

# POLICY BRIEF

October 2026



## CLIMATE, LAND AND WATER

Environmental Pressures and Political Risk in Syria

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Syria Policy Dialogues — Policy Brief

The Syria Report, in collaboration with the Omran Center for Strategic Studies

Workshop held 18–19 July 2026, Damascus. Conducted under the Chatham House Rule.

The  
Syria Report



## Executive summary

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On 18 and 19 July 2026, The Syria Report convened its second workshop of the Syria Policy Dialogues (SPD) initiative in Damascus, in collaboration with, and with the support of, the Omran Center for Strategic Studies. Titled “*Climate, Land and Water: Environmental Pressures and Political Risk in Syria*,” the two-day workshop brought together a diverse group of stakeholders under the Chatham House Rule to examine how climate, water and land degradation impact Syria's political transition. Participants included climate experts and advocates, water specialists, agricultural and food security experts, and environmental engineers drawn from national and regional scientific bodies, alongside officials from the relevant ministries and representatives from international agencies and diplomatic missions.

The workshop proceeded from a central premise: that Syria's environmental pressures should be understood not only as technical challenges, but as political risks bearing on stability, legitimacy and the return of the displaced. Many participants argued that Syria's difficulties reflect governance constraints as much as resource scarcity. Across five sessions, each designed to open a theme and let the discussion follow the expertise in the room, participants examined climate as a political risk, the domestic and transboundary dimensions of water, land and food security, the institutional and legal architecture of environmental governance, and the conditions governing international climate finance.

**The following themes summarise the workshop's principal areas of discussion and broad convergence; they do not imply unanimity among participants on every point:**

- Participants broadly agreed that environmental pressures remain insufficiently integrated into the frameworks guiding Syria's transition. The movement from severe drought to destructive Euphrates floods within a single year was repeatedly cited as an illustration of how environmental shocks can generate political pressure.
- Syria's water challenge was described as a crisis of governance as well as scarcity, marked by dispersed ministerial responsibilities, uneven enforcement, and major gaps in monitoring and data.
- Water emerged as a question of national security. Around half of Syria's water crosses an international border before it arrives, tying the country's water security to its most sensitive relationships, from the Euphrates and Turkey in the north to the Yarmouk and the Israeli-occupied dams of the south.
- Agricultural resilience was tied closely to political stability. Nearly half of the rural population depends on farming, wheat was repeatedly described as a political red line, and participants raised concerns about farmland degradation and the terms under which foreign agribusiness may expand.
- Syria's environmental governance, participants noted, has not kept pace with the scale of the challenge. Environmental policy sits inside a broad administrative ministry with limited convening authority over other sectors, legislation is fragmented across decades of disconnected laws and decrees, and unlike the 2012 constitution, the current Constitutional Declaration contains no reference to the environment.
- On climate finance, participants argued that the international system often favours countries with stronger institutional capacity, potentially placing vulnerable, low-capacity countries such

as Syria at a disadvantage. They viewed Syria's first Green Climate Fund grant as an important opening, while noting that the available sums remain modest and are implemented through international partners.

## Overview

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Syria's environmental stress is not new, and neither is its political significance. The drought of 2007 to 2009, among the most severe in the country's modern history, devastated the northeast, wiped out crops and livestock, and drove hundreds of thousands of rural people into the cities.<sup>1</sup> Many analysts count it among the pressures that fed the unrest of 2011, not as a single cause but as a multiplier of grievances the state was failing to address.<sup>2</sup> The years of conflict that followed deepened the damage. Fighting destroyed water and sanitation infrastructure, stripped large areas of forest, and let environmental management collapse, leaving the country's water, land and forests severely degraded well before the transition began.<sup>1</sup>

Syria now enters its transition as one of the most climate-exposed countries in the world. The Notre Dame Global Adaptation Initiative ranks it the 42nd most vulnerable country to climate change and only the 157th most ready to respond, placing it among states with high need and low capacity.<sup>3</sup> That structural exposure has met a run of violent shocks. The 2024 to 2025 season brought the most severe drought in around 36 years, with rainfall from November to April more than 50 per cent below average and some areas facing water deficits of up to 69 per cent.<sup>4</sup> The cereal harvest fell to about 1.2 million tonnes, which the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) put at more than 60 per cent below the longer-term average, opening a wheat deficit of some 2.73 million tonnes and leaving up to 16 million people struggling to secure food.<sup>4</sup> The following winter then swung the other way, with heavy rains that replenished dams and improved the outlook for rain-fed farming,<sup>5</sup> before an unusual surge along the Euphrates in late May 2026 flooded farmland and displaced thousands in the agricultural heartland.<sup>6</sup> That swing, from drought to flood within a single year, is the shape of the risk.

These shocks land on a political transition that is still finding its footing. Since the fall of the Assad government in late 2024, the transitional authorities have worked to consolidate institutions, restore basic services, reopen the economy as sanctions ease, and rebuild relationships with neighbours and donors, all at once and amid competing political, economic and security demands. Environmental stress does not sit apart from this work. It runs through all of it as a threat multiplier. It weakens rural livelihoods and pushes people toward displacement rather than the return the transition needs. It strains the water and electricity that citizens use to judge a new government. It also turns technical questions about dams, crops and pricing into questions of legitimacy and stability. While climate change does not cause political crises on its own, it magnifies the pressures a fragile state already carries. Whether these pressures deepen the transition's difficulties or are brought under control will depend less on the scale of the crisis than on how Syria chooses to govern it.

## 1. Climate as a political risk in the transition

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Syria can no longer afford to treat the environment as a peripheral concern. Workshop participants from every professional background returned to the same point from different angles: water, land and climate have become drivers of political risk, and they belong at the centre of policy planning rather than in a technical annex to it.

The environmental pressures Syria faces today pre-date the transition by many years. Participants noted that the former Assad regime bore significant responsibility for the degradation that accumulated over the conflict period. In parts of the Idlib countryside, residents returning after the fall of the regime found their villages stripped of trees, olive and fig groves reduced to bare land. Across conflict-affected areas more broadly, forests were cut, agricultural land was damaged, infrastructure was destroyed, and environmental management was left without resources or direction for over a decade. The damage extended beyond physical destruction to the institutional systems meant to measure and manage the environment. Monitoring stations were lost, data collection lapsed, and the early-warning capacity needed to anticipate floods or droughts deteriorated significantly. By the time the transition began, the foundations of environmental governance required substantial rebuilding.

*“Technical decisions carry major social weight. The Government should not underestimate the impact of decisions framed as purely technical.”*

— A workshop participant

### What the floods of 2026 revealed

The Euphrates floods of May and June 2026 brought those degraded institutional foundations face to face with a real emergency. Turkish reservoir operators, managing the consequences of an unusually heavy snowmelt season, opened additional gates at the Ataturk Dam. The Tabqa Dam reservoir, Syria's largest, rose to roughly 98.5 per cent of capacity and engineers opened additional spillway gates to relieve it.<sup>7</sup> According to government preliminary figures, the surge flooded around 10,000 dunums of farmland, equivalent to 1,000 hectares, affected some 2,400 families, and put around 60 water stations out of service, while three bridges collapsed; humanitarian agencies put the number of people affected higher still.<sup>6</sup> Syrian officials said notification of the increased flows arrived late, in part because of the unusual timing and scale of the rainfall and snowmelt, leaving little time to prepare.<sup>8</sup>

Participants were direct in their assessment. The dam management had only just transferred from the Syrian Democratic Forces to the transitional authorities, and a representative of the Ministry of Emergency Management noted that the ministry had only recently begun the shift from reactive crisis response to proactive risk management. They also stressed that much of the physical damage followed from years of unauthorised construction and cultivation inside the river's floodplain, a pattern that had not been effectively regulated and that, according to them, expanded during the drought years, when the river corridor appeared to offer usable land.

It was also noted that the scale of damage was not a function of the dam's design capacity but of the governance failures around it: weak coordination between responsible bodies, the absence of functional early-warning systems, and years of encroachment on the river's buffer zone. The distinction is important for policymaking, as it points toward institutional gaps that can be addressed rather than engineering constraints that are harder to resolve.<sup>9</sup>

The timing added political weight. The surge coincided with the wheat harvest in one of Syria's main agricultural regions, and a presidential visit to Deir ez-Zor shortly after, the first by a Syrian head of state since 2007, took place against a backdrop of public frustration over services and support.<sup>7</sup> Participants drew from this a broader observation: environmental shocks of this kind are not only humanitarian events. They are also tests of state capacity, and they tend to shape public assessments of a new government quickly.

The floods were the acute expression of pressures the workshop spent two days examining in their chronic form. Groundwater depletion, declining agricultural output and soil degradation each erode the rural livelihoods that shape whether displaced Syrians return to their communities or remain displaced. One participant noted a structural risk in how international engagement with these issues is organised: civil society organisations tend to follow donor priorities, and donor priorities follow prevailing “trends”. If climate is treated as a passing focus rather than a standing feature of Syria's transition, the institutional and financial attention it requires will not be sustained.

Two themes from the opening session carried through the rest of the workshop. The first is that Syria's environmental difficulties are as much a product of governance gaps as of resource scarcity: laws and plans exist on paper, but enforcement and coordination between responsible bodies remain weak. The second is that decisions framed as technical matters, whether on crop support, water pricing, or shared river management, have political and distributional consequences that must be accounted for when setting policy priorities, not deferred to implementation.

## 2. Water: governance before scarcity

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Water was the centre of gravity of the workshop, and participants were clear that it belongs at the centre of the transition too. The recurring argument was that governance failures compound Syria's water scarcity rather than simply reflect it. The country faces real resource constraints, but weak institutions, poor data and inadequate enforcement mean it manages those resources less effectively than it could. One participant asked whether Syria faced a resource crisis or a governance crisis, and much of the discussion answered that it faced both, with the second making the first worse.

Syria's annual water deficit stands at around 2 billion cubic metres, dam reserves remain below half their capacity, and the country has formally fallen below the water poverty line. Agriculture accounts for the overwhelming share of consumption, roughly 16 of some 18 billion cubic metres used each year, which is why efficiency in the sector matters more than any other single lever.<sup>10</sup>

### Fragmentation and enforcement at home

The clearest structural weakness is institutional fragmentation. Responsibility for water is split across ministries, with water infrastructure now under the Ministry of Energy, and climate and environmental policy under the Ministry of Local Administration and Environment, and participants described the result as parallel and sometimes competing efforts rather than a shared strategy. Several called for a single coordinating body, so that decisions on dams, irrigation, drinking water and climate stop moving on separate tracks.

Beneath the coordination gap sits an enforcement gap that participants returned to repeatedly. Laws exist, but they are not consistently applied. As one civil society organisation put it:

*“We already have decent laws. The core problem is that they are not enforced.”*

— A civil society organisation working on climate

In the months following the fall of the Assad regime, unregulated well-drilling spread across several areas, accelerating the depletion of already stressed groundwater reserves. The transitional authorities responded by banning unauthorized drilling, seizing dozens of rigs operating in violation, and reportedly advancing a new water policy law that currently awaits adoption by the People's

Assembly. Participants acknowledged these as meaningful steps, while stressing that their effectiveness depends on consistent enforcement.

Enforcement, however, presents its own challenges. Participants cited tens of thousands of unaccounted wells across the country, and described one stretch of eastern farmland of roughly sixty square kilometres containing around 3,500 unlicensed installations. In at least one instance, attempts by authorities to shut down illegal wells were met with resistance from local residents.<sup>9</sup> This reflects a broader governance challenge for the transition: in areas where water is scarce and livelihoods depend on access to it, enforcement of water regulations can generate friction between the state and the communities whose cooperation the transition depends on. Addressing this requires not only legal instruments but also community engagement and, where possible, alternatives that reduce dependence on unregulated extraction.

The pressure on groundwater is, if anything, intensifying. Aid agencies and communities have increasingly turned to solar power to run water pumps, which lets users draw from water reserves around the clock at almost no running cost. What looks like a clean-energy gain therefore carries a hidden risk. Solar pumps make it easier than ever to over-extract the very groundwater the drilling ban was meant to protect, and aid agencies working on water supply have begun leaving batteries out of their solar installations for exactly this reason.<sup>11</sup>

The infrastructure that system is meant to run is in a dire state, and external reporting confirms this. The bill to repair Syria's water and sanitation network is estimated at around USD 10 billion, roughly 70 per cent of raw sewage enters the environment untreated, and in some places water facilities run at 40 per cent of capacity. Damascus households receive water on average for about six hours every two to three days, and many rural areas far less. The Adra plant that serves the capital and much of its countryside operates at about a third of capacity and bypasses what it cannot treat toward farmland, while in parts of Rural Damascus groundwater sits only 10 to 15 metres below the surface, shallow enough to be polluted by any break in the sewage network.<sup>11</sup> A water specialist put the longer arc bluntly:

*“The last real surplus was in the 1990s. For thirty years we have lost water every year, and dams that were once filled now stand empty.”*

— A water studies specialist

The government has raised seawater desalination as a longer-term answer to the capital's supply crisis, and the proposal has attracted renewed interest since the severity of the 2025 water shortages. In February 2026, the Ministry of Energy signed a joint development agreement with a Saudi-led consortium to study desalination capacity of up to 1.2 million cubic metres per day; officials estimated that such a project could take around five years and cost more than USD 5 billion.<sup>12,13</sup> Participants were divided on its merits. Some acknowledged that, given the scale of Damascus's shortfall, it may be difficult to avoid. Others pointed to significant practical constraints: Damascus sits on a plateau roughly 680 metres above sea level, around 200 kilometres from Syria's own Mediterranean coast, with mountainous terrain in between, making the energy cost of pumping desalinated water inland exceptionally high. The proposal has also been studied before, most recently in 2002-2003, without moving to implementation. Several participants argued that improving irrigation efficiency and addressing infrastructure losses would free up substantially more water at a fraction of the cost, and should be the policy priority before committing to a project of this scale and expense. The risk, in their

view, was that desalination could become an expensive emergency response rather than a durable solution.

For many households the crisis is already immediate and personal: in some areas families now buy trucked water of unknown origin and quality, turning scarcity into a public-health hazard.<sup>9</sup>

Two problems cut across all of this. The first is the loss of measurement. Years of conflict destroyed much of the monitoring and early-warning network, and participants argued that a unified national system to measure water and forecast risk is the first priority, because the country cannot manage what it cannot see. The second is efficiency. With agriculture accounting for the overwhelming share of national water use, participants argued that the real lever is using water better rather than simply expanding modern irrigation hardware, and that cropping choices must be judged against water reality. One ACSAD specialist put numbers to the waste:

*“Half of our irrigation water is wasted through outdated systems. Modern irrigation is expensive, but better governance and distribution alone could raise efficiency to around 70 per cent.”*

— ACSAD water specialist

None of these are purely technical questions, and the workshop kept returning to their political edge. Decisions about water pricing, subsidies and which crops to support redistribute costs and benefits across communities, and they carry a social and political weight that a ministry cannot settle on its own. The point has become concrete since the workshop. In late July 2026, residents of Ain Menin in Rural Damascus protested the entry of a drilling rig into their land, fearing it would drain an already depleted groundwater basin to the benefit of the neighbouring city of Al-Tal. The dispute escalated into a security confrontation, with detentions, road blockages and the collective resignation of the town's municipal council, before a negotiated resolution referred the water file to a neutral technical committee. What made the episode significant was not the specific works but what lay beneath them: data from the water authority showed the basin was already under severe stress from hundreds of unlicensed wells, and residents were receiving water only once a week.<sup>14</sup>

The incident echoed a pattern already raised in the workshop, in which attempts to regulate scarce groundwater met local resistance. Participants noted that both communities had supported the opposition and cautioned against reducing the episode to a sectarian explanation. In their reading, it illustrated how water stress and mistrust can generate friction between communities and a new administration. A study of two parts of the Damascus countryside found that about 72 per cent of reported local tensions were tied to water access.<sup>15</sup> Managing water, in this sense, is inseparable from managing consent.

### **The transboundary dimension**

If governance is the domestic half of the water question, dependence on neighbours is the external half, and participants treated it as a matter of national security rather than of engineering. Around half of Syria's water crosses an international border before it arrives, which ties the country's water security directly to its most sensitive relationships.

The Euphrates is the clearest case. Turkey controls the great majority of the river's flow, and a 1987 protocol commits it to releasing a minimum of 500 cubic metres per second at the border, with the

volume that reaches Syria then shared with Iraq on a 42 to 58 basis under a 1990 accord.<sup>7</sup> In practice, flows have often fallen below 200 cubic metres per second since 2019, and the May 2026 floods showed the opposite danger, when a sudden upstream release arrived with less than a day's warning.<sup>7</sup> The workshop was divided on the framework itself. Some argued the agreements should be reopened to reflect the change of government and mounting climate stress, while others cautioned that most existing arrangements already favour Syria, and that reopening them from a weaker negotiating position could forfeit advantages the country currently holds. What united participants was the case for building shared early-warning and data-exchange mechanisms, and there were cautious grounds for optimism. A Turkish diplomat framed the relationship as entering a more constructive phase, and reminded the room:

*"It is not only a question of how much water we have, but how effectively we use it."*

— A representative of Turkey's diplomatic mission

Turkey is not the only external pressure affecting Syrian water. Participants pointed to the south, where Israeli forces have taken control of several dams and water installations since the fall of the former regime, including the Al-Mantara dam in Quneitra, whose reserves have collapsed into dead storage.<sup>16,17</sup> They were particularly concerned about the Yarmouk basin, one of Syria's most important water sources, which Syria shares with Jordan. Its main structure, the Al-Wehda dam, has been under Israeli control since December 2024, and participants described severe depletion across the basin, with water tables in some areas falling from three metres below the surface to as deep as seventy metres.<sup>9</sup> They also noted the resumption of water cooperation with Jordan, with the joint committee under the 1987 agreement reactivated, while stressing that Israeli control of Al-Wehda still complicates joint management.

Participants argued that any future agreement between Israel and Syria will need to address water-sharing directly, including the status of the occupied dams and Syria's access to the Yarmouk. Taken together, the Euphrates in the north and the contested waters of the south place water at the heart of Syria's foreign relations.

### 3. Land, agriculture and food security

Climate change is reshaping Syria's agricultural base faster than its policies are adapting. A Ministry of Agriculture representative explained that the country's five agricultural stability zones, which assign crops by rainfall level, no longer reflect current conditions, and that the entire zoning system needs to be revisited in light of shifting rainfall patterns. Groundwater depletion, salinisation and the contamination of irrigation water from poorly sited wastewater infrastructure are degrading soil quality across the country. An agriculture and desertification expert told the workshop that groundwater pollution is severe where dams sit close to wastewater facilities, with as much as half the groundwater in those affected areas becoming unfit for irrigation after limited use.<sup>9</sup> The sector is being asked to feed a country while the natural systems it depends on are deteriorating, and the policies governing it were designed for a climate that no longer exists.

#### Food security is not self-sufficiency

The clearest conceptual point participants pressed was the difference between food security and self-sufficiency. Food security rests on four conditions at once: that enough food is available, that people

can physically and economically reach it, that they can use it safely and nutritiously, and that this supply holds over time.<sup>9</sup> Self-sufficiency means growing everything domestically, and participants warned against confusing the two. Syria achieved wheat self-sufficiency in earlier periods, but at significant cost to its water and soil resources, and current conditions make that model neither viable nor desirable as a policy objective.<sup>18</sup> The scale of the current problem is stark. Only around a fifth of households outside camps are food-secure, while roughly half sit in a fragile band one shock away from food insecurity.<sup>4</sup> Affordability, not only supply, is the binding constraint. Participants noted that some produce, such as olive oil, is exported on the claim of weak local demand when the real reason is that ordinary Syrians can no longer afford it. Wheat remains the political red line: it anchors the bread supply, has no ready substitute, and any move on bread subsidies carries immediate political risk.

Because the sector's health directly shapes return, food affordability and rural stability, keeping farmers on their land is itself a food-security policy. When a season fails and support is absent, families leave the countryside for the cities, the same drift that has hollowed out rural Syria in past droughts. Protecting rural livelihoods is therefore not only an economic question but a way of preventing the next displacement wave and the instability that travels with it.

### The politics of what Syria grows

Crop choice is where climate and politics converge most directly, and it is one of the most consequential policy decisions the transitional authorities face. Syria's crop distribution reflects historical policy choices rather than current water and climate realities. Banana cultivation, highly water-intensive, has replaced citrus groves in some areas. Under the former regime, olive and citrus cultivation was pushed into soils and climates poorly suited to it, extending into areas like Houran and Deir ez-Zor, with official figures pointing to very poor yields. Cotton and sugar beet, both heavy users of water Syria can no longer spare, have been scaled back, but the adjustment has been slow and incomplete. Participants pressed the concept of a crop's water footprint, noting that exporting a water-intensive crop effectively ships scarce Syrian water abroad. One economist's published figure estimated that Syria exported around 5.8 billion cubic metres of water to the European Union through cotton exports alone, while a single kilogram of tomatoes requires roughly 45 litres of water for a modest return.<sup>9</sup>

These are not technical choices. As one participant put it:

*“Politics is the management of competing interests. Stopping cotton is not a technical decision. It touches the textile sector and tens of thousands of livelihoods, and we know what internal migration did in 2011.”*

— Agricultural Expert

Crop and subsidy reform is necessary, but it redistributes hardship, and a transitional government has to sequence and explain it or risk the very instability it is trying to avoid. One important calibration came from an ACSAD expert who challenged the commonly cited figure of a 60 per cent climate-related decline in wheat yields. In his assessment, when field management, soil quality, irrigation and climate are modelled together, the decline attributable specifically to climate is no more than around 11 per cent, with the broader production losses driven by war damage, policy failure and infrastructure collapse rather than by climate alone.<sup>9</sup> If borne out, this points to an agricultural crisis that is substantially recoverable through governance and investment, not through climate adaptation alone.

## A degrading base

While policy debates the ideal crop mix, the agricultural base itself is deteriorating. Soil salinisation is advancing from over-fertilisation and irrigation with contaminated water. Fragmented land ownership, where farms are subdivided across multiple family members over generations, leaves individual plots too small and ownership too dispersed to attract sustained investment. The loss of biological diversity is a slower but equally serious risk: recurring wildfires destroyed not only tree cover but plant genetic resources that are slow or impossible to recover, and the introduction of imported seed varieties without proper testing has caused documented crop failures, including seed distributed in the northeast this season that showed very poor germination.<sup>5</sup> Participants also noted that Syria lacks systems for measuring the carbon footprint of agricultural production. Although the EU Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM) currently applies to selected carbon-intensive sectors rather than agricultural crops,<sup>19</sup> participants argued that broader carbon-accounting capacity could help Syrian producers prepare for possible future reporting requirements and carbon-finance opportunities.

Moreover, unexploded ordnance contaminates farmland along former front lines and blocks both cultivation and the return of displaced farmers. Removing it is a precondition for agricultural recovery in the most conflict-affected areas.<sup>9,20</sup>

## The dependency risk

Participants discussed the rapid growth of foreign investment interest in Syrian agriculture since sanctions eased. Some linked this pace partly to regional food-security concerns heightened by recent disruptions around the Strait of Hormuz. The UAE's Silal signed contract-farming and investment agreements with the Ministry of Agriculture in mid-2026, while Qatar's Baladna announced a multibillion-dollar farming project.<sup>20,21</sup> They generally welcomed the additional capital but raised questions about contract terms, transparency, domestic food-security safeguards and farmer participation. As one put it:

*“A foreign company deals directly with our farmers. In a bad season the farmer carries the loss, in a good one the investor takes the gain, and the decision to farm moves from internal to external.”*

— A workshop participant

The concern, as outlined in the discussion, was one of sovereignty as much as economics. Contract farming that serves export demand before domestic need, or that turns Syrian farmers into suppliers for other countries' food-security strategies, moves control over what Syria grows out of Syrian hands. Participants proposed safeguards including transparent contracts, meaningful farmer representation, and provisions appropriate to each commodity and project for protecting domestic supply.

## 4. Governance and institutions: an incomplete architecture

Syria's ability to manage its water and agricultural pressures will ultimately be determined by the strength and adaptability of its institutions. The workshop's second day turned from the problems to the machinery meant to manage them, and the diagnosis was blunt: Syria lacks the institutional architecture to govern its environment. The gaps run through four areas at once, coordination, law,

data and constitutional standing, though participants differed on the institutional form best suited to closing them. Until they close, even sound policies will keep failing at the point of delivery.

## A dispersed mandate

The first problem is where environmental responsibility sits. Environmental affairs have moved in and out of independent ministerial status over the past two decades, existing at times as a standalone Ministry of State for Environmental Affairs. Since 2016, the portfolio has been folded into the current Ministry of Local Administration and Environment.<sup>22,23</sup> Participants felt that within this broad portfolio, occupied with municipalities, urban planning and service delivery, environmental governance commands neither the authority nor the resources to address the scale of the challenges at hand. As one natural-resources consultant put it:

*“Environment sits inside local administration like an orphan in an orphanage.”*

— A natural-resources consultant

Institutional fragmentation compounds the problem. Responsibility for the environment is split across at least four ministries, along with numerous directorates and separate authorities, with no single body coordinating between them. Since the March 2025 restructuring, water resources have been folded into the Ministry of Energy, which now oversees dams, reservoirs and water companies, alongside electricity and oil. Agriculture, which consumes the overwhelming share of that water, sits under the Ministry of Agriculture. Environmental regulation lies with the Ministry of Local Administration and Environment, disaster response with the newly created Ministry of Emergency and Disaster Management, and climate and hydrological data with separate bodies such as the meteorological authority and the remote-sensing authority.

A director at the Ministry of Agriculture captured the confusion in the workshop, noting that water is now divided so that one ministry controls the resource, another depends on it, and no clear line of coordination runs between them. Each, as participants put it, operates as its own authority, with its own mandate and its own priorities, and too often in competition rather than to a shared plan. A United Nations projects director described exactly this problem. An effort to build a national strategy for managing water and land ran up against deep legislative and institutional gaps, and even assembling part of the data it needed took more than six months, in part because much of that data was treated as sensitive.

Participants were divided on the fix. Many argued for a dedicated environment ministry or a high national authority with real convening power, partly because independent standing would also strengthen Syria's hand in reaching global environmental funding. Others favoured keeping the current structure but forcing genuine coordination across it. One participant pointed out that a coordinating body for water already exists on paper but has never delivered in practice, which sharpens the real problem: the gap is one of authority and activation, not simply of structure. What they agreed on was the need for a clear legal division of mandates. One participant pointed to investment rules that had once allowed a power plant to be built inside a protected area as the kind of contradiction a clear legal matrix would prevent.

## Law without a home

The legislative picture is just as fragmented. Environmental rules are scattered across decrees and laws written in different eras for different purposes, and participants pressed for pulling them into a

single coherent framework and for placing an environmental law among the first the People's Assembly takes up, rather than leaving it to a distant session.

A draft water policy law, which had been prepared and amended and was awaiting adoption by the People's Assembly at the time of the workshop, is intended to modernise the management of water resources and to strengthen penalties for illegal extraction.<sup>10</sup> Because many of its provisions, on pricing, allocation and enforcement, carry direct social and political consequences, participants urged that its draft be opened to the relevant stakeholders in a dedicated consultative session before it is adopted, rather than passed as a purely technical instrument.

The gap reaches the constitution itself. The 2012 constitution, for all its faults, made environmental protection a duty of the state and society in its Article 27. The current Constitutional Declaration contains no equivalent provision. Participants argued that including an environmental provision in the permanent constitution would give the field a firmer legal foundation and affirm environmental protection as a lasting national commitment. As one participant noted plainly:

*“Climate change must be written into the constitution as a matter of the security of the Syrian people. That is the only way to give the government and the parliament the authority to act on it.”*

— A workshop participant

### Governing without data

Underlying both the coordination and legal gaps is an even more basic deficit, the absence of reliable data on the state's own resources. Years of conflict destroyed the monitoring networks that once tracked river flows, groundwater levels and rainfall, and what remains is patchy. A water studies specialist told the workshop that the measurement system was already weak before the war and has effectively ceased to function since, so that many of the figures now in circulation are estimates rather than real readings. His argument was one of sequencing: measurement has to come before the studies and strategies that depend on it.

*“Information is power. Without accurate data, any decision can be an unjust one.”*

— A workshop participant

The problem is not only technical but political. Much of the data that does exist is treated as sensitive and withheld, as noted by a UN projects director who described spending more than six months trying to assemble even part of the data needed for a resource-management strategy, eventually turning to remote sensing to fill the gaps that official channels would not. Yet the gap is not always a true vacuum. Regional research bodies hold extensive data, growth models and drought studies that Syrian institutions have been slow to draw on, which makes part of the challenge one of coordinating around data that already exists rather than a simple absence of it. Participants also noted Syria's near-absence from the main international environmental rankings as a marker of how far its own reporting has fallen behind.

The solution participants favoured was twofold. The first is a unified national system for environmental and water monitoring and early warning, treated as a first-order priority and made accessible across

ministries. The second is a strategic environmental assessment carried out before major sectors are rebuilt, so that energy, housing and water reconstruction are shaped by environmental realities from the start rather than assessed project by project after the damage is done.

### From parallel to shared

The thread running through all of this was a call to move from competition to cooperation. Government bodies, research institutions, civil society and international agencies have too often pulled in different directions, and participants urged a genuinely participatory approach built around a single national strategy for climate, land and water. This also extends to the public, since many technical decisions carry political and social weight. Participants argued for real dialogue with the communities affected, rather than decisions handed down and met with resistance. Several also pressed a point rarely heard in such settings, that the state should hold itself accountable for the environmental damage its own institutions cause, not only regulate everyone else.

Participants framed reconstruction itself as the opportunity. Rebuilding gives Syria a rare chance to design environmental sustainability into its institutions and infrastructure from the outset, rather than retrofitting it once the damage is done. The alternative, rebuilding first and turning to the environment later, would lock the same vulnerabilities into the country's physical and institutional foundations for another generation. Without a coherent governance architecture, coordinated, adequately mandated, and grounded in reliable data, even well-designed policies will struggle to move from paper to practice. Building it is not a technical afterthought to the transition; it is part of building the state.

## 5. The international response and climate finance

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Syria cannot meet environmental pressures on its own, and the final session tested what international support is actually available and on what terms. Participants offered a candid assessment. The financing Syria needs exists, but the international climate finance architecture tends to disadvantage countries like Syria, those with high vulnerability, limited institutional capacity, and heavy indebtedness.

### A system that rewards the strong

The central insight came from a climate finance specialist who set Syria's position against how the global system actually works. Climate finance, she argued, does not flow to where the need is greatest. It flows to where the risk is the lowest and the paperwork is strongest. As she put it:

*“Climate finance rewards institutional capacity and investment risk more than climate vulnerability itself, even though the difficulty of accessing it is often a consequence of that vulnerability.”*

— An international climate finance expert

Syria embodies the trap. It ranks among the world's most vulnerable countries to climate change and among the least ready to act on it, which leaves it least able to reach the money it most needs.<sup>3</sup>

The shape of the money compounds the problem. A climate finance specialist noted that in 2024, roughly two-thirds of international climate finance came as loans and under a third as grants. For a

country with a collapsed currency, minimal public revenue, and an economy shattered by more than a decade of conflict, loans are close to unusable. The bias runs deeper still. Private investment gravitates toward revenue-generating mitigation projects such as renewable energy, and away from the adaptation Syria most needs. Early-warning systems and flood defences save lives and money but return little to an investor. The global market is therefore least willing to fund precisely the measures that would most reduce Syria's risk.

As a representative of the Ministry of Energy observed, there is a tendency for institutions to align with donor priorities, and for donors in turn to follow the themes prevailing in the aid sector at any given time. The finance specialist turned that observation around, stating that the broader direction of international climate policy is itself not encouraging. Climate action, as she noted, is increasingly bent to strategic self-interest, multilateral cooperation is fraying, and climate is treated more as a security lever than a shared task. Aligning Syrian priorities to prevailing donor fashions, in other words, is not a strategy the country can rely on.

*“Syria is not a polluting country, yet it carries the burden of a crisis others created. Those who caused it should help us adapt to it.”*

— A water diplomacy expert

### A door that has opened

Against that, there was real and concrete progress. In July 2026, the Green Climate Fund approved Syria's first national project, a grant of USD 25 million within a package of around USD 27 million, to address water scarcity in the Barada and Awaj basins that supply Damascus, with an estimated 1.5 million people to benefit.<sup>24</sup> It is the first time the Fund has financed a project in Syria. The lifting of sanctions has removed what was once a hard barrier,<sup>25</sup> and the door to international climate cooperation is, for the first time in years, open.<sup>24</sup>

The limits matter as much as the breakthrough. Dedicated climate finance offers sums in the hundreds of millions of dollars over several years, meaningful for adaptation but modest against the scale of the climate pressures Syria faces.<sup>26</sup> Because the Fund disburses only through entities it has formally vetted, the money reaches Syria through international organisations rather than the state directly. Gaining direct access requires accrediting a national body to the Fund's standards, a multi-year process Syria has barely started.<sup>27</sup> Syria also lacks a dedicated assessment of its climate needs, as some participants noted. It can state its needs for water, shelter and food, but not yet for climate adaptation as such, which makes it harder to make the case that would unlock funding.

Participants also looked further ahead, to carbon accounting and potential carbon-finance opportunities. An ACSAD expert noted that work had begun on measuring the carbon footprint of Syrian forests. Participants argued that developing this capacity could support future access to carbon markets and protect Syrian export competitiveness as environmental reporting requirements evolve, though this would depend on data and institutions not yet fully in place.

### Turning the opening into more than a moment

Two further points from the workshop sharpen what this will take. The first is that the barriers to finance are not only external. One participant recounted how Syria had recently lost a climate-related project worth around USD 10 million, connected to the World Meteorological Organization, when internal delays meant the necessary approvals did not come through in time.<sup>9</sup> It was cited as a

reminder that access to international support depends as much on Syria's own institutional readiness as on donors' willingness to give.

The second is that energy sits at the centre of the climate question, and Syria's power needs are urgent. Participants, including a Turkish energy-sector centre, pressed a pragmatic line: restore reliable baseload power by rehabilitating existing plants and gas infrastructure, build climate-resilient design into that reconstruction, and expand renewables where they strengthen the grid rather than as a slogan. Off-grid solar has expanded quickly, much of it aid-funded, and increasingly powers water systems. Turning signed agreements into built projects, however, has lagged.<sup>28</sup> The deeper point was that water, energy and agriculture should be planned as one nexus, not in silos, since a decision in any one of them ripples through the others. Participants gave the nexus concrete form: solar-powered irrigation eases energy costs but accelerates groundwater depletion, and desalination to relieve water stress is itself highly energy-intensive, so gains in one sector can quietly deepen strain in another. Treating the three as a single system, rather than as separate ministerial files, is therefore a precondition for decisions that do not solve one shortage by worsening the next. Meanwhile the large reconstruction financing now taking shape, from Gulf grants to the international financial institutions, will set Syria's environmental trajectory for a generation.<sup>29</sup>

Whether it builds in resilience or bakes in vulnerability depends on choices being made now. The international community's most useful contribution may be less about new pledges than about helping Syria build the capacity to absorb, direct and account for the money that a recovering economy will attract.

## Recommendations

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The recommendations that follow were drawn from the proposals participants put forward across the five sessions. They are political as much as technical, and should be read as policy options emerging from the discussion rather than as positions unanimously endorsed by every participant. In a transition, how a state manages water, land and climate is not a matter of administration alone but a test of whether it can govern, whether citizens trust it, and how it stands with its neighbours and donors. Each is therefore also a state-building measure. Those marked immediate are the steps participants treated as first-order and achievable within the current transitional period.

### For Syrian policymakers

#### Governance and law: showing the state can govern

1. *(Immediate)* Establish or empower a single coordinating authority for climate, water, land and disaster risk. A coordinating body for water nominally exists but has not functioned, so the task is to give it, or a purpose-built successor, real authority and reach. Beyond ending the split between the Ministry of Energy and the Ministry of Local Administration and Environment, this demonstrates a state able to organise itself to deliver. Settle, as part of it, whether the field is better served by a dedicated environment ministry or an empowered national authority.
2. Consolidate scattered environmental legislation into one coherent framework, and move an environmental framework law and the new water policy law early through the People's Assembly, opening the water law to stakeholders before adoption. Legislating the environment early marks it as a governing priority rather than a postponed one.

3. Give environmental protection constitutional standing, reinstating in the permanent constitution the duty of state and society that the 2012 text carried and the current declaration dropped. It signals a commitment binding on whoever governs, not the preference of one cabinet.

#### **Legitimacy through delivery: data, enforcement and reconstruction**

4. *(Immediate)* Set up a unified national monitoring and early-warning system, and share baseline data across ministries and, where national security and data protection allow, with the public. Owning the country's own environmental facts is a matter of sovereignty as much as good policy.
5. Commission a strategic environmental assessment as early as possible to guide ongoing and planned reconstruction across energy, housing and water.
6. Plan water, energy and agriculture as one nexus, restoring reliable power through climate-resilient rehabilitation of existing plants and gas infrastructure while expanding renewables where they strengthen the grid, so the transition's urgent power needs and its climate goals advance together.
7. Enforce existing water and environmental rules consistently and proportionately, regulate and monitor solar-powered groundwater pumping alongside other forms of extraction rather than singling it out, and hold public bodies accountable for the environmental damage they cause. Even-handed enforcement, applied to state institutions as well as private actors, is how a new government earns the authority to regulate everyone else.

#### **The rural social contract: water, land and food**

8. *(Immediate)* Protect food-insecure households and returnees by using needs assessments to target support, rebuilding a strategic wheat reserve, and prioritising demining and land rehabilitation so displaced farmers can return safely. Keeping the countryside fed and populated is the surest guard against the next wave of displacement and instability.
9. Prioritise water efficiency over new hardware, judge cropping patterns against each crop's water footprint, and study the economics before large irrigation or desalination projects.
10. Safeguard food sovereignty in deals with foreign agribusiness, requiring transparent contracts, a real seat at the table for farmers, and clear provisions to protect domestic food supply, calibrated to each crop and project.
11. Sequence subsidy and pricing reform with social protection and clear public communication, so that necessary reform does not trigger the very instability it is meant to prevent.

#### **Sovereignty and standing: finance and diplomacy**

12. *(Immediate)* Build the capacity to access climate finance: complete Green Climate Fund accreditation, revise the national climate contribution, commission a dedicated climate needs assessment, and establish the monitoring and evaluation units funds require. Consider a national climate fund seeded by environmental penalties and a share of reconstruction flows, reducing dependence on external goodwill.
13. Prepare for carbon finance by building a national carbon-accounting capacity, within an existing institution or a dedicated centre, to measure emissions in the sectors most exposed to export and climate-finance requirements. Build on regional carbon-footprint work already under way, and prioritise the sectors currently or plausibly covered by external carbon rules.

14. Turn environmental cooperation into a diplomatic asset, converting the constructive water dialogue with Turkey into standing joint technical committees and data-sharing, using shared-water cooperation as a confidence-building track, and pursuing clarity with Iraq and Jordan and on the occupied southern dams.

### For international partners

1. *(Immediate)* Embed minimum climate and environmental standards in every reconstruction contract and programme, so resilience is built in from the start rather than retrofitted later. Support for the transition and support for its environment are the same investment.
2. Rebalance support toward Syria's reality, favouring grants over loans given the country's debt and fiscal fragility, and funding the adaptation private capital avoids, early warning, flood protection, water and wastewater, not only revenue-generating projects, while sustaining the underfunded humanitarian water and agricultural lifelines that people depend on until the shift toward resilience takes hold.
3. Fund the groundwork that lets Syria reach larger flows, from preparing fundable projects to accrediting its institutions and assessing its climate needs.
4. Build on the first project, moving beyond the Green Climate Fund's initial grant toward other international climate funds, and beyond today's modest ceiling.
5. Back regional cooperation, supporting cross-border early-warning and data-sharing and Syria's technical capacity on shared waters, which serves regional stability as much as Syrian recovery.
6. Align with national priorities rather than trends, funding against Syria's own stated needs, involving Syrian researchers and institutions in design, and investing in durable capacity rather than short training cycles. Financing that respects Syrian ownership strengthens the transition; financing that bypasses national and local institutions weakens the legitimacy it should reinforce.

### Unresolved tensions

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The recommendations above reflect where the workshop reached enough agreement to point to a course of action. On several questions it did not, and those unresolved tensions matter just as much, because they mark the genuine trade-offs Syrian policymakers will have to weigh for themselves.

#### **Act now or build the foundations first:**

The most fundamental divide was over sequencing. Syrians are already drilling wells, rebuilding in floodplains and farming without direction, and some argue the state must act at scale now or risk losing control over realities forming on the ground. Others warned that acting without institutions, data and legal frameworks in place risks entrenching the very problems it aims to solve.

#### **Who defines Syria's baseline:**

Participants disputed internationally sourced figures, from wheat losses to water shares. Beneath the numbers lies a contest over data sovereignty, since whoever produces the baseline shapes every policy and financing decision built upon it.

**Renegotiate or preserve transboundary agreements:**

Some argued Syria's water treaties should be reopened to reflect the change of government and mounting climate stress. Others warned that most existing arrangements favour Syria, and that reopening them from a weak negotiating position could forfeit hard-won advantages.

**What form the institutional fix should take:**

The recommendations call for a single coordinating authority in some form. What participants did not settle is its precise shape, a dedicated environment ministry or a high national authority, and the related question of which ministry should govern water.

**Desalination for Damascus:**

Some saw seawater desalination as difficult to avoid given the scale of the capital's shortfall. Others judged it an expensive and impractical answer to a problem that conservation, efficiency and reduced losses could address at a fraction of the cost.

**How far and how fast to reform subsidies:**

There was broad agreement that crop subsidies and water pricing need reform, and that it must be handled carefully. What remained contested was the timing, how quickly the state can move before the social stability those subsidies currently underwrite comes under strain.

**Foreign agribusiness:**

Gulf investment offers capital the sector badly needs, but participants disagreed on how to weigh that against the sovereignty risks of contract farming conducted on the wrong terms.

## About

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### **Syria Policy Dialogues:**

The Syria Policy Dialogues is a track 1.5 initiative by The Syria Report, funded by the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA). This workshop was conducted in collaboration with the Omran Center for Strategic Studies. It is an initiative aimed at tackling key and ongoing issues relevant to Syria's political transition with experts, stakeholders, and government representatives, fostering a deeper exchange on key policy issues and ensuring that an open and transparent dialogue is sustained on the questions that will shape Syria's future.

### **The Syria Report:**

The Syria Report is an independent economic publication covering Syria's economy, business environment, and political economy. Founded in 2001 and marking its 25th anniversary in 2026, it provides analysis, data, and advisory services to a wide range of international and Syrian stakeholders. The Syria Report is the lead organisation of the Syria Policy Dialogues initiative.

### **Omran Center for Strategic Studies:**

The Omran Center for Strategic Studies is a policy think tank established in 2013 and currently operates from its headquarters in Damascus. It serves as the policy and knowledge program at the Syrian Forum, an independent non-governmental organization working on Syrian affairs. The Center's work extends beyond producing research and policy papers. It contributes directly to the design of practical implementable policy solutions that support complex security, development, political, and societal challenges. Through a broad network of researchers and experts inside and outside of Syria, the Center engages in professional and technical collaboration with state institutions and policymakers, thereby strengthening its role in shaping public policy and supporting Syria's national transition process.

### **Disclaimer:**

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This policy brief draws on two categories of source material. The primary source is the workshop itself: five sessions of structured expert discussion, rapporteur notes, and workshop minutes. The secondary sources are publicly available reports, data, and analysis from international institutions and policy research organisations, used to verify and contextualise the claims made during the workshop, where possible. Where statistics or claims are derived solely from workshop participant contributions, they are attributed to the workshop and cited accordingly. All figures cited from external sources are referenced with full attribution below.

All workshop contributions are anonymised in accordance with Chatham House Rule. Where direct quotations are used, they are attributed by professional profile only. No statement in this brief should be attributed to any individual participant or their affiliated organisation.

The findings, interpretations, and recommendations presented in this brief reflect the collective discussions of the workshop and do not necessarily represent the views of any single participant, the organisers, or their respective institutions.

The workshop was conducted primarily in Arabic while the policy brief was drafted in English. Quotations and participant contributions are based on transcripts and rapporteur notes, and some have been paraphrased or translated from the original Arabic; while wording may vary slightly, all quotations remain faithful to the substance and intent of what was said.

This brief draws on material sourced and produced by its authors, including workshop proceedings, rapporteur notes, and transcripts. AI language tools were used to support transcription analysis and data synthesis. All findings, interpretations, and recommendations were subject to human editorial review and checked against available sources where possible.

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