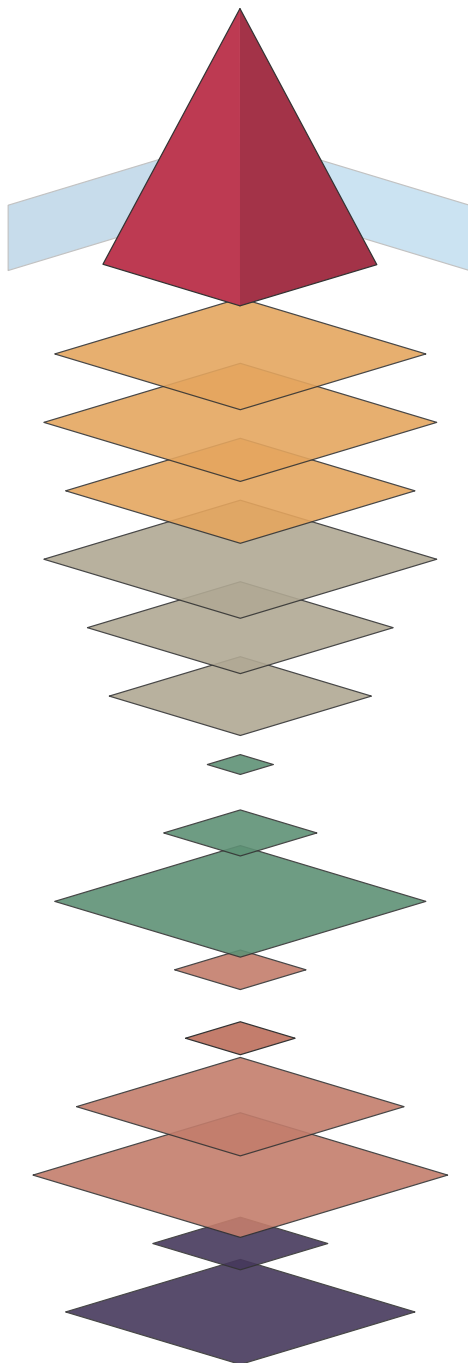
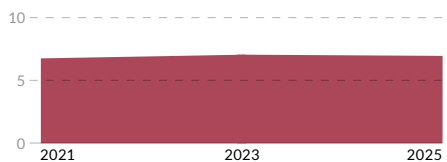


 **SYRIA**



 **6.98** $\searrow 0.08$
CRIMINALITY SCORE

19th of 193 countries $\searrow 8$
7th of 46 Asian countries $\searrow 2$
4th of 14 Western Asian countries $\searrow 1$



 **CRIMINAL MARKETS** **6.37** $\searrow 0.07$

HUMAN TRAFFICKING	8.50	0.00
HUMAN SMUGGLING	9.00	0.00
EXTORTION & PROTECTION RACKETEERING	8.00	0.00
ARMS TRAFFICKING	9.00	0.00
TRADE IN COUNTERFEIT GOODS	7.00	$\nearrow 0.50$
ILLCIT TRADE IN EXCISABLE GOODS	6.00	$\searrow 0.50$
FLORA CRIMES	1.50	0.00
FAUNA CRIMES	3.50	0.00
NON-RENEWABLE RESOURCE CRIMES	8.50	0.00
HEROIN TRADE	3.00	0.00
COCAINE TRADE	2.50	0.00
CANNABIS TRADE	7.50	0.00
SYNTHETIC DRUG TRADE	9.50	$\searrow 0.50$
CYBER-DEPENDENT CRIMES	4.00	$\searrow 0.50$
FINANCIAL CRIMES	8.00	0.00

 **CRIMINAL ACTORS** **7.60** $\searrow 0.10$

MAFIA-STYLE GROUPS	4.50	0.00
CRIMINAL NETWORKS	8.50	$\searrow 0.50$
STATE-EMBEDDED ACTORS	10.00	0.00
FOREIGN ACTORS	8.00	0.00
PRIVATE SECTOR ACTORS	7.00	0.00



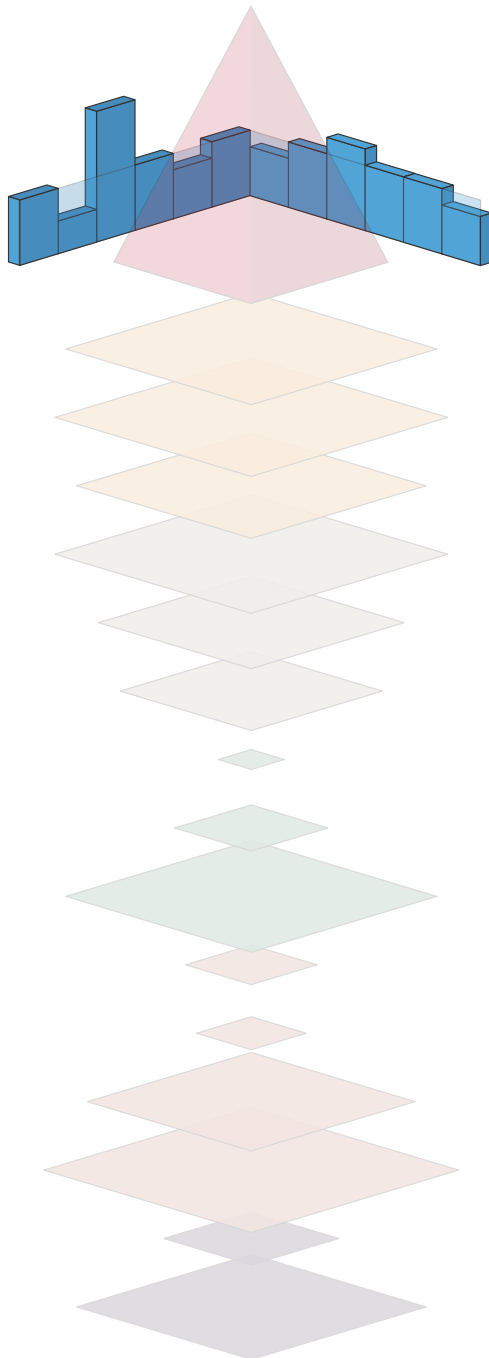
This project was funded in part by a grant from the United States Department of State.



Funded by the European Union

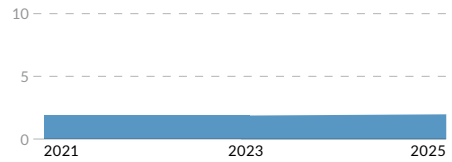
ENACT is funded by the European Union and implemented by the Institute for Security Studies and INTERPOL, in affiliation with the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime.

 **SYRIA**



 **2.00** $\nearrow 0.08$
RESILIENCE SCORE

185th of 193 countries $\searrow 1$
42nd of 46 Asian countries -
13th of 14 Western Asian countries -



POLITICAL LEADERSHIP AND GOVERNANCE	2.00	0.00
GOVERNMENT TRANSPARENCY AND ACCOUNTABILITY	1.00	0.00
INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION	4.00	$\nearrow 0.50$
NATIONAL POLICIES AND LAWS	2.00	0.00
JUDICIAL SYSTEM AND DETENTION	1.50	0.00
LAW ENFORCEMENT	2.00	0.00
TERRITORIAL INTEGRITY	1.50	0.00
ANTI-MONEY LAUNDERING	2.00	0.00
ECONOMIC REGULATORY CAPACITY	2.50	$\nearrow 0.50$
VICTIM AND WITNESS SUPPORT	2.00	0.00
PREVENTION	2.00	0.00
NON-STATE ACTORS	1.50	0.00



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CRIMINALITY

CRIMINAL MARKETS

PEOPLE

Human trafficking remains pervasive in Syria, fuelled by displacement and fragile governance structures. Internally displaced people – especially women and children – face elevated risks of sex trafficking, forced labour and early marriage. Armed groups continue to recruit minors as soldiers, often exploiting children both domestically and abroad, with locations such as Idlib emerging as trafficking hotspots. Although Syria hosts a substantial internal market, it also serves as a source country for trafficking beyond its borders. Indeed, vulnerable Syrian girls and women have long been targeted by transnational criminal organizations, which draw them across borders – particularly for sex trafficking – with networks operating in Lebanon, Türkiye and Iraq taking advantage of porous borders. This environment is further complicated by the overlapping trafficking of drugs, weapons and counterfeit goods, underscoring the multifaceted nature of Syria's transnational criminal landscape.

Before the fall of the Assad regime in December 2024 and the subsequent shifts in Syria's political landscape, the country served as a major hub for human smuggling, largely due to prolonged conflict, economic collapse and deteriorating public services. Smuggling networks expanded in response to stringent military service requirements and high barriers to legal travel, gradually making irregular migration more socially accepted. In both 2023 and 2024, Syrians accounted for the highest number of irregular entries into the EU and asylum applications, underscoring the reach and resilience of transnational smuggling networks. Corruption across all regions of Syria enabled this activity, with armed groups and officials alike benefiting financially. Human smuggling also intersected with trafficking in drugs, weapons and petroleum, contributing to regional criminal activity despite existing penalties. Since the fall of the regime, hundreds of thousands of Syrians have returned from countries such as Türkiye, Jordan and Lebanon. Nevertheless, how illicit smuggling operations may evolve remains to be seen.

During the height of Syria's civil war, extortion and protection racketeering were widespread, particularly in unstable regions. Armed groups aligned with government and opposition forces exploited businesses and individuals, demanding fees such as 'aid to the party' payments from merchants or royalties on agricultural goods. Payment demands have escalated notably in recent years. Groups like ISIS, despite diminished capabilities, continued localized extortion. Control of checkpoints along major roads intensified intimidation practices, raising transportation and logistics costs and driving up consumer prices. These

practices discouraged investment and economic activity, reinforcing cycles of poverty. Since the ousting of the Assad regime in December 2024, it remains unclear how these illicit activities might evolve in the country's changing political and security landscape.

TRADE

Arms trafficking has been deeply embedded in Syria, driven by demand from armed groups, civilians and external entities. Weapons regularly enter from countries such as Iran and Türkiye, often enabled by corrupt officials and criminal networks. Sales occur on social media and in local shops, with prices varying widely based on the type of weapon and where it stood in the supply chain. Both domestic and foreign actors benefit from this market, worsening regional insecurity. Arms trafficking also frequently intersect with other illicit trades, notably drug trafficking. Following the end of the Assad regime in December 2024, it is unclear how this entrenched criminal market will evolve.

The counterfeit goods market in Syria appears to be widespread, encompassing various activities including manufacturing, trafficking and distribution of counterfeit products ranging from clothing, accessories and electronics to medicines, car parts and food items. Goods are both domestically produced and imported from countries like China, Lebanon and Türkiye, often sold through shops or social media. Counterfeit medicines, in particular, pose serious health risks and command high black-market prices. Economic hardship and shortages of authentic goods make counterfeit products a necessary alternative for many citizens, while the lack of enforcement and trademark protection further undermines legitimate businesses.

Syria sustains a notable illicit market for excisable goods, particularly tobacco and alcohol, driven by high taxes, economic hardship and ready demand. Smuggling routes stretching from Lebanon and Iraq are often facilitated by corrupt officials, allowing products to bypass legal channels and reach consumers unimpeded. Local clans and communities, especially in border areas, have relied on smuggling for generations, leveraging their in-depth knowledge of terrain and established networks. Hezbollah and various domestic groups also play major roles in cigarette smuggling, while armed factions – including the Fourth Division of the former government forces – sought to control strategic border crossings and main roads. These groups offered protection, logistics and enforcement, but their competing interests often led to violent clashes. Corruption among customs officials further ease the smuggling of goods, which are closely connected to other criminal markets, including drug and human smuggling. Although the toppling of the Assad regime altered Syria's

political landscape, it remains unclear whether these extensive smuggling activities will wane or simply adapt to new conditions.

ENVIRONMENT

Years of conflict, poverty and climate change have severely impacted Syria's forests, prompting extensive illegal deforestation. According to a 2023 study, more than one-third of the country's forested areas have been cut down, with northern Aleppo and Palmyra among the hardest hit by logging carried out by armed groups, military operations and displaced communities seeking fuel. Despite the significant ecological damage, there is currently no indication of substantial organized crime involvement in this sector.

However, Syria is known to serve as a source and transit country for fauna crimes, with species such as deer, turtles and falcons trafficked domestically and abroad, particularly to Gulf countries. Wildlife has been traded through open markets and social media, with prices increasing along the supply chain. Falcon trafficking appears to be especially lucrative and increasingly common. Weak enforcement of conservation laws enables illicit hunting and trade to persist, contributing to biodiversity loss and ecological imbalances. Although less widespread than other illicit markets, fauna crimes in Syria significantly impact fragile ecosystems.

Before the Assad regime fell, Syria's illicit oil market was deeply entrenched, driven by shortages, sanctions and conflict. Oil and petroleum products were smuggled domestically and internationally, often facilitated by corruption among officials and criminal networks. North-east Syria, controlled by the Autonomous Administration, served a major production hub. Oil was smuggled to Iraq in particular, which faced its own shortages partly caused by illicit smuggling. Meanwhile, areas controlled by the former Syrian government drew on smuggled oil from Lebanon, driven by local demand and fuel scarcity. These operations frequently yielded low-quality, adulterated fuels, heightening public health risks, while profits often funded armed groups and worsened the conflict. Environmental damage from rudimentary refining methods further compounded these issues, and it is unclear how this market adapts to the shifts in Syria's political and security landscape.

DRUGS

The heroin trade in Syria appears relatively small and less consolidated compared to other narcotics markets. Although data on the heroin market remains limited, some level of activity has been reported in northern and eastern Syria in recent years. The country primarily serves as a transit zone for heroin shipments, with routes through cities like Damascus, Aleppo and the north-western coast. Stocks reportedly move toward neighbouring countries such as Jordan, Lebanon and Türkiye, which then facilitate trafficking

to Europe and the Gulf. Some heroin flows into Lebanon for processing before re-entering Syria. Similarly, the cocaine trade in Syria remains relatively small, constrained by the high cost of cocaine and the limited purchasing power of the population. The widespread availability and lower prices of other drugs, like Captagon, further reduce domestic demand. Most cocaine present in Syria is understood to be smuggled from Lebanon, with limited quantities entering the country. Syria may also function as a transit route for cocaine destined for Jordan and Iraq, although the scale of this activity is unclear. Evidence of cocaine use and trade within Syria is minimal.

The cannabis trade in Syria remains widespread and has continued to expand in recent years. Prior to the fall of the Assad regime in December 2024, this illicit trade was present across areas formerly controlled by the government, opposition and Syrian Democratic Forces alike. Trade networks relied on corruption within the former Syrian government as well as the military to facilitate distribution in government-controlled regions. Cannabis primarily entered Syria from Lebanon's Bekaa Valley, but there were also reports of local cultivation in southern and north-eastern regions and the Syrian coast. The country serves as both a source and a transit point for other destination markets in the region, particularly Jordan and Iraq. Prior to the toppling of the Assad government, a range of criminal actors reportedly engaged in the trade, such as militias linked to the former Syrian government to groups like Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, other factions operating in north-western Syria and Kurdish groups in north-eastern Syria. Foreign actors – notably militias supported by Iran, Iraqi militias along the eastern border and Lebanese militias near the border with Lebanon – also participated. Revenues from cannabis trafficking have supported armed groups and fuelled local conflicts for almost 14 years in the country.

Prior to the political shift marked by the ousting of the Assad regime in December 2024, Syria's synthetic drug market – particularly the production and trafficking of Captagon – was the country's largest and most lucrative illicit economy. Captagon production was widespread, generating billions in revenue for criminal networks and actors linked to the former regime, and accounted for approximately 80% of the global supply before December 2024. Syria served both as a major source and a key consumer market, with substantial domestic demand and strong external markets, particularly in the Gulf region. In recent years, the former regime made limited efforts to curb the trade, although many analysts considered these efforts to be largely performative, as the Syrian state itself was deeply embedded in the Captagon economy. Notably, these gestures coincided with Syria's readmission to the Arab League, framed as part of a regional strategy to combat the Captagon trade, with financial aid packages promised in return for concrete action against smuggling. Alongside Captagon, crystal methamphetamine also emerged in the market, trafficked along the same established routes. The synthetic drug trade fuelled violence, corruption and public

health crises, while escalating regional tensions. However, in the aftermath of the regime change and amid ongoing political and security uncertainty, the future scope and trajectory of Syria's synthetic drug economy remain unclear.

CYBER-DEPENDENT CRIMES

Cybercrime is not widespread in Syria, largely because of limited internet access, technological infrastructure challenges and sanctions. Law enforcement has remained focused on more traditional crimes, such as arms trafficking and human smuggling, rather than cybercrime. Historically, cyber activity during the civil war was primarily politically motivated, with pro-Assad groups and ISIS-affiliated hackers targeting opposition forces. Recently, malwares capable of espionage and ransomware attacks, were detected. Cyber-dependent crimes in Syria have mainly aimed to suppress dissent rather than generate profit, resulting in limited domestic impact.

FINANCIAL CRIMES

Financial crimes became pervasive in Syria during the decade-long conflict, driven by economic hardship, weak governance and legal loopholes. Widespread tax evasion, misuse of public funds, embezzlement and online fraud schemes – including fake humanitarian aid appeals following the 2023 earthquake – characterized this market. Criminal networks, private sector actors, government officials and militias were all implicated in fraudulent activities. Proceeds from financial crimes were sometimes funnelled into other illicit markets, including drug and human trafficking. These crimes have significantly weakened public finances and exacerbated socioeconomic inequalities. Looking ahead, the scope and intensity of financial crimes may shift depending on how the evolving political and security situation unfolds following the fall of the Assad regime.

CRIMINAL ACTORS

Prior to December 2024, the Syrian state, within areas formerly controlled by the Assad regime, allowed little space for mafia-style groups to operate independently of state authority. However, in other parts of the country, numerous such groups emerged, often in the form of militias and armed factions. In the north-west, groups such as the Sultan Murad Brigade, Moutassem Brigade and Ahrar al-Sharqiya, among others, were known to be active and engaged in a range of criminal activities. Similarly, in the north-east, groups including the Syrian Democratic Forces, People's Protection Units, Syriac Military Council, Self-Defence Forces, tribal militias and municipal military councils were implicated in smuggling and trafficking various commodities within Syria and across its borders. These groups typically maintained sizable memberships and exerted significant territorial control. Their areas of operation often functioned as 'criminal enclaves': zones

dominated by organized criminal actors where central state authority was absent or limited. While most of these militias were involved in multiple illicit markets, a core component of their funding derived from their territorial control, which enabled them to impose informal taxes, extort businesses and fund their operations. Notably, many of these groups played a role in the ousting of the Assad regime, a movement led by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, (HTS) which subsequently appointed a transitional government. The new administration has since announced the dissolution of the armed factions involved in Assad's removal, including HTS's own militia. As a result, the future influence of these groups within Syria's criminal markets is uncertain and will become clearer in the coming period of political transition.

Syria has seen the rise of loosely organized groups active across a range of illicit markets, including human trafficking, smuggling, drug trafficking, illicit trade in excisable goods and financial crimes. Levels of violence among these actors vary significantly. These networks are primarily based in urban centres and border regions, which offer strategic advantages for cross-border operations. Transnational ties are evident, with foreign criminal groups exploiting Syria's porous borders and geographic position to facilitate trafficking and collaborative illicit activities.

Under the Assad regime, Syria's government was marked by high levels of opacity, corruption and collusion with criminal actors. Bribery and protection payments to officials at various levels allowed illicit activity to flourish with minimal repercussions. State actors were also directly engaged in organized crime, particularly in the Captagon trade, which became a major source of revenue for the former government. The regime's involvement enabled foreign actors aligned with it to operate more freely within Syria's borders. As regime control weakened after 2011, both state and non-state actors increasingly competed for influence, especially in areas where government authority had receded. The new transitional government taking shape under HTS and allied opposition factions could reshape how criminal markets are controlled.

Foreign actors have also played a significant role in shaping Syria's criminal landscape throughout the country's civil war. These actors were linked to extortion, arms trafficking, drug smuggling and human trafficking, forming a complex network of routes and hubs. Before December 2024, Hezbollah was deeply involved in smuggling operations across the Syrian Lebanese border, with its activities tightly interwoven with Syria's political and criminal structures. US-backed Kurdish groups engaged in oil smuggling, while Turkish-affiliated militias were active in trafficking along the Syrian Turkish border. Iran-backed militias were influential along eastern trade corridors. The future role of foreign actors in the Syrian criminal landscape amidst political and security shift occurring in the country remains uncertain.

Prior to the fall of the Assad regime, the Syrian state was deeply entangled with the private sector, making it difficult

to distinguish between organized crime and state-linked illicit activity. Front companies associated with the regime were established to circumvent Western sanctions and were frequently implicated in financial crimes such as tax

evasion and bankruptcy fraud. There were also allegations of private sector involvement in human trafficking, counterfeit goods and the illicit trade in excisable products.

RESILIENCE

LEADERSHIP AND GOVERNANCE

Political leadership and governance in Syria have undergone a major shift following the ousting of the Assad regime in December 2024. Under the previous government, Syria was characterized by authoritarianism, centralized control and widespread corruption. State institutions, including the judiciary and legislature, were largely subordinated to the president's will, and dissent was systematically suppressed. The electoral process lacked genuine competition and was confined to formerly government-controlled areas, effectively excluding opposition-held territories. This exclusion undermined electoral inclusivity and contributed to a perception of illegitimacy both domestically and internationally. Public distrust was further exacerbated by the regime's alleged involvement in facilitating organized crime, particularly in the drug trade. Despite occasional announcements of arrests and seizures, state action against criminal networks remained largely ineffective. Governance in opposition-held areas also suffered from a lack of accountability, with authorities there often complicit in illicit economies. The fall of the Assad regime marked a significant turning point. A transitional government, led by HTS and its Syrian Salvation Government assumed authority. While this transition was welcomed by parts of the international community, concerns remain over the ideological orientation of HTS, its sectarian views and the implications for Syria's future governance. The impact of the new leadership's approach to political representation, minority rights and governance is unclear.

Government transparency and accountability were longstanding challenges under the former regime. While some initiatives were undertaken, such as publishing national budgets and drafting anti-corruption strategies, these efforts often fell short due to systemic constraints and limited political momentum. Instances of high-level corruption were reported, including among senior officials and external partners, who were perceived to benefit from opaque procurement mechanisms and selective distribution of aid. Lower levels of governance were similarly affected, with economic hardship contributing to practices that undermined accountability. Information dissemination was tightly regulated, limiting the ability of external actors and domestic institutions to provide independent oversight. Following the transition in leadership, there is cautious optimism regarding the potential for greater transparency

and improved governance. However, concrete reforms have not yet materialized, and public confidence remains tentative. In territories formerly controlled by opposition forces, comparable challenges related to governance and transparency have also been noted, particularly concerning humanitarian aid distribution.

Syria has ratified most major international treaties related to organized crime, including the UN Convention against Transnational Organized Crime and CITES, though it has not signed the Arms Trade Treaty or the UNTOC protocol on illicit arms. The implementation of these agreements has been limited by institutional weaknesses, civil conflict and limited transparency. However, in recent years, the state has engaged in international efforts to combat organized crime, including participation in INTERPOL-led operations and contributions to regional anti-drug strategies. Syria's re-admittance to the Arab League in 2023 signalled a shift in regional relations and opened new avenues for cooperation on border security and intelligence-sharing. International normalization efforts also included renewed engagement from European countries, with Italy re-establishing diplomatic ties in 2024. These developments reflect a growing interest in stabilizing Syria through engagement rather than isolation, particularly to curb irregular migration and drug trafficking. Nonetheless, the HTS-led transitional government presents a dilemma for international partners, as the group is designated a terrorist organization by many states. While external actors such as Germany and Türkiye have expressed support for Syria's transition, the extent and nature of future cooperation remain uncertain.

Syria has enacted numerous national laws addressing various aspects of organized crime, including legislation on drug trafficking, human smuggling, arms trade, cybercrime and financial crimes. However, the legal framework remains deficient in several key respects. There is no explicit legal definition of organized crime, and the laws often do not differentiate between perpetrators and accomplices. Provisions concerning human trafficking and drug-related offences are particularly inadequate, with a punitive approach towards victims, including those involved in forced labour or exploitation. Sentences for drug crimes can include the death penalty, which diverges from international standards. Legislative gaps are compounded by weak enforcement capacity and corruption. Laws that exist on paper are not

always applied in practice, and enforcement mechanisms are often undermined by resource constraints and political interference. While reforms have been attempted, their effectiveness is limited by a lack of institutional independence and systematic oversight.

CRIMINAL JUSTICE AND SECURITY

The judicial system in Syria lacks specialized units to handle organized crime cases. Judicial proceedings are typically managed by general courts without targeted expertise or resources. Under the former regime, the judiciary was heavily influenced by the executive branch and security services, severely compromising its independence. Trials were often politically motivated, and corruption, arbitrary detention and a lack of due process were prevalent. This environment made it difficult to investigate or prosecute complex criminal networks effectively. The post-regime judiciary's commitment to independence and legal reform remains unclear, although expectations for change persist among the population. Prison conditions vary significantly across facilities. Central prisons offer minimal services but suffered from overcrowding, while those under former security agencies were marked by inhumane conditions, torture and widespread abuse. Arbitrary detention and enforced disappearances were common under the Assad regime. Since the regime's collapse, tens of thousands of detainees have reportedly been released, yet more remain unaccounted for, with many presumed dead.

Law enforcement capacity remains fragmented. While Syria has departments for addressing specific crimes such as human trafficking and drug offences, overall policing suffers from a lack of public trust, impeded by allegations of abuse and corruption. Security forces are perceived as politically biased and sectarian, further eroding legitimacy. Community policing initiatives are limited, and enforcement remains inconsistent across different territories. Intelligence agencies play a central role in law enforcement, maintaining extensive surveillance over both civil and private sectors. In December 2024, following Assad's removal, the new leadership announced a policy to bring all weapons under state control and integrate armed groups into a national army. This aimed to centralize military authority and address longstanding fragmentation. While this initiative is a positive step toward reestablishing order, its success depends on the willingness of diverse armed factions to cooperate and the capacity of the transitional government to enforce its directives.

Territorial integrity has long been compromised by the country's civil war and political instability. Syria's borders with Iraq, Lebanon, Jordan, Türkiye and Israel have been exploited for illicit activities, including drug trafficking and arms smuggling. The state has limited control over many of its borders, which remain porous and poorly monitored. Regional actors, including Iran-affiliated militias and Kurdish groups, exert influence in border regions, further complicating

national efforts to assert sovereignty. Criminal networks in neighbouring countries have facilitated cross-border illicit trade, contributing to Syria's vulnerability. Efforts to strengthen border control have included the expansion of customs enforcement and penalties for corruption among customs officials. Some success was reported in reducing extortion along internal checkpoints. However, the current government's strategy for safeguarding territorial integrity is not yet fully articulated. External developments, such as Israel's increased military presence near the Golan Heights, further complicate the country's territorial landscape.

ECONOMIC AND FINANCIAL ENVIRONMENT

Syria has established the Anti-Money Laundering and Terrorist Financing Commission under the central bank to oversee suspicious financial activities, conduct investigations and refer cases to judicial authorities. The commission strengthened regulatory frameworks, provided specialized training, and enhanced compliance efforts across financial and law enforcement sectors. Internationally, Syria is a founding member of Western Asia and North Africa Financial Action Task Force and a member of the Egmont Group, promoting financial intelligence cooperation. Despite progress, Syria's financial practices remain under international scrutiny because of concerns about illicit financial activities amid ongoing conflict, and the country remains on the FATF grey list.

Syria's economy has been severely impacted by over a decade of conflict, sanctions and internal instability. International sanctions targeting trade, finance and technology remain in place, restricting economic activity and limiting government surveillance capabilities. Despite sanctions, the former government engaged in illicit financial activities to maintain resources. Efforts to stimulate investment through new laws faced challenges caused by persistent conflict and weak enforcement. Subsidized goods and high taxation on imports inadvertently fuelled smuggling networks. Advances were made in electronic payment systems, though rural areas lagged. Despite reforms, the economy continued to contract, and most of the population remains reliant on humanitarian aid.

CIVIL SOCIETY AND SOCIAL PROTECTION

Victim and witness support structures in Syria remain underdeveloped. Under the Assad regime, resource constraints and restricted access for international organizations limited the availability of services for victims of organized crime. Drug users and other victims were often stigmatized and criminalized rather than supported. The few government-run centres that existed were poorly equipped and inadequately staffed. Victims of human trafficking, particularly children, faced punishment for acts committed as a result of their exploitation. The transitional government's policies on victim support are not yet clear, leaving the future of this critical area uncertain.

In previous years, the Syria's National Committee for Drug Affairs initiated awareness programmes on drug abuse prevention, involving ministries, NGOs and civil society groups. Efforts to combat human trafficking included establishing a 24/7 confidential hotline under the Ministry of the Interior and allowing reporting through police departments. However, these efforts were undermined by broader failures in governance and protection. International assessments noted that the previous government did little to prevent the recruitment of child soldiers or to raise awareness of trafficking risks. It is unclear whether the new administration will strengthen prevention mechanisms.

Civil society in Syria has long operated under severe restrictions. Under the previous regime, independent organizations were heavily regulated and often suppressed. Media freedom was virtually non-existent in government-controlled areas, and even in opposition territories, press liberties were inconsistently applied. Attacks on journalists and activists were widespread, and many civil society actors were forced to operate in exile or under clandestine conditions. According to rights organizations, hundreds of journalists have been killed or have disappeared since 2011. Following Assad's departure, there have been attempts to reform state-run media, with new leadership promising professionalization and modernization. However, doubts persist about the extent of true press freedom under the HTS-led government. Existing legal and institutional constraints, as well as the legacy of repression, continue to pose challenges to the development of an open and robust civil society capable of monitoring governance and supporting victims of organized crime.

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