CANADIAN MUSLIM PUBLIC AFFAIRS COUNCIL

Pathways to Renewal: A Strategic Framework for Canadian Engagement in Post-Conflict Syria

Executive Summary

The collapse of the Assad regime in December 2024 marked a historic turning point for the Syrian people, opening an overdue path toward ending more than thirteen years of state-sponsored violence, forced displacement, and systemic oppression. The Canadian Muslim Public Affairs Council (CMPAC) commends the Government of Canada for its diplomatic engagement and commendable financial commitments, including the vital allocation of $84 million as well as the proactive appointment of Special Envoy Omar Alghabra. These proactive measures, alongside Canada's historic resettlement of over 100,000 Syrian refugees since 2015, reflect Canada's enduring leadership and commitment to international humanitarian principles on the global stage.

While the Government of Canada has taken important steps by adjusting legislative and regulatory frameworks, Canada's broader foreign policy posture must now evolve to meet the immense realities on the ground. To date, Canadian engagement has balanced regional stabilization and regulatory adjustments with essential refugee support across neighboring host states like Jordan, Lebanon, and Iraq. Meanwhile, inside Syria, over 16 million people, representing roughly 70 percent of the population, remain in urgent need of humanitarian aid amidst widespread infrastructure destruction, severe economic strain, and the systemic disruption of basic public services. According to World Bank assessments, post-conflict reconstruction costs are estimated at a conservative $216 billion, with nearly half of all physical damage concentrated heavily within public utilities and municipal infrastructure.

Canada’s moral obligations and international humanitarian commitments demand a decisive shift from short-term crisis management to sustained, structural support for development. While multilateral channels and regional partnerships remain valuable mechanisms for delivering aid, a comprehensive approach requires Canada to also work directly within Syria. Complementary bilateral engagement is essential to maximize impact, foster local agency, and ensure reconstruction efforts respond directly to the realities on the ground.

In October 2026, the Canadian Arab Congress and UOSSM Canada led the Canadian Parliamentary and a Humanitarian Delegation to Syria alongside eight Members of Parliament, leaders from more than eight Canadian charities, and dedicated contributors. The mission’s objective was to assess firsthand the complex humanitarian challenges Syrians continue to face after years of conflict. What the delegation witnessed across the country was both heartbreaking and eye-opening, with every community visited reflecting a profound narrative of immense suffering, resilience, and hope.

To build on its positive momentum, CMPAC calls on Global Affairs Canada to advance direct bilateral development,locally driven municipal recovery, institutional capacity building, active financial normalization, and support for a clear process for truth and reconciliation.

Policy Recommendations

1. Fostering Full Bilateral Relations including Economic Engagement, Trade Relations, and Sanctions Relief

Canada must actively engage in the Syrian economy by establishing normal bilateral trade relationships, lifting remaining sanctions, and encouraging broader commercial and institutional partnerships. While recent regulatory amendments eased broad sectoral restrictions, true economic recovery requires removing all residual sanctions and financial barriers that continue to deter cross-border commerce, banking access, and private-sector investment. By opening formal trade channels, facilitating trade missions, and encouraging economic ties between Canadian enterprises, Syrian institutions, and international partners, Canada can help revitalize local markets, drive job creation, and support sustainable economic self-sufficiency.

a. Reassessing and Lifting Remaining Economic Restrictions

Building upon the important regulatory amendments enacted in February 2026, the Government of Canada should continuously review and lift any remaining sanctions that unnecessarily impede reconstruction, economic recovery, and the restoration of essential civilian services in Syria. While those legislative updates successfully repealed broad sectoral bans on imports, exports, and financial transactions, residual administrative hurdles and complex compliance mechanisms continue to create a challenging environment for vital aid and development operations.

To ensure these measures translate into genuine recovery, Canadian policy must actively facilitate rather than restrictively manage the legitimate economic and developmental activities required for Syrian communities to rebuild. By systematically dismantling remaining bureaucratic barriers and clearing pathways for authorized transactions, Canada can empower trusted local partners, encourage the influx of necessary resources, and support the sustainable rehabilitation of critical public utilities and basic economic stability across the region.

b. Non-Refoulement, Refugee Protection, and Anti-Racism

Canada's diplomatic engagement and regional financial aid must safeguard displaced populations while directly confronting systemic discrimination. All Canadian stabilization funding allocated to neighboring host states must be legally contingent on strict compliance with international law and the legal principle of *non-refoulement*, prohibiting forced returns, pushbacks, or involuntary deportations. Canada should maintain sustained diplomatic pressure ensuring that any refugee repatriation efforts remain strictly voluntary, safe, and dignified.

2. Transitioning from Emergency Relief to Investment in Long-Term Development

Canada's foreign policy must transition from short-term emergency relief to sustained structural development through the normalization of diplomatic and bilateral relations. The October 2026 delegation of eight Members of Parliament to Syria marked a positive first step, but Canada must now build on that positive momentum. While multilateral humanitarian assistance remains necessary, lasting recovery requires formal State-to-State engagement, including taking steps toward reopening a Canadian embassy in Damascus. Re-establishing a permanent diplomatic presence will enable Canada to coordinate directly with Syrian institutions, oversee reconstruction efforts on the ground, and build the long-term partnerships essential for stability.

a. Inclusive Coordination, Participatory Governance, and Community Voice

Global Affairs Canada (GAC) must pivot from top-down aid administration to participatory, decentralized planning that embeds decision-making authority within local Syrian communities and diaspora experts. Canada should institutionalize a Policy Dialogue Table bringing together Canadian officials, the Syrian Transitional Government, local civic authorities, Syrian and Canadian-Muslim NGO/NPOs, and the Syrian-Canadian diaspora to co-design long-term development strategies.

All Canadian-funded initiatives should be required to implement the United Nations Development Programme's Participatory Local Recovery Planning framework, ensuring projects are prioritized directly by municipal councils, community-led organizations, women, youth, and displaced populations to reflect local struggles. Furthermore, technical assistance and capacity-building resources should target municipal councils and regional public utility boards rather than central ministries alone, preventing the concentration of political power while guaranteeing equitable service delivery across diverse regions.

b. Water Infrastructure and Essential Utilities

Canadian development assistance must address the water infrastructure crises, where the water network is nearly 50% non-functional. The assistance should support agencies to deploy solar-powered hybrid systems directly at water-pumping stations, bakeries, and schools to bypass central grid failures. In tandem, external actors must train local water management committees in technical maintenance, fair block-tariff collection, and groundwater monitoring to eliminate reliance on foreign engineers, curb illegal drilling, and prevent localized resource disputes.

c. Healthcare Access and Institutional Capacity

Canadian development assistance must prioritize restoring primary care in a context where fewer than 60 percent of hospitals are functional. Funding should deploy mobile health clinics to serve remote returnee populations while protecting critical health data from loss or

displacement. Furthermore, institutional capacity building must focus on task-shifting models that connect local medical professionals with Syrian diaspora clinical experts, alongside training community health volunteers in trauma triage and psychological first aid.

d. Educational Rehabilitation and Academic Recovery

Canadian development assistance must prioritize the comprehensive rebuilding and rehabilitation of schools, responding directly to the reality that more than 2.5 million children are out of school and nearly 8,000 schools require urgent rehabilitation. Beyond repairing physical structures, capacity building must focus on training local educators to manage psychological distress and address the learning disruptions caused by prolonged conflict. This support must fund accelerated catch-up curricula to bridge massive learning gaps for children who have missed years of schooling, creating safe, stable environments that foster resilience alongside academic recovery.

3. Condemning Illegal Military Activity and Protecting Territorial Integrity

In accordance with findings from the United Nations Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Syria, Canada must explicitly condemn sustained and entrenched foreign military incursions on Syrian territory, specifically citing ground incursions, raids, and unauthorized border operations that displace civilians. This includes explicitly condemning the military interventions of the Israeli military, which have involved documented ground actions such as the detention of 49 individuals, including two children, on Syrian territory. Noting that some of these individuals were transferred to Israel where they remain detained incommunicado.

Canada should call for the immediate release or judicial due process for all individuals detained in cross-border military operations, addressing grave concerns highlighted by UN Commissioners regarding individuals held incommunicado without legal counsel, which heightens the risk of torture and ill-treatment. These acts violate the prohibition against arbitrary detention and may amount to war crimes. Ultimately, Canadian foreign policy must demand that all regional state actors respect Syria's sovereign borders, cease actions that constitute potential violations of international law, and ensure unhindered humanitarian access to populations displaced by military aggression.

Ensuring Comprehensive Atrocity Accountability and the Rule of Law

Historical justice remains an indispensable prerequisite for national reconciliation, requiring Canada to maintain an uncompromising position on international law. Canada should urge the Syrian Transitional Government to enforce strict rule-of-law standards and ensure that all perpetrators of grave human rights violations, regardless of political or military affiliation, are prosecuted equally because selective justice is fundamentally incompatible with international law.

Canada must sustain its legal co-leadership in prosecuting state-sponsored torture before the International Court of Justice under the Convention Against Torture while increasing long-term funding to the United Nations International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism and local Syrian documentation groups.

Conclusion

The post-Assad transition presents a critical window for Canada to demonstrate principled, and pragmatic leadership in global affairs. By building upon its established humanitarian contributions, its diplomatic outreach, and recent regulatory updates, Canada is uniquely positioned to help steer Syria away from protracted instability and toward sustainable recovery.

Achieving this vision requires a deliberate evolution in Canadian foreign policy from reactive crisis management to proactive, structural investment. By prioritizing participatory local governance, rehabilitating vital infrastructure, and lifting remaining economic barriers, Canada can make a lasting impact. CMPAC urges Global Affairs Canada to adopt these recommendations, ensuring that Canadian foreign policy remains deeply aligned with humanitarian principles, international law, and the enduring aspirations of the Syrian people.