Syria's Polycrisis: Integrating Environmental Justice and Green Reconstruction for a Resilient Future

Author: Dr. Rayan Azhari

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Contents

Part I: The Anatomy of Syria's Polycrisis

Introduction: A State of Self-Reinforcing Collapse

The Syrian Arab Republic is the archetype of a 21st-century "polycrisis," a state of devastating and self-reinforcing collapse where the escalating consequences of climate change are inextricably linked with the legacy of authoritarian mismanagement, the fallout from over a decade of brutal conflict, and a profound economic breakdown.[1] These are not parallel crises unfolding simultaneously; they constitute a single, intertwined system of failure, where each element amplifies the others in a catastrophic feedback loop. The visible destruction of war is layered upon a deep environmental disaster that was not merely a consequence of the conflict, but one of its primary causes.[1]

This report advances a central thesis: sustainable peace and the establishment of state legitimacy in post-conflict Syria are impossible without fundamentally addressing environmental degradation as both a driver and a consequence of the conflict. The severe drought that gripped the country from 2006 to 2011 was more than a climate event; it was a spark that ignited a fire fuelled by decades of unsustainable agricultural policies, systemic neglect of rural populations, and a catastrophic failure to manage dwindling water resources.[1] The Assad regime's inability to respond to this environmental shock acted as a powerful "legitimacy destroyer," shattering the social contract in rural areas and contributing directly to the 2011 uprising.[1] Any future government that fails to address environmental security will inevitably face the same crisis of legitimacy.

Therefore, this analysis posits that **environmental justice**, the fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, colour, national origin, or income with respect to the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies, must be treated not as a secondary or niche issue, but as a prerequisite for any viable political settlement. Consequently, **green reconstruction** emerges not as a luxury, but as the only viable pathway to long-term national resilience. An attempt to rebuild Syria by recreating the fragile, inequitable, and environmentally bankrupt system of the past would not be a recovery, but a guarantee of future collapse.

This report provides a comprehensive and updated assessment of Syria's polycrisis, integrating the critical and often-overlooked dimensions of transitional justice and

environmental accountability. It begins by analysing the anatomy of the crisis, updating the evidence base on climate impacts and their cascading socio-economic consequences. It then introduces the imperative of environmental justice, drawing on international precedents to propose concrete mechanisms for accountability and redress in the Syrian context. Finally, it lays out an integrated framework for a green, just, and resilient recovery, detailing actionable strategies for energy, agriculture, and infrastructure, and outlining pathways to finance this transformation. The analysis concludes that while the challenges are monumental, a narrow window of opportunity exists to pivot from a cycle of collapse to a trajectory of sustainable peace.

The Climate Accelerator: Physical Manifestations and Future Projections

Syria is situated in a global hotspot for climate change, where the physical impacts of a warming planet are already acute and accelerating.[1] Scientific projections paint a grim picture of a hotter, drier, and more volatile future, creating cascading crises that threaten the very foundations of the nation. The 2025 drought is not a cyclical anomaly but a systemic shock, occurring within a national system that has lost all capacity for resilience. The confluence of upstream damming by neighbouring countries, the internal destruction of critical water infrastructure, and an unregulated boom in groundwater pumping has created a "perfect storm" for water collapse, demonstrating that siloed solutions are not just ineffective, but actively harmful.[1]

Updated Analysis of Water Scarcity

Water scarcity is the defining feature of Syria's climate vulnerability. The historic drought of 2006-2011, once considered an extreme event, is now a harbinger of the new reality; anthropogenic climate change has increased the probability of such a severe drought from a once-in-250-year event to a once-in-10-year event.[1] The 2024-2025 agricultural season marks a stark deterioration, with the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) reporting that cumulative rainfall in the first quarter of 2025 was just 94.9 mm, the lowest level since 1997 and well below the long-term average of 165.4 mm.[6] This has led to widespread crop failure and what the FAO has termed the worst drought on record since 1989.[7] Projections for the future are dire, with models predicting an average temperature increase of up to 2.0 °C and an 11% reduction in annual rainfall by 2050.[1]

Geopolitical Dimensions of Water

This climatic pressure is intensely magnified by geopolitics. The flow of the Euphrates River, the nation's agricultural lifeblood, is frequently at half its historical levels, a result of both climate change and the extensive network of dams in upstream Turkey, notably the Southeastern Anatolia Project (GAP).[1] This has effectively weaponised water, granting Turkey immense leverage over Syria's food and energy security. Despite a 1987 agreement obligating Turkey to release 500 cubic meters per second to Syria, actual flows have often fallen far short, at times dropping to as low as 200 cubic meters per second.[5] This reduction has crippled Syria's hydroelectric dams, such as the Tabqa and Tishrin dams, leading to severe power outages and a collapse in the irrigated agriculture they support.[8] Recent diplomatic engagements between Turkey and Iraq in July 2025, while resulting in temporary increases in flow to Iraq, often bypass Syria or fail to provide it with a secure, long-term share, leaving the country in a perpetually precarious position.[9]

Desertification and Land Degradation

The hotter, drier climate creates ideal conditions for wildfires, which have become a recurring national disaster. Since 2011, Syria has lost a staggering one-third of its forest cover due to a combination of fires, conflict-related damage, and rampant illegal logging for fuel and profit as governance collapsed.[1] This widespread deforestation, coupled with unsustainable irrigation practices and overgrazing, is dramatically accelerating desertification and soil erosion. The result is an increase in the frequency and intensity of debilitating sand and dust storms, which not only degrade agricultural land but also cause a surge in respiratory illnesses among the population.[1]

Threats to Cultural Heritage

This environmental degradation poses a direct and existential threat to Syria's invaluable cultural heritage. The accelerating desertification threatens to engulf ancient ruins and archaeological sites, including the UNESCO World Heritage site of Palmyra.[1] The physical integrity of monuments that have stood for millennia is being undermined by climate-induced erosion and sand encroachment. In this context, environmental preservation is not a separate issue but is intrinsically linked to the protection of Syria's, and the world's, cultural legacy.

The Human Toll: Cascading Socio-Economic and Health Crises

The physical risks of climate change translate directly into profound human suffering, systematically dismantling food security, driving displacement, and precipitating a public health catastrophe. The nature of Syria's humanitarian crisis is undergoing a fundamental shift. While initially driven by the direct violence of conflict, it is now transitioning into a chronic catastrophe fuelled by intensifying environmental pressures. The primary drivers of need cited in 2025 are drought, food insecurity, and the collapse of basic services like water and electricity.[7] This evolution demands a corresponding shift in the international response, from a model of short-term emergency relief to one focused on building long-term resilience to the root environmental causes of suffering.

Updated Food Security Assessment

Syria's agricultural sector, once the cornerstone of its economy and a source of regional exports, has collapsed. The 2006-2011 drought forced the country to import cereals for the first time in its modern history, with up to 75% of farmers in the worst-hit regions experiencing total crop failure.[1] The situation in 2025 is even more dire. The FAO and World Food Programme (WFP) have designated Syria a "hotspot of very high concern".[12] An estimated 14.5 million people are food insecure, with 5.4 million at risk of hunger.[7] The historic drought of 2024-2025 is projected to cause a wheat production deficit of 2.73 million metric tons, equivalent to the annual dietary needs of 16.25 million people.[7]

This production collapse is compounded by a severe economic crisis. As of early 2025, the national minimum wage covered only 13-18% of the cost of the WFP's minimum food expenditure basket, leaving the vast majority of households unable to afford basic nutritional needs.[15] This forces families into negative coping strategies, such as purchasing food on debt, reducing dietary diversity, and resorting to child labor.[16]

Public Health Emergencies

Syria's public health system is collapsing under the combined weight of conflict and climate change. Two-thirds of the country's water and sanitation facilities have been damaged or destroyed, often deliberately.[1] This, combined with severe drought and the widespread discharge of untreated sewage, has led to a catastrophic decline in water quality. The consequences are predictable and deadly: widespread outbreaks of waterborne diseases like cholera, typhoid, and leishmaniasis have been reported.[1] The 2025 drought has significantly increased the risk of another major cholera outbreak, as

communities are forced to rely on unsafe water sources, a pattern observed following the 2020-2021 drought.[6]

Displacement and Vulnerability

The destruction of the rural economy has triggered waves of destabilising human migration. In the years before 2011, an estimated 1.5 million people were forced to move from the countryside to urban peripheries, creating impoverished informal settlements where competition over scarce resources fuelled the social unrest that erupted into rebellion.[1] A new wave of climate-driven displacement is now underway as farmers are once again forced to abandon their desiccated lands.[1]

According to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), while over 1.23 million people have returned to their areas of origin since the political transition in late 2024, they are returning to communities that lack the most basic services.[11] They face destroyed homes, non-existent job opportunities, and the daily threat of unexploded ordnance, which has caused hundreds of casualties since the start of 2025.[17] This polycrisis does not affect all Syrians equally. It disproportionately harms the most vulnerable groups. Women and girls, as the traditional managers of household water, bear the primary burden of scarcity, often traveling longer and more dangerous routes to collect water, which exposes them to a heightened risk of gender-based violence. Children suffer devastating and often irreversible physical and cognitive impacts from malnutrition and waterborne diseases. The elderly and persons with disabilities face immense challenges in mobility, making it difficult to flee hazards or access scarce resources.[1] Any effective response must prioritize the specific needs of these groups to avoid deepening pre-existing inequalities.

The regression is starkly quantified by Syria's performance against the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Decades of development progress have been erased, with the country now facing major and worsening challenges across all key environmental and social indicators.

Table 1: Syria's SDG Regression (Updated for 2025)

Data based on the 2025 Sustainable Development Report and supporting sectoral reports.[1]

Goal and Number	Current Status	Trend	Key Challenges in Syria
SDG 2: Zero Hunger	Major Challenges Remain	Decreasing	14.5 million people are food insecure; historic drought in 2025 has led to widespread crop failure; wheat production is 30-40% below pre-crisis average; minimum wage covers only 13-18% of the food basket.
SDG 6: Clean Water and Sanitation	Major Challenges Remain	Decreasing	Destruction of two-thirds of water facilities; widespread discharge of raw sewage; massive depletion of groundwater aquifers; recurrent and widespread outbreaks of cholera and other waterborne diseases.
SDG 7: Affordable and Clean Energy	Major Challenges Remain	Information Unavailable	Destruction of over 70% of the electricity grid; electricity supply reduced to 2-4 hours per day; collapse of oil and hydropower production; unregulated solar boom is accelerating water depletion and creating a future toxic waste crisis.
SDG 13: Climate Action	Major Challenges Remain	Decreasing	Severe vulnerability to drought, heatwaves, and desertification; Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC) is entirely conditional on external aid and sanctions relief; ranked 146/181 on the ND-GAIN vulnerability index.
SDG 15: Life on Land	Major Challenges Remain	Decreasing	Loss of one-third of forest cover since 2011; accelerated desertification and soil erosion; widespread land contamination from conflict remnants and industrial pollution; high and recurring risk of wildfires.

Part II: Accountability and Justice in the Anthropocene

The Justice Imperative: Transitional Justice in Post-Conflict Syria

The political transition in Syria has opened a critical, albeit fragile, window for confronting the country's legacy of atrocities. However, the nascent transitional justice (TJ) process is already revealing a fundamental disconnect from the lived experience of the conflict. By focusing narrowly on traditional human rights violations, the process risks marginalising the very rural communities whose environmental and economic grievances were central to the 2011 uprising. This exclusion is not a passive oversight; it is an active delegitimization of the entire transitional project. For justice to be meaningful and for peace to be sustainable, the scope of accountability must be expanded to include the profound environmental harms that both catalysed and were exacerbated by the war.

The Syrian Transitional Justice Commission: Mandate, Politics, and Potential

In May 2025, Syria's transitional authorities announced the establishment of a Transitional Justice Commission (TJC) and a National Commission for the Missing.[20] While these bodies represent a potential turning point, they have been met with cautious optimism and significant scepticism from Syrian civil society and international observers. The TJC's mandate has been described as opaque and vague, tasked broadly with "investigating past violations and supporting national reconciliation" but lacking clear jurisdiction, independent investigative powers, or enforcement mechanisms.[21]

Many analysts view the TJC's formation as a calculated political move designed to secure international legitimacy and, crucially, to create a pathway for sanctions relief and reconstruction aid.[20] There are deep concerns that the commission could become a tool for "performative justice," selectively prosecuting crimes of the former Assad regime while shielding actors with influence in the new political order from accountability, thereby replicating rather than dismantling the culture of impunity.[21] Without a clear, rights-based framework and genuine participation from victims and survivors, the TJC risks becoming a symbolic gesture rather than a transformative institution.[20]

Beyond Human Rights: Expanding Transitional Justice to Address Environmental Harms

A core deficiency in the current conception of the TJC is its adherence to a traditional, anthropocentric framework for justice. Such frameworks, which dominate international law, tend to reduce the natural world to a mere resource for human exploitation or a backdrop for human suffering, failing to recognize harms perpetrated against nature itself.[22] This is a profound misreading of the Syrian conflict.

A TJ process that investigates torture and disappearances but ignores the systematic pre-war mismanagement of water, the deliberate wartime targeting of irrigation infrastructure, the pollution from destroyed industrial sites, and the illicit war economy of deforestation fails to address the conflict's root causes.[1] For the farmers whose livelihoods were destroyed by unsustainable agricultural policies, for the communities poisoned by contaminated water, and for the pastoralists whose grazing lands turned to dust, environmental destruction was not a side effect of the war, it was the war. To deny these grievances a central place in the national reckoning is to deny justice to a vast portion of the Syrian population.

International Precedents: Lessons from Colombia and Iraq

Syria does not need to invent a framework for environmental justice from scratch. Two key international precedents offer powerful, albeit different, models for how to integrate environmental harms into a post-conflict accountability process.

Colombia's Special Jurisdiction for Peace (JEP) provides a judicial and truth-telling model. Established after the 2016 peace agreement, the JEP has progressively expanded its scope to include environmental crimes. In a groundbreaking move, it has recognized natural entities, such as the River Cauca, as victims of the conflict, acknowledging that the river was used as a mass grave and systematically polluted with mercury from illegal mining linked to the war economy.[23] The JEP's "Macro-Case 05" investigates crimes against indigenous peoples and their territories, explicitly linking forced displacement to the destruction of their sacred natural environment.[24] It has brought charges against former FARC commanders for war crimes related to environmental destruction, including promoting illegal mining and coca cultivation, which it identified as the "economic motor of violence".[26] While the JEP faces challenges, including internal judicial debates and criticism of its Western-centric framing of nature, it establishes a vital precedent for treating environmental destruction as a core crime within a transitional justice framework.[25]

Iraq's UN Compensation Commission (UNCC) offers a financial and reparations-based model. Established by the UN Security Council after the 1990-91 Gulf War, the UNCC was mandated to process claims and pay compensation for losses and damage from Iraq's invasion of Kuwait.[29] Critically, this included a specific category of claims, "F4," for environmental damage. This mechanism processed 170 claims from 12 governments, ultimately awarding over $5.2 billion for projects aimed at environmental remediation and restoration.[29] The UNCC demonstrates the viability of a large-scale, claims-based system for assigning financial value to environmental harm and funding its cleanup, setting a powerful precedent for environmental reparations under international law.

Environmental Accountability: Mechanisms for Redress and Non-Repetition

Achieving environmental accountability in Syria requires a multi-faceted approach that moves beyond abstract principles to establish concrete mechanisms for documenting harm, providing reparations, and ensuring non-repetition through institutional reform. A hybrid model, drawing lessons from both the judicial focus of Colombia's JEP and the financial focus of Iraq's UNCC, offers the most promising path forward. Such an approach would validate the suffering of victims, fund the cleanup of a poisoned landscape, and build the governance structures needed to prevent a recurrence of the environmental failures that led to the polycrisis.

Documenting the "Ecocide": The Role of a UN-led Post-Conflict Environmental Assessment

The foundational step toward any form of accountability is the establishment of a comprehensive, impartial, and scientifically rigorous evidence base. This report recommends the immediate commissioning of a UN-led Post-Conflict Environmental Assessment (PCEA) for Syria, conducted under the auspices of the UN Environment Programme (UNEP), which has well-established methodologies for such undertakings.[30]

This assessment would move beyond anecdotal reports to systematically map and quantify the full spectrum of environmental damage. Its scope should include:

- **The Toxic Legacy of War:** Field sampling and analysis to identify and map "hotspots" of contamination from munitions (e.g., heavy metals like lead and arsenic) and destroyed industrial and oil facilities.[1]

- **The Water Crisis:** A nationwide audit of damage to water infrastructure, coupled with hydrological studies to assess the depletion of critical groundwater aquifers.[1]
- **The Waste Crisis:** Quantification of the volume and composition of unmanaged solid waste and hazardous conflict debris, particularly in and around urban centres and displacement camps.[4]
- **Deforestation and Land Degradation:** Using satellite imagery and ground-truthing to create a definitive map of forest loss and areas at high risk of desertification.[1]

The PCEA would serve as the undisputed evidentiary foundation for all subsequent justice, reparations, and reconstruction efforts, providing the data needed to prioritize cleanup activities and calculate the costs of remediation.

Reparations for Environmental Damage: Legal Frameworks and Models

Building on the precedent of the UNCC, Syria should establish a national **Environmental Remediation and Compensation Fund**. This fund would serve as the primary mechanism for financing the cleanup of environmental damage and compensating communities that have suffered collective harm, such as the loss of agricultural land or contaminated water sources.

The legal basis for such a fund is well-established. International law holds that a state responsible for an internationally wrongful act has a duty to make reparation, which includes compensation for any financially assessable damage.[31] Potential funding sources for a Syrian fund are significant and could include:

- **Seized Assets:** The frozen assets of the former Assad regime and its cronies, estimated to be worth at least $2 billion, represent a primary and just source of initial capitalisation.[33]
- **International Contributions:** Donor governments and multilateral institutions should contribute to the fund as part of their broader reconstruction support.
- **Future Levies:** A small levy on future extractive industry revenues (e.g., oil, gas, phosphates) could provide a sustainable long-term revenue stream for the fund.

Foundational Institutional Reform for Environmental Governance

Accountability is incomplete without ensuring non-repetition. This requires a radical overhaul of Syria's failed environmental governance framework. While Syrian human rights organisations like the Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR) have rightly focused on reforming the security and judicial sectors, environmental governance has been a critical blind spot.[34]

A future Syrian government must move beyond the toothless pre-conflict laws, such as the Environment Law of 2012, which proved utterly incapable of preventing the country's ecological collapse.[35] This report recommends the establishment of a new, politically independent, and fully empowered

National Environmental Protection and Regulatory Agency. This agency must be given the mandate, technical capacity, and enforcement power to:

- Oversee and enforce all environmental laws, including a new Green Building Code.
- Conduct mandatory Environmental Impact Assessments (EIAs) for all major infrastructure and industrial projects.
- Manage a national network of protected areas.
- Regulate the use of water resources in coordination with agricultural and energy ministries.

The following table outlines a practical framework for applying these accountability mechanisms to specific environmental harms in Syria.

Table 2: Transitional Justice Mechanisms for Environmental Crimes in Syria

Type of Environmental Harm	**Applicable TJ Mechanism**	**Key Objective**	**Syrian Context / International Precedent**
Systemic Water Mismanagement (Pre-Conflict)	Truth Commission (within TJC)	Establish historical record of failed policies (e.g., diesel subsidies, unsustainable crop choices) that created vulnerability.	Investigate Assad-era agricultural and water policies that led to groundwater collapse. Precedent: Colombia's JEP investigating systemic causes of conflict.[28]
Weaponisation of Water (Conflict-Era)	Criminal Prosecution; Reparations	Hold individuals accountable for deliberate targeting of water infrastructure; compensate affected communities.	Prosecute commanders who ordered destruction of irrigation canals or dams. Precedent: JEP charging FARC for war crimes.[27]
Toxic Remnants of War & Industrial Pollution	Environmental Reparations Fund	Finance the assessment and cleanup of contaminated sites ("hotspots") to protect public health.	Fund cleanup of oil spills from Baniyas and contamination around destroyed industrial sites in Aleppo/Homs. Precedent: Iraq's UNCC F4 Claims.[29]
Deforestation & Illicit Resource Extraction	Truth Commission; Institutional Reform	Expose the war economy dynamics and actors behind illegal logging; establish new forest management laws.	Investigate the role of armed groups and corrupt officials in deforestation for profit. Precedent: JEP investigating illegal mining as FARC's economic engine.[26]
Collapse of Waste Management Services	Institutional Reform; Reparations	Rebuild municipal capacity for waste management; fund cleanup of legacy dumpsites.	Finance community-based waste management projects and remediation of informal landfills near IDP camps. Precedent: Post-conflict institutional building (UN frameworks).[36]

Part III: Pathways to a Resilient and Just Reconstruction

The Energy and Resource Nexus

Syria's recovery is contingent upon a fundamental paradigm shift in how it manages its two most critical and contested resources: energy and water. The 20th-century models of development, one based on financing the state through fossil fuel extraction, the other on asserting dominance through upstream control of rivers, are not only obsolete in the face-of 21st-century climate and market realities, but are direct pathways to future conflict and collapse. The widespread destruction of Syria's infrastructure, while tragic, presents a unique, albeit painful, opportunity to leapfrog these failed models. Instead of rebuilding a centralised, polluting energy system and a conflict-ridden water management apparatus, Syria can invest in a decentralised, decarbonised, and cooperative resource future.

The Stranded Asset Risk: Navigating the End of the Fossil Fuel Era

A cornerstone of traditional post-conflict reconstruction planning is the leveraging of natural resource wealth to finance recovery. For Syria, with its history of oil production (383,000 barrels per day in 2010 before the conflict), this would mean rehabilitating its damaged oil and gas fields to generate state revenue.[37] However, this strategy is now fraught with extreme peril. In a global economy rapidly transitioning away from fossil fuels to meet climate targets, Syria's undeveloped hydrocarbon reserves are at high risk of becoming "stranded assets", investments that become worthless before the end of their economic life.[1]

This risk is not abstract. Global efforts to limit warming to the Paris Agreement targets require that a vast portion of existing fossil fuel reserves remain in the ground.[39] For a country like Syria, whose state budget has been historically dependent on oil revenues, basing a multi-decade reconstruction plan on a declining and volatile commodity is fiscally irresponsible.[1] It risks channelling billions in precious reconstruction capital into infrastructure that will be obsolete long before it has paid for itself, leaving the state with massive liabilities and no engine for growth. The potential for a sudden repricing of these assets could destabilise not only the companies involved but also the nation's sovereign credit, perpetuating economic fragility.[40]

The Water Impasse: Environmental Peacebuilding and Transboundary Cooperation

The second critical resource challenge lies in the transboundary waters of the Tigris-Euphrates basin. As detailed earlier, Turkey's upstream dams have turned water into a potent geopolitical tool, leaving downstream Syria and Iraq in a state of chronic water stress.[5] This dynamic, where water is treated as a national property to be controlled rather than a shared resource to be managed, is a recipe for permanent regional instability, especially as climate change further reduces overall water availability.

Technical solutions alone, such as more efficient irrigation or new desalination plants, are insufficient to resolve a fundamentally political problem. The path forward lies in **Environmental Peacebuilding**, a concept that seeks to transform conflicts over shared natural resources into opportunities for cooperation, confidence-building, and joint benefit.[41] Instead of viewing the Euphrates as a source of zero-sum competition, it can be reframed as a shared interest requiring joint management for the mutual survival of all riparian states.

International precedents show this is possible. Despite a lack of formal diplomatic relations, Turkey and Armenia have continued to adhere to Soviet-era treaties to equitably share the waters of the Arpacay River.[43] The Mekong Committee provided a vital forum for dialogue on water management in Southeast Asia even during periods of intense regional hostility.[43] Syria must pivot from a reactive to a proactive diplomatic stance. This entails moving beyond the current state of ad-hoc, temporary agreements with its neighbours and pursuing a robust, multilateral diplomatic process aimed at negotiating a permanent, legally binding, and climate-adaptive water-sharing treaty for the entire Tigris-Euphrates basin. This process should involve third-party mediation and technical support from neutral actors like the United Nations or the European Union to ensure an equitable and sustainable outcome.[1]

Building Back Greener: A Framework for Sustainable Reconstruction

The sheer scale of destruction in Syria, with reconstruction costs estimated at $250-$400 billion, represents a monumental challenge.[37] However, it also presents a once-in-a-century opportunity. This vast investment will lock in the country's development trajectory for the next 50 years. A "brown" reconstruction, based on the inefficient, polluting, and vulnerable technologies of the past, would mean spending billions to rebuild the very system that failed, effectively financing a future crisis. A "green" reconstruction, in contrast, is not a matter of aesthetics or ideology; it is the most

fiscally prudent and security-conscious path to building a resilient and prosperous state.

The Economic Case for Green Reconstruction: A Cost-Benefit Analysis

A common objection to green reconstruction in fragile contexts is its perceived high cost. This argument is dangerously short-sighted. While the upfront capital expenditure for green infrastructure can be modestly higher, a 2012 study suggests up to 8% more than for conventional projects, this is more than offset by long-term gains.[45] A comprehensive cost-benefit analysis reveals that green approaches consistently deliver superior economic, social, and environmental returns over the lifecycle of the asset.[46]

These benefits include:

- **Reduced Operational Costs:** Green buildings and infrastructure dramatically lower lifelong energy and water bills, freeing up capital for households, businesses, and the government.
- **Enhanced Resilience and Security:** Decentralised renewable energy grids are less vulnerable to single points of failure than centralised power plants. Water-efficient agriculture and rainwater harvesting reduce vulnerability to drought and geopolitical water pressure.
- **Public Health Co-Benefits:** Green infrastructure reduces air and water pollution, leading to lower rates of respiratory and waterborne diseases and reduced strain on a fragile healthcare system.
- **Job Creation:** The construction and maintenance of green infrastructure, from renewable energy installations to reforestation projects, can be a significant source of local employment.
- **Increased Asset Value:** Green buildings command higher rental and resale values and improve the quality of life for their occupants.[46]

Case studies demonstrate these returns vividly. An analysis of urban forestry programs in several US cities found that for every dollar invested in tree planting and maintenance, the annual benefits in terms of stormwater management, energy savings, and air quality ranged from $1.37 to $3.09.[46] For Syria, the choice is not between a "cheap" reconstruction and an "expensive" green one, but between a sustainable investment and a costly, failed one.

A Blueprint for Action: A Syrian Green Building Code and Climate-Smart Agriculture

To translate the principle of green reconstruction into practice, Syria needs a robust regulatory framework and targeted sectoral strategies.

A **Syrian Green Building Code** should be developed and made mandatory for all new construction and major renovations. This code should not be created in a vacuum but should draw on best practices from comprehensive regulations like those in Dubai and policy guidelines from countries like Pakistan, adapting them to Syria's specific context.[49] Key mandatory provisions should include:

- **High-Performance Building Envelopes:** Strict requirements for thermal insulation, high-performance glazing, and passive solar design, tailored to Syria's diverse climate zones (coastal, arid, mountain) to minimize heating and cooling loads.[49]
- **Water Efficiency:** Mandatory installation of low-flow fixtures, dual-flush toilets, and water-efficient appliances. For larger buildings, condensate recovery for reuse in irrigation or toilet flushing should be required.[49]
- **On-Site Renewable Energy:** A mandate for solar water heating systems on all new residential buildings, a proven and highly effective technology for the region.[49]
- **Sustainable Materials:** Prioritizing the use of locally sourced, low-carbon, and recycled materials, and integrating principles from traditional Syrian architecture, which evolved over centuries to be climate-responsive.[49]

Syria's **agricultural sector** must be rebuilt on a foundation of climate resilience. This requires a decisive break from the failed policies of the past. A strategy for **Climate-Smart Agriculture** should include:

- **Ending Harmful Subsidies:** Immediately and permanently phasing out the pre-war subsidies for diesel fuel and water-intensive crops like cotton and wheat in arid regions, which incentivised the catastrophic depletion of groundwater.[1]
- **Deploying Drought-Tolerant Crops:** Launching a nationwide program, in partnership with organisations like the International Centre for Agricultural Research in the Dry Areas (ICARDA), to distribute and promote drought-tolerant crop varieties. Strains like 'Jabal' and 'Nachit' durum wheat and various barley

varieties have been specifically developed from wild Syrian relatives and have proven highly resilient and productive in similar dryland conditions in the region.[53]

- **Modernising Irrigation:** Investing reconstruction funds in the large-scale rehabilitation of irrigation networks, with a focus on shifting from inefficient flood irrigation to water-saving technologies like drip and subsoil systems. Critically, this must be paired with strict new regulations on groundwater extraction to ensure that the "free" energy from new solar-powered pumps does not lead to an even faster depletion of aquifers.[1]

Table 3: Cost-Benefit Analysis: Green vs. Traditional Reconstruction of a City's Electricity Grid

Metric	Scenario A: Traditional (Centralised Gas-Fired Plant)	Scenario B: Green (Decentralised Solar + Storage)	Analysis & Implications for Syria
Upfront Capital Cost (CAPEX)	Moderate to High	High	While solar may have higher initial costs, these are falling rapidly. Gas plants require extensive pipeline infrastructure, which is also costly to rebuild.[45]
Lifecycle Operational Cost (OPEX)	High & Volatile	Very Low	Gas plants have significant ongoing fuel and maintenance costs. Solar has near-zero fuel cost, providing long-term price stability for consumers and the state.[46]
Fuel Security & Price Volatility	Very Low (Dependent on imports or domestic production)	Very High (Domestic resource)	A gas-based system perpetuates Syria's vulnerability to global energy price shocks and reliance on imports or politically contested domestic fields.[57] Solar provides true energy independence.
Water Consumption	High (for cooling)	Very Low	In a water-scarce country like Syria, the high water consumption

			of thermal power plants is a major hidden cost and liability.[49]
Local Air Pollution & Health Costs	High	None	Gas plants contribute to local air pollution and associated public health costs. Solar power eliminates this burden on a fragile health system.[50]
Grid Resilience	Low (Centralised single point of failure)	High (Decentralised and modular)	A centralised plant is a strategic vulnerability. A decentralised grid is more resilient to localised damage or disruption, a key lesson from the conflict.[1]
Job Creation	Moderate (Concentrated)	High (Distributed)	Solar installation and maintenance are labour-intensive and create distributed jobs across the country, supporting broader economic recovery.[45]

Financing the Future: Overcoming Sanctions and Mobilising Capital

Mobilising the hundreds of billions of dollars required for Syria's reconstruction is a monumental task, made more complex by the legacy of international sanctions. However, the recent political transition and subsequent easing of some restrictions have created a critical window to design a financing architecture that can support a green and just recovery. This requires a proactive strategy to fully lift the "chilling effect" of remaining sanctions and a blended finance approach that strategically layers grants, climate funds, and de-risked private capital. The international community's role is pivotal; by setting clear green conditionalities on its financing, it can steer the entire reconstruction process toward a sustainable path.

Navigating the Sanctions Maze: Leveraging the Easing of US/EU Restrictions

Following the political transition in late 2024, both the United States and the European Union have taken significant steps to ease the comprehensive economic sanctions that had isolated Syria.[58] In May and June 2025, both jurisdictions lifted broad restrictions targeting Syria's energy sector, including prohibitions on investment in oil, gas, and

electricity production, and its financial sector.[60] Key state-owned entities like the Central Bank of Syria and the Syrian Petroleum Company were de-listed.[61]

While these actions are a necessary precondition for recovery, they are not sufficient. A significant "chilling effect" persists among international banks and companies, who remain wary of residual risks and the complexity of compliance.[1] To overcome this, sanctioning bodies must move from passive easing to proactive facilitation. This report recommends the issuance of clear, broad, and permanent general licenses for all transactions related to humanitarian aid, climate adaptation, renewable energy development, water infrastructure, and environmental remediation. This should be accompanied by explicit public guidance to financial institutions to de-risk legitimate investment and reduce uncertainty.[58]

This easing of sanctions is a double-edged sword. While it opens the door for investment in renewable energy, it also clears the path for investment in rehabilitating Syria's old fossil fuel infrastructure. Without a strong national green strategy and clear donor conditionalities, capital may flow to the path of least resistance, locking Syria into a high-carbon, high-risk future.

A Blended Finance Strategy for Syria's Green Recovery

No single source can meet Syria's immense financing needs. A sequenced, multi-layered strategy is required to build momentum and attract capital at scale.

- **Phase 1: Immediate Grant-Based and Concessional Financing.** The immediate priority is to utilise grants and highly concessional loans for foundational activities. This includes deploying funds like the **World Bank's US$146 million grant** from the International Development Association (IDA) for emergency electricity sector rehabilitation.[64] This project, which aims to repair transmission lines and build institutional capacity, should be explicitly oriented towards creating a grid that is ready for renewable energy integration. Other mechanisms like the World Bank's Post-Conflict Fund and UN-managed pooled funds can provide rapid, flexible funding for critical early-stage projects, such as the UN-led PCEA and community-based pilot projects for waste management or reforestation.[65]

- **Phase 2: Accessing Dedicated Climate Finance.** As a signatory to the Paris Agreement, Syria is eligible for support from global climate funds. The government should immediately work with an accredited entity to activate its **Country Programme with the Green Climate Fund (GCF)**.[67] The GCF is designed to finance large-scale adaptation and mitigation projects that align with a country's

national priorities. A Syrian proposal focused on a nationwide program for climate-smart agriculture or the development of utility-scale solar power would be a strong candidate for GCF support.

- **Phase 3: Mobilising Private Capital through De-risking.** The ultimate goal is to mobilise private sector investment, which will constitute the bulk of reconstruction finance. Given the high-risk environment, this will not happen without public sector intervention. Multilateral Development Banks (MDBs) like the World Bank and the European Investment Bank must play a crucial de-risking role. This can be achieved through a **blended finance** approach, using public funds to mitigate risks for private investors. Key instruments include:
    - **Loan Guarantees:** Public guarantees can cover political or commercial risks, making projects bankable.
    - **First-Loss Provisions:** Public funds can absorb the initial losses of a project, protecting private investors and encouraging them to enter the market.
    - **Scalable Frameworks:** Syria could adopt a model similar to that used by the World Bank in Lebanon, which established a $1 billion scalable framework for infrastructure. An initial public investment created a unified structure capable of efficiently absorbing additional financing from various sources over time.[68]

Crucially, all financing from MDBs and donor governments must come with strict **green conditionalities**. Support should be explicitly tied to adherence to the Syrian Green Building Code and alignment with a national green reconstruction framework. This ensures that public funds are not used to subsidize unsustainable, high-carbon investments, and it uses the leverage of public finance to steer private capital towards resilient outcomes.

Integrated Strategic Recommendations

To navigate the complexities of Syria's polycrisis and pivot towards a sustainable future, a series of integrated, actionable, and coordinated steps must be taken by both Syrian and international stakeholders. The following recommendations synthesize the analysis of this report into a strategic roadmap.

For the Syrian Transitional Government

Establish the Primacy of Environmental Justice: Immediately expand the mandate of the newly formed Transitional Justice Commission to explicitly include the investigation of environmental crimes and systemic pre-conflict environmental mismanagement. This action is critical for validating the grievances of marginalised communities and addressing a root cause of the conflict.

Create an Objective Evidence Base: Formally request UN leadership for a comprehensive Post-Conflict Environmental Assessment (PCEA). The findings of this assessment must be made public and serve as the official baseline for all future remediation, compensation, and reconstruction planning.

Mandate Green Reconstruction: Develop and legislatively adopt a national Green Reconstruction Framework, which includes a mandatory Syrian Green Building Code. This framework must become the non-negotiable standard for all public and private reconstruction projects, ensuring that all new infrastructure contributes to climate resilience and resource efficiency.

Launch Proactive Water Diplomacy: Establish a high-level diplomatic task force to engage with Turkey and Iraq on negotiating a permanent, legally binding, and climate-adaptive multilateral treaty for the management of the Tigris-Euphrates basin.

For International Donors and Multilateral Development Banks (World Bank, IMF, EIB)

Enforce Green Conditionalities: Condition all reconstruction financing, including grants, concessional loans, and private sector de-risking instruments, on strict adherence to Syria's national Green Reconstruction Framework and internationally recognized Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) standards. This is the single most powerful lever to ensure a sustainable recovery.

De-risk and Incentivise Green Investment: Actively deploy blended finance mechanisms (e.g., loan guarantees, first-loss capital) to reduce the perceived risk for responsible private sector actors investing in renewable energy, water-efficient agriculture, and green infrastructure.

Shift from Relief to Resilience: Systematically pivot funding priorities from short-term humanitarian relief to long-term resilience-building programs. This means investing in projects that address the root drivers of the crisis at the water-energy-food nexus,

such as rehabilitating irrigation for climate-smart agriculture and supporting community-based natural resource management.

For Sanctioning Bodies (United States, European Union, United Kingdom)

Eliminate the "Chilling Effect": Move beyond passive sanctions easing to proactive facilitation. Issue clear, broad, and permanent licenses and public guidance for all activities and financial transactions related to climate adaptation, renewable energy, water infrastructure, environmental remediation, and humanitarian and development work. This is essential to unlock investment and aid flows.

For UN Agencies (UNEP, UNDP, FAO, OCHA)

1. **Lead Technical Assistance for Environmental Governance:** UNEP should take the lead in conducting the PCEA and provide sustained technical assistance to the Syrian government in establishing a new, effective environmental regulatory agency.

2. **Scale Up Climate-Smart Agriculture:** The FAO and WFP should massively scale up programs to support the transition to climate-smart agriculture, focusing on the widespread distribution of drought-tolerant seed varieties and the deployment of water-efficient irrigation technologies.

3. **Facilitate Environmental Peacebuilding:** UNDP and the UN Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs should offer their expertise to facilitate environmental peacebuilding dialogues, particularly around the management of transboundary water resources.

The following table provides a more detailed, actor-oriented matrix to operationalise these strategic recommendations.

Table 4: Actor-Oriented Recommendation Matrix for a Green and Just Recovery in Syria

Strategic Priority	Specific Action	Lead Actor(s)	Supporting Actor(s)	Funding Mechanism	Key Performance Indicator (KPI)
Ensure Environmental Justice	Expand TJC mandate to include environmental crimes.	Syrian Transitional Government (Ministry of Justice)	Syrian Civil Society, UNEP	National Budget, Donor Grants	TJC mandate officially amended; first environmental case opened.
	Establish an Environmental Reparations Fund.	Syrian Ministry of Finance	World Bank, UNDP	Seized Assets, Donor Contributions	Fund capitalised with initial $500M; first remediation project funded.
Decarbonise the Energy Sector	Mandate solar water heaters in new residential buildings via Green Building Code.	Syrian Ministry of Public Works & Housing	Municipalities, Private Sector Developers	Private Investment	100% of new residential permits include compliant solar water heating.
	Develop utility-scale solar projects.	Syrian Ministry of Energy	World Bank, Private Investors	Blended Finance (IDA Grants, GCF, Private Capital)	500 MW of new solar capacity commissioned by 2030.
Build a Resilient Agri-Food System	Distribute drought-tolerant seed packages.	Syrian Ministry of Agriculture, FAO	ICARDA, Local Farming Cooperatives	FAO/WFP Programs, GCF Adaptation Fund	500,000 farming households receive resilient seed packages.
	Rehabilitate irrigation with	Local Water User Associations	FAO, UNDP, Local Councils	World Bank/IDA Grants	100,000 hectares of farmland

	water-saving tech.				converted to efficient irrigation.
Unlock Green Finance	Issue permanent general license for green tech/finance.	US Treasury (OFAC), European Council	N/A	N/A	Public guidance issued; >10 international banks confirm readiness to finance green projects.
Strengthen Environmental Governance	Conduct UN-led Post-Conflict Environmental Assessment.	UNEP	Syrian Government, Local NGOs	UN Pooled Funds, Donor Grants	PCEA report published and adopted as official baseline by government.
	Establish an independent National Environmental Protection Agency.	Syrian Parliament / Transitional Authority	UNDP, UNEP	National Budget, Technical Assistance Grants	Agency legally established with enforcement powers and budget.

Part IV: Strategic Outlook

Future Scenarios: Stalemate, Fragmentation, or Sustainable Peace

The path forward for Syria is not predetermined. The country stands at a critical juncture where its political trajectory will define its environmental future, and vice versa. The following scenarios, updated from the original report, explore the potential pathways and their profound implications when viewed through the integrated lens of green reconstruction and environmental justice.[1]

- **Scenario A: Protracted Stalemate and Systemic Decay.** In this scenario, the current state of fragmented governance and low-intensity conflict persists. A comprehensive political settlement remains elusive, and the transitional government fails to establish nationwide legitimacy or control. In this power vacuum, environmental degradation accelerates catastrophically. Unregulated resource extraction continues, with armed groups and local power brokers controlling illicit economies in logging, quarrying, and water diversion. The chaotic, unregulated transition to solar power deepens the groundwater and toxic waste crises. International assistance remains confined to short-term, life-saving humanitarian aid, with no political space or security for long-term resilience projects. Transitional justice stalls completely, becoming a tool for factional retribution rather than national reconciliation. Syria remains a "black hole" for climate resilience, its vulnerability deepening with each passing season, making it a permanent source of regional instability and human suffering.

- **Scenario B: Fragmented Reconstruction and Deepening Inequality.** This scenario envisions a "cold peace," where different regions, controlled by various authorities, begin to rebuild independently, often with the backing of external patrons with competing interests. This leads to a patchwork of "brown" and "green" development. A coastal region backed by European investment might see the development of green infrastructure and tourism, while an interior region backed by a petro-state might double down on rehabilitating old oil fields and power plants. This would create stark "environmental inequalities," where access to clean water, air, and reliable energy becomes a function of geography and political alignment. New conflicts could erupt over shared resources, particularly water, as development in one zone negatively impacts another. Transitional justice in this context would be highly politicized and selective, addressing only the crimes of a

defeated enemy while ignoring those of current allies, thereby entrenching grievances and undermining any chance of national cohesion.

- **Scenario C: Comprehensive Settlement and Integrated Recovery.** This is the most optimistic, and most challenging, scenario. It follows a durable and inclusive political settlement that establishes a legitimate national government. This unified governance structure allows for a nationwide, internationally supported reconstruction effort. This is the only scenario that provides a genuine opportunity for a "green reconstruction" at scale, guided by a national framework and a Syrian Green Building Code. It allows for the implementation of a credible, comprehensive transitional justice process that addresses the full spectrum of harms, including environmental crimes, laying the foundation for true reconciliation. However, this path is fraught with immense challenges, including the risk of elite capture of reconstruction funds, the sheer cost of remediating the toxic legacy of war, and the difficulty of building institutional capacity from the ground up.

These scenarios underscore a critical reality: while the technical and financial solutions for a green and just recovery exist, the ultimate determinant of Syria's environmental future will be its political future.

Conclusion: From Polycrisis to Integrated Recovery

The Syrian polycrisis stands as a devastating and cautionary tale for the 21st century. It is a stark illustration of a self-reinforcing cycle of collapse, where climate change, authoritarian failure, violent conflict, and economic ruin have fused into a single, systemic crisis. The analysis in this report demonstrates that these elements are not merely correlated; they are causally intertwined in a feedback loop where environmental degradation acts as both a catalyst for conflict and a profound barrier to peace. The path to stability is therefore inseparable from the restoration of Syria's environment and the pursuit of justice for all harms, including the deep ecological wounds inflicted upon the nation and its people.

In the midst of this devastation, a theoretical opportunity exists to "build back better", to leapfrog the failed, polluting, and inequitable models of the past and construct a modern, resilient, and sustainable society. However, this report must conclude with a sober and realistic assessment: this opportunity, for now, remains almost entirely theoretical. Its realisation is contingent upon a series of monumental and interconnected shifts that are far from guaranteed.

A green and just reconstruction is impossible without a stable, inclusive, and durable political settlement that ends the conflict and establishes a legitimate government with the capacity to act in the national interest. It is impossible without a resolution to the international sanctions regime that currently isolates Syria from the global economy, technology, and finance needed for recovery. It is impossible without the painstaking process of rebuilding functional state institutions, re-establishing the rule of law, and creating the capacity for effective and transparent governance. And it is impossible without securing and judiciously managing the tens of billions of dollars in international investment required for the task.

The international community holds immense leverage. By shifting from siloed, short-term humanitarian interventions to an integrated, long-term strategy that places environmental justice and green conditionality at the heart of its engagement, it can help steer Syria toward a more hopeful future. But this requires a paradigm shift in policy and a level of political courage and coordination that has so far been absent.

Without a concerted, integrated, and politically brave effort from both Syrian and international actors to address the polycrisis in its entirety, any discussion of "green reconstruction" will remain an elusive dream. The far more probable path is a continuation of the current downward spiral, where a degraded environment and a changing climate continue to fuel fragility, poverty, and conflict for generations to come. The choice is stark, and the window to act is closing.

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