

**Position paper – Melvyn Ingleby (Middle East correspondent NRC)
Roundtable on Syria held at the Committee on Foreign Affairs of the Dutch House of Representatives
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I've covered Syria for the past nine years and am currently working on a book project on the legal, social and psychological aftermath of mass violence since the fall of the Assad regime. Last December, I visited Damascus and Homs and had a chance to speak with dozens of Syrians of various communities and backgrounds. Below are my main recommendations to the Committee, based on these conversations held in Syria, observations from inside the country and interviews with academics and other experts.

1. Engage, but don't lecture Syrians.

Credibility matters when raising human rights concerns. In Syria, unfortunately, Europe and many other international actors have next to no credibility left. Most Syrians feel betrayed by an international community that failed to stop Assad from massacring them at an industrial scale, disproportionately focused on the jihadist threat whilst the regime killed far more civilians, and lost interest in the plight of the Syrian people after ISIS was territorially defeated. This context of widespread disillusionment should be taken into account when raising human rights concerns with Syria's new rulers. To do so effectively, diplomats would do well to show humility, engage in self-criticism and treat their Syrian counterparts as equals. Given the international community's total failure to protect human rights in Syria when Assad was in power, 'lecturing' Syrians about human rights now that his regime has fallen is not the right approach – and can actually backfire and fuel anti-Western sentiment in Damascus.

2. Beware of disinformation

Social media are flooding with reports of extrajudicial killings and other violent acts against Syria's various ethnic and religious minority groups. While such violence has definitely occurred and must be condemned, there are several things to keep in mind regarding these reports. 1) Many of them are unverified and some clearly constitute disinformation, often accompanied by images of atrocities committed earlier in the war; 2) Some accounts spreading this information are or were supportive of the former Assad-regime or its former allies, notably Iran, which still have means to sow unrest and have an interest in doing so; 3) Many violations target individuals accused of regime links or complicity in past atrocities. They are more often acts of revenge than acts of 'ethnically motivated' violence targeting minorities as a whole. Of course, neither are acceptable, but accuracy is important to prevent sectarian tensions from deepening. 4) The new authorities in Damascus have consistently spoken out against acts of extrajudicial revenge. While individual crimes do occur, there is no government policy encouraging this violence, and most observers have been surprised that the number of revenge actions so far seems relatively limited given the enormous scale of regime atrocities.

3. Avoid the identity trap

There is a tendency amongst Western policy makers to engage with Syria through perceived 'representatives' of the country's different ethnic and religious communities. This approach has many serious pitfalls: 1) It is reminiscent of French colonial practices and draws resentment from much of the Syrian population – including from within 'minorities' themselves, who often prefer to be identified first and foremost as Syrian citizens; 2) It tends to lead to a disproportionate focus on 'minorities' at the expense of the Sunni Arab majority; 3) It strengthens stereotypes about various groups' political allegiance: Kurds, for instance, are often assumed to be YPG supporters and Alawites to be Assad supporters – whereas in reality, of course, there are many Kurds who oppose the YPG and many Alawites who welcomed the fall of the Assad-regime. 4) Such stereotyping in turn fosters mistrust between groups and can fuel sectarian tensions. To avoid such tensions, then, Western policy makers would do well to steer clear of identity politics and promote *civil* rights for all Syrians rather than 'minority rights' for some. The experience in Iraq, which is still paralysed by the *muhasasa* system (power sharing along sectarian lines) introduced by the US, should serve as a warning in this regard.

4. Inclusivity is about power sharing

The real risk with Ahmed al-Sharaa so far does not seem to be that he is sidelining ‘minorities’ specifically, but that he is reluctant to share real power with civil society at large. This became apparent at the recent dialogue conference in Damascus. The problem was not so much that minorities were not invited – they were – but that the conference was organised last-minute, only lasted two days and many participants felt their presence was largely symbolic and would not impact actual decision making. Achieving actual inclusivity, then, above all requires finding concrete ways to empower Syrian civil society vis-à-vis the country’s rulers so that Syria can move away from authoritarianism.

5. Focus on economic recovery and expand the lifting of sanctions

A young Kurdish friend of mine who recently returned to his hometown Aleppo recently told me: “I don’t understand why the West is again obsessing with minorities. I’m here sharing an apartment with Kurds, Sunni Arabs and Christians. That’s all fine, it’s just not an issue. The real problem is: there is no electricity in the apartment.”

For many Syrians, the most urgent challenges right now are about economic survival. The government has promised a 400% increase in salaries and eight hours of electricity a day, but has not yet been able to deliver as the country remains under sanctions. In time, the resulting poverty and frustration may spark renewed social tensions and violence. To avoid that, it’s essential that international actors help Syria to get basic services up and running by sending cash support, lifting sanctions, and aiding reconstruction and economic development in the country. The easing of sanctions by the EU in late February is a step in the right direction, but not enough. US sanctions on Syria – intended to punish the Assad regime – must also be lifted. If Washington is reluctant to do so, the EU should develop mechanisms to protect businesses from US sanctions and avoid overcompliance.

6. Beware of Israeli escalation in southern Syria and the instrumentalisation of the Druze

When I was in Damascus last December, the only thing interrupting festivities marking the fall of the Assad regime were the blasts of Israeli bombardments. As the regime crumbled, Israel took its chance to decimate Syrian military equipment and infrastructure with hundreds of airstrikes and extended its already illegal occupation of the Golan Heights. The latter move was said to be ‘temporary’, but has only escalated since, with the IDF building new army posts in the area. In addition, Israel recently launched new strikes on southern Syria and ordered the IDF to “prepare to defend” the Druze community in a suburb of Damascus following recent skirmishes there between the new government and Druze militias who refused to lay down their arms. These militias have been disowned by Druze community leaders, who also clearly indicated that they reject Israeli meddling in Syrian affairs and don’t want to be ‘defended’. These developments should serve as a clear warning that 1) Israel does not seek de-escalation of tensions in southern Syria and could pose a serious threat to the fragile Syrian state, potentially leading to renewed war; 2) The instrumentalisation of ‘minorities’ by foreign powers can have disastrous consequences – and actually threaten the wellbeing of these communities.

7. Protect your own interests by helping Syria

All of the above recommendations align with the interest of the Netherlands and Europe more generally. Without international support to guarantee Syria’s internal security, economic recovery and reconstruction, after all, the country risks redescending into chaos and renewed violence. This would impede the return of Syrian refugees, could cause an exodus of even more refugees, further escalate regional conflict, create space for Russia and Iran to regain their foothold in Syria and provide fresh breeding ground for extremist organisations which threaten international security. Neither Syria nor the world are in need of such *déjà-vus*. Avoiding them requires the foresight to engage constructively with Damascus at an early stage and not abandoning Syria a second time.