

Syria's Post-Baath Mass Dismissals: Transitional Justice or Catalyst for Division?

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Brief Analysis

While those deemed responsible for crimes committed under the Assad regime must face justice, the sweeping purge of public-sector employees threatens to deepen divisions in an already fragmented nation.

Since the Assad regime fell in December 2024, Syria has seen a sweeping [purge \(https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2025/02/21/in-syria-a-climate-of-purge-in-the-public-sector_6738400_4.html\)](https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2025/02/21/in-syria-a-climate-of-purge-in-the-public-sector_6738400_4.html) of public sector employees. Economic restructuring plans will remove at least [three hundred thousand employees \(https://stj-sy.org/en/mass-dismissals-in-syria-after-the-regimes-fall/\)](https://stj-sy.org/en/mass-dismissals-in-syria-after-the-regimes-fall/) from state institutions, adding to an already soaring unemployment rate of more than [60 percent \(https://www.tesaaworld.com/en/news/syria-and-the-challenges-of-the-new-generation-in-reconstruction\)](https://www.tesaaworld.com/en/news/syria-and-the-challenges-of-the-new-generation-in-reconstruction). Many have already been removed despite the lack of [clear legal criteria \(https://syriantold.com/2025/03/06/fighting-corruption-or-revenge-for-the-past/\)](https://syriantold.com/2025/03/06/fighting-corruption-or-revenge-for-the-past/) or methodology for the dismissals. While personnel reform is a necessary component of any credible transitional process, [mass dismissals \(https://judiciariesworldwide.fjc.gov/question/what-lustration\)](https://judiciariesworldwide.fjc.gov/question/what-lustration) carried out in the absence of national dialogue, safeguards against collective punishment, or clear guarantees of future inclusion risks deepening divisions rather than building anew. The perception that certain religious groups are being targeted in Syria, while the government fails to hold individuals responsible for Assad-era human rights violations, is fueling an atmosphere that encourages wartime grievances to be settled extrajudicially and often violently.

The tension between reform and stability is not without precedent in countries experiencing major regime changes. The experience of de-Baathification in occupied Iraq offers a cautionary tale for Syria. In the early days of post-Saddam Iraq, orders number [1 \(https://www.refworld.org/legal/decrees/natlegbod/2003/en/45181\)](https://www.refworld.org/legal/decrees/natlegbod/2003/en/45181) and [2 \(https://www.refworld.org/legal/decrees/natlegbod/2003/en/45187?prevDestination=search&prevPath=/search?order=desc&sm_country_name%5B%5D=Iraq&sm_document_source_name%5B%5D=National+Legislative+Bodies+//+National+Authorities&sort=score&result=45187-en\)](https://www.refworld.org/legal/decrees/natlegbod/2003/en/45187?prevDestination=search&prevPath=/search?order=desc&sm_country_name%5B%5D=Iraq&sm_document_source_name%5B%5D=National+Legislative+Bodies+//+National+Authorities&sort=score&result=45187-en) of the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) began gutting state institutions and emptying ministries overnight. Teachers, university professors, healthcare workers, engineers, and low-level bureaucrats were [dismissed en masse \(https://journals.openedition.org/remmm/3451\)](https://journals.openedition.org/remmm/3451) for having belonged to the Baath Party, even if only nominally, while the army, security, and intelligence forces were [disbanded \(https://www.chathamhouse.org/2023/03/iraq-20-years-insider-reflections-war-and-its-aftermath/iraqs-security-sector-twenty-years#:~:text=dismantling%20the%20old%20Iraqi%20armed%20forces%20and%20security%20services\)](https://www.chathamhouse.org/2023/03/iraq-20-years-insider-reflections-war-and-its-aftermath/iraqs-security-sector-twenty-years#:~:text=dismantling%20the%20old%20Iraqi%20armed%20forces%20and%20security%20services) altogether. What began as an attempt to purge tyranny quickly unraveled into institutional paralysis and sectarian fragmentation. Amidst a collapsed economy and a dismantled state, exclusionary transitional policies [intensified societal insecurities. \(https://www.foreignaffairs.com/middle-east/iraq-united-states-orders-disorder?check_logged_in=1\)](https://www.foreignaffairs.com/middle-east/iraq-united-states-orders-disorder?check_logged_in=1) spurring armed conflicts and eventually leading to an internationalized civil war in 2006–2008 with multiple paramilitary fronts.

Syria is now teetering on the edge of a similar precipice, struggling with the rupture from its own Baathist legacy. Where transitional justice is pursued without securing sufficient public trust, addressing victims' priorities, and building credible institutions, it risks eroding accountability rather than reinforcing it. The consequence is that transitional efforts lack public legitimacy and are ultimately viewed as ineffectual. While Iraq serves as a cautionary tale of a transition gone wrong, several crucial differences separate its experience from Syria's present circumstances. Unlike Iraq in 2003, Syria's transition has not followed a direct foreign invasion but an internal regime collapse, producing a more fragmented authority structure and competing centers of power. Additionally, Syrian society—shaped by over a decade of war and displacement—faces both greater economic devastation and a more complex mosaic of local governance arrangements than post-Saddam Iraq. These distinctions magnify the risks of repeating the perils of Iraq's experience under more volatile social and institutional conditions.

From Reform to Fragmentation

In December 2002, the Democratic Principles Working Group issued its final report titled [Transition to Democracy in Iraq \(https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB198/FOI%20Democratic%20Principles.pdf\)](https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB198/FOI%20Democratic%20Principles.pdf), where it explicitly advised against wholesale de-Baathification, and instead encouraged a measured approach modeled on [Central European lustration laws \(https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/1351034042000317943\)](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/1351034042000317943). Those laws, they noted, did not aim to purge all former communists but focused on identifying key individuals directly implicated in past crimes and utilized appeal or accountability mechanisms early on. The report emphasized that Iraq's civil service, public administration, and military, though deformed by decades of Baathist rule, remained a repository of vital administrative knowledge and should be retained. It further advocated for a broader definition of victimhood that encompassed rank-and-file Baathists who suffered under the regime, recognizing that Iraq's transition should not come at the cost of functionality or reconciliation. Lamentably, these recommendations were ignored by the CPA.

Instead, mass dismissals—which meant purging former regime personnel or affiliates from all government posts—pushed already high unemployment rates up to between [60 and 75 percent \(https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2003/10/30/amid-the-bombs-and-the-rubble-the-country-is-still-slowly-on-the-mend\)](https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2003/10/30/amid-the-bombs-and-the-rubble-the-country-is-still-slowly-on-the-mend). The CPA also opted to suspend salary payments of senior Baath members rather than co-opting them. This stands in stark contrast to the post-communist transition in Czechoslovakia. There, former intelligence officials were offered “[golden parachutes \(https://www.jstor.org/stable/44483158\)](https://www.jstor.org/stable/44483158)” to prevent institutional inertia, ostracization, and rebellion. In Iraq, disaffected groups alienated from the emerging order quickly became fertile ground for insurgent recruitment as ideological polarization and sectarian narratives fueled tensions. The CPA later considered reconstituting the military with [units of the old army \(https://www.nytimes.com/2003/11/02/world/struggle-for-iraq-military-us-considering-recalling-units-old-iraq-army.html\)](https://www.nytimes.com/2003/11/02/world/struggle-for-iraq-military-us-considering-recalling-units-old-iraq-army.html) due to shortages, but it was not until 2006 that efforts to revise de-Baathification were enacted. Motivated by the potent political symbolism of the purge, the [reconciliation strategy \(https://news.un.org/en/story/2006/06/183792\)](https://news.un.org/en/story/2006/06/183792) of then–Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki was tentatively set in

motion, but the damage had already been done.

The Iraqi example is not simply one of poor implementation; it serves as a warning that miscalculated transitional policy can undermine national unity. As Syria's own transitional phase stutters forward amid new eruptions of sectarian violence, the temptation to pursue a policy of sweeping dismissals will grow.

Syria's Current Path

Mass dismissals in Syria—where the public sector is the country's [largest employer](https://www.unicef.org/syria/reports/2023-budget-brief) (<https://www.unicef.org/syria/reports/2023-budget-brief>)—have added to the travails of a country with a debilitated private economy and a [90 percent poverty rate](https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/2025-02/undp-sy-seia-final-24022025_compressed.pdf) (https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/2025-02/undp-sy-seia-final-24022025_compressed.pdf). In January, [protests erupted](https://stj-sy.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/Mass-Dismissals-in-Syria-After-the-Regimes-Fall.pdf) (<https://stj-sy.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/Mass-Dismissals-in-Syria-After-the-Regimes-Fall.pdf>) across major cities, including Damascus, Suwayda, Aleppo, Hama, Latakia, and Tartus, as ousted workers demanded reinstatement or an official explanation for their termination. Although a handful of terminations were reportedly [reversed](https://stj-sy.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/Mass-Dismissals-in-Syria-After-the-Regimes-Fall.pdf) (<https://stj-sy.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/Mass-Dismissals-in-Syria-After-the-Regimes-Fall.pdf>), the overall vetting process for these dismissals remains opaque.

Beyond the scale of the layoffs, these policies have disproportionately impacted certain groups in particular: Baath Party affiliates, families of fallen soldiers, and military personnel. The Alawite community, long intertwined with the regime's security apparatus, was hit especially hard, raising fears that entire constituencies were being penalized by association with the previous regime. For many, the economic shock of dismissal was compounded by the loss of housing and other [social protections](https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/east-mediterranean-mena/syria/finding-path-through-perilous-moment-post) (<https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/east-mediterranean-mena/syria/finding-path-through-perilous-moment-post>) tied to those positions.

During transition periods, authorities have a responsibility to prepare for permanent, popularly elected government and adopt confidence-building measures that address social anxieties, foster genuine national dialogue, and bridge deepening divisions. Instead, transitional powers are being exercised with little transparency and scant engagement with civil society, [reinforcing fears](https://www.nytimes.com/2025/10/05/world/middleeast/syria-elections.html) (<https://www.nytimes.com/2025/10/05/world/middleeast/syria-elections.html>) among minorities and the broader population that the emerging political order will be exclusionary and unrepresentative. As of September 2025, the only instance of national dialogue was a one-day conference on February 25, 2025, whose preparatory questionnaire excluded constituencies in [Hasaka and Raqqa](https://www.fdd.org/analysis/policy_briefs/2025/02/28/syrias-national-dialogue-conference-a-missed-opportunity/) (https://www.fdd.org/analysis/policy_briefs/2025/02/28/syrias-national-dialogue-conference-a-missed-opportunity/).

[Decree number 143 of 2025](https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/syrian-president-approves-temporary-electoral-system-for-parliament/3665038) (<https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/syrian-president-approves-temporary-electoral-system-for-parliament/3665038>), issued by President al-Sharaa to establish a temporary electoral system for the Syrian parliament, was framed as a milestone toward free and fair elections reflective of Syria's diversity. Yet it immediately elicited [criticism](https://syriaaccountability.org/joint-position-paper-regarding-the-temporary-electoral-system-for-the-syrian-parliament/) (<https://syriaaccountability.org/joint-position-paper-regarding-the-temporary-electoral-system-for-the-syrian-parliament/>) from prominent Syrian rights groups, who argued that the temporary electoral system entrenches executive dominance over other branches of government, excludes opposition and marginalized groups, restricts political freedoms, and violates both Syria's constitutional commitments and international law—reflecting fears that transitional justice mechanisms will be instrumentalized to consolidate power rather than laying the foundation for genuinely pluralistic and independent institutions.

Taken together, economic—referring to the large-scale loss of income, employment, and access to state-linked social benefits—and political exclusions—through disenfranchisement and disqualification from participation in new political institutions—risk further entrenching sectarian and patronage-based hierarchies, ultimately undermining the legitimacy of Syria's transitional process.

Confronting the Judas Complex

In Iraq, de-Baathification was a major driver of loyalty vs. betrayal narratives and assigning guilt by association. Entire communities were cast in the mold of Judases, either painted as complicit in past repression or as traitors to the “new Iraq.” Transitional efforts centered on the broad exclusion of groups from the emerging political order are not only logistically challenging but also socially explosive precisely because they further divisions in an already fractured society.

When Saddam was toppled, at least four hundred thousand Iraqis held the rank of full party members, while estimates of party affiliates ranged from [1.2 to 2 million](https://www.ictj.org/sites/default/files/ICTJ-Report-Iraq-De-Baathification-2013-ENG.pdf) (<https://www.ictj.org/sites/default/files/ICTJ-Report-Iraq-De-Baathification-2013-ENG.pdf>). Mass dismissals relied on rank-based exclusion, leaving hundreds of thousands without livelihood in a collapsing economy, many of them armed and recently stripped of the prestige and income tied to military or government service. Full Baath Party membership had once brought significant economic advantages, from monthly stipends and preferential access to jobs, housing, and education, to control over resources such as seed banks and technical training. When these benefits disappeared abruptly, resentment and insecurity deepened, particularly among the Sunni minority, which was [disproportionately affected](https://www.mei.edu/publications/de-baathification-iraq-how-not-pursue-transitional-justice#_ftn11) (https://www.mei.edu/publications/de-baathification-iraq-how-not-pursue-transitional-justice#_ftn11).

The Baath Party's position in Syrian society has been cemented since at least 1968, when it extended [compulsory membership](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/ideology-authority-50-years-education-syria) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/ideology-authority-50-years-education-syria>) to its Revolutionary Youth Union to all preparatory and secondary school students. In January 2011, it had [2.5 million](https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2012/12/the-decline-of-syrias-baath-party?lang=en) (<https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2012/12/the-decline-of-syrias-baath-party?lang=en>) members. Alawites, particularly those from rural areas, were [strategically](https://warontherocks.com/2016/09/decisive-military-defections-in-syria-a-case-of-wishful-thinking/) (<https://warontherocks.com/2016/09/decisive-military-defections-in-syria-a-case-of-wishful-thinking/>) placed in elite military units in order to insulate the regime from attempted coups. At the same time, party membership also served as a vital avenue for [upward mobility](https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP88T00096R000300330001-3.pdf) (<https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP88T00096R000300330001-3.pdf>) for many Sunnis. Those who secured public sector jobs were then further inclined to remain in their posts during the war out of economic necessity, especially because quitting could result in blacklisting from other employment and could make them [targets of the regime](https://www.ecoi.net/en/file/local/2049622/COI_report_syria_consequences_of_leaving_a_public_sector_position_without_notice_april_2021.pdf) (https://www.ecoi.net/en/file/local/2049622/COI_report_syria_consequences_of_leaving_a_public_sector_position_without_notice_april_2021.pdf). Such was the [case of Taher al-Amin](https://arij.net/investigations/Syrian-Government-en/) (<https://arij.net/investigations/Syrian-Government-en/>), a former finance clerk at the state-run General Establishment for Bakeries. Here again, the example of de-Baathification in Iraq serves as an augury of how a similar policy in Syria could rapidly lead to widespread social unrest.

Toward a Balanced Approach

While mass dismissals are a tempting mechanism of transitional justice, they are not a panacea. Given the vast entanglement of Syria's civilian and military populations in Baathist networks, any attempt to assess guilt among the entire party membership would be administratively overwhelming and politically destabilizing. This is particularly evident in the former regime's legacy of staffing based on patronage—such as appointments made through [kinship to fallen soldiers](https://web.archive.org/web/20241207235856/https://pministry.gov.sy/contents/11999/%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%82%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%88%D9%86-%D8%B1%D9%82%D9%85-%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%A7%D9%85-2014-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%B6%D9%8A-%D8%A8%D8%AD%D8%AC%D8%B2-%D9%86%D8%B3%D8%A8%D8%A9-50-%D8%A8%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%A6%D8%A9-%D9%85%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B4%D9%88%D8%A7%D8%BA%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%AF-%D9%85%D9%84%D8%A4%D9%87%D8%A7-%D8%A8%D9%85%D9%88%D8%AC%D8%A8-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%B3%D8%A7%D8%A8%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%AE%D8%AA%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AA%D9%8A-%D8%AA%D8%AC%D8%B1%D9%8A%D9%87%D8%A7-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AC%D9%87%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%A7%D9%85%D8%A9-%D9%84%D8%B0%D9%88%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B4%D9%87%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%A1-%D9%88%D9%85%D9%86-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%AD%D9%83%D9%85%D9%87%D9%85) (<https://web.archive.org/web/20241207235856/https://pministry.gov.sy/contents/11999/%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%82%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%88%D9%86-%D8%B1%D9%82%D9%85-%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%A7%D9%85-2014-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%B6%D9%8A-%D8%A8%D8%AD%D8%AC%D8%B2-%D9%86%D8%B3%D8%A8%D8%A9-50-%D8%A8%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%A6%D8%A9-%D9%85%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B4%D9%88%D8%A7%D8%BA%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%AF-%D9%85%D9%84%D8%A4%D9%87%D8%A7-%D8%A8%D9%85%D9%88%D8%AC%D8%A8-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%B3%D8%A7%D8%A8%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%AE%D8%AA%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AA%D9%8A-%D8%AA%D8%AC%D8%B1%D9%8A%D9%87%D8%A7-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AC%D9%87%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%A7%D9%85%D8%A9-%D9%84%D8%B0%D9%88%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B4%D9%87%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%A1-%D9%88%D9%85%D9%86-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%AD%D9%83%D9%85%D9%87%D9%85>)—where blanket removal would hollow out institutions without meaningfully

addressing accountability for injustices committed during the Baath era. Syria's mass dismissals have, for instance, already worsened the shortage of [schoolteachers](https://syriauntold.com/2025/03/06/fighting-corruption-or-revenge-for-the-past/) (<https://syriauntold.com/2025/03/06/fighting-corruption-or-revenge-for-the-past/>). In contexts where individual screenings are slow or resource-constrained, targeted exclusions that prioritize only a select number of individuals from public service based on credible evidence of direct participation in or command responsibility for serious human rights abuses, corruption, or violations of international humanitarian law can help close the impunity gap. Such selective measures avoid the drawbacks of mass dismissals provided that they do not become a substitute for future judicial accountability and that the vetting process is clearly divorced from attribution of criminal responsibility.

Successful transitions require balancing justice with pragmatism. The [lessons of the Iraqi experience](https://www.ictj.org/sites/default/files/ICTJ-Report-Iraq-De-Baathification-2013-ENG.pdf) (<https://www.ictj.org/sites/default/files/ICTJ-Report-Iraq-De-Baathification-2013-ENG.pdf>) demonstrate the need for a phased, transparent, and thorough process that offers acknowledgment of individual wrongdoing without resorting to collective exclusion, and protects vetting programs from political manipulation and violations of due process. International bodies, including the [OECD](https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/2008/02/the-oecd-dac-handbook-on-security-system-reform_g1gh8153.html) (https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/2008/02/the-oecd-dac-handbook-on-security-system-reform_g1gh8153.html), [UNDP](https://www.ictj.org/sites/default/files/ICTJ-UNDP-Global-Vetting-Operational-Guidelines-2006-English.pdf) (<https://www.ictj.org/sites/default/files/ICTJ-UNDP-Global-Vetting-Operational-Guidelines-2006-English.pdf>), and [OHCHR](https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Publications/RuleoflawVettingen.pdf) (<https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Publications/RuleoflawVettingen.pdf>) offer valuable recommendations for institutional reform during transition periods. Proposed measures include establishing independent oversight and complaint bodies, updating legal frameworks, revising ethical codes, removing abusive symbols, and ensuring adequate pay and resources to sustain professional conduct. A notable [OHCHR recommendation](https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2025/07/turk-calls-immediate-steps-ensure-protection-people-suweida-and-across-syria) (<https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2025/07/turk-calls-immediate-steps-ensure-protection-people-suweida-and-across-syria>) is to consider international involvement in overseeing vetting processes. This could range from international to hybrid arrangements supported by international secretariats, each to be chosen with sensitivity to local political realities to avoid perceptions of foreign imposition.

Ultimately, effective power-sharing arrangements can help stabilize divided societies, but they are not self-sustaining. To endure, transitional policies need to be grounded in local reconciliation efforts and supported by broad civic engagement and national dialogue. The Suwayda governorate in Syria, long peripheral to the frontlines of war, has recently been [shaken](https://news.un.org/en/story/2025/07/1165452#:~:text=More%20than%2093,000%20Syrians%20have,press%20briefing%20in%20New%20York.) (<https://news.un.org/en/story/2025/07/1165452#:~:text=More%20than%2093,000%20Syrians%20have,press%20briefing%20in%20New%20York.>) by a breakdown of intercommunal stability. Violence there, in conjunction with the [massacres](https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/09/23/syria-march-atrocities-demand-senior-level-accountability) (<https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/09/23/syria-march-atrocities-demand-senior-level-accountability>) in Syria's coastal cities in March, provides a sobering example of a now visible pattern of social divisions, entrenchment, and radicalization. Syria stands at an inflection point, where the execution of the transitional justice process could either precipitate or prevent the resurgence of another civil war.



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