of German revanchism and Soviet aggression. Iraq and Syria face religious extremism at home, whether in the form of Islamic State or the more extreme elements of the PMF, and the bullying of Iran, Turkey and Israel from abroad. A stronger relationship between Baghdad and Damascus would make both harder to manipulate or intimidate.

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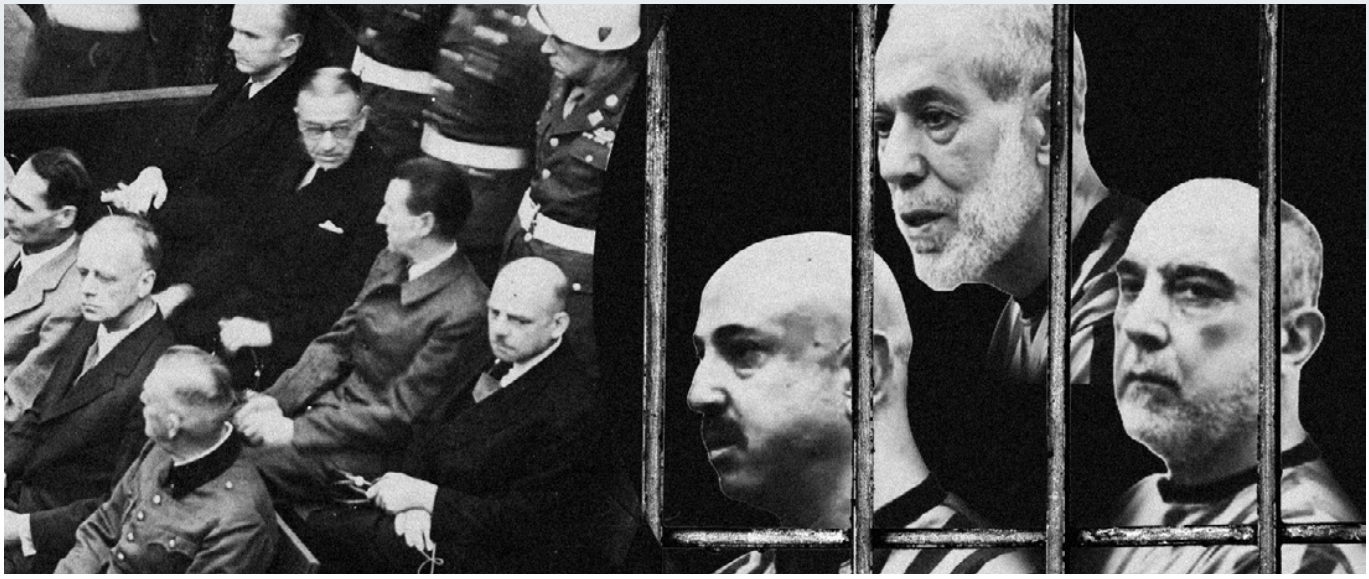
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Syria's Lucifer effect

What makes people who know right from wrong do evil things?



Syria's transitional justice is missing something the Allies did with Hitler's key henchmen after Germany's defeat in World War II: psychiatrists and psychologists examined their minds to understand how a modern society could sustain a regime of mass extermination. What they found was unexpected and invites comparisons with once-powerful men now on trial in Syria.

With the first verdicts issued against high-ranking officials of the former regime, Syria's evolving transitional justice is beginning to take a distinctly punitive form. Apart from procedural shortcomings, the proceedings have so far been marked by a highly retributive understanding of justice: perpetrators are to be identified, convicted and punished for specific offences. Driven largely by public demands for vengeance, Syria's reckoning with the past has therefore focused on making heads roll. The criminal liability of individual heads of the Assadist hydra has overshadowed a broader question: to what extent was this 54-year nightmare sustained by a decades-long paranoid fixation on conspiracies and existential enemies, while the panoptic system ostensibly built to guard against them produced a social order in which advancement depended on preying on one another?

What appears self-evident from afar is difficult to recognise for those who grew up within the system. A shared Syrian narrative of the past is still a long way off. What one community remembers as oppression and loss may be remembered by another as protection, stability or even redemption. In any case, giving substance to Ahmed al-Sharaa's promise of a Syrian "journey of recovery and revival" requires learning from the perpetrators and uncovering the motives, rationalities and justifications that kept the machinery of repression running at all levels of Syrian society. Forced disappearance to Sednaya, the expropriation of property and torture in public institutions such as hospitals implicated not only those who visibly carried a gun or wore a badge, but also judges, nurses, taxi drivers and countless others. The responsibility for suffering thus extends far beyond the individ-

uals whose guilt can be established in court. The arrest of high-profile figures may create a sense of redress. For ordinary Syrians, however, the greater societal problem may be the informant who still lives next door.

To prevent guilt, shame and anger from becoming a suffocating legacy that haunts Syria for decades, Syria's own "Lucifer effect" needs attention: what makes people who know right from wrong do evil things?

Demystify Monsters

The Allied-led war crimes trials in Nuremberg provided a blueprint for looking into the tyrannical mind. To support the criminal investigation, the US authorities appointed psychiatrists and psychologists to assess Hitler's key accomplices. Of particular significance were the contributions of Douglas Kelley and Gustave Gilbert. Their work addressed one of the defining questions of the post-war period: was there something inherent in Germans themselves, some kind of "Nazi gene" that predisposed them towards authoritarianism and cruelty? Or had National Socialism produced a distinctive human type through socialisation – a "Nazi psyche" that could help explain how a modern society became capable of sustaining a machinery of extermination?

Most of the defendants showed no signs of psychosis. They were of sound mind and capable of distinguishing between right and wrong.

Most of the defendants showed no signs of psychosis. They were of sound mind and capable of distinguishing between right and wrong. Kelley and Gilbert arrived at different explanations, but both undermined the comforting assumption that Nazi perpetrators could simply be dismissed as clinically abnormal monsters. Their behaviour instead pointed to more familiar forces: ambition, submission to authority, the surrender of personal responsibility in the name of loyalty, the construction of existential enemies and the cultivated loss of empathy. Tyranny, even genocide, does not require an army of madmen. Under the right social conditions, otherwise psychologically normal people can carry it out.

Hermann Göring, Hitler's second-in-command, exemplified the power-opportunistic breed of a Nazi careerist. Confronted with Nazi antisemitism and its notion of the racial inferiority of non-Aryans, he responded with the calculated cynicism of a political entrepreneur: "hardly anyone", he insisted, truly believed that "nonsense"; as a political instrument, however, it represented "first-rate propaganda" that appealed to people's basest instincts. The same cold-blooded pragmatism came to the fore when his personal relationships clashed with political ambition. Göring rationalised the purge of long-standing allies such as SA leader Ernst Röhm during the so-called Night of the Long Knives as political necessity since they had become obstacles to his power. Yet the psychiatric assessment also revealed another Göring: a charming, Paracodin-addicted attention-seeker who dominated those around him through wit and self-promotion, while displaying a hypersentimental and caring side in private correspondence with his family.

Julius Streicher, one of the Nazis' most notorious antisemitic propagandists, represents a more doctrinal path to perpetration. Far more deeply imbued with conspiratorial antisemitism, his obsessive belief in a Jewish diabolism illustrates how objectively absurd worldviews can acquire subjective plausibility. The Thomas theorem captures the underlying logic: if people define situations as real, they become real in their consequences. Once an existential threat is perceived as real, violence against it begins to appear rational, necessary or even virtuous.

This banality became even more apparent in subsequent trials, where mid- and low-level figures had to account for their involvement. The questioning of doctors, lawyers, industrialists and administrative officials showed how an everyday life shaped by conspiracy, notions of identitarian exceptionalism and the constant invocation of existential threats gradually normalised violence. SS doctors involved in selecting Jews at Auschwitz for the gas chambers, for example, developed a perpetrator identity adapted to an extreme social environment that their own actions, in turn, sustained. They distanced themselves from their own complicity through moral codes that justified killing as a means of healing the nation.

From Doctors to Butchers

The normalisation of killing provides a useful point of comparison with Syria. Many doctors and medical staff became part of the regime's architecture of violence, from participating in the torture of prisoners to bureaucratic complicity in the extermination of detainees. A video published by the Syrian Ministry of Justice in the summer of 2026 revealed new depths of depravity. The foot-

Confronting these perversions could become a resource for a more enlightened next generation willing to look into the social abysses the Assad system produced to sustain itself.

age featured various military doctors from the notorious Tishreen Hospital who are accused of removing the liver of a conscious detainee from Military Intelligence Branch 215 and transplanting it into an ailing regime general. Media coverage focused primarily on reconstructing the medical procedure carried out in the hospital and dramatising the monstrosity of the individuals involved. What was left out was the pressing question: in what moral universe, and by what rationale, did such conduct – which turned detainees into readily available biological material for trained physicians – become intelligible in the first place?

Anyone familiar with Bashar al-Assad's speeches after 2011 will recognise the worldview in which such acts could come to make sense. Assad described political opponents as "germs" or "vermin" within the social organism. Their removal could accordingly be understood as a surgical intervention to excise diseased tissue. This dehumanising language offers a clue to the rationality that a forensic analysis of the perpetrators would need to reconstruct as part of the 'Assad self'.

The "Assad self" describes no single perpetrator personality. Instead, it is a recurring way of understanding oneself and behaving within a social order in which hierarchy, insecurity and proximity to power turned egoism and rivalry into rational strategies for getting by. This does not dissolve individual guilt into social structure. It does, however, raise the question of how freely people make choices within a system that systematically alters the costs and benefits attached to them. Assadism recoded Baathism's totalitarian claim into an antagonistic social grammar that tied protection and advancement to one's position within the regime, while the permanent fixation on existential enemies fostered a paranoid perception of politics as existential conflict. Within this order, superiority – and with it the normalisation of violence – was reproduced throughout society as people learned to secure their own position by distinguishing themselves from those deemed inferior, disloyal or threatening.

A Triptych of Complicity

Psychological assessments of defendants could give these abstractions concrete form and reveal different facets of the tyrannical self. Atif Najib may represent its security-driven variant, sustained by the regime's persistent narration of a transgenerational conspiracy against Syria. It may reveal that in this world view, belonging to the regime's muscles offered protection against the threats invoked on a daily basis, while also reducing the risk of becoming a target of the regime's repressive machinery himself. It may reveal that he made a virtue out of perceived necessity. Identifying oneself as an 'ibn al-muassasa', a son of the institution, could fulfil a professional duty while expanding one's personal micro-sovereignty, at times to almost god-like status. That power could then be used to vent the personal loss and humiliation produced by the very Assad system that had bestowed it in the first place.

Waseem al-Assad may embody the egocentric variant of this self, rooted in the patrimonial order of dynastic rule. Within that order, proximity to the nucleus was a basic resource in the everyday struggle for survival of the fittest, combining submission to those above with domination of those below. His public boasting about his connections and the impunity for killing and drug dealing afforded by his proximity to the regime offer a glimpse into a form of personalised sovereignty – the ability to carve out a sphere in which ordinary rules no longer applied and unequal treatment became an expression of social position.

Finally, former Grand Mufti Ahmad Hassoun's court statement may illustrate the self-reassuring variant of the 'Assad self', through which much broader sections of Syrian society could accommodate themselves to the regime. His testimony shows how proximity to unjust power was justified as an unavoidable necessity for preserving at least some capacity for moral action. Hassoun justified his alignment with the regime by arguing that it enabled him to help people in their daily lives or secure the release of detainees. Loyalty here becomes a bargain with the devil: complicity is accepted as the price of remaining able to do some good, while that limited agency in turn serves to temper responsibility through the claim that staying close to power also enabled others to be spared worse fates.

Turning the mirror inwards

Confronting these perversions is no end in itself. It could become a resource for a more enlightened next generation willing to look into the social abysses the Assad system produced in order to sustain itself. The patterns vis-

ible in the justifications and decisions of regime elites also reveal the rules by which the wider system operated. Those seeking personal advancement, aspiring to embody the ideal of the patriotic citizen, or simply trying to get by, learned to navigate according to the same underlying logic.

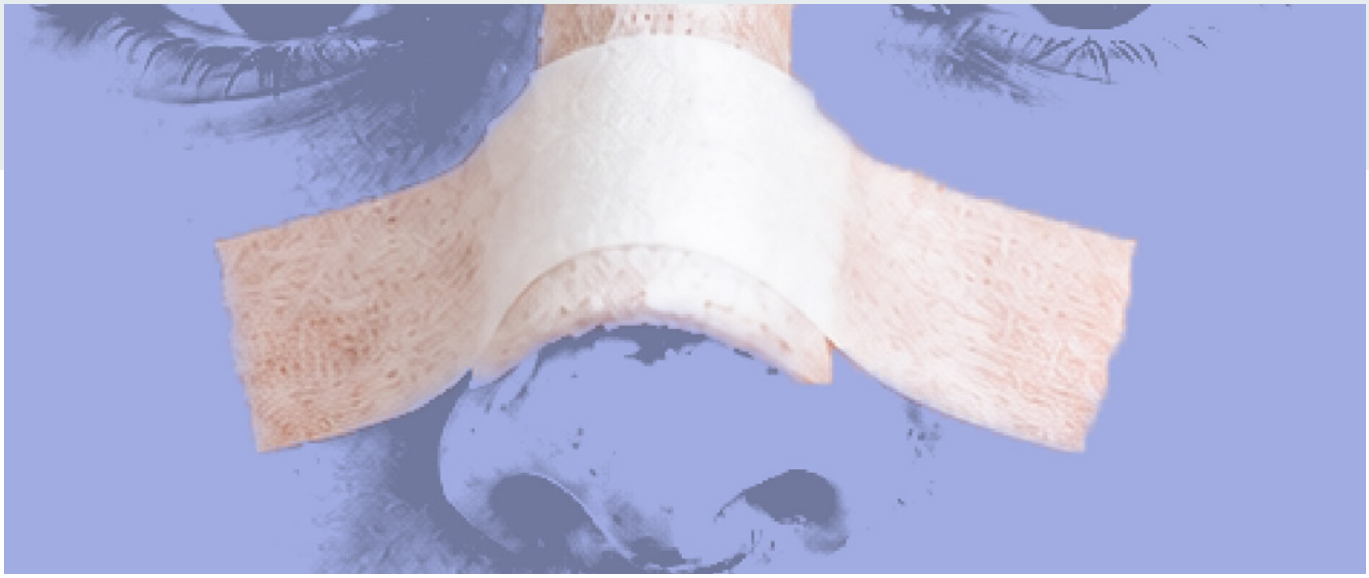
One did not have to belong to the upper echelons of power to internalise these rules. They provided a general frame of reference for functioning within a culture of brutalisation. The regime was therefore never entirely external to the society or limited to those with guns in their hands, nor could its legacy simply disappear with the institutions that sustained it. It can also be found in ordinary biographies, habits of judgement and forms of self-justification shaped under conditions in which self-interest was rewarded and everyday baseness was a rational mode of conduct. The persistence of these rationalities makes this kind of societal shadow work particularly relevant to Syria's future. Learning from the ways of thinking of regime elites helps understanding how hierarchy, power, loyalty and personal gain came to govern everyday social life.

Systematically assessing the psychology of perpetrators accused in court could help structure the transitional justice process itself. Syria will have to decide who should be prosecuted, who may qualify for amnesty, and how such decisions can be explained to a society in which the machinery of repression reached far beyond those who gave the orders. Who, then, were the real wolves? Where is the line between wolves and those who merely learnt to howl with them? And at what point does a howler become a wolf?

Even if present conditions do not allow such insights to inform prosecutions and sentencing, systematically recording them would create an archive for future generations – a record not only of what perpetrators did, but of how they understood and justified what they did. Understanding why people crossed the line could help future Syrians make sense of responsibility and build institutions that make it less tempting for a new generation to howl with the wolves.

Damascus, the city of nose casts

How social media, changing beauty standards and a new generation of surgeons are fuelling Syria's cosmetic surgery boom



Cosmetic surgery boomed in Syria during the war years – and the boom continues. We delved into the world of surgeon influencers and social media groups where women search for the right doctor and desperately seek advice about complications; spoke with Syrian surgeons; and visited the first international conference of Syria's Association of Surgical and Medical Aesthetics.

Walk the streets of Damascus today and there's a good chance you'll come across a young person with a white bandage or cast taped to their nose – the telltale sign of a recent rhinoplasty. Most are women in their twenties, but it's also men and even children.

What's going on?

At around $600-1,500, these operations are relatively affordable, and the presence on the city's streets of so many post-rhinoplasty nose casts indicates considerable demand and widespread social acceptance.

Online cosmetic advice groups

One of Syria's largest online cosmetic advice spaces is a Facebook group called 'wein a'malti tajmeel' – 'Where Did You Get Your Cosmetic Work Done?' It already has more than 155,000 members and attracts around 200–250 new members a week and some 75 posts a day, overwhelmingly from young women. Posts reviewed by *Syria in Transition* over several weeks in September and October broadly fell into three categories: requests for practitioner rec-



ommendations; advice about complications; and questions about particular treatments, ranging from laser hair removal and fillers to liposuction and rhinoplasty.

Women also regularly turn to the group for advice about potentially serious post-operative complications.

> "*It's been 7 months since my nose job and I feel like my breathing isn't normal at all. When I go to bed I find it very difficult and I'm unable to sleep because of it. Also for about two weeks, a noise comes out when I breathe, and I swear it's getting more distorted. I go to see the doctor and he says everything is fine but he doesn't go into detail and keeps it short.*"

> "*Girls, this is my nose one year after the operation. I have swelling above the tip as you can see. It comes and goes. I am putting the 'blaster' on it every night and I put two injections of cortisone on it. It worked for a period and looked great but the swelling comes back. I'm going to die. What is this? The doctor is travelling and I don't want to go to another doctor and have him tell me it needs repairing. I'm super-depressed. The swelling goes down and it looks amazing but the puffiness comes back like this periodically.*"

> "*I've developed a fibrous scar on my nose two months after the surgery. Girls who went through the same thing, what did you do? Please advise if I can get a massage? Is there any hope it'll go away?*"

Another recurring theme is suspicion of covert advertising. Women seeking recommendations repeatedly (and annoyed) insist that they want genuine experiences rather than responses from marketers.

> "*Girls, I've decided to do my nose with [doctor's name removed]. Dears, tell me about your experiences, without ads, because this is a nose, not a game. I don't have breathing problems I just want to change its shape...*"

> "*Ladies I want your advice. Advise me which doctor I should get my nose done with. I want a good and natural result and prices that aren't too high. I won't forgive any marketer who advertises. I want real experiences, hopefully from girls that can photograph their noses with the name of the doctor. Don't hold back.*" *[praying hands emoji]*

> "*Good evening, ladies. I'd like to ask about [Doctor's Name Omitted] regarding rhinoplasty. I'm hoping to hear from those who have had the procedure done by him. Please note that I'm not doing this for cosmetic reasons, but rather due to health issues.*
> *I truly hope no one posts a comment here just for the sake of advertising – this is already my third time undergoing this surgery.*"

Body shame, or unhappiness with various aspects of the body, or a desire to look younger, are also commonly expressed by women in the group. The origins of that shame are hard to assess for individual posters, but in some cases, the event or social pressure that led the woman to post is revealed in comments.

> "*Ladies, I am 30 years old. Yesterday a 25-year-old-guy called me 'auntie' and of course I was super-annoyed and upset and angry. Is it normal that a society calls a girl in her thirties by the word 'auntie'? What [word] have they left for the [women in their] fifties and sixties? Are there procedures that can be done at this age to make me look ten years younger? Guide me, and consider it your zakat [religious charity].*"

Social media surgeons

Advertising disguised as comments in online groups is not the only way cosmetic practitioners are leveraging social media. Some Syrian cosmetic surgeons have built substantial online followings, using their accounts as shop fronts showing tempting before-and-after images of their work. Dr Rami Al-Hussain (who goes by the moniker *Dr Rami Rhinoplasty*), for example, has more than 70,000 followers on Instagram, and 39,000 followers on Facebook, while several other Syrian surgeons have audiences in the tens of thousands. Dr Imad Hussain (*Dr Imad_Rhinoplasty*), who has 54,000 Instagram followers, advertises "over 2,000 aesthetic operations" documented through photographs.

These figures are not an indication of the quality of the surgeons' work, but they illustrate how closely social media and the marketing of cosmetic surgery have become intertwined. There is no suggestion that either doctor mentioned here has engaged in the paid promotional practices discussed below.

A veteran surgeon seeks to bridge a generational divide

Dr Wael Al-Barazi is a consultant plastic surgeon of 25 years' experience and founding president of the Syrian Association of Surgical and Medical Aesthetics (SASMA). Speaking at his clinic near the Syrian Cen-

tral Bank, he was forthright about the relationship between social media and Syria's cosmetic surgery industry. Asked about Facebook groups such as 'Where Did You Get Your Cosmetic Work Done?', Al-Barazi alleged that young doctors paid influential people in these online groups to promote them:"They pay thousands and millions of Syrian pounds to get patients."

Particularly concerning to him is that some doctors are performing procedures beyond their expertise. "Fifty percent of my operations are reconstructive, and many of those patients come to me to fix work that has been done by other surgeons", he said. The nose of one patient, for example, had been disfigured by a botched rhinoplasty and three subsequent attempts at reconstruction. Al-Barazi eventually used a large flap of skin from the patient's forehead to repair the damage. "You can't imagine her psychological state," he said. "She was in a bad state and now she's in a better one."

He added that in Damascus "some ENT (ear, nose and throat) surgeons do breast augmentations. This is a crime. They are not specialised."

Yet demand for cosmetic procedures is hardly new. Al-Barazi recalls foreign colleagues assuming that Syria's war must have caused the industry to contract. His experience was the opposite: "I said no, demand is going up, because of the psychological state of the patients: they want to do something to forget what is going on around them."

This is supported by a 2022 report from Damascus Medical Association official that cosmetic centers in Damascus had expanded by 80 percent in the previous five years. The nose bandages visible on the streets of Damascus today suggest that demand far from disappeared with the fall of the Assad regime.

Academic research on social media and cosmetic surgery

Academic research supports a link between social media and cosmetic procedures in Syria. A 2025 study of 2,605 Syrians found that those spending more than five hours daily on social media were significantly more likely to consider cosmetic procedures, while following large numbers of fashion influencers was associated with greater dissatisfaction with one's appearance. Some 76 percent believed cosmetic procedures could help them resemble social media celebrities, while only 19 percent reported verifying practitioners' credentials.

The findings were "significant and concerning", said Dr Ahmad Al-Darra, a Syrian surgeon and co-author of the study. "While it demonstrated an association, not a causation, we cannot ignore the link as it shows a pattern and not in a good direction," he told *Syria in Transition*.

The researchers recommended tighter verification of practitioners qualifications, screening for body-image disorders, more transparent advertising and media-literacy education to help young people recognise manipulated content and the effects of appearance-based comparisons. Dr. Al-Darra argues that responsibility should be shared. The government should oversee licensing and regulation, and professional associations such as SASMA should establish ethical standards and guidance, while social media platforms should enforce ethical advertising standards and promote media literacy.

Plastic surgeons gather in Damascus

Dr Al-Barazi sees associations like SASMA, which was founded in 2025 and held its first international conference, Beauty Damas 1, on 17-19 October, as a way to guide a new generation of plastic surgeons in Syria.

"The main goal of SASMA is to teach the new generations what is wrong and what is right: standards and ethics", he said. That is particularly important, he commented, in an age when young surgeons encountered a new technique on YouTube or social media and decided: "OK, I'll do it tomorrow."

The conference, attended by 285 surgeons, reflected some of these concerns. Most of its 83 sessions were technical, but several explicitly addressed safety considerations. Dr Al-Barazi spoke about "disastrous complications in plastic surgery", while UK-based Syrian surgeon Dr Sami Al-Hasan discussed common reasons why rhinoplasty can fail. In the opening masterclass, UK surgeon Dr Omar Tillo also addressed the influence of social media, warning of "unrealistic, filtered results presented





as routinely achievable" and "unsafe practices and irresponsible marketing promoted without medical oversight". One slide offered a simple rule of thumb: "A technician is someone who knows how to operate. A surgeon is someone who knows when to operate. And good surgeons are those who know when NOT to operate."

The emphasis on safety was encouraging. Yet the conference programme largely left untouched the broader social and ethical questions surrounding Syria's cosmetic surgery boom: the beauty standards and pressures driving mostly young women to want to change their bodies, the role of online advice groups and the ways surgeons themselves use social media to attract patients. Nor is it clear how far the warnings of experienced practitioners like Dr Al-Barazi will reach those operating beyond their expertise.

A female medical student in her final year in Damascus, who preferred not to be named, was blunt in her assessment: "Cosmetic surgery is trendy. Some women do it to show off that they've got money; some are pretty but suffer from a lack of self-esteem. It's purely materialistic thinking, and people are like a flock of sheep, standing in line to get a procedure done without thinking about future complications."

She added that the same trend had taken hold among doctors, distorting what she considers the field's original purpose of helping people with deformities caused by injuries and other conditions. "These days, everyone wants to work in aesthetics. Whenever someone asks me what I want to specialise in, they tell me: 'Specialise in aesthetics – make some money.'"





Father of Grime's new clothes

A restaurant review of Toshka al-Firdous in Homs

Our restaurant critic Nadim Sufra visits a Homsi institution once notorious for questionable hygiene but beloved for its food, only to find it transformed into something resembling an international fast-food chain. He wonders whether its transformation is symptomatic of Syria today.

Every true Homsi knows Toshka al-Firdous. This old haunt, which opened in the 1980s, has left such an indelible mark on the city's gastronomic landscape that it has become as essential to Homs as Abu Abdo al-Fawwal was to Aleppo or Bakdash ice cream is to Damascus.

Al-Firdous specialises in toshka, a grilled meat and melted cheese sandwich, and in fruit cocktails and milk and banana cocktails: items that are popular throughout Syria.

I love toshka and fruit cocktails, and I love an eatery that has a limited number of offerings – a rarity in Syria, where menus are often encyclopaedic, with the greater the variety not necessarily leading to better quality.

Al-Firdous has therefore long been on my list of places to visit in Homs. So when I found myself there for work I made sure to carve out time for this culinary venture.

Walking there from the old city, one could easily tell that its strategic location on Tripoli Road helped cement its place in Homsi gastronomic culture. Nestled between established central and western residential neighbourhoods that house much of the city's urban middle class, such as al-Inshaat, al-Tawzi al-Ijbari, al-Mahatta and al-Ghouta, al-Firdous is also close to various schools, while the famous Safir Hotel is only a few steps away.

I was aware that al-Firdous had recently undergone a complete refurbishment, but I was not quite prepared for the extent of the transformation. The brightly lit, polished new façade proclaimed the restaurant's name in glowing, rounded and playful yellow Arabic lettering. Inside, the makeover was no less thorough, and the effect was rather extreme.

In old pictures, al-Firdous looked capable of stirring the most nostalgic sentiments, even in one who had neither lived in Homs nor eaten there before. It was heartwarm-



Toshka al-Firdous before its renovation.
Photo: Ibn Battuta Travel (photographer unknown)

ing to look at old reviews and social media posts showing a modest, rather scruffy sandwich shop, with white-tiled walls, harsh fluorescent lighting and mismatched chairs and tables. It resembled the best of Syrian family-run eateries.

But I was not to be rewarded with this humble aesthetic reminiscent of a simpler time. The al-Firdous that I saw looked like a newly opened branch of an international fast-food chain: perfectly presentable but almost entirely devoid of character – not as soulless as a Prêt à Manger perhaps, but less interesting than a Shake Shack. Inside, burgundy-and-cream upholstered chairs surround terrazzo-effect tabletops mounted on black metal pedestal bases, while geometric wood-effect wall panelling, decorative latticework and warm pendant lights complete the refurbishment. The walls are conspicuously devoid of photographs that might have offered a glimpse of the restaurant's history: generations of proprietors, illustrious guests, or even the old Father of Grime in his less presentable days. Some of the old establishment's habits have nevertheless survived the transformation. A television still occupies pride of place on the wall, as it did before. There were no waiters hovering around the tables to take orders, and our dealings with the staff were limited to placing our order at the counter, behind which they were busy preparing the food.



As I left al-Firdous, I reflected on how deceptive a polished exterior can be.

One could perhaps understand why the proprietor of this longstanding establishment would want to shed some of its scales now that Syria itself is rebranding and entering a new chapter, with many who have a stake in the hospitality sector eager to welcome more tourists and Syrians returning from abroad. The owners may also have had another motivation. The restaurant has long been known among Homsis by another name: Abu Nishih, or Father of Grime. Hardly a Homeric epithet, this nickname, used more playfully than with disdain, likely derives from the establishment's longstanding aversion to excessive fussiness about sanitation.

While the association with grime may today give the place an unappetising air, I remember, when a teenager, my peers singing the praises of such sandwich places, and that they were expressly known for their loose hygiene standards. Of all the times we commended our souls into God's hands before digging into some dubious fare, I don't remember any of us getting sick, and Homsi friends of mine agreed that the old Father of Grime did no more to compromise their health than the rustic drinking fountains in Syrian schools.

On my recent visit, I ordered the famous $2 toshka meal and equally distinguished $1.44 fruit cocktail. The toshka came cut into several pieces, the flatbread bearing the dark parallel stripes of the grill, with melted cheese and minced meat enclosed between its thin layers. It was served on a tray lined with pink paper – which matched the colour of the plastic straw that came with my drink – alongside slices of tomato, pickled green peppers, a dollop of *cream toum* (garlic sauce) and some chilli paste.

The filling, when exposed, was rather pale and unpromising, with the minced meat and cheese forming a bland-looking mass encased in soggy bread that did little to excite the senses. The taste was disappointingly bland, lacking both the richness of the meat and the satisfying interplay of flavours and textures that make a good toshka such a pleasure. A good toshka contains well-seasoned and slightly spicy minced meat and cheese that has melted into the meat rather than merely sitting alongside it, entirely enclosed in thin, crisp bread.

While I finished my meal without difficulty, I could understand the many comments I had read from locals who said it used to taste better. The portion would have been

quite insufficient had I arrived properly hungry, although the satisfyingly thick and heavy fruit cocktail did help make up for the modest quantity of the toshka.

As I left al-Firdous, I reflected on how deceptive a polished exterior can be. The appetite for fashionable cafés and borrowed international aesthetics is hardly new to Syria, but fortunately many of the traditional haunts that survived the war have remained unchanged. However, there are dozens of new cafés and restaurants that are grotesquely out of place and they seem to be proliferating. These include a bright pink café with plastic plants on the Straight Street in Damascus and a SpongeBob SquarePants-themed ice-cream-on-saj establishment in Qemarieh, another old-city quarter. Meanwhile, some of Syria's most prominent and expensive restaurants can be shockingly careless about both hygiene and the quality of their ingredients. In much the same way, the new Syrian government has been devoting considerable attention to appearances, leaving many citizens wondering whether the same care goes into what happens behind the scenes, and whether the eventual offerings will be quite as appetising as their presentation seeks to suggest.

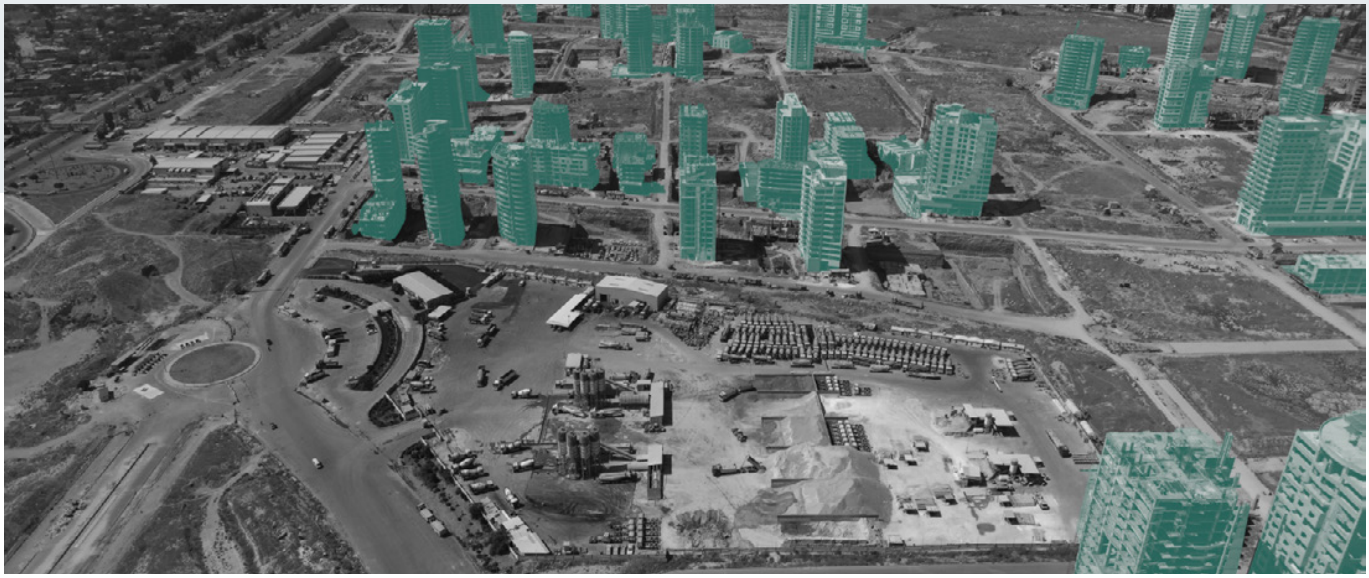
I wish al-Firdous success with its new chapter. I have no doubt that the refurbishment was costly and it appears to have been implemented to a high standard. I regret, however, that it paid such little regard to al-Firdous' history, and place in Homsi collective memory. Residents of a city that suffered so much horrific damage and loss during the war, deserve small pleasures associated with a happier past.

Toshka al-Firdous, Tripoli Road, near Safir Homs Hotel, Homs.



Syria Business Diary – October 2026

The first letter of credit in 14 years, and no cheap diesel yet



October brought Syria's first letter of credit in 14 years and a new chief at the oil company. Burhan, a lighting trader in Damascus, and Khaled Mahmoud, a microbus driver from Quneitra, both spoke to us in September. Burhan still cannot pay his suppliers through his bank, and Khaled has yet to see the cheaper diesel he was promised. Our Business Diary follows Syria's economy from government announcements and billion-dollar deals to prices, wages and transactions on the ground.

Banking and finance: the first letter of credit in 14 years

For the first time in 14 years, the Central Bank has opened a letter of credit, to pay Saudi Aramco for 65,000 tonnes of diesel. The first tanker, carrying about 64,000 tonnes, reached the Banyas terminal on 19 October. JP Morgan helped confirm the letter of credit, a Syrian energy official said. The bank declined to comment. Aramco made the sale in a month when it had cut European buyers off its October crude after attacks on its pipeline to the Red Sea. By late October it was close to a $10 billion credit line with a group of banks that included JP Morgan. Central Bank Governor Safwat Raslan wrote on 11 October that the deal mattered less than "rebuilding trust and reopening banking channels" that had been out of reach for years. A week earlier, on 5 October, his delegation met the Federal Reserve in New York to discuss the Central Bank's account there.

Private importers are still waiting, a month on. Burhan, whose lighting showroom in Damascus's Sanjaqdar market supplies several lighting shops in Rural Damascus, told *Syria in Transition* in September that he hoped to pay his Chinese suppliers "directly and officially" through his own bank. Nothing has changed, he said this week. He has accounts at the International Islamic Bank and the Real Estate Bank, and neither offers transfers abroad or SWIFT. More than six Syrian banks had resumed commercial dollar transfers abroad by late September. Burhan's two are not among them. At home, the Real Estate Bank asks for his commercial register and ID just to withdraw 10,000 new pounds (about $69 at the market rate) a week.

His partners in the UK and the US wire the money to China from their own accounts. A recent $150,000 payment cost him $45 that way, he said. Through a Syrian remittance office the fee would be 6 to 8 percent, which "completely drains the profit margin." He also pays about $5,000 to ship a container of goods worth $18,000. The Chinese embassy's visa office, which once let him travel easily to meet suppliers, has been shut since the fall of the Assad regime. Reopening was promised for the start of October but failed to occur.

Syria left the IMF and World Bank meetings in Bangkok with commitments of nearly $900 million in grants and loans. At the meetings, held from 12 to 18 October, Finance Minister Mohammed Yisr Barnieh discussed how to use $493 million in World Bank grants, and import financing with the Arab Monetary Fund. The Saudi Fund for Development approved six projects worth $406 million in soft loans, to be signed soon. The grants and loans go to government projects. Syrian officials also held first talks with JP Morgan, Bank of America and two Japanese banks. On 1 November Syria joined the World Bank's Arab Group constituency.

Syria's 2027 budget has yet to reach the People's Assembly. In the first half of 2026 the government spent about $3.7 billion and collected $2.7 billion. In late September, Mr Barnieh put this year's deficit at about $1.8 billion, and added that the presidency had told ministries to cut spending and defer projects. He said the budget would be finalised in October. On 21 October he told Assembly committees it was in its final stages, and the two sides agreed to meet monthly. It is not yet clear how much say the new Assembly will have.

By 2024 the civil war had cost the Syrian economy about $1 trillion, according to the Syrian Center for Policy Research. The cumulative figure includes lost output, factories and infrastructure destroyed or left idle, and growth that never happened. It does not include the cost of reconstruction. Annual output fell by about two-thirds between 2010 and 2024, the center's Rabie Nasser said on *Ala Blata* ("Straight Up"), an Arabic video series that explains economic issues in plain terms, in an episode posted on 28 October. He said that even that understated the damage, because Syria had been growing at 4 to 5 percent a year before the war.

Bread and prices: shortages in Hasakah, no WFP bread

Subsidised bread still costs 40 new pounds (about 28 cents) for eight loaves weighing a kilo, the size set in June, when the bundle went from ten loaves to eight. On 17 October residents of rural Hasakah reported a bread shortage, rising prices and queues, and farmers in the Jazira said on 6 October that wheat payments were late and some might not plant. The government paid 55,000 new pounds (about $380) a ton for wheat this season, including a bonus, and irrigation alone can account for 20 to 50 percent of a grower's costs.

WFP's subsidised bread program, suspended early this year for lack of money, has not restarted. It supplied flour to 300 bakeries serving about two million people. Bread prices rose around 18 percent after it was stopped, WFP Syria Country Director Marianne Ward told *Syria in Transition.*

WFP now reaches far fewer people – over 619,000 with food and cash in August. It has put its money into the supply chain instead, rehabilitating 14 bakeries and three silos this year and 44 bakeries since 2020. "As winter approaches, many families face difficult choices between buying food, heating their homes, and meeting other essential needs," Ms Ward said. WFP estimates 7.2 million Syrians are acutely food insecure.

Consumer prices rose 8.1 percent in September, up from 1.8 percent in August, the Syrian Center for Policy Research found in its monthly bulletin. Prices rose in all 14 governorates. After the 13 September fuel decision, diesel rose 45.5 percent on average and gasoline 29.9 percent. Bus and shared-minibus fares went up 32.6 percent, to about 44 new pounds (31 cents) a trip. Fuel, housing and transport made up about 87.5 percent of the month's inflation. Food followed: cucumbers rose 19.2 percent, potatoes 18.8 percent and tomatoes 14.7 percent. The pound slid from about 132 to the dollar on the eve of the fuel decision to 143 by the end of October.

Investment and trade: tariff cuts and a border closure

Decree 188, issued on 12 October, cut customs duties on energy equipment, including generators, transformers, cables and wind turbine parts, on industrial machine parts and on some medical equipment. The financial analyst Abdul Hamid Qatlan told *Al-Watan* it "represents an important step to move the economic wheel and encourage industrial and commercial investment." He warned that it "may reduce customs revenues in the short term."

The Nassib crossing with Jordan, Syria's main land route to the Gulf, closed for a day. The General Authority for Borders and Customs shut it on 27 October after Jordanian airstrikes in Daraa the night before. Hundreds of trucks, cars and buses were backed up about three kilometers on the Jordanian side, Jordan's *Al-Mamlaka* TV

reported. Traffic returned to normal the next morning, after the two foreign ministers agreed to set up a joint security committee. Jordan's exports to Syria rose 28.9 percent in the first eight months of the year.

Syrian fruit and vegetables bound for the Gulf travel that road. The Damascus wholesale market sent about 15,000 tons of fruit and vegetables to Gulf countries in September, most of it by refrigerated truck to the UAE and Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia is Syria's biggest export market, and sales there rose 17 percent in the first five months of the year.

The Hasya industrial city has granted 29 administrative licenses this year, out of 39 applications. This month a factory in its engineering zone went up for sale. "The factory is now just a warehouse, unfortunately," the owner's son, Abdul Rahman al-Sayfi, told *Syria in Transition.* Three new industrial cities in Raqqa, Idlib and Daraa will cost about $760 million, the industry ministry says.

EBLA Ventures led two Syrian startup rounds in two days. Alo Hakeem, a home healthcare platform based in Aleppo, raised about $165,000 in a round led by EBLA Ventures, announced on 12 October. It came through Maynger Ventures' ChangeMakers program and plans to launch its app in November. The next day Salehli, which matches customers with plumbers, electricians and other tradesmen, closed a $100,000 round, also led by EBLA, with Maynger taking part. It says it has more than 15,000 users and 3,500 verified professionals and plans to expand to cover more Syrian cities.

Eagle Hills signed for more than 14 million square meters of land in Damascus and Latakia on 5 October. The value of the framework deal with the government, for 10 million square meters in Damascus and 4.3 million in Latakia, was not disclosed. Eagle Hills is the Abu Dhabi developer founded by Mohamed Alabbar, who built Dubai's Emaar. Its Belgrade Waterfront project drew protests in Serbia over a lack of transparency and public consultation.

The next day, the Old Damascus directorate closed Khan As'ad Pasha, the 18th-century caravanserai in the spice market, pending a decision on its future. It reopened on 7 October, and the directorate said a plan to turn it into a hotel had been dropped. Activists had objected that a tender had been drawn up with no public debate and no named investor. The khan answers to four authorities, the governorate and the ministries of culture, tourism and religious endowments, which still write to each other on paper, the activist Fadi Zidan told Asharq Al-Awsat. Accor is in advanced talks on two hotel projects in Syria, Wyndham is scouting Damascus and the coast and Minor Hotels is studying old houses in Old Damascus as small heritage hotels. Visitor arrivals more than doubled to 3.52 million in the first half of the year. Of these, 2.13 million were Syrians living abroad.

Fuel: a new oil chief, and still no heating diesel

The head of the Syrian Petroleum Company was replaced on 18 October, five weeks after fuel prices rose. Youssef al-Qablawi left after a scandal over adulterated gasoline, and Decree 190 named Maher Khalil al-Hassan chief executive. Mr al-Hassan, a petroleum engineer who once ran oil fields east of Homs, had been deputy minister of economy for internal trade. On 13 September, the day fuel prices rose, he promised that bread prices and weights would not change.

An American company is now pumping oil in the northeast. HKN, partnered with Qatar's UCC Holding, has taken over eight fields around Rmeilan in Hasakah that the Kurdish-run Jazira Oil Company ran after 2011. It signed a 25-year deal with the Syrian Petroleum Company in April. The aim is to raise output from these fields from just over 100,000 barrels a day to about 250,000 by the end of 2027.

When we spoke to microbus driver Khaled Mahmoud in September, he had been told that cheaper diesel might reach his station within two months. The ministry announced the 150-pound ($1.04) transport grade at the end of September. Neither it nor the 115-pound (80-cent) heating diesel has reached any station he uses, and he knows no one who has received either. As of 2 November, heating diesel had not been handed out anywhere in Damascus or Rural Damascus. "Government promises to provide subsidised heating diesel remain nothing more than talk," he told *Syria in Transition.* On Sunday he and his son Majd split shifts on the microbus and filled up at 175 new pounds ($1.22) a litre, the price since September, at a station in Qaboun. Fares have not moved either. He saw on the news that Saudi diesel had arrived for provinces short of fuel, but it has not changed what he pays.

At his home in Jubata al-Khashab, a village in the foothills of Jabal ash-Shaikh (Mount Hermon) in Quneitra governorate, the station sells only gasoline and the same diesel. He has cut dead trees on his land for the stove, but the family hasn't lit it yet, fearing that if they burn the wood too early they might run out before spring.

The Uyghurs who went to war

A review of Emily Feng's book 'Our Hearts Burned for Home: Uyghur Militants in Syria's Civil War'



Based on dozens of interviews with Syria's secretive Uyghur community, Emily Feng provides the most comprehensive account to date of those who left their home in Xinjiang, fleeing an oppressive Chinese state, to organise, arm themselves and prepare for an eventual return. It is a compelling read because, for once, Syria's Uyghurs are doing much of the talking themselves. Beyond this wealth of first-hand accounts, the book leaves crucial questions about access unanswered and says little about the arrangements between the Uyghurs and their long-standing allies in HTS, but it certainly provides the material to start asking them.

Living in constant fear of Chinese surveillance, Uyghur militants in Syria form a particularly secretive community. Despite how little is known about the estimated 3,000-4,000 fighters and an additional 15,000 family members, they have acquired a reputation as perhaps the most "tame" of Syria's foreign fighters: highly disciplined, not into global jihad and willing to obey the rules of their hosts while maintaining their own culture. That image may resonate especially well with Western audiences since much of it resembles the cliché of the model Chinese immigrant, as opposed to the Arab "troublemaker". The Uyghurs are a Turkic people, and they – at least not those in Syria – would not consider themselves "Chinese". Syria's Uyghurs, organised in the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP), are also known to be fiercely loyal to Ahmad al-Sharaa, under whose command they spearheaded the offensive on Aleppo in November 2024 and then marched towards Damascus, only to retreat quietly to their settlement areas around Jisr al-Shughur in Idlib province once al-Sharaa gave the order. They are usually portrayed as one homogeneous mass, which certainly has something to do with the secrecy surrounding their communities: most talk is about them, not with them.

Emily Feng, supported by Uyghur linguist Abduweli Ayup, attempts to change that with her book 'Our Hearts Burned for Home: Uyghur Militants in Syria's Civil War', published in October 2026 by Columbia Global Reports. The publisher is clearly a good match because reporting is what the book does. In a prologue and six chapters spanning a brisk 117 pages, Feng – a National Public Radio (NPR) correspondent – presents the curated essence of around 60 interviews she conducted with Uyghurs in Syria, and some who had already left the country, in the summer of 2025.

The road to Syria

The chapters begin chronologically with accounts of humiliation and deadly violence in Xinjiang, the Chinese province home to the Uyghur Muslim minority. For Feng's interviewees, these experiences led to a nationalist and religious awakening and the conclusion that the threat to themselves and their people was existential. The overwhelming power of the Chinese state and its chauvinistic and racist wrath meant that emigration and organisation abroad appeared to be the only option, and for those who regarded existing international Uyghur organisations such as the World Uyghur Congress as paper tigers, learning armed resistance and gaining access to weapons was the way to go. Most of those who would later find themselves in Syria had experienced particularly brutal episodes such as days of raging violence between Uyghurs and Han Chinese in 2009 after Uyghur protests in Xinjiang's capital were violently dispersed. One interviewee recalls watching a Han Chinese mob drag a Uyghur family from their car, beat them, force them back into the vehicle and set it on fire.

This generation, however, was not the first to conclude that armed resistance required looking abroad. The previous generation had already been influenced by political Islam and jihadist ideas brought back by Uyghur pilgrims returning from the Hajj in Saudi Arabia in the late 1990s. They began looking for places where they could train and arm themselves, eventually finding their way to Afghanistan and Pakistan. It was in this milieu that the al-Qaeda-aligned East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM), also known as the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP) emerged. Feng stresses that ETIM/TIP in Afghanistan – designated as a terrorist organisation by the UN, US and EU – never really was a functioning organisation but a loose network of scattered fighters. China conveniently used its existence to label Uyghur resistance to Communist Party rule as terrorism, drawing on the language of the US-led "war on terror", which gave governments around the world a ready-made justification for repression. Members of the old guard in Afghanistan moved to Syria in about 2012, where they served as leaders and trainers for a new generation of Uyghur militants who, having crossed the border from Turkey, found in Syria a sort of Wild West where they could organise, arm themselves and learn how to wage war.

Learning war

There followed years of brutal warfare, which Feng reconstructs in vivid detail from her interviews. Large portions of the book consist of direct testimony from fighters, alongside a smaller number of non-combatants including several women, who are portrayed as deeply immersed in the highly militarised culture Syria's Uyghurs developed. One fighter gives his wife a pistol as a wedding gift, and when she practises shooting, she imagines firing at "Xi Jinping, the pig". Military drill is total, designed to "physically and mentally wear a person down and then build them back up", as one commander puts it. The toll of these baptisms of fire is immense: some fighters are initially paralysed by fear and sometimes cry from loneliness and hardship; but dedication ultimately prevails, they say, because the goal of liberating their homeland is everything, and they know that fighting a heavily armed, technologically sophisticated cyberocracy like the Chinese regime will be a confrontation of an entirely different magnitude from the Syrian conflict. It is moving to read later in the book how wounded fighters in hospital, under anaesthetics that seem to break down their iron self-control, cry uncontrollably.

One fighter gives his wife a pistol as a wedding gift, and when she practises shooting, she imagines firing at "Xi Jinping, the pig".

How the TIP ended up settling around Jisr al-Shughur; how the jihadist schism between ISIS and the Nusra Front tore into the TIP itself; how Russia's military intervention in 2015 brought new levels of carnage; and how the advance of the Assad regime and its Iranian and Russian backers was ultimately checked by the Turkish-Russian ceasefire of March 2020 that stabilised the front lines – all these landmarks of the Syrian civil war are narrated from the perspective of the Uyghurs. It makes for insightful reading and vividly illustrates phenomena that extend well beyond their particular story: the camaraderie that war can produce and the fragile sense of belonging and equality that collective trauma can give a community; the order and certainty that strict Islamism can offer when everything else is falling apart; and the disorientation that sets in once the guns fall silent.

A major theme is the TIP's moderation under a younger generation of commanders. Central among them is Choghtal, the book's main protagonist, with whom it begins and ends. Now 36, he serves as second-in-command of the 84th Division of the Syrian Army, which was created largely to absorb foreign fighters. Another is Abdulaziz

Dawood Kuhdaberdi, an Afghanistan veteran portrayed as having supported the split from al-Qaeda and the alignment with HTS who today commands the 84th Division with the rank of brigadier general. Feng tells a story of evolution. The commanders she interviews say they came to realise that radical Islamism would alienate both their own people and the international community, whose support they would ultimately need to complement their military capacity if their dream of an Uyghur nation state was ever to come true. Some explicitly cite Zionism as a model. TIP's break with al-Qaeda in 2018 came shortly after the creation of HTS and was inspired by it, according to the commanders.

Access granted

Feng writes that in early 2025 she approached Syria's Ministry of Information for permission to interview Uyghurs, but was turned down. The foreign-fighter file – and the Uyghur question in particular – was highly sensitive. China was hyper-focused on their presence in Syria, while the new government in Damascus still needed Beijing not to block a lifting of UN sanctions on Ahmad al-Sharaa and HTS. Access eventually came through Abduweli Ayup, the Uyghur linguist who assisted Feng and had direct contacts with Uyghurs in Syria. In the summer of 2025, "all the Uyghur groups" were suddenly open to interviews, and she and Ayup conducted dozens in the course of a month-long visit. It is likely that interviews on this scale, including with senior commanders who now serve in the Syrian army, would not have happened without a green light from Damascus. This is, after all, a well-organised community that takes the threat of Chinese espionage so seriously that in spring 2025 Uyghur locals beat a group of Chinese "tourists" bloody when they tried to visit Uyghur villages in northern Syria, as Feng recounts. That does not mean that the interviews were orchestrated or that the accounts are untrue; but it does raise the question of whether at least some of the interviews, particularly with senior commanders who stress the need to gain international support, should be understood as an exercise in strategic communication. The book would have benefited from addressing the issue of access and sourcing more directly, especially since Feng rarely contextualises or comments on the narrative provided by her interviewees. This type of narration – presenting the accounts with relatively little contextualisation or commentary – is never neutral, since the material presented to the reader is itself selected. Feng anyway does not pretend to be neutral. In the prologue, she foreshadows what the future may hold in Xinjiang: "What several thousand highly motivated, highly experienced Uyghur fighters can do may end up surprising us all. They have already surprised me."

Waiting for the right time

When they enter Damascus, Uyghur fighters are described as weeping as they think of home. Choghtal gives a speech promising that the liberation will continue in Xinjiang. Another fighter describes how one of his comrades begins hallucinating as they enter Latakia, believing that he is returning to his home town. An old heart condition returns, and he dies of heart failure that same night. Feng's accounts leave little doubt about the enormous importance the fight against Chinese occupation still holds for these men and women. Equally intense are their fears that their children, who know their homeland only through stories, will forget the cause, and that the agenda of "waiting for the right time" could become a convenient slogan that in reality means inaction. In any case, an Islamist group drilled into total obedience (one Uyghur woman describes it as the "worshipping of leaders") and built around the goal of liberating Xinjiang – or East Turkistan, as they call it – is unlikely simply to call it a day.

It is unclear how the Syrian government has managed to placate Beijing, and whether al-Sharaa has promised to keep an eye on the Uyghurs and otherwise satisfy China's obsession with surveillance. It would not be an entirely novel challenge for him. He kept jihadist factions in Idlib under control while information about them was passed to the US-led coalition. What remains unresolved is what that might mean for the heavily armed Uyghur community, which is still finding its place in the new Syria while grappling with what that means for the cause that brought many of them there in the first place. Many such questions arise from Feng's book. Whatever the answers, it will almost certainly become a major reference for anyone trying to understand Syria's Uyghurs..