

What role does civil society play in confronting settlements with the Assad regime's oligarchs?



They were not merely businessmen standing on the sidelines of the scene. Some of them formed a key economic lifeline for the Assad regime and helped sustain it throughout the war years. Names such as Naim al-Jarrah, Khaled Qaddour, Yassar Ibrahim, Hossam Qaterji, Waseem Qattan, and Khodr Ali Taher are only examples from a longer list of economic actors whose interests were tied to the structure of power and whose activities intersected with paths of violence and war profiteering.

In many cases, those who wore suits and ties were no less consequential than those who carried weapons, as their roles were linked to financing networks, facilitating sanctions evasion, and reinforcing an economy built on abuses, including displacement and looting.

The financial settlements concluded with some of them through the Illicit Gains Committee have raised fundamental questions about the limits of accountability. Do these settlements mean closing this complex file and settling for recovering

part of the money? Or do they remain a partial measure that does not touch the core responsibilities tied to what took place?

Recovered bags of money do not mean closing the old ledgers. That is the wager Syrian civil society is making today. In the face of what is being described as attempts to reduce justice with Assad's oligarchy to "silent administrative decisions," the battle now centers on one goal: ensuring that recovering money from these figures goes no further than being a financial measure within the path of transitional justice, rather than a substitute for it or an end to it.

Do economic settlements extinguish the public right, or open the door to broader accountability?

Broad questions emerged alongside a wave of anger that swept social media following successive reports of settlements with businessmen whose names had been linked to the former regime, as many expressed shock at the return of these figures to the spotlight.

The wave of anger did not come all at once, but escalated gradually as settlements were announced one after another. The process began in early 2026 with the emergence of the name Mohammad Hamsho, who announced on his official page that a settlement had been reached under what became known as the "voluntary disclosure" program, in a step seen as an initial test of this approach.

As the months passed, the scope of the measures expanded to include clearer implementation stages, most notably in April 2026, when it was announced that the state had taken possession of assets belonging to both Waseem Qattan and Naim al-Jarrah after similar settlements.

Between those two milestones, expectations grew that the process would include other names tied to the war economy, making each new announcement read not as an isolated financial measure, but as part of a broader trajectory raising accumulating questions about its limits and aims.

By contrast, the Illicit Gains Committee has been keen on more than one occasion to stress that the path of "voluntary disclosure" does not cancel the judicial track, but rather runs in parallel with it, with the aim of shortening litigation time and easing the burden on the courts without affecting the essence of the legal process.

The committee explained that its role is limited to addressing the financial aspect and recovering funds, noting that it continues to prepare reports and refer files that do not meet disclosure requirements to the competent authorities in preparation for a later stage of judicial follow-up. It also stressed that criminal

and penal accountability, including serious crimes and grave violations, falls within the jurisdiction of the judiciary and transitional justice and civil peace bodies, and does not fall within its powers.

Accordingly, these statements affirm that economic settlements do not extinguish the public right, nor do they cancel or restrict any other path of justice, whether through public or personal prosecution or within transitional justice frameworks, which in principle keeps the door to accountability open.

Yet this clarification opens a deeper problem, as these assurances reveal a clear gap between the legal text and practical implementation. The public right does not automatically turn into tangible measures unless there is pressure to activate it, which raises again the question of whether these settlements represent the end of open files or the beginning of a broader and more serious accountability process.

Who drives justice outside traditional state channels?

A large part of the public debate still places sole responsibility for producing justice on the “state,” a view that reduces justice to a political or administrative decision issued from above. Yet transitional justice experiences show that rights are not granted, but won through continuous societal pressure that prevents files from being closed under the label of “economic necessities.”

Here, the role of civil society emerges as a “guardian of the public right.” Its role goes beyond passive documentation to creating a state of popular oversight that makes the political and social cost of “impunity” extremely high. Accountability here is not merely a legal procedure, but a process of reclaiming the public sphere and ensuring that the authorities do not alone determine the scale of harm or the price of settlement away from the eyes of victims and the original rights holders.

This role becomes even more important in files such as economic settlements, because treating them as merely a financial measure means losing the opportunity to understand something deeper: how fortunes were formed, where money intersected with violence, and who benefited from the war years.

That is why civil society’s mobilization around these files becomes necessary to prevent justice from being reduced to silent administrative decisions, by insisting that recovering funds is merely an initial procedural step that does not absolve anyone of criminal or moral responsibility.

In this sense, civil society does not compete with the judiciary; it supports it, pressures it toward action, and prevents justice from being turned into nothing more than partial financial deals.

A rights-based reading of the settlement process and the role of civil society

In an interview with Noon Post, Fadel Abdul Ghani al-Shaqfa, a prominent rights activist, researcher in international law, and founder and director of the Syrian Network for Human Rights, offered a detailed reading of the role of civil society in economic accountability files, the limits of the ongoing settlements with businessmen linked to the former regime, and the possibilities of integrating them into the transitional justice process.

In answering the first question about the practical role civil society can play in this file, he noted that “the primary role civil society can undertake is not direct judicial prosecution, as that authority remains the exclusive domain of the competent judicial bodies, but rather building documentary files that can be used before the courts.”

He explained that the methodology of work at the Syrian Network for Human Rights is based on verification from multiple independent sources before establishing any incident, and on building files according to standards that can be used in UN reports and international criminal courts.

He added that these files, when it comes to businessmen, are not limited to financial aspects, but extend to documenting involvement in financing or facilitating repression, “which in some cases rises to the level of criminal responsibility under international criminal law.” He also noted that civil society is capable of filing complaints with UN special rapporteurs, treaty bodies, and states concerned with sanctions, in addition to activating the principle of universal jurisdiction, as has previously been applied in cases involving military and security officials.

As for the ongoing economic settlements through the Illicit Gains Committee, al-Shaqfa explained that the problem does not lie in the principle of voluntary disclosure itself, but in the scope of its application, saying that the problem is that “if it is limited to the financial aspect without the criminal and informational aspects, it turns into a tool for closing files rather than opening them.”

He said the required framework should rest on three elements:

First, requiring full disclosure of the sources of wealth and networks of relationships as a condition for completing any settlement.

Second, tying the settlement to a legal commitment to provide information about broader networks, including sanctions evasion and money laundering.

Third, allocating part of the recovered funds to victim compensation funds under transparent mechanisms in which civil society organizations participate.

He stressed that “when settlements are built in this way, money is transformed

from an alternative to justice into a gateway toward it.”

The economy at the heart of transitional justice

In discussing the future of accountability in Syria, the pursuit of businessmen intersects with broader questions related to the essence and limits of transitional justice. The issue does not stop at recovering funds or financial settlements, but extends to dismantling the structures that allowed corruption to accumulate and intertwine with power and the economy.

In this context, al-Shaqfa explained that “guarantees of non-recurrence, one of the four pillars of transitional justice alongside truth, accountability, and reparation, are not achieved through criminal prosecution alone, even if it is necessary. Criminal prosecution of businessmen involved in supporting violations produces a real deterrent effect only when accompanied by structural reform of the system that enabled that involvement in the first place namely legislative reform of the business sector, ending the monopolies of the former regime, and severing the link between capital and the security services.”

He adds that what the Syrian Network for Human Rights has documented shows that some businessmen who grew wealthy under the former regime benefited directly from the economic siege imposed on opposition-held areas and from reconstruction contracts conditioned on political loyalty. These facts are not merely financial crimes in the narrow sense, but in some cases acts that aided the commission of war crimes or crimes against humanity.

From this perspective, it becomes clear that economic accountability cannot be separated from the path of transitional justice. It goes beyond the idea of recovering funds or partial settlements to become part of a broader process aimed at dismantling the corruption system and reshaping the relationship between power and wealth on new legal and institutional foundations.