



Maria Luisa Fantappiè

➤ How Italy and the Gulf Can Help Achieve Durable Peace in Gaza*

- In the context of Trump's plan for Gaza, Italy can leverage its good relations with the US, Gulf states and Israel to sustain the ceasefire and advance Hamas demobilisation.
- Italy and Gulf partners should coordinate to facilitate the creation of legitimate Palestinian governance mechanisms and the reconstruction process, preventing Gaza's fragmentation and reinforcing regional stability.
- Leveraging its peacekeeping experience, Rome should rally European support for a UN mandate enabling an International Stabilisation Force that upholds Palestinian sovereignty and ensures peace implementation.



Ministry of Foreign Affairs
and International Cooperation

At this crucial time, Italy has a role in “holding the hand of the United States” to do the right thing and bring about the implementation of all the parts of the [October 2025 Gaza ceasefire] deal, steering the ambiguous sections in the right direction.¹

Trump's twenty-point plan for Gaza surely has many shortcomings – especially in detailing the schedule of implementation and its formulation around the sovereignty and governance of Palestine. Yet it also holds opportunities, including with regard to Italy's possible increased cooperation with members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) in guaranteeing the preservation of the ceasefire, reconstruction and governance efforts that are needed for a durable peace. The Italian government's special relationship with the US administration, the consolidated ties with Gulf countries and continued dialogue with Israel all place Rome in a favourable position to positively contribute to the plan while also shaping and securing a broader European role in the process. This may unfold along three parallel tracks: accompanying the demobilisation process, catalysing synergies on governance and reconstruction, as well as supporting adequate actions in the Security Council.

¹ Author's interview with an adviser to a MENA state.

* This brief was produced in the framework of the research project “Stati Uniti, Italia e il futuro dell'ordine mediorientale”, conducted by IAI with the support of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, Fondazione Compagnia di San Paolo and Fondazione CSF. All opinions expressed in this document are solely and exclusively those of the author.



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Accompanying demobilisation

The ceasefire brokered through Trump's plan remains as fragile as the overall trust between the parties in conflict. The exchange of Israeli hostages in the hands of Hamas against Palestinian prisoners in Israeli jails remains uncompleted. Some of the bodies of dead hostages have still to be handed over. Should this not be fulfilled in the short term, Israeli authorities have already stated that they are prepared to return to war.

Meanwhile, plans for the disarmament of Hamas militants and the definition of their role in post-war Gaza remain fluid. Israel distrusts Turkey and Qatar – the regional powers with the largest influence over Hamas leadership – and fears that they may push for a continued role of Hamas in the strip under the guise of new governance and police authorities – to which Israel is firmly opposed. Divergence on Hamas's demobilisation risks becoming a stumbling block that holds back negotiations on other crucial files (flows of humanitarian aid; ceasefire in Gaza; post-war governance reconstruction), is already hampering return of humanitarian aid to the strip and may set the stage for a return to a medium intensity confrontation in the strip.

Still, so far, thanks to US pressures, the ceasefire is holding, and all parties have moderated their posture. Notably, Doha has played an important role in pushing Hamas's politburo elements to agree to the ceasefire plan and considers it crucial as the starting point towards a clear, step-by-step decommission plan. The latter includes granting amnesty for Hamas veterans in return for their handing over weapons and leaving the strip, as well as demobilising middle ranks and fresh recruits under a police authority integrated within the Palestinian Authority (PA) police ranks.

Italy can help Washington in its endeavour to uphold a truce in the hostilities. Its role as a neutral third party in the discussion that has strong ties to the US, as well as to Qatar and Gulf states, and maintains open channels to Israel, could be leveraged to partner with and support the United States in moderating and mediating between the parties, engaging with those counterparts that are less maximalists and more ready to compromise on the demilitarisation plan and the decommissioning of Hamas members. Track II diplomacy with Qatar and Turkey and, in the meantime, consultations with Israel could bolster Italy's role as a player in Middle East politics and, in parallel, advance prospects for peace.

Synergies on governance and reconstruction

Discussions on post-war reconstruction and governance are where Italy's roles and synergies with the Gulf countries have the greatest potential to deliver results. The composition and role of the "Board of Peace" (point 9 of the twenty-point plan)² that should be headed by Trump and heads of state is yet to be defined. According to the plan, the board should supervise a Palestinian

² Rapid Response 47, "President Donald J. Trump's Comprehensive Plan to End the Gaza Conflict", X post, 29 September 2025, <https://x.com/RapidResponse47/status/1972726021196562494>.



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committee made up of handpicked 'apolitical technocrats' which, in the hopes of Israel's current government, should be dependable and may potentially even challenge, if not replace, the PA. In this respect, there is a concrete risk that, as a technocratic and weak body of governance settles in, Hamas's cells will continue to operate in Gaza. This, in turn, would pose the conditions for a prolonged presence of the IDF in the strip, continued bloc of humanitarian aid and return to low and mid-intensity war and declining prospects for Palestinian effective governance of their own land.

Gulf countries fear this outcome. Their approach is instead to focus on including talented Palestinian leaders – part of the PA's new generations, business people and civil society activists – early on into the picture. Saudi Arabia in particular, which has led the Global Alliance for the Implementation of the Two-States Solution initiative, is particularly committed to ensuring that PA be involved in governance as soon as possible – without conditioning such inclusion on the completion of its internal reform. Turning a crisis into an opportunity, the reconstruction and governance in Gaza could indeed be the very opportunity for PA to jumpstart an internal reform process.

Concerns by Arab and Gulf states are also hovering over a potential partition of the Gaza strip to be governed and administered in autonomy from the West Bank, as this will further undermine steps towards Palestinian sovereignty and effective Palestinian governance. In effect, as many have pointed out, it was precisely that split between Gaza and the West Bank, alongside a dormant and ineffective PA, that was among the root causes of the consolidation of Hamas and 7 October operations. While conservative and extreme far-right fringes of the Knesset see annexation and divide and rule as the right formula for fulfilling the messianic and security goals of Israel, Gulf states argue that an effective Palestinian governance is instead the best guarantee for Israel's own security.

Against this backdrop, Italy has a role to play in this in at least two different respects:

- › Leveraging strong ties with members of the GCC, launching – and if needed leading – a consultation process with regional partners, above all Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Turkey, Jordan and Egypt, to “push the right people into the room”³ to ensure that Palestinian governance over the strip is effectively advanced through the committee instead of turning it into a mere proxy-entity lacking legitimacy and capabilities on the ground. Tangible advances in defining Palestinian governance of the strip could help make the ceasefire work, building overall trust between the parties and advancing the negotiations over the exchange of prisoners/hostage bodies, issues of disarmament notwithstanding.
- › As far as reconstruction efforts are concerned, Saudi Arabia has a crucial role to play in light of the economic and political capital that will be needed to ensure a fair reconstruction and governance in the post-war period. “Palestine is for the Kingdom much more than something we care for as Arab and Muslims. It is an issue of national

³ Author's interview with an adviser to a MENA state.



»» It will be crucial that any UN Security Council resolution provides the ISF with a clear mandate that does not deny or challenge the legitimate claim of sovereignty of Palestinians over the strip.

security. Not sorting it out could give our rivals, Iran in particular, an advantage point”.⁴ In particular, Saudi Arabia and Italy could partner together to facilitate and boost reconstruction and its governance by hosting a joint Forum for Reconstruction in Riyadh where international companies, alongside Palestinian businesspeople, are brought together to discuss reconstruction and future governance. Furthermore, Israel will welcome a more important role for Saudi Arabia and the UAE in defining governance of the strip to balance the influence of Turkey and Qatar.

Actions in the Security Council

Finally, Italy also has an important role in mobilising European member states support for a UN Security Council Resolution providing a clear framework for the deployment of the International Stabilisation Force (ISF) mentioned in the plan. While not a member of the UN Security Council, Italy remains one of the most experienced players in peacekeeping operations such as that envisioned for the ISF. Building on past experience, it will be crucial that any UN Security Council resolution provides the ISF with a clear mandate that does not deny or challenge the legitimate claim of sovereignty of Palestinians over the strip.

⁴ Author's interview with a Saudi Arabia interlocutor, October 2025.

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Filippo Simonelli

› Italy, Europe and the Iran-US Confrontation: Managing Escalation without Illusions*

- › The Israeli-American war on Iran has had more severe implications for Italy and Europe than previous episodes of escalation.
- › Brussels and Rome have to deal with a fractured transatlantic bond, limited capacity to craft a new Iran policy and the need to reaffirm a credible image in the Middle East and with Gulf partners.
- › Italy is also exposed to potential spillover effects affecting its partners in Africa, adding an additional layer of policy implications for Rome. The activism of the Italian government, especially in terms of energy access, shows willingness to deal with immediate problems, but addressing the long-term effects of the crisis may exceed a single member state's capacity.



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The crisis is testing Europe's place in the Gulf and Italy's claim to act as a bridge

The new phase of the decades-long US-Iran confrontation, opened at the end of February 2026, has brought the Gulf back to the centre of European strategic concerns. The combination of US and Israeli military action, Iranian retaliation and the disruption of maritime flows has turned a regional confrontation into a crisis with direct consequences for Europe's economy, energy security and political room for manoeuvre. In the Italian case, effects of the crisis may reach Rome through the Mediterranean, through its relations with Gulf partners and through the African dimension of its foreign policy.¹ Italy and Europe face the very difficult test to keep a capacity to shape events around a crisis whose military core remains outside their control.

Italy has generally followed the European consensus on Iran, but Rome's long-established and never disavowed diplomatic relationship with Tehran has

¹ The two issues are connected, as some countries, such as the UAE, which are included in financing facilities linked to the Mattei Plan. See, for instance: Cassa Depositi e Prestiti, *Support for Business, Renewables and Water: Three New Agreements with the United Arab Emirates*, 25 February 2025, https://www.cdp.it/sitointernet/page/en/support_for_business_renewables_and_water_three_new_agreements_with_the_united_arab_emirates?contentId=PRG50147.

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»» The nuclear dimension remains central, but with new caveats

encouraged a generally cautious tone.² For more than two decades, Europe's Iran policy relied on nuclear diplomacy through sanctions and verification, the informal Anglo-French-German E3 format and transatlantic coordination, all of which were central to the negotiation and signing of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), the 2015 nuclear deal.³ That framework had already weakened after the United States left the deal during the first Trump administration, and the present crisis has further reduced Europe's political clout. Its room for action now lies less in reviving the old Iran policy than in protecting what remains of it. Nuclear verification is still the main point of continuity with the pre-JCPOA phase. The fact that Italy was not an active contributor to the old framework can be a relative advantage, as it does not carry the baggage of deep mistrust that Iran has developed toward the E3. Its good relations with Gulf capitals and its Mediterranean exposure give it an opening for some form of diplomatic engagement.

The crisis beyond the nuclear issue

Despite hitting some highly sensitive targets, the military operation that the United States and Israel started on 28 February 2026 did not achieve the goal of regime change or even replicate a Venezuela-like scenario in which leadership decapitation would lead to policy change. The strikes transformed the Islamic Republic of Iran from a religiously based system into a similarly authoritarian but military-led one, with the new leadership taking the confrontation beyond previous boundaries: direct attacks on US regional bases; retaliatory operations hitting Gulf states, harming their hard-earned image of security and prosperity havens in a war-torn region; and closure of the Strait of Hormuz, where 20 per cent of global oil and liquefied natural gas transit.

The nuclear dimension remains central, but with new caveats. The International Atomic Energy Agency had not had access to Iran's nuclear facilities after Israel and the United States bombed them during the June 2025 12-day war. Consequently, it could no longer determine the size of Iran's uranium stockpile, especially the 450 kg of uranium enriched to 60 per cent (for which there is no civilian application), at affected nuclear facilities.⁴ Attempts to degrade Iran's nuclear infrastructure have therefore weakened the international oversight on which any future diplomatic track would depend.

The disruption of passage through the Strait of Hormuz has shown how Iran can widen the costs of confrontation without matching the United States militarily,⁵ bringing the political message to Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)

² Fantappiè, Maria Luisa, "Limits and Strengths of Italy's Balancing Act in the Middle East", in *IAI Briefs*, No. 26 | 09 (February 2026), <https://www.iai.it/en/node/21630>.

³ The E3 was a diplomatic format comprising France, United Kingdom and Germany. For a deeper focus on E3 Diplomacy, see among others Alcaro, Riccardo, "Weathering the Geopolitical Storms: The Ever-elusive Success of EU Policy towards Iran", in *The International Spectator*, Vol. 59, No. 1 (2024), p. 98-119, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03932729.2023.2273852>.

⁴ International Atomic Energy Agency, *Implementation of the NPT Safeguards Agreement and relevant provisions of the United Nations Security Council resolutions in the Islamic Republic of Iran*, 17 February 2026, point 35, <https://www.iaea.org/sites/default/files/gov2026-8.pdf>.

⁵ Hafezi, Parisa and Jacob Bogage, "Trump Says US Operation Will Aid Ships Stranded in Strait of Hormuz", in *Reuters*, updated 4 May 2026, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/iran-offers-strait-deal-trump-dissatisfied-prefers-non-military-path-2026-05-02>.



»» Europe is now pulled between a weakened transatlantic anchor and a Gulf that expects more than declaratory support

countries that closeness to Washington does not remove their geographical vulnerability.⁶

The war has also exposed divisions within the GCC. Saudi Arabia supports the containment of Iran but does not want a regional order defined entirely by Israel or by an open-ended US-Iran confrontation. The memory of the 2019 attacks on Saudi oil facilities still weighs on Riyadh's calculations, as it showed the limits of American protection and encouraged the kingdom to widen its strategic options.⁷ Other Gulf capitals read the crisis differently: Oman and Qatar,⁸ despite being directly impacted, have preserved channels to Iran and kept greater distance from the conflict. Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) have adopted a much harder line.

Energy governance is shifting concurrently. The UAE's exit from OPEC and OPEC+ signals a more fragmented Gulf energy landscape at a moment when Europe needs greater predictability from the region.⁹

Europe is now pulled between a weakened transatlantic anchor and a Gulf that expects more than declaratory support. Washington remains essential for deterrence, but its choices have become harder for European governments to read and support politically;¹⁰ Gulf partners, meanwhile, are looking for security and diplomatic engagement that does not simply reproduce the US-Israeli line. This leaves Brussels and member states with a narrower, but more pressing, space for action.

The widening transatlantic rift and Europe's wider Middle Eastern problem

The crisis has widened the distance between Washington and several European capitals. Requests linked to the use of American bases, threats of retaliation against European allies and the broader unpredictability of US policy under the second Trump administration have made transatlantic coordination on Iran severely weakened. The nuclear question remains one area where Europe and the United States share a basic concern, but the regional context around that concern has changed. European public opinion is increasingly critical of Israel's conduct in Gaza, and this affects the political language through which European governments can support deterrence against Iran.¹¹ Europe does

⁶ The impact of the Hormuz showdown has hit way beyond Europe and GCC. This crisis has also produced significant impacts on other parts of the world: while it is not the main focus of this research, it is worth pointing as an example the impact it had up to the far East and sparking crises in countries such as the Philippines, which has had to eventually mediate with Tehran to obtain safe access for its ships through the strait in order to avoid a national oil shortage. See, for instance: Cabato, Luisa, "Marcos: PH Has Enough Crude Oil Supply until June 30", in *Inquirer.net*, 27 March 2026, <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/2202216/marcos-on-crude-oil>.

⁷ This has forced combining reliance on the United States with ties to China, a cautious opening to Iran and deeper relations with actors such as Egypt, Pakistan and Turkey: see Fantappiè, Maria Luisa and Vali Nasr, "Can Saudi Arabia Keep Hedging?", in *Foreign Affairs*, 20 April 2026, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/node/1134866>.

⁸ The latter had suffered from the attacks even as part of the choreographic retaliation of June 2025.

⁹ "UAE to Leave OPEC and OPEC+ Oil Producer Groups", in *Reuters*, 28 April 2026, <https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/view-uae-leave-opec-opec-oil-producer-groups-2026-04-28>.

¹⁰ This is particularly true when support for the attacks against Iran is perceived as a support for Israel and therefore linked with the ongoing violence in Gaza and Lebanon. See later.

¹¹ Political science broadly explains that public opinion does not determine foreign policy, but it does, however, shape what governments can defend over time. A series of YouGov surveys



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not need to merge its Iran policy with the Palestinian question; it does need, however, to avoid treating Gaza as a separate moral exception.

Europe's commitment to Israel's security remains part of its regional posture, but it now carries a high political cost when it is not matched by a visible concern for Palestinian governance and humanitarian access in Gaza. This weakens Europe's ability to speak about restraint toward Iran without appearing selective in its own use of principles.¹²

Furthermore, weakening Iran's allies does not by itself produce a stable regional order. The old "axis of resistance" may be damaged militarily, but the social and political terrain that sustained Iranian influence has not disappeared.¹³ Europe's Iran policy therefore must look beyond command structures and account for the conditions that allow Iranian influence to return through local actors.

Italy's caution and its limits

Italy entered the crisis with energy and diplomatic vulnerabilities already exasperated by the war in Ukraine. Rome has since sought to diversify its energy partnerships, including through new agreements to increase gas supplies from Azerbaijan and Algeria, but the Strait of Hormuz crisis shows how exposed Rome is to shocks outside the Mediterranean. The war has also added pressure to Italy's relationship with Washington, especially after tensions over the use of US bases and Donald Trump's public attacks on Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni after she stated that the war was not in Italy's interest and criticised Trump's spat with Pope Leo XIV.¹⁴ Attempts to lower the tension, including through a visit by US Secretary of State Marco Rubio to the Vatican and Rome, suggest that neither side has an interest in letting the fracture become permanent.¹⁵

Rome's opportunities lie in its ability to keep channels open without presenting itself as a substitute for larger diplomatic formats. The attempt to create space

published from June 2025 found that favourable views of Israel had fallen to between 13 and 21 per cent across six Western European countries, while unfavourable views stood between 63 and 70 per cent. Italy's net favourability toward Israel was reported at minus 52, one of the lowest figures in the series. Smith, Matthew, "Net Favourability towards Israel Reaches New Lows in Key Western European Countries", in *YouGov Articles*, 3 June 2025, <https://yougov.com/en-gb/articles/52279>.

¹² Fantappiè, Maria Luisa, "Europe and the Syrian Crisis: Keep Calm and Clear-minded", in *IAI Commentaries*, No. 24 | 73 (December 2024), <https://www.iai.it/en/node/19289>.

¹³ Fantappiè, Maria Luisa and Vali Nasr, "What Comes After the Axis of Resistance?", in *Foreign Affairs*, 10 December 2025, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/node/1134268>.

¹⁴ In this context it is worth noting that Iranian official channels, mainly through embassy accounts, have tried reaching out to the Italian authorities and public on X by sharing support messages in a significant attempt at digital public diplomacy best practices. Some examples can be found in the following tweets, mentioning figures such as Enrico Mattei or culturally resonant themes, such as football or food and wine heritage as well: Iran Embassy in Italy, "Oggi è l'anniversario della nascita di Enrico Mattei", X post, 29 April 2026, <https://x.com/iraninitaly/status/2049467686623510758>; Iran Embassy in Thailand, "Why would we hurt Italy?", X post, 14 April 2026, <https://x.com/IranInThailand/status/2044058595286044676>; Iran Embassy in Italy, "Il calcio appartiene ai popoli, non ai politici", X post, 23 April 2026, <https://x.com/iraninitaly/status/2047260986625626461>; Iran Embassy in Ghana, "Dear Italy", X post, 24 April 2026, https://x.com/IRAN_GHANA/status/2047571199878734020.

¹⁵ It is likely, however, that parts of the American administration are already trying to mend this fracture, although not so explicitly, as Marco Rubio's trip to Rome in early May shows: Roberts, Hannah, "Rubio's Rome Challenge: Managing an Ally, Appealing to a Pope", in *Politico EU*, 6 May 2026, <https://www.politico.eu/?p=8389349>.



>> Not being in the E3 gives Rome a renewed degree of flexibility under current conditions

for direct contacts between American and Iranian representatives during the short-lived nuclear negotiations between the two in spring 2025 – with two sessions held in Rome – belongs to this framework.¹⁶

Still, Italy's access to Gulf and Mediterranean partners has greater weight when it feeds into a European position rather than remaining a national diplomatic initiative. As mentioned above, not being in the E3 gives Rome a renewed degree of flexibility under current conditions. The E3 still carries diplomatic memory and technical expertise, but it no longer structures the political field, so Rome can operate around that declining format if it does so with partners that Gulf capitals still regard as relevant.

The crisis also intersects with Italy's broader projection toward Africa. Rome has presented its Mattei Plan as a platform for cooperation with African countries, but its political meaning goes beyond project finance, reflecting Italy's attempt to make energy security part of a wider Mediterranean policy.¹⁷

The Strait of Hormuz remains outside its typical geography, yet a disruption there would affect the African and Mediterranean spaces where Rome is trying to build influence.

The space for Rome's contribution is not so limited, as it can work with actors that still retain channels to Tehran, especially Oman and Qatar, while also engaging Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Turkey, to help identify the diplomatic tracks along which a long-term stabilisation of the Gulf region can be pursued incrementally. Attempts to build a new mediation format between the United States and Iran would likely be ineffective, but Rome should try to make a European position more tangible through access to, and agreement with, GCC countries. Europe's renewed Iran policy must also account for the political terrain in which Iranian influence takes root. In Lebanon and Iraq especially, pressure on Tehran will remain incomplete if it is not matched by efforts to reduce local dependence on armed actors connected with the "axis of resistance", and so a European line that takes Israeli military pressure as acceptable would miss the social and political conditions through which Iranian influence can return.

The Gulf is the channel through which this crisis reaches Italy and Europe's economy in general, impacts its southern neighbourhood and hits domestic politics with consequences yet to be seen. Any attempt to act as a bridge by the Union or member states will be under the spotlight, but its test should not be limited to the visibility of its diplomatic gestures, which are often seen by their counterparts as weak and ineffective. Rather, it will be whether relations with Gulf capitals, Washington and regional mediators can help Europe preserve a political track as the effects of the crisis continue to unfold.

¹⁶ Fantappiè, Maria Luisa, "Limits and Strengths of Italy's Balancing Act in the Middle East", cit.

¹⁷ For a more detailed insight, see Italian Government website: *News on the Mattei Plan for Africa*, <https://www.governo.it/en/archivio-articoli-piano-mattei-en>. It is important to note how the Italian government has tried to engage also with Gulf actors to internationalise the Mattei Plan. See, for instance: Cassa Depositi e Prestiti, *Support for Business, Renewables and Water*, cit.

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**Akram Ezzamouri**

› Stabilising Syria without Reinforcing Authoritarianism: Priorities for Italy and Europe*

- › Nineteen months after Assad's fall, reconstruction financing, diplomatic engagement and commercial partnerships are accumulating around a centralised institutional architecture in Syria.
- › Italy has prioritised trade reconnections with Syria and is seeking to classify it as a “safe country of origin” to accelerate migration returns, but has not articulated what this commercial engagement is meant to achieve politically or what governance benchmarks must be met before market access deepens.
- › Support should prioritise a legislatively established, victim-centred and independent transitional justice framework, to prevent impunity and elite pacts from becoming entrenched in Syria's new political order.



Ministry of Foreign Affairs
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Nineteen months after the fall of Bashar al-Assad, Syria remains at a critical stage of transition, marked by progress towards institutional consolidation and regional reintegration, but also by persistent political, security and humanitarian challenges. The transitional authorities have expanded diplomatic engagement, attracted financial and political investments from Gulf countries, and taken steps towards restoring state institutions. Yet unresolved questions over inclusive governance, accountability, economic recovery and territorial cohesion continue to shape the transition. As quick international normalisation of the new Syrian leadership advances faster than domestic institutional reforms, economic engagement has increasingly been treated, by European actors as much as by Damascus, as a substitute for political transition rather than as a leverage to shape it.

In line with the broader trend of Arab League countries normalising relations with Assad from 2023, Italy became the first EU member state to explore re-engagement with Syria by reopening its embassy prior to the regime's fall in late 2024. This was motivated primarily by humanitarian considerations and migration management priorities, while Prime Minister Meloni emphasised in December 2024 that the embassy reopening did not constitute recognition of the Assad regime.¹

¹ “Italy's Meloni Defends Choice to Reopen Damascus Embassy under Assad”, in *Reuters*, 17

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Following Assad's flight from Syria in December 2024, after an insurgent offensive led by the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham armed group resulted in the capture of Damascus, Italian Foreign Minister Antonio Tajani visited Syria on 10 January 2025.² His visit followed the joint mission by German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock and French Foreign Minister Jean-Noël Barrot, who met the country's new leadership under Ahmed al-Sharaa during a visit to Damascus on 3 January 2025.³

Since then, Rome has pursued a policy of engagement centred on the resumption and strengthening of economic and trade cooperation. It inaugurated an Italian Trade Agency Desk in Damascus in June 2026, facilitated a study tour to Italy for a group of Syrian businesspeople⁴ and participated in the BuildEx reconstruction fair in Damascus. Furthermore, in March 2026, Rome hosted the Joint Syrian-Italian Economic Conference, organised by the Syrian-Italian Council, a bilateral platform established by the Syrian Ministry of Economy and Industry to promote trade and investment cooperation between the two countries.⁵

It has not, however, articulated what this commercial engagement is meant to achieve politically, or what governance benchmarks must be met before market access deepens. Reconstruction financing, diplomatic rehabilitation and commercial partnerships are in fact accumulating around an institutional architecture in Syria that – if not addressed – will harden into a version of governance whose fragility will impose costs on Mediterranean security that European actors like Italy are not currently pricing.

Governance fragmentation and the normalisation dynamic

Since the regime change in late 2024, Syria's governance has fragmented considerably. The transitional authority under President al-Sharaa, constituted through a constitutional declaration drafted by a seven-person committee of presidential appointees and issued in March 2025 following a largely perfunctory one-day National Dialogue Conference, has pushed forward a top-down political transition that moves half-heartedly towards institutionalised power-sharing and popular participation.

The declaration, which identifies Islamic jurisprudence as a main source of legislation, establishes a five-year transition period concluding with elections and a permanent constitution, with an appointed Parliament of 210 members – one-third hand-picked by the President directly. It concentrates executive

December 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/italys-meloni-defends-choice-reopen-damascus-embassy-under-assad-2024-12-17>.

² Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Minister Tajani Meets with the New Syrian Authorities*, 10 January 2025, <https://www.esteri.it/en/?p=129347>.

³ German Federal Foreign Office, *A Reset for Syria: Foreign Minister Baerbock to Travel to Damascus for Talks*, 3 January 2025, <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/en/aussenpolitik/laenderinformationen/syrien-node/baerbock-syria-2692372>.

⁴ Ravagnan, Stefano, "Last November a group of businesspersons went on a study tour", *X post*, 3 February 2026, https://x.com/Ste_Ravagnan/status/2018652727769985207.

⁵ See the official website: <https://syrianitaliancouncil.com>. See also Syrian Business Councils, *Decision No. 62 Issued to Establish the Syrian-Italian Joint Business Council and Expand Cooperation Prospects with the European Union*, 18 March 2026, <https://www.sbcboard.org/en/news/formation-syrian-italian-joint-business-council>.

» Since the regime change in late 2024, Syria's governance has fragmented considerably



>> The indirect electoral framework and the President's extensive appointment powers are undermining parliamentary independence

authority, removes institutional counterweights and ensures that no political alternative can compete or obstruct during the transition period. Moreover, no law regulating political parties has been enacted. In early July 2026, President al-Sharaa appointed the remaining 70 members of the People's Assembly, completing the formation of the transitional parliament more than eight months after the process began and allowing it to convene for its first session. The appointments included fifteen women, increasing female representation from six to 21 members, and were presented as an effort to address imbalances in political representation. Nevertheless, the institutional design continues to leave the legislature with limited powers, and while the Assembly can propose and approve legislation during its renewable 30-month mandate, it has no authority to grant or withdraw confidence from the government.⁶

The indirect electoral framework and the President's extensive appointment powers are undermining parliamentary independence and limiting meaningful political pluralism. The General Directorate of Political Affairs, tasked with absorbing former Ba'ath party functions, has expanded its oversight to require prior approval for civic activities in major cities. The Syrian Islamic Council, which had maintained independent religious authority throughout the revolution, has been disbanded in June 2025 at the new government's request.

This architecture of power only partially incorporates the Syrian Defence Forces (SDF), the Kurdish-dominated militias that for years fought against the ISIS in alliance with a US-led coalition and whose gradual integration into Syria's state institutions was set out in the January 2026 agreement with the country's authorities. Islamic State remnants continue to exploit security vacuums in northwest and central Syria. Cells loyal to the former Assad regime were at the centre of clashes in the coastal regions in March 2025. And Iran has reached out to Alawite communities – from which the Assad family hailed – in western Syria alongside a new entity, the Islamic Resistance Front in Syria, which emerged in late December 2024 in opposition to Israel's continued occupation of southwestern Syria. Since December 2024, Israel has conducted more than six hundred air, drone and artillery strikes across the country – including on the presidential palace and Ministry of Defence in Damascus on 16 July 2025 – framed instrumentally as protection of Druze communities in Suwayda.

External legitimisation of the al-Sharaa government has accelerated in parallel with these dynamics. The Syrian president was welcomed in the White House in November 2025 – the first visit by a Syrian head of state since independence in 1946 – and met German Chancellor Friedrich Merz in Berlin in March 2026. The EU reinstated the 1978 Cooperation Agreement with Syria in May 2026 and launched a High-Level Political Dialogue. Syria was reportedly invited to the G7 summit in Évian in June 2026, although al-Sharaa ultimately did not attend. However, following his meeting with US President Donald Trump on the margins of the NATO summit in Ankara on 8 July 2026, Washington initiated the process of removing Syria from its list of state sponsors of terrorism, further accelerating Damascus's international reintegration.

⁶ Dalatey, Feras, "Syria's Sharaa Appoints Lawmakers, Paving Way for New Parliament to Convene", in *Reuters*, 1 July 2026, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/syrias-sharaa-appoints-lawmakers-paving-way-new-parliament-convene-2026-07-01>.



>> Syria's social fragmentation is both the legacy of years of civil war and the result of the way the transition has been unfolding since 2024

This re-engagement has unfolded alongside, and in practice reinforced, the domestic process of territorial fragmentation in which governance arrangements over the country's peripheries are becoming constitutive parts of the transitional state framework. The January 2026 agreement between Syrian authorities and the SDF marked an important step in addressing the future of the country's north-east and of the region. The deal, which followed battles in which Syrian government forces – with Turkish backing and apparent US acquiescence – advanced into SDF-controlled Deir al-Zour and al-Raqqa, establishes a framework for the handover to Damascus of civilian institutions, oil and gas facilities, and the individual vetting of SDF fighters seeking to join the Syrian army. In March 2026, the commander of the Kurdish People's Defence Units (YPG), Sipan Hamo, was appointed deputy defence minister for eastern territories, and the US handed over its last military base to the Syrian army. But other, larger issues remain unresolved, such as the modalities of SDF integration into the regular army, the fate of their weapons, civil administration arrangements and the status of tens of thousands of individuals held in SDF-managed detention camps.

The consolidation of this governance model has come at the expense of political representation and accountability, with important consequences for social cohesion and the credibility of the transitional justice process.

Social fragmentation, gender and the weakness of transitional justice

Syria's social fragmentation is both the legacy of years of civil war and the result of the way the transition has been unfolding since 2024. Local intermediaries have emerged as key actors shaping governance and security, while sectarian and ethnic fault lines continue to impact mobility and trust. The current transition has prioritised the consolidation of executive authority at the expense of the development of inclusive political institutions. The distinction between a governance process that is transitional and one that is using transitional language to institutionalise a centralised distribution of power is nowhere more visible than in the limits around Syria's political representation and judicial accountability.

On representation, the October 2025 "quasi-elections" to the 210-seat transitional legislature excluded the three governorates of al-Raqqa, al-Hasakah and Suwayda⁷ and candidates stood individually because no political party law exists. Moreover, civil society organisations still have to operate under a 1958 law that makes donations subject to government approval, which has led to a public letter of protest signed by 31 Syrian organisations.⁸ The imprisonment of a Hizb al-Tahrir member, a political opponent of al-Sharaa, on a ten-year sentence, together with detention of journalists whose whereabouts were not disclosed, also points to a transition designed to prevent forms of political

⁷ Sadiki, Larbi and Layla Saleh, "A New Syria in a 'New Middle East': Challenges and Opportunities for Democratization", in *Toda Peace Institute Reports*, No. 285 (3 March 2026), <https://toda.org/?p=9881>.

⁸ Justice for Life (JFL) et al., *Joint Position Paper on the Directive from the Minister of Social Affairs and Labor*, 22 October 2025, <https://syriaaccountability.org/joint-position-paper-on-the-directive-from-the-minister-of-social-affairs-and-labor>.



»» On
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organisation that can threaten the consolidation of the new configuration of powers from taking shape.

That same logic appears in the treatment of social actors outside formal institutions. Women were central to mediation, community resilience and service delivery during the Syrian civil war and in the early post-Assad period,⁹ yet their access to formal politics remains marginal and institutional responses to gender-based violence weak. Civil society, including think tanks, advocacy groups and feminist collectives, has been kept at arm's length by the new regime. Civic and political activities require prior approval from the General Directorate of Political Affairs, whose oversight is expanding well beyond its original mandate of absorbing former Ba'ath party functions.

The Suwayda assault against the Druze in July 2025 by government forces and the coastal massacres of Alawite people in March 2025 show the cost of a centralised transitional model lacking representation. In Suwayda, government forces supported by Bedouin fighters clashed with Druze militias, leaving hundreds dead and triggering a siege. In the coastal areas, more than 800 people were killed, including revenge killings by newly integrated security forces. These events deepened Druze and minorities' mistrust of Damascus and revived debate over federalism and decentralisation, which the central authorities have treated as threats to national unity.

On accountability, the Syrian transitional justice process has made little progress too. The Atef Najib trial, opened in Damascus on 26 April 2026, with nine defendants including Assad's cousin and former head of Political Security in Daraa, indicted alongside Bashar and his brother Maher al-Assad *in absentia* – is the first domestic judicial proceeding addressing crimes committed by Assad regime officials. The children arrested and tortured in Daraa in 2011 for writing anti-regime graffiti – whose detention triggered the protests that began the revolution – have waited fifteen years for this moment. But the trial is proceeding without a transitional justice law, without codification of international crimes in Syrian domestic law, and without a policy clearly defining who will be prosecuted, on what charges and through what process. Syrian domestic criminal law contains no provision for war crimes, crimes against humanity, enforced disappearance or command responsibility. Charges for enforced disappearance rely on the domestic crime of “kidnapping” as the nearest available substitute. And the application of capital punishment – probable in Atef Najib's case – risks undermining international judicial cooperation on which any broader accountability process will depend.¹⁰

More specifically on transitional justice, two presidential decrees of May 2025 – Decrees no. 19 (National Committee for Missing Persons) and no. 20 (Transitional Justice Committee) – replicate the same executive unilateralism that characterises the transition as a whole. Both were issued without legislative deliberation. In addition, creating a separate Missing Persons committee generates competing jurisdictions and findings on what was, under

⁹ UN Women, *How Syrian Women Navigate Security Risks to Mediate Local Conflicts*, 17 October 2022, <https://www.unwomen.org/en/node/174816>; Ghoutouk, Lina, “Syrian Women's Voices: Legal, Social and Security Realities in the post-Assad Transition”, in *Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung Post*, 22 December 2025, <https://tr.boell.org/en/node/23795>.

¹⁰ Kurd Ali, Obai, “Atef Najib's Trial: Syrians Deserve a Clear Transitional Justice Strategy”, in *Tahrir Institute Analysis*, 29 May 2026, <https://timep.org/?p=44039>.



>> Syria's reconstruction is where the gap between European rhetoric on reform and European practice of commercial engagement is most consequential

Assad, a unified system of arbitrary detention, torture and disappearance. The presidentially appointed committees lack independence, and former regime and militia figures have been informally reintegrated through negotiated arrangements.

The preference for amnesties over accountability risks entrenching impunity and reproducing elite pacts similar to other post-conflict settings in the region. An effective transitional justice framework would require the challenging task of combining accountability, truth-seeking, reparations and institutional reform, considering that partial implementation risks normalising impunity while producing selective or merely symbolic justice. Grievances are currently muted by the urgency of stabilisation, but in a context of widespread protests in Idlib, Aleppo, Hama, Deir al-Zour and Damascus,¹¹ their accumulation constitutes a medium-term threat to social peace and cohesion.

Reconstruction and politics of centralisation

Syria's reconstruction is the primary area in which the normalisation of centralised power structures is being operationalised, and where the gap between European rhetoric on reform and European practice of commercial engagement is most consequential. Syria's estimated 300 billion US dollars reconstruction need has attracted substantial Gulf engagement, particularly from Saudi Arabia and Qatar, preventing economic freefall. Gulf financial flows have enabled Syria's reintegration into the global financial system and have been accompanied by political support: it was reportedly Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan who convinced the Trump Administration to suspend sanctions on Syria in 2025.

Qatar's Emir was the first head of state to visit Damascus after Assad's fall and Doha has positioned itself as a key mediator between Syria and third-party states, reflecting longstanding ties with Syria's opposition to Assad; Saudi Arabia has dispatched senior diplomatic figures, called for the lifting of sanctions and emerged as a central promoter of US-Syria normalisation. These investments reflect economic interests but also regional ambitions to shape Syria's post-conflict order. A key Saudi consideration is preventing Damascus from becoming too dependent on Qatar and Turkey, with al-Sharaa's first foreign visit – to Riyadh rather than Ankara – read as a signal that such dependency may be averted.

Turkey remains a key regional actor with overlapping security and economic interests. Ankara supports the consolidation of a centralised Syrian state that limits Kurdish autonomy, has provided security training and military support to the transitional government and maintains close economic ties through infrastructure projects and cross-border trade. Turkish officials have cautiously welcomed the January 2026 agreement with the SDF but stressed the need for its full implementation, and Turkish airstrikes in northern Syria and Iraq continue alongside diplomatic engagement.

¹¹ al-Issa, Yasser and Hamza al-Badr, "Deir ez-Zor, Spearhead of the Transitional Justice Spring", in *Justice Info*, <https://www.justiceinfo.net/en?p=160711>.



»» *The architecture of reconstruction is highly centralised*

Iranian influence has receded substantially relative to Gulf economic leverage, as with the fall of Assad, Tehran lost its primary channel of influence in the Levant and currently lacks the financial resources to compete with Gulf actors in reconstruction financing. Israel, by contrast, acts against a unified Syrian state and continues to prioritise expansionary territorial policies and the consolidation of its military occupation in Syria. It has also cultivated ties with Druze communities and Kurdish factions as a hedge against an unfavourable centralised Syrian state.

The architecture of reconstruction is highly centralised. Sovereign and development funds operate under presidential oversight, and the assets recovery committee has negotiated extra-judicial settlements with sanctioned tycoons. Such negotiated political and economic trade-offs contrast with the principles of rule-based governance and risk reconstituting crony capitalism under new configurations of power – a pattern comparable to that observed in post-conflict Iraq, where Western investment interests compounded by the cronyism of newly established authorities contributed to the constitution and resilience of a corrupt system.

In this context, reconstruction is both a driver for stabilisation and a mechanism of political consolidation. Syrian businesses face practical obstacles, with unreliable access to banking guarantees, the absence of a digital financial infrastructure and a lack of regulatory frameworks deterring both domestic entrepreneurs and external investors. European private sector engagement has stalled precisely for these reasons, even as key EU member states signal openness to Syria's transition. The main question is whether Italian and other European governments will treat these governance problems as constitutive of the reconstruction model itself or whether they will bypass them in the name of commercial re-engagement.

Italy, the EU and the terms of engagement

The United States keeps significant influence in Syria, especially in the northeast, where its cooperation with the SDF over nearly a decade defined the counter-ISIS campaign, while also expanding its engagement with the country's new authorities after Assad's fall. The Trump Administration's approach has tilted toward security and geopolitical interests over inclusive governance, with US officials ultimately approving the January 2026 SDF-Damascus agreement after initial caution, following Turkish diplomatic pressure and discussions brokered by Kurdish leader Masoud Barzani in Erbil. The Administration's willingness (or reluctance) to sustain engagement will shape the trajectory of territorial reintegration and the viability of the northeast agreement. The suspension of US foreign aid, including to SDF-managed detention facilities housing tens of thousands of suspected ISIS fighters and their families, has already created severe operational disruptions.

For the EU, the priorities are preventing renewed instability, limiting regional escalation and encouraging governance arrangements that support stabilisation and reconstruction. France, Germany and Italy have opened up to Syria and welcome the transition, but acknowledge the need for further



»» *France, Germany and Italy acknowledge the need for further reforms, inclusivity and good governance*

reforms, inclusivity and good governance. The EU has initially suspended sectoral sanctions in the energy, transport and financial sectors in early 2025 and has since sought to align its Syria policy with broader EU initiatives in the Middle East, including the EU-GCC dialogue, the Global Gateway and the Pact for the Mediterranean.¹² In May 2026, the EU reinstated the 1978 Cooperation Agreement with Syria and launched a High-Level Political Dialogue and a 620 million euro financial support package for 2026-2027 has been committed for early recovery and socioeconomic stabilisation.

However, these remain insufficient given the scale of the reconstruction challenge. A persistent gap exists between governmental openness and private sector reluctance to engage in and with Syria as European businesses await the legal guarantees and transparent regulatory frameworks that Damascus has yet to establish. This generates frustration in Syria and risks ceding reconstruction space to actors with less interest in governance conditionality. The decision to lift sanctions was not wrong, as sanctions were punishing Syria's population. But the sequencing and conditionality attached to the lifting are where the policy failure lies as sanctions were lifted without specifying the benchmarks to be met.

Beneath the EU framework, member states have pursued divergent national tracks that weaken collective leverage. Germany has committed over 200 million euros to Syrian reconstruction in 2026, channelled through GIZ, KfW and the Syria Recovery Trust Fund, with projects targeting water supply systems in al-Hasakah, Suwayda and Aleppo and hospital rehabilitation. Chancellor Merz received al-Sharaa in Berlin in March 2026, publicly pressing for inclusion of all Syrians regardless of religion, ethnicity and gender, and a representative parliament. Germany has also partially resumed returns of rejected Syrian asylum seekers following a legal reassessment of protection needs for the over one million Syrians in Germany.¹³

France hosted al-Sharaa for his first official European visit on 7 May 2025, with President Emmanuel Macron urging protection of Syria's multi-confessional communities; it maintains a focus on security dynamics in the northeast, Kurdish rights and minority protection, preferring to coordinate major diplomatic moves through EU frameworks rather than bilateral breakthroughs.¹⁴

Italy, on the other hand, has actively prioritised trade reconnections with Syria (including vocational training and banking access) and is also seeking to classify Syria as a "safe country of origin", a political-legal move that would accelerate migration returns to meet domestic electoral priorities. Syria's stabilisation is closely linked to broader Mediterranean security concerns, including migration, humanitarian stability and regional connectivity. There is growing interest in Italy and Europe in including Syria in inter-regional trade corridors, partly to bypass Arab reluctance to cooperate with Israel following the mass atrocities in Gaza and to address the need for alternative routes from

¹² Council of the European Union, *Council Conclusions on Global Gateway* (10349/26), 15 June 2026, <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-10349-2026-INIT/en/pdf>.

¹³ German Federal Government, *Support for Syria's Stability and Growth*, 30 March 2026, <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-en/news/chancellor-merz-al-sharaa-2417730>.

¹⁴ French Presidency, *Meeting with Ahmed Al-Charaa, Interim President of the Syrian Transitional Authorities*, 7 May 2025, <https://www.elysee.fr/en/emmanuel-macron/2025/05/07/meeting-with-ahmed-al-charaa-interim-president-of-the-syrian-transitional-authorities>.



»» Italy's diplomatic positioning has since focused on acceleration of trade links without a corresponding governance strategy

and to the Gulf. Syria's strategic geography – particularly its potential to open new transport routes as an alternative to existing corridors, including in a post-Hormuz-crisis regional reconfiguration – positions it as increasingly central to EU-Gulf dialogue and to European energy security calculations. Fragmented European engagement would dilute leverage precisely when reconstruction financing and diplomatic engagement can provide the most influence and incentives for a reformed transition. Coordinated European policy remains essential to shaping incentives around decentralisation, transparency and incremental institutional reform.

While Italy's direct leverage in the Syrian arena remains limited, Rome could nonetheless play a constructive role in sustaining European engagement and dialogue with regional actors involved in Syria's reconstruction, building on its diplomatic positioning and its experience in facilitating mediation and dialogue in other regional crises. Italy's early diplomatic positioning following the fall of Assad regime and opening to the new leadership has since focused on acceleration of trade links without a corresponding governance strategy. The question, for Italian and European policymakers, is whether those assets will be deployed to build the coordinated framework pushing for reforms that European engagement currently lacks. Whether European support to the al-Sharaa government produces a Syria that is stable in the near term or durably so will depend in large part on that and on whether Mediterranean security, for which Italy bears strategic responsibility, is shaped by a governance-conscious European approach or by the sum of disconnected national interests.

Conclusion

The apparent stabilisation of Syria's transition should not be confused with progress toward accountable governance. For Italy and Europe, the strategic objective should be to align reconstruction, diplomatic engagement and stabilisation with gradual institutional opening. Stability without inclusion will remain fragile, and inclusion without stability would generate conflict and increase social fractures. The success of Syria's transition will depend on whether centralised consolidation can evolve, incrementally and deliberately, into accountable governance before social, political and security-related tensions harden into a state of consolidated fragmentation.

For Italy and Europe, the priority should be to support the transition on a stabilising path by linking reconstruction support to basic governance benchmarks. Support should prioritise transitional justice to allow the process to move towards a legislatively established, victim-centred and independent transitional justice framework that reduces the risks related to entrenched impunity and the reproduction of elite pacts.

At the same time, the legal and financial obstacles preventing foreign investment and private-sector engagement must be addressed to create conditions that encourage responsible investment while ensuring that reconstruction benefits are distributed beyond politically connected elites. Reconstruction support will remain limited without reliable banking channels, transparent regulatory frameworks, anti-corruption safeguards and clear procedures for foreign investors.



Finally, Gulf states, Turkey and other regional powers will remain essential economic and political partners for Syria, but their engagement should be channelled towards coordinated reconstruction and institutional development, avoiding reinforcing dependency or competing spheres of influence that risk undermining state-building and social cohesion in the country. European diplomacy should, therefore, focus on maintaining a balanced international environment in which Syria's transition is not shaped by the mere interests or militarily expansive policies of external powers, but by the needs of Syrian society and the consolidation of accountable governance.

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