

Meeting Report

Workshop on Inclusive Political Transition in Syria
Amman, 21–22 September 2025

Background and Objectives

On 21–22 September 2025, the Swedish Dialogue Institute for the Middle East and North Africa (SDI), in cooperation with the Olof Palme International Centre (OPC) and the Swedish International Liberal Centre (SILC), convened a workshop in Amman on an inclusive Political Transition in Syria. The workshop brought together Syrian participants from within Syria and the diaspora, representing civil society actors, and political activists and parties.

The workshop aimed to assess the evolving political and societal landscape in Syria following the fall of Bashar al-Assad nine months earlier and to explore pathways toward an inclusive political transition that reflects Syria's social diversity and supports long-term stability.

Workshop Recommendations

- **Prioritise Inclusive, Nationwide Dialogue Processes**

Support the establishment of sustained dialogue mechanisms that engage diverse societal actors across regions, generations, and communities, with particular attention to youth participation and intra-communal tensions.

- **Advance Security Sector Reform in Parallel with Political Processes**

Encourage the development of a clear DDR strategy linked to transitional justice frameworks, while promoting integration of military structures into broader social and civic structures.

- **Support Hybrid Models of Political Transition**

Promote approaches that combine top-down political processes involving the government and parliament with bottom-up civic participation. Government-led initiatives should be complemented by strong civil society engagement to enhance legitimacy, accountability, and public trust.

- **Strengthen Civil Society and Political Parties**

Invest in capacity-building for civil society organisations and political parties, with specific measures to ensure women's and youth participation, inclusive leadership, and pluralistic political competition.

- **Ensure International Engagement Is Enabling, Not Directive**

Encourage international actors to provide technical support and incentives without imposing external agendas, ensuring Syrian ownership of reform processes and safeguarding space for internal voices.

Opening Remarks

The workshop was opened by Ann Måwe, Director of SDI, who welcomed participants and emphasised the importance of inclusive dialogue at a critical juncture in Syria's history. She underscored that sustainable change depends on the engagement of individuals committed to constructive, Syrian-led transformation.

Margot Wallström, Chairperson of OPC, participated virtually and highlighted the importance of dialogue in shaping Syria's future. She stressed Syria's strategic relevance to Sweden and clarified that Swedish engagement sought to support, rather than direct, Syrian processes. Lars Leijonborg, Chairperson of SILC, echoed the remarks, acknowledging both the magnitude of Syria's challenges and the central role of Syrian agency in addressing them.

Setting the Scene: Syria Today

The facilitator of the workshop opened discussions with a gloomy reality check, describing Syrian society as deeply fragmented, characterised by mutual blame and competing narratives of victimhood. While the interim government included representatives from multiple religious and ethnic communities, participants emphasised that societal fragmentation persisted, including growing intra-communal tensions. Divergent understandings of inclusivity further complicated reconciliation efforts. The need for nationwide dialogue engaging actors across Syria's cities and ensuring meaningful youth participation was highlighted, while noting the continued difficulty of organising such initiatives inside Syria. Independent dialogue platforms were identified as potential facilitators of trust-building processes if operating free from political agendas.

Session 1: Opportunities and Challenges for Peaceful Coexistence and Civic Peace

The first session featured a Syrian researcher, who examined prospects for civic peace with a focus on Security Sector Reform (SSR).

It was emphasised that effective SSR required trust-building among central military commanders and sustained dialogue to reduce tensions. Drawing on interview-based research, it was noted that prior to Assad's fall, many fighters joined armed groups due to personal grievances rather than sectarian motivations. In contrast, sectarianism had since become significantly more pronounced.

She observed that initial post-Assad optimism had given way to increasing fragmentation, underscoring the need to shift from a revolutionary mindset toward a nation-building

approach. The absence of a clear Disarmament, Demobilisation, and Reintegration (DDR) strategy and a transitional justice framework continued to generate uncertainty regarding the future of security reform.

The researcher stressed that SSR must be embedded within broader social frameworks, including addressing hypermasculine norms, promoting inclusive national narratives, providing psychological support, and linking security reform to transitional justice. She also highlighted the role of media in rebuilding social trust.

Participants noted that DDR processes are inherently long-term, often extending over several years. Concerns were raised regarding significant salary disparities within the military and limited coherence between central command and local actors. Questions were also raised as to whether Syria is evolving toward a doctrine-based military rather than a national army.

Participants cautioned that unconditional international legitimacy for the interim government could marginalise internal Syrian voices, suggesting that any sanctions relief should be sector-based. At the same time, positive examples were cited, including former military leaders who had successfully transitioned into civilian governance roles.

Session 2: Opportunities and Challenges for Inclusive Political Participation in Syria

The second session explored models for inclusive political participation. While acknowledging the interim government's current representation model, participants discussed alternative frameworks for inclusive governance.

Top-Down, Government-Led Approach

One model discussed involved a government-led national conference building on the February 2025 national dialogue, facilitated by Syrian actors with technical support from a neutral external entity. Participants emphasised that meaningful political commitment and incentives would be required for this model to succeed. If effectively implemented, such an approach could position Syria as a distinct case in the region by combining national ownership with inclusive reform.

Bottom-Up, Society-Led Approach

A second model focused on bottom-up processes driven by civil society organisations and political parties. This approach prioritised local ownership and participatory inclusivity, particularly for women, youth, and marginalised groups. Participants pointed to early post-Assad local initiatives as evidence of this model's potential to build trust, promote reconciliation, and establish sustainable foundations for national unity.

Internationally Facilitated Approach

A third model involved an internationally facilitated process leading to a new political framework beyond UN Security Council Resolution 2254. Participants stressed that such

engagement should avoid external guardianship and instead recognise Syria's evolving realities. Proposals included redefining regime–opposition binaries, sponsoring a more inclusive constitution, and establishing a second parliamentary chamber based on geography rather than population.

Session 3: Lessons from South Africa – Reconciliation and Inclusive Institutions

Session three was led by a South African democracy advocate and educator, who reflected on South Africa's transition from apartheid. It was highlighted the combined role of grassroots mobilization and sustained international pressure, including sanctions, in enabling systemic change.

The importance of informal negotiations and backchannel communication in building trust ahead of formal agreements was also highlighted, as well as the parallel pursuit of disarmament during peace negotiations. Religious communities played a critical role as mediators and moral authorities. A key lesson was the shared ownership of state institutions, which helped ensure legitimacy and long-term stability. Guaranteeing equal rights for all citizens was identified as foundational to reconciliation.

Session 4: Driving Public Opinion, Advocacy for Political Reform, and Political Mobilization

The fourth session was led by a Jordanian expert who reflected on Jordan's experience with political reform. It was noted that while political activity, particularly youth engagement, was historically constrained, Jordan has introduced significant reforms in recent times.

Several concrete measures were outlined, including legal protections for party members, mandatory quotas for women and youth in party membership, and lowering the parliamentary candidacy age to 25. It was emphasised that Jordan's reform trajectory had largely followed a top-down approach, initiated and supported by King Abdullah II, signalling strong political will. At the same time, the reform process incorporated dialogue among government institutions, parliament, and civil society organisations.

It was suggested that while Syria's context was different, a gradual reform trajectory combining top-down leadership with civic engagement could offer relevant lessons.

Closing Reflections

The final session featured Oscar Ernerot, Secretary General of OPC, and Joar Forsell, Member of the Swedish Parliament and Foreign Policy Spokesperson for the Liberal Party. Both emphasised the importance of coalition-building across ideological divides and advocated for solution-oriented politics focused on addressing societal challenges. Third-party mediation was highlighted as a useful tool for fostering inclusive dialogue.