

The Transformation of Syria

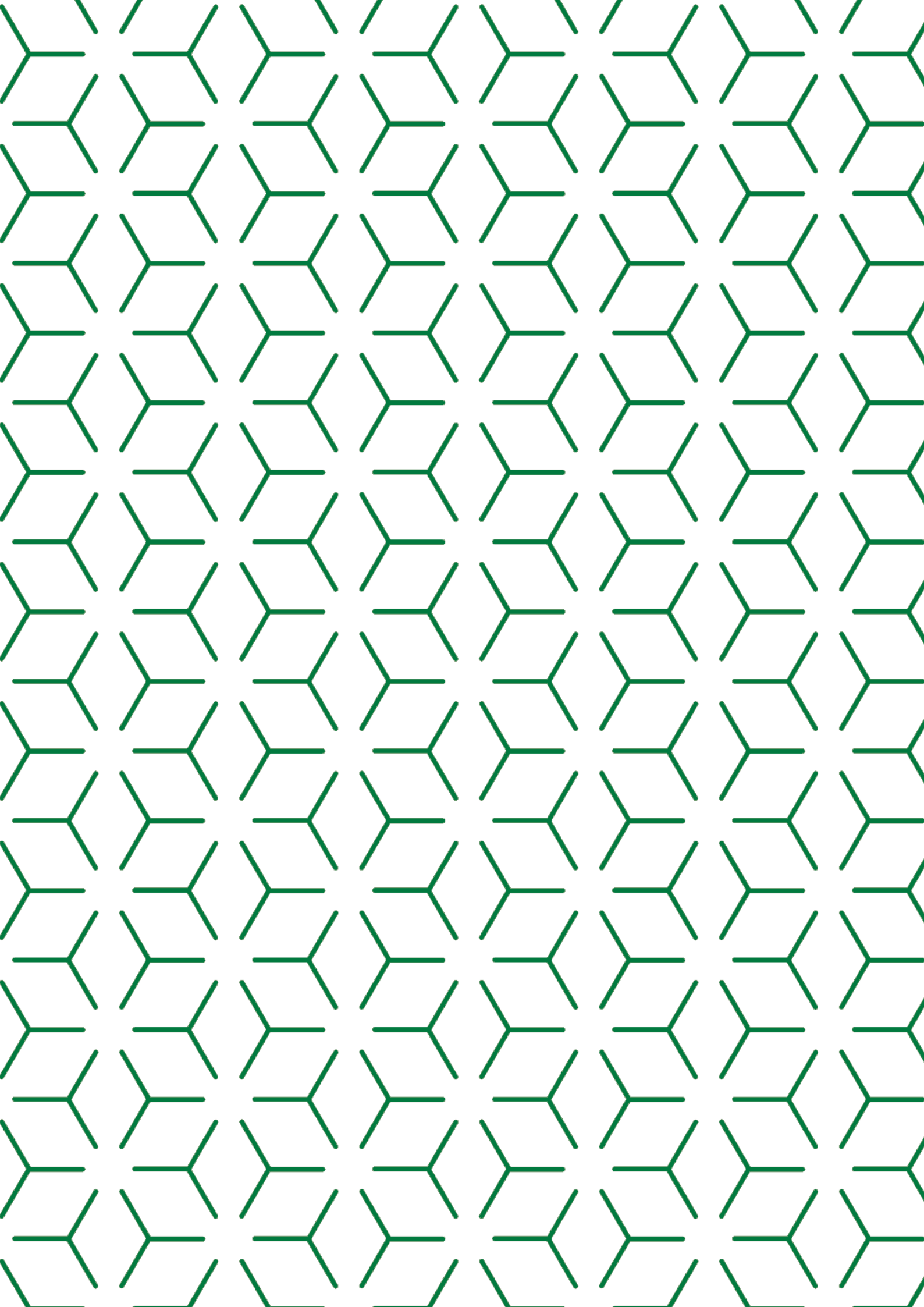
and Challenges for EU Policy in the Middle East

Sara Nowacka, Aleksandra Maria Spancerska,
Michał Wojnarowicz



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The Transformation of Syria and Challenges for EU Policy in the Middle East

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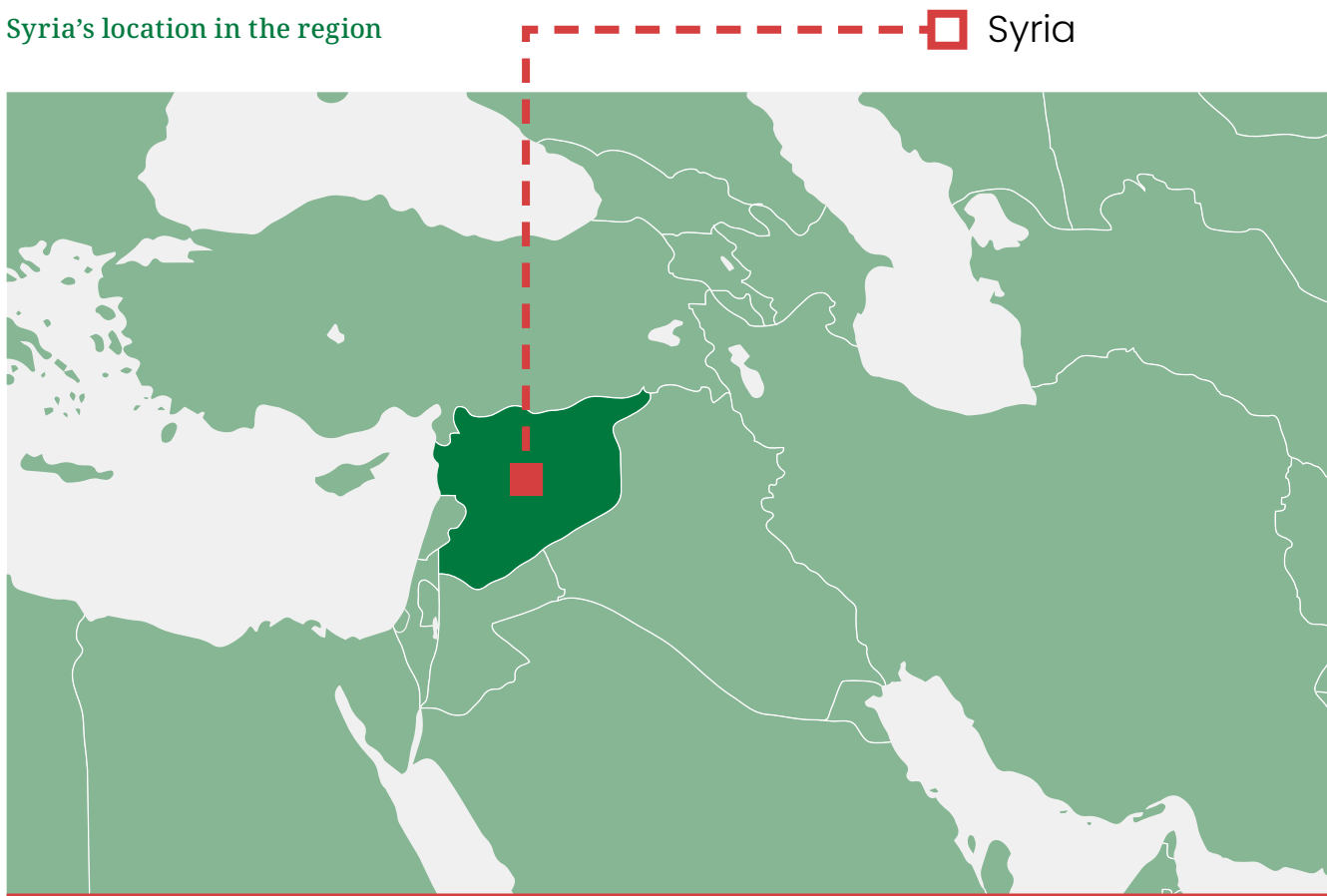
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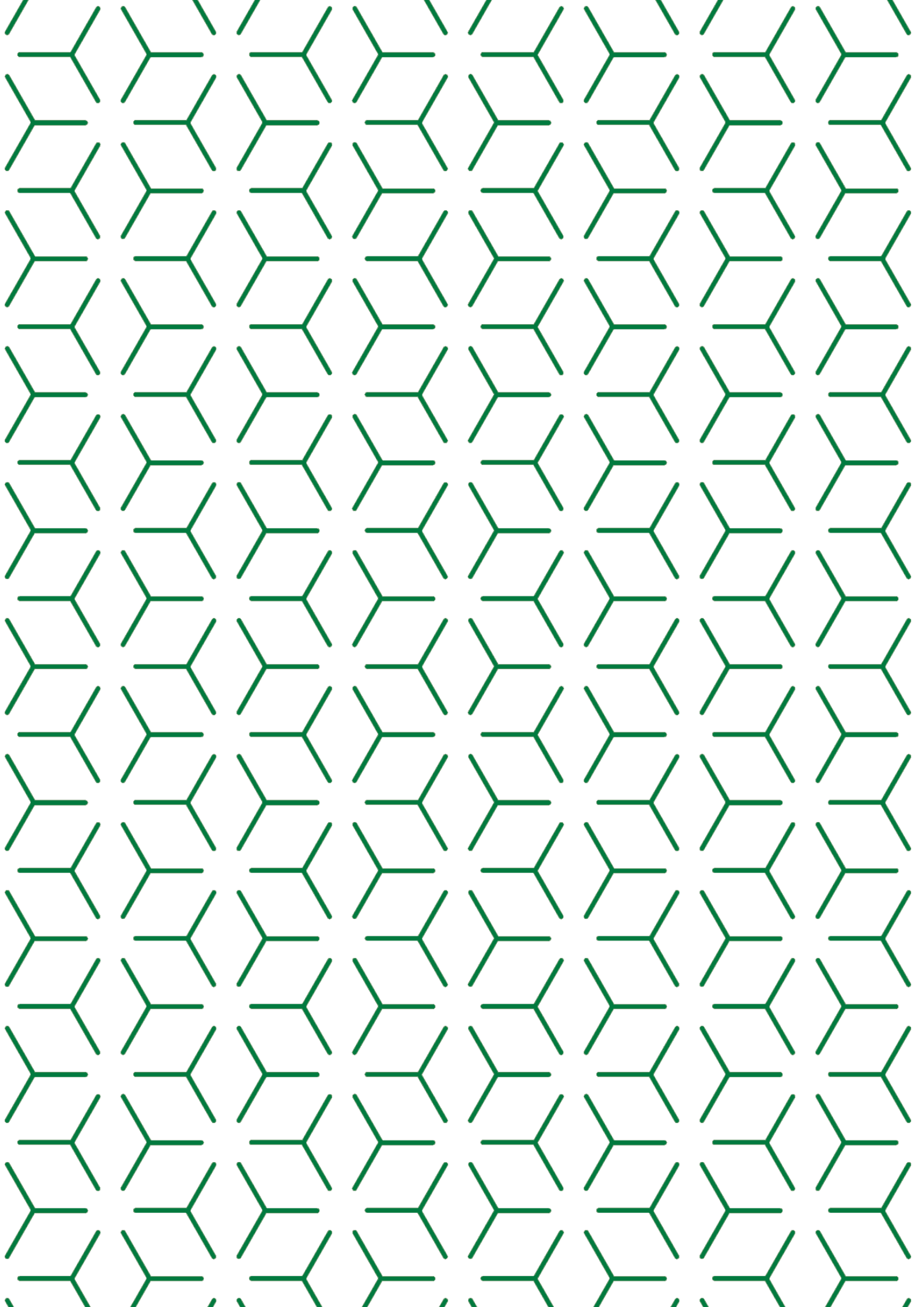
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The overthrow of the Assad regime has initiated a transformation in Syria, giving the EU an opportunity to engage more actively in its southern neighbourhood. By easing sanctions and supporting the reconstruction of basic infrastructure in Syria, the EU can not only help stabilise the country but also limit the harmful influence of Russia, Iran, and paramilitary organisations in the region. However, Syria's stabilisation is extremely fragile and requires the establishment of mechanisms for a "just" transition and support in bringing to justice members of the Assad regime responsible for war crimes. This will be crucial to alleviating social tensions exploited by regime loyalists and their supporters to delegitimise the new authorities. The EU should also use the state-building process to strengthen the position of civil society in its relations with the authorities and to take a more active stance in its relations with the countries involved in the region. In this context, the challenge will remain to reconcile support for the Syrian authorities' reintegration efforts with the protection of the rights of minorities, some of whom are demanding the federalisation of the state, which is unfavourable from the perspective of the EU's interests.

Syria's location in the region





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Introduction

Just before the fall of Bashar al-Assad there was a revival of diplomatic contacts and normalisation of relations between the countries of the region and the Syrian regime, highlighted by its return to the Arab League in May 2023.

This process was not driven by a belief in the effectiveness or legitimacy of Assad's rule, but by the practical political and security interests of the countries in the region, such as limiting Iran's influence and curbing drug trafficking. Despite the Syrian regime's incompetence and minimal social legitimacy, many international actors, especially in the Arab world, considered maintaining the status quo to be less risky than supporting change.

Contrary to the long-dominant narratives focusing almost exclusively on international rivalries in Syria, it was internal factors, in particular the quality of governance and the higher standard of living in Idlib under Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) control, as well as the consolidation of local support for the new authorities and the chaos and lack of unity among Assad loyalists, that determined the course of events. HTS's ability to adapt, build a relatively efficient administrative model and effectively combat security threats, including the so-called Islamic State and drug trafficking, helped it build trust among part of the population. Meanwhile, the Assad administration's incompetence, corruption, and role in systemic violence (including torture and killings), and the economic collapse of the country led ultimately to its delegitimisation.

Therefore, after more than a decade of conflict, a significant portion of Syrians, regardless of religion or origin, welcomed the change of authorities with enthusiasm as an opportunity to rebuild their own country, one independent and more inclusive. The overthrow of the regime responsible for brutal repression and war crimes, documented by the UN, the Syrian Network for Human Rights, and others, opened the door to long-awaited change. The collapse of the regime highlighted the failure of a conflict-management approach based on ignoring the will of the people. Attempts by Russia to keep Assad in power, despite a complete lack of public support for the

regime and the many victims, only prolonged the suffering of millions of Syrians. Ultimately, the regime was unable to continue without basic legitimacy and functionality, which Assad failed to provide, either as a leader or as a symbol of state continuity.

Despite reservations about the dominance of HTS and the continuation of some authoritarian practices, the current government enjoys greater public support than the Assad regime. Moreover, its actions have been met with signals of readiness to cooperate from neighbouring countries and the European Union. It, along with Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Türkiye see an opportunity to rebuild a Syrian state that is more resilient to Iranian and Russian influence. Common interests, including stabilising the region, countering radicalisation, drug trafficking, and forced migration, prevail in the current calculations, even between rivals, such as Saudi Arabia and Türkiye.

However, the transformation is not without risks. The legacy of repression, trauma, lack of accountability for crimes, and distrust of the new authorities by some of the population create an exceptionally difficult context for reforms. The social reconstruction of Syria will require long-term political, institutional, and financial support from the international community. The European Union can play a special role in this process, as its involvement can contribute not only to a just transition in Syria but also to a re-definition of EU policy towards its southern neighbourhood.

The following report is a set of recommendations for the EU and its Member States regarding their engagement in Syria. It was prepared over a period of almost six months, during which the authors conducted dozens of interviews with diplomats, representatives of state institutions, experts, and members of civil society organisations during study visits to Syria, Lebanon, and Türkiye, as well as through online interviews. In the final phase of work on the report, the authors held a working meeting with EU officials, which influenced the final shape of the report's conclusions and recommendations. Based on the history of the conflict in Syria, the priority was to emphasise the role of society and its vision of the future of the country and to propose areas of cooperation with the EU where its interests remain consistent with this will.

Summary of the Report and Recommendations

The political transformation of Syria following the fall of the Assad regime in December 2024 is a turning point for the regional order in the Middle East. Although Assad's overthrow took place without major military escalation, it was the result of long-standing exhaustion from civil war, tensions in regional relations, and the growing importance of new players, primarily the militant group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), which transformed from a jihadist organisation into a more pragmatic and decentralised model of Islamist rule.

The impetus for HTS's identity shift was the weakening of the moderate opposition as a result of Russia and Iran's intervention on Assad's side, as well as divisions between Islamist groups. HTS took advantage of this to seize power in Idlib province and create quasi-state structures. The organisation's ideological transformation from global jihad to nationalist rhetoric of resistance against Assad enabled the gradual normalisation of HTS's relations with Türkiye and Qatar, as well as raised its legitimacy in the eyes of local communities. A key moment in the evolution of HTS was the creation in 2017 of the Syrian Salvation Government (SSG), a grassroots initiative launched by local urban elites, academics, and Islamist activists.

This became the foundation for the creation of a new state administration after the fall of the Assad regime. The new authorities are trying to create an image of inclusiveness—the interim government includes representatives of the Kurds, Druze, Alawites, and Christians—but it is dominated by people with ties to HTS. President Ahmad al-Sharaa plays a central role in the administration of the state. Although he presents himself as a pragmatist and promoter of unity, his past and methods of consolidating power remain controversial and a source of concern for minorities. Real control over key ministries—including defence and internal affairs—remains in the hands of circles originating from HTS. Another challenge is the legacy of violence and tensions between communities, with the most dramatic event the massacre of Alawites in

Latakia in February 2025, which began after Assad loyalists attacked patrols of the new authorities, as well as fighting in the mainly Druze-inhabited Suwayda.

The response of the new Syrian government, including the launch of investigations, was an attempt to counter radicalisation and demonstrate its readiness to defend all Syrian citizens, regardless of their identity. However, trust in the authorities remains limited. While some minorities declare their willingness to cooperate with the new authorities, their loyalty still depends on progress in terms of a just transition and guarantee of civil rights.

The unexpected seizure of power by HTS and allied opposition factions in December 2024 led to the rapid collapse of the government in Damascus. However, this success did not mean complete stabilisation. The fragmentation of the armed forces, resistance from Druze and Kurdish groups, as well as threats from pro-Assad loyalists and remnants of the so-called Islamic State (IS) are hindering the new authorities' efforts to integrate security structures. The process of building a unified Syrian army through the integration of existing rebel groups and HTS security structures is necessary to ensure that the new administration has control over the security forces and to restore order. In this context, HTS's experience in fighting Hezbollah, drug smugglers, and IS also remains important. This track record was an argument in negotiations with the United States and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), a Kurdish-dominated military formation, and the basis for building cooperation with the West in combating IS after coming to power. The agreement between the new authorities and the SDF, signed in March 2025, is also crucial for energy security and guarantees of the political integration of the Kurds. Despite its strategic importance, tensions over the model of governance, the role of Islam and Arab nationality in the constitution are hampering the stabilisation of the government's relations with Kurdish groups, which fear that the loss of control over their territory will mean increased pressure and military action by Türkiye against the community.

Another challenge on the road to rebuilding the state is an economy devastated by war, sanctions, and criminal activities such as drug trafficking. HTS's efforts to combat drug trafficking are part of an attempt to build credibility with Gulf states and potential investors. The appointment of technocrats to economic ministries, including people with experience in the U.S. and the former Assad administration, is a signal that should facilitate support from international financial institutions. However, such a direction of change may also deepen inequalities in Syrian society and hinder development.

The change of power in Syria has had a number of consequences in the region. The most obvious effect is the reduction in the influence of Iran, which had been one of the main patrons of the Assad regime. The new authorities, which come from the HTS milieu hostile to Iran and Hezbollah, have initiated actions aimed at dismantling intelligence and military networks linked to Iran. As a result, Syria is no longer a “strategic bridgehead” for Iranian influence in the Levant, which has far-reaching consequences for the regional order.

For Jordan and Saudi Arabia, the new Syrian authorities’ fight against the captagon trade, previously supported by structures linked to the Assad family, was important. The decline in the smuggling of this drug has created space for diplomatic rapprochement, particularly in the context of potential economic and humanitarian cooperation. Türkiye and Qatar, as traditional patrons of Islamist opposition groups, including HTS, have gained a new opportunity to influence the reconstruction and institutional shaping of Syria. Their interests focus on maintaining border stability, countering the rise of Kurdish groups (in the case of Türkiye) and securing channels of political influence. The changes in Syria have also allowed both countries to intensify their cooperation with Saudi Arabia, despite traditionally problematic relations. For Lebanon, the change of power in Syria is an opportunity to revise relations that have been asymmetrical for decades. Following the weakening of Hezbollah’s influence, both countries have common interests in limiting Iran’s influence, demilitarising Hezbollah as a destabilising force in the region, and working to mobilise international support for pressure on Israel. At the same time, this process is hampered by political instability in Lebanon itself, loyalist networks of the former regime, and potential divergences of interest regarding further security integration.

Israel has responded to the change of power in Syria in a confrontational manner, occupying part of the border area and carrying out airstrikes on military infrastructure, among other things. Interference in internal conflicts and hostile rhetoric, including delegitimising the new authorities’ credibility on the international stage, undermine their authority. The Israeli authorities view the transformation in Syria through the prism of regional rivalry, in which regional adversaries other than Iran, primarily Türkiye, will gain influence. They also want to secure new territorial gains obtained through an illegal invasion carried out on the day of Assad’s fall.

The situation in Syria is forcing the EU to balance support for stability with the need to protect democratic values and human rights. Although post-Assad Syria shows greater potential to combat terrorism, smuggling, and migration, the jihadist past of HTS and constitutional restrictions are causing concern among Western countries.

The West is therefore continuing its policy of conditional engagement, making recognition and support conditional on progress in guaranteeing freedom and security for all ethnic and religious groups.

An Opportunity for the European Union

The situation in Syria and the resulting changes in the regional environment, i.e., in the EU's southern neighbourhood, pose a challenge for EU policy. The new regional order opens up space for more active EU participation in reconstruction and mediation processes to counteract and prevent the influence of Iran and Russia and the expansion of criminal networks. It is also in the EU's interest to reduce irregular migration, improve border security, and combat cross-border crime, including drug trafficking and the activities of armed and terrorist groups.

In this context, financial assistance and technical cooperation with Syrian administrative structures should be continued, while maintaining conditionality based on gradual political inclusiveness, improvement of the situation of minorities, and respect for human rights. The EU can use its instruments, including assistance programmes, neighbourhood policy, and dialogue with Türkiye and the Gulf states, to support the integration of administrative structures, the development of institutional capacities of the new Syrian authorities, and civil society organisations.

- **It is in the European Union's interest to engage in cooperation with the new Syrian authorities.** Their actions to date to combat terrorism, drug trafficking, and Hezbollah's influence are beneficial to the EU. Although the situation in Syria is not fully stable, the current Syrian administration offers a real opportunity to limit the influence of Russia and Iran, and its successes to date require a proportionate political and institutional response from the EU, for example, through the return of Member States' diplomatic missions and the EU delegation to Damascus as soon as possible.
- **The changes in Syria provide an opportunity to shift the EU's policy in its southern neighbourhood from reactive to proactive and less dependent on the U.S.** The war in the Gaza Strip and the changes in Syria have once again revealed the EU's limited ability to pursue its interests in the region, which stems largely from its excessive dependence on the U.S. However, Assad's fall should enable greater involvement of the EU and its Member States in the region's security. It creates an opportunity for a more independent and proactive EU policy towards Syria, which may translate into an increase in the EU's ability to shape the security situation in its southern neighbourhood, especially in light of the signalled willingness of the U.S. to withdraw from Syria.

- **The EU's activity should focus on striving for a just transition in Syria.** Accountability for members of the former regime and justice for victims must be its foundation if it is to stabilise the situation in the country in the long term and thus limit the negative effects of internal disputes and conflicts caused by dynamic changes for the EU. Efforts to achieve a just transition should include support for reforms of the justice system, for the victims of the Assad regime, and for the creation of reconciliation mechanisms.
- **It would be worthwhile for the EU to start cooperating with the Syrian authorities in areas where both sides have common interests.** These are primarily border security, counter-smuggling, and migration management. Cooperation in these areas, for example, through training and the use of the European Peace Facility, will also help to increase the competence and consolidate the position of the new authorities, which will limit the activities of subversive and radical groups destabilising the transition process.
- **The EU must strongly oppose Israel's actions in southern Syria, which should be part of the debate on the possible suspension of the association agreement with that country.** These actions violate the territorial integrity of the state and constitute one of the main threats to the transition. They also facilitate the activities of groups linked to the former regime, Iran, and Russia, threatening one of the most important outcomes of the fall of the Assad regime from the EU's perspective, namely the weakening of Russia's harmful influence on the EU's southern neighbourhood.
- **The EU should strengthen coordination with key countries in the region,** especially Türkiye and the Gulf states, on stabilising Syria under the new authorities, curbing radical and criminal groups, and rebuilding the state. This is particularly facilitated by the unprecedented cooperation in Syria between Türkiye and Saudi Arabia, which have been rivals until now.



From Jihadists to Pragmatists— Who are the New Authorities in Syria?

The Road to Deradicalisation

One of the key challenges for the Syrian transition is the very nature and roots of the group that forms the core of the new Syrian government. The new authorities originate from Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), an organisation formed in 2017 to consolidate the Syrian Islamist armed opposition, part of which was an offshoot of Al-Qaeda. At that time, these organisations, which mainly controlled the province of Idlib, and Turkish-backed militias belonging to the Syrian National Army (SNA), dominated the opposition to Assad's rule. This was a consequence of the intervention of Iran since the beginning of the war and Russia since 2015 on the side of Bashar al-Assad, which weakened moderate groups, mainly the Free Syrian Army (FSA), which were largely deprived of aid from the Western countries or Arab monarchies in the Persian Gulf that had initially supported the Syrian revolution.

As a result of this weakening, most FSA fighters joined pro-Turkish militias and some joined Islamist groups that declared loyalty to Al-Qaeda (related to the split between that organisation and the, or IS). However, because Al-Qaeda was a designated terrorist organisation, it was targeted by the U.S., which meant that other revolutionary groups feared joining their activities as a result. Internal disputes and a lack of coherent tactics were also challenges that led to the loss of control over Aleppo to the regime in 2016. This motivated Sharaa, then the leader of Jabhat al-Nusra (known as Abu Muhammad al-Julani), to break away from Al-Qaeda, prompting five Islamist groups to unite under a new organisation, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), the following year. Uniting under a single faction and strengthening its leadership allowed HTS to take control of cross-border trade with Türkiye and reinforce its legitimacy as one of the main actors

in the revolution, thereby forcing countries supporting the Syrian opposition (Türkiye, Qatar) to cooperate with the organisation. This was also facilitated by an ideological transformation of HTS, which distanced itself from global jihad, focusing instead on the need to fight Assad and liberate Syria. It also softened its rhetoric towards religious minorities and conducted relatively inclusive rule in Idlib.

Ultimately, HTS's hegemony in Idlib was consolidated by the ceasefire signed between Türkiye and Russia in 2020. This led to a significant improvement in security and living conditions for residents and in the quality of provincial governance. However, consolidating this position required military action and constant renegotiation of the social contract in Idlib. Sharaa's actions in this regard focused on incorporating local religious and political leaders into the emerging structures and eliminating militias rivaling HTS, such as Ahrar Al-Sham in 2017. HTS also fought organisations affiliated with Al-Qaeda and IS, as well as Hezbollah.

Model of Governance

Political compromises and military operations against rival militias reduced divisions in Idlib, allowing the formation of the Syrian Salvation Government (SSG). It constituted the civilian part of the provincial administration, which was established on the initiative of local urban elites, Islamists, and activists and academics who had been involved in the 2011 protests but did not belong to any of the opposition structures that had been created earlier.¹ The functioning of the SSG and the extension of its mandate to further territories taken over by HTS was guided by grassroots logic and left room for independence for some administrative units. This was particularly the case in more conservative areas governed by revolutionary Islamists. Extremely conservative rules and customs in some parts of the province were therefore not imposed by HTS or SSG, but resulted from the preferences of tribal or local leaders. Due to social tensions, HTS and later SSG dissolved or changed several times the mandate of the morality police, which were to enforce a radical version of Islamic law. Shopping centres where men and women were allowed to be in the same space and loud music was permitted were often the subject of controversy. From the perspective of the ruling elite, this was part of developing economic activity, which was necessary to maintain the relatively good living conditions in Idlib. For many local leaders, including religious leaders and activists, however, these were new and worrying developments. Therefore, in 2023,

¹ J. Drevon, P. Haenni, "How Global Jihad Relocalises and Where it Leads. The Case of HTS, the Former AQ Franchise in Syria," European University Institute, Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies, The Middle East Directions Programme, EUI Working Paper RSC 2021/08, p. 5.

moral law was finally introduced. Failure to comply with it was punishable by detention in designated facilities for up to 48 hours.

The 2023 earthquake in Türkiye, which also destroyed infrastructure in northern Syria, highlighted the crucial importance of Idlib's model of governance, i.e., the delegation of some public services to local organisations. At that time, the SSG and its Ministry of Development and Humanitarian Affairs focused on coordinating aid, which was delivered by local non-governmental organisations (NGOs), including the White Helmets, a volunteer civil defence formation operating since 2013.²

At the same time, the nature of HTS rule remained authoritarian, and the means of enforcing loyalty included arrests, violence, torture, and executions, not based on religious affiliation but on loyalty. According to a report by the Syrian Network for Human Rights, between 2012 (when HTS was still operating as Jabhat al-Nusra) and 2021, 505 civilians were killed by the organisation and 2,327 were unlawfully detained or forcibly disappeared.³ In 2023, the UN Independent Commission of Inquiry on Syria reported numerous arrests of people critical of the HTS government, including for comments on social media about poor living conditions and increased control of NGOs and media workers.⁴ In February 2024, unprecedented protests against HTS broke out in response to reports of torture by HTS security services against detainees during a wave of arrests lasting several months (including members of HTS itself). The demonstrators also criticised the non-transparent court proceedings and unjustified arrests. Sharaa admitted at the time that the authorities had exceeded their powers and announced investigations and punishment for those responsible. Despite this, many protesters were detained.⁵ Most of them were acquitted, and the protests initiated reforms in HTS and SSG, including among the security services.

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² G. Waters, "Idlib is under siege," Middle East Institute, <https://mei.edu/blog/idlib-under-siege>, [accessed on 11 August 2025].

³ "The Most Notable Hay'at al Sham Violations Since the Establishment of Jabhat al Nusra to Date," Syrian Network for Human Rights, https://snhr.org/wp-content/pdf/english/The_Most_Notable_Hayat_Tahrir_al-Sham_Violations_Since_the_Establishment_of_Jabhat_al_Nusra_to_Date_1_en.pdf, [accessed on 11 August 2025].

⁴ "Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic," UN Human Rights Council, Session No. 52, p. 13, <https://docs.un.org/en/A/HRC/52/69>, [accessed on 11 August 2025].

⁵ "Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic," Human Rights Council, Session No. 57, p. 11, <https://docs.un.org/en/A/HRC/57/86>, [accessed on 11 August 2025].

HTS in the New Government

Authoritarian tendencies pose the greatest risk to the future of relations between the Syrian authorities and society. After the appointment of the first interim government in December 2024 (which was replaced by a new one at the end of March 2025), residents expressed concerns about the close ties between ministers and Sharaa and the fact that most of them belonged to HTS or SSG. These concerns were further heightened by the non-transparent mechanism for appointing ministers, the appointment of Sharaa's brother, Maher, as health minister, and the most influential positions—defence, foreign affairs, and interior—going to close associates of Ahmed al-Sharaa, namely Murhaf Abu Kasra, Asaad al-Shaibani and Alem Kiddie.⁶ From the perspective of religious minorities, the appointment of Shadi al-Waisi, a member of the former SSG educated in Islamic law, as minister of justice was also worrying. Despite the official dissolution of HTS on 29 January 2025, these ministries remained in the hands of people associated with the organisation even after the formation of the new government on 29 March this year. Shaibani and Kasra retained their positions, while the Ministry of the Interior was taken over by Anas Khattab, former deputy commander of HTS and head of the Main Security Office created by the organisation. Madhar al-Wais, who served as minister of justice under the SSG, became the new Syrian minister of justice. While he is an extremely conservative Muslim jurist, he is a long-time critic of both IS and Al-Qaeda.

A positive sign is the decline in the number of HTS-affiliated figures in the second transitional government. In the previous government, 14 of the 21 ministries (including the Office for Women) were headed by members of the organisation. The government formed at the end of March increased the number of ministries to 23, with only nine headed by figures associated with HTS, of whom only four were actual members. To increase the inclusiveness of the authorities, the new government also has representatives of the Druze community, Amjad Badr (minister of agriculture and agricultural reform), the Alawite Yaarub Bader (minister of transport), the Christian Hind Kabawat (minister of social affairs and labour, the only woman in the government), and the Kurdish Mohammed Abdul Rahman Turko (minister of education). Five new ministers held high positions in Assad's former government before 2012. Although some of the population criticises the HTS's continued control over the four most important ministries, the remaining positions have been given to independent figures and on a technocratic basis. This was particularly evident in the appointments of Nidal al-Shaar as

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⁶ Muhammad Abdul Rahman was originally appointed interior minister, but was replaced by Kidda in January.

economy minister and Mohammed Barnieh as finance minister. Both held high positions after Assad became president in 2000, striving to liberalise the Syrian economy. They received part of their education at universities in the U.S., where Sharaa also worked in the private sector.

Of particular note is al-Shaibani, who graduated in Türkiye. Although he is a former member of HTS, he and his cabinet are effectively building relations not only with foreign diplomats but also with representatives of Syrian civil society, especially NGOs operating abroad. During an interview, one NGO representative pointed out that Shaibani (and his office) is the person to whom “you go to get anything done”.⁷ He was described in similar terms by an employee of a Western embassy, who emphasised that “everyone goes to Shaibani”,⁸ which was partly due to the continuing chaos and limited trust that HTS has towards representatives of foreign institutions.

The interim president, Sharaa, remains a key figure in the new government. He comes from a prominent Sunni Syrian family, and his nickname from his jihadist days, “Jolani”, indicates family ties to the Golan Heights, from where his ancestors were displaced after the Israeli invasion. In 2003, Sharaa left for Iraq, where he joined Al-Qaeda, arguing that it was necessary to defend against the U.S. invasion. In 2006, he was arrested by the Americans and spent more than five years in detention and interrogation in several facilities, including Abu Ghraib, where he established relationships with leading figures in jihadist terrorist organisations. With the transformation of HTS from a jihadist organisation into an Islamist Syrian opposition group, Sharaa significantly softened his image and rhetoric, which allowed him to strengthen his influence within the Syrian opposition and build HTS’s dominant position in Idlib, at the expense of isolating the most radical groups. He was the *de facto* leader of Syria since Assad’s fall and was then officially declared president at the Revolution Victory Conference on 29 January this year. The event was attended by HTS fighters and other armed opposition factions outside the Kurdish forces, groups from Suwayda and the Southern Operations Command, which agreed in December to integrate into the Ministry of Defence. The manner of the president’s appointment was not subject to consultation and was not transparent. However, this was a symbolic move, given Sharaa’s dominant influence on the situation in Syria after 8 December 2024. Although Sharaa has maintained relatively inclusive rhetoric since coming to power in Syria, his path to the presidency suggests a pragmatic and opportunistic approach to politics, focused on consolidating his power. His biggest challenge remains balancing between

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⁷ Interview with a representative of Syrian civil society, Beirut, February 2025.

⁸ Interview with a representative of a Western diplomatic mission, Damascus, February 2025.

the radical groups that support him, which pose a threat to religious minorities, and maintaining a non-discriminatory form of government, which is necessary for the stabilisation of the state and the consolidation of its international legitimacy.

The political path of Ahmad al-Sharaa



He comes from a prominent Syrian Sunni family. His nickname, 'Jawlani,' indicates his family's ties to the Golan Heights, from which his ancestors were displaced after Israeli forces entered the area.

2003	He travels to Iraq, where he joins Al-Qaeda.
2006	He's arrested by the Americans.
2008	He is released from prison and becomes the leader of Al-Qaeda in Mosul.
2011	He goes to Syria.
2012	He establishes the group Jabhat al-Nusra as a branch of Al-Qaeda in Iraq.
2016	Ayman al-Zawahiri establishes Jabhat al-Nusra as a separate organization, independent of al-Qaeda. Al-Joulani becomes its leader. The group adopts the name Jabhat Fateh al-Sham.
2017	He enters into a coalition with three other radical groups, forming the **Hayat Tahrir al-Sham** alliance, and becomes its military commander. In October, he takes control of the organization.
2024	When fighting between Assad's forces and the rebels resumed on November 28th, they captured the Syrian capital, Damascus. Assad flees to Moscow, and al-Sharaa becomes the interim head of the Syrian state.
2025	On January 29, he becomes the president of Syria.

Security

Since the overthrow of the Assad regime on 8 December 2024, the security situation in Syria has determined the progress of the transition and the international community's attitude towards the new authorities. The main threats to stability in Syria are the groups loyal to Assad that are still present in the country, the activities of Iran and Hezbollah that support them, the associated drug trafficking and arms smuggling, Israel's armed interventions on Syrian territory, and the future of IS. The risks associated with these factors are further increased by limited resources and personnel⁹ and divisions between pro-government forces and other armed opposition groups, which often have a larger number of fighters (e.g., the SDF has around 100,000).

The decisive factor limiting the effectiveness of the consolidation of control over Syria in the hands of the new government was the unexpected seizure of power in Damascus by HTS. The offensive launched at the end of November last year was primarily aimed at capturing Aleppo and attempting to reach the territories of Hama. The joining of other armed opposition groups to HTS, as well as the lack of will on the part of the Syrian army, Russia and Iran to defend Assad, led to the fall of the regime and the success of the rebellion. This prevented escalation, large-scale fighting and a high number of casualties. Such a beginning to Syria's transformation after more than 13 years of civil war has increased the legitimacy of the new authorities among civilians and the international community.

At the same time, the unexpected success has not sufficiently weakened the forces loyal to Assad and hostile to the revolution, nor has it allowed the militants to fully prepare to ensure security throughout the country. Another challenge is the takeover of state financial resources after Assad, which prevents Sharaa from paying salaries to the security services. The uncertain situation also makes it difficult to reach an

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⁹ Promoting a Stable, Peaceful Transition in Syria," International Crisis Group, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/east-mediterranean-mena/syria/promoting-stable-peaceful-transition-syria>, [accessed on 11 August 2025].

agreement with representatives of various ethnic and religious groups in Syria, who fear losing control over their territories, which have so far been more or less independent of the authorities in Damascus.

Building Armed Forces

In order to reduce these threats, on 17 December last year, Sharaa announced that all rebel factions would be disbanded and incorporated into the Ministry of Defence. The authorities also integrated the General Security Service, an organisation created by HTS that was responsible for law enforcement and intelligence activities in the Idlib region, into the Ministry of Defence.¹⁰ HTS announced that it would be the first to dissolve its organisation in order to encourage other groups to follow suit.¹¹ It did so officially during the Revolution Victory Conference on 29 January 2025. The originally pro-Turkish SNA rejected the possibility of laying down its arms and integrating with the Ministry of Defence. It was only after the intervention of Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan at the end of January this year that the new Syrian administration announced the gradual dissolution of former rebel formations, including the SNA. However, some of the groups operating within the SNA refused to be incorporated into the state structures, as evidenced by their continued fighting with the SDF along the Euphrates. Other units feared that cooperation with the new authorities would entail consequences for human rights violations they had committed and the loss of territorial control. This was particularly true of the Eighth Brigade under the command of Ahmad al-Awda, which belonged to the Southern Operations Command, a coalition of militias from southern Syria. It was only after a military clash with the new security forces in April this year that Awda agreed to integrate with state institutions, which was one of the most important military successes of the new authorities to date.

By mid-February, the administration had incorporated about 100 armed factions into the new Syrian army and the Ministry of Defence. However, some groups remained reluctant to integrate and even formed opposition to the new authorities after the regime was overthrown. One of these is the Suwayda Military Council, formed at the end of February this year. This group is compared to the Kurdish SDF, and its principles suggest separatist ambitions, although this idea is rejected by the majority of the Druze community. The Suwayda Military Council also reportedly includes former Assad

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¹⁰ A. Y. Zelin, "The New Syrian Government's Fight Against the Islamic State, Hezbollah, and Captagon," *CTC Sentinel*, March 2025.

¹¹ "Syria ex-rebel military chief says to dissolve armed wing," France24, <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20241217-syria-ex-rebel-military-chief-says-to-dissolve-armed-wing>, [accessed on 11 August 2025].

officers among its members and supported the actions of another Druze organisation from the suburbs of Damascus whose members belonged to militias supporting Assad.¹² However, the latter surrendered to the new administration after clashes in Jaramana near Damascus, which began with the killing of one of the new security forces' soldiers by a member of the group.

Forces of the Former Regime

Some of Assad's former soldiers, including high-ranking officers, most of whom belong to the Alawite community, also refused to lay down their arms. They were responsible for organising strikes against the security services of the new administration almost from the moment it took power. Some of them made their way to northern Lebanon where Hezbollah, which supported the Assad regime, provided them with shelter. From there, they mobilised other former soldiers and supporters of the regime and obtained weapons from Hezbollah (and most likely Iran). Their goal was to destabilise Syria again, undermine the legitimacy of the new authorities, and even carry out a coup d'état. Their actions coincided with an increase in violent incidents against Alawites (murders and looting) and their mass dismissal from the public sector.¹³ This violence, mainly from groups supporting the new authorities, was partly in the form of vigilante justice targeting former regime soldiers who had used torture. However, it was also partly due to collective punishment for Assad's crimes.

The atmosphere of growing fear among Alawites encouraged Assad's supporters to intensify their activities. On 7 March, they attacked soldiers patrolling the area around Latakia and killed 16 of them. This angered pro-government forces, in particular the still existing SNA militias but also independent individuals, who retaliated, resulting in massacres in which a total of about 800-1,000 civilians, 150 security personnel, and around 120-150 Assad loyalists were killed. On one side, organisations linked to the Assad regime, such as the Coastal Shield Brigade and the Military Committee for the Liberation of Syria, took part. On the other side were groups of the former SNA (including, most likely, the Sultan Murad Division, notorious for its cruelty), groups affiliated with the new authorities, forces belonging to the Ministry of Defence, and individuals, including families of soldiers kidnapped and killed on 7 March.

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¹² C. Lister, "Intriguingly, I'm told x3 #Suwayda Military Council leaders are former senior #Assad military intel officers (more on regime links later...) But the SMC is a minor player. The major #Druze militias have publicly & repeatedly rejected #Israel's stance" (post), X, 5 March 2025, https://x.com/Charles_Lister/status/1897286891650896108, [accessed on 11 August 2025].

¹³ During Assad's rule, Alawites constituted a disproportionate share of public sector employees relative to the size of this group, which may also have contributed to their dismissal being described as "mass".

At the same time, the new authorities received information from pro-Alawite groups about the location of Assad loyalists. On the same night that the situation escalated in Latakia, the army carried out an armed operation on the targeted area, where it discovered satellite photos showing the deployment of new armed forces, advanced communication equipment, and a large amount of cash in U.S. dollars. The quality of the found equipment and photos indicates cross-border support, most likely from Iran, for the pro-Assad groups. Alongside parallel attempts to cause chaos in other provinces (Aleppo, Homs, Hama, Deir ez-Zour), this suggested that Assad loyalists were preparing a coup. They were hoping that violence between different religious groups would ruin any chance of building trust in the new authorities. Although they achieved some success (e.g., the Kurdish Community Union unequivocally blamed government forces for the massacres¹⁴ and some EU countries distanced themselves from lifting sanctions), two days after the escalation in Latakia, the government signed a preliminary agreement with the SDF, followed by a similar agreement with the Druze community. In addition, representatives of the minority Christians, Druze, and even Alawites issued statements supporting the government's efforts to stabilise Latakia. However, the subversive groups' activities are influencing attempts to further organise the Alawite community against the authorities, the latest example being a statement by influential businessman and Bashar al-Assad's cousin Rami Makhlouf on the creation of another militia. In addition to his business networks, he will also use his ties with Russia to try to destabilise Syria, as reflected in his appeal to the Russian authorities to intensify cooperation with Syria in support of communities living on the coast.

The Situation with IS

Another significant challenge to the stabilisation of the security situation is the continued activity of IS and the presence of militants and their families in guarded camps in eastern Syria. To date, the SDF, with U.S. support, remains the main force fighting IS. The Kurdish administration is also responsible for managing camps in Al-Hol where terrorists and families of IS fighters are held (about 37,000) and Roj (around 2,500 women from abroad, including Europe). It is also responsible for rehabilitation centres, where boys from the camps are transferred upon reaching adulthood, and prisons, where about 10,000 fighters are held. These places are a serious potential source of destabilisation. Their inhabitants are highly radicalised, infiltrated by IS, and have limited access to basic goods and services (healthcare, clean water, food), exacerbated by the

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¹⁴ "KCK condemns massacres against Alawites in Syria," Hawar News Agency, <https://hawarnews.com/en/kck-condemns-massacres-against-alawite-in-syria>, [accessed on 11 August 2025].

recent withdrawal of foreign aid by the Trump administration. This has led to increased tension and violence among detainees towards humanitarian workers operating in the camps.

The potential deradicalisation of camp residents is hampered by limited access to education and care. Such activities in these areas were completely suspended following Trump's decision to suspend U.S. aid, which is particularly problematic given that the camps are mainly populated by minors (around 61% in al-Hol). The most at-risk group among those detained are third-country nationals (mainly from Russia, China, and Türkiye, numbering about 6,300 people). They are considered to be the most radicalised and infiltrated by IS. Following security operations carried out in the camp by Kurdish and U.S. forces, prohibited electronic devices and materials promoting IS ideology and training among children were discovered in the part of the camp where they were living.

Although the new authorities remain in contact with the SDF and, indirectly, with U.S. forces regarding the future of the prisoners and the camps, their plans for involvement in the management and security of these areas are unknown. However, part of the agreement between the SDF and the Syrian government on the repatriation of displaced persons indicates the government's interest in returning Syrians detained in the camps to their homes. Furthermore, taking control of the camps was part of the U.S. conditions for maintaining the suspension of sanctions. However, many camp residents are reluctant to be repatriated. Moreover, this process would require the development of measures to deradicalise and integrate the camp population into society. The Iraqi state's successes in this area could support the development of such a plan. Since May 2021, Iraq has repatriated around 12,000 people from al-Hol,¹⁵ and their reintegration is seen as a potential model for future actions by the Syrian authorities in this area.

The scale of armed operations undertaken by IS decreased after HTS came to power. This was linked to the intensification of U.S. operations against IS immediately after the overthrow of the regime, which was intended to prevent IS from escalating its activities after the withdrawal of Assad's troops. On the day the regime fell, the U.S. and its allies carried out airstrikes on 75 IS targets. They attacked the organisation's area

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¹⁵ O. Al-Shamree, "Stepped-up repatriation of 'IS families' presents opportunities, risks for Iraq," <https://amwaj.media/en/article/stepped-up-repatriation-of-is-families-presents-opportunities-risks-for-iraq>, [accessed on 11 August 2025].

of operations again 8 and 14 days later.¹⁶ HTS also continued its actions against IS. In January, the new authorities prevented an attack on the Shiite mosque in Sayyida Zaynab near Damascus. Due to concerns about the return of IS activity in Syria, in March the U.S. military and intelligence services established cooperation with the interim Syrian government to coordinate actions against IS and exchange intelligence information about it. The effectiveness of this cooperation is facilitated by HTS's experience in fighting the extremists. Between HTS's establishment in 2017 and February 2025, the organisation carried out 67 operations against IS, while IS managed to carry out only one successful operation in HTS-controlled territories.¹⁷ Although the actions of HTS and the U.S. have managed to limit IS operations, the number of attacks carried out by the organisation has been gradually increasing since the turn of January to February this year (while still remaining well below last year's level, when, for example, in February 2024, it stood at 100). In May, 38 attacks were recorded. Fears of the organisation's resurgence have prompted countries in the region to seek new formats for counter-terrorism cooperation. In May, Türkiye, Jordan, and Syria opened a new centre for operations against IS in Damascus.

HTS Operations Against IS

Year	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025
Number of operations	5	22	8	8	10	6	0	4	4

Based on data from Syria Weekly

Drug trafficking

Over the past six years, Assad's regime played a key role in the production and smuggling of captagon, the generic version of the synthetic drug, the illicit sale of which has become a serious problem for Syria's neighbours and the Gulf monarchies. Captagon produced in Syria also reached Europe and East Asian countries. The main production centres were Damascus, Latakia, Eastern Ghouta, Aleppo, Al-Qusayr, and Homs, as well as other towns under Assad's control located near ports and border crossings. Drug sales provided the regime with 90% of its foreign exchange earnings. The value of *legal*

¹⁶ A. Y. Zelin, "The New Syrian Government's Fight Against the Islamic State, Hezbollah, and Captagon," op. cit.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*.

Syrian exports in 2021 was \$800 million, while the value of captagon seized by anti-drug services in various countries totalled about \$6 billion. The estimated annual value of Syria's total exports of this drug was as high as \$30 billion (for comparison, drug trafficking from Mexico to the U.S. is worth about \$5–7.5 billion per year).¹⁸ Maher al-Assad, brother of the former president and commander of the 4th Division of the Syrian army, known for serious human rights violations, including torture, and other war crimes and crimes against humanity, was primarily responsible for managing this industry.

After Syria's reinstatement to the Arab League and in the context of ongoing normalisation with Arab countries in 2024, the number of arrests of people involved in the drug industry increased. However, only a small increase in the number of small-scale seizures was reported, suggesting that Assad had forced large captagon producers linked to the regime to suspend their activities as a tool of his policy towards Arab countries. The focus on small producers resulted in them moving outside Syria. This was indicated by, among other things, the first seizure of a captagon laboratory in Kuwait in August 2024 and in Türkiye, where no similar activity had been reported for years. Recent seizures of captagon in Iraq (twice, in March and April this year) also indicate its growing importance for traffickers in that country following the fall of Assad in Syria. At the same time, trade in methamphetamine, which is produced in a similar way and is easier to smuggle due to its smaller size, has increased in the region. A laboratory producing both captagon and methamphetamine was shut down in mid-July this year by the Lebanese army in the Bekaa Valley, where Hezbollah, which cooperates with the former regime, concentrates its activities.

HTS and its subordinate GSS had been fighting drug smuggling and trafficking long before taking power in Syria. In 2018, the GSS first published information about an operation to seize hashish, and in 2019, HTS seized "drug pills" (presumably captagon). Around the same time, the organisation held a series of lectures for the security forces, the Ministry of the Interior, the University of Idlib, and local administrations on combating drug smuggling and trafficking.¹⁹ The first official seizure of captagon by the GSS was announced in 2022. Since then, the organisation has carried out six similar operations until the fall of the regime. After the fall of the regime, HTS continued these activities, aiming to completely eliminate the production and smuggling of captagon. Government forces seized the main production centres and destroyed hundreds

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¹⁸ S. Nowacka, "Syria's Assad Regime Using Drug Smuggling as a Political Tool," PISM Bulletin, No. 92 (2211), <https://www.pism.pl/publications/syrias-assad-regime-using-drug-smuggling-as-a-political-tool>, [accessed on: 11 August 2025].

¹⁹ A. Y. Zelin, "The New Syrian Government's Fight Against the Islamic State, Hezbollah, and Captagon," op. cit.

of millions of tablets.²⁰ These actions, apart from reducing a destabilising factor, are aimed at increasing the credibility of the new authorities in Syria in the eyes of the leaders of neighbouring countries, and above all the monarchs in the Persian Gulf. It was mainly Jordan and Saudi Arabia that faced the negative consequences of the captagon trade and put pressure on Syria to curb it. The new authorities hope that the fight against the illicit drug industry will increase the chances of investment and financial support from the Gulf states for the reconstruction of the country.

Although captagon smuggling has fallen sharply as a result, drug warehouses and production centres remain in Syria, particularly in areas where the new authorities have limited control (around Daraa and Suwayda). In this context, the south of the country remains problematic, with armed groups still active, refusing to integrate or fighting government forces, and the situation is further destabilised by the presence and attacks of Israeli troops. Given the extremely difficult economic situation in Syria, the new government will also face the challenge of limiting factors encouraging the continuation of the illicit drug industry, even on a small scale, and the recruitment of new workers.



Syria, February 2025, Author: Sara Nowacka

20 "The Captagon Industry in Syria After Assad's Fall – A Current Overview," Alma Research and Education Center, <https://israel-alma.org/the-captagon-industry-in-syria-after-assads-fall-a-current-overview/>, [accessed on: 11 August 2025].

Social Cohesion

More than a decade of armed conflict, population movements, and the lack of a census that takes into account ethnic and religious identity make it difficult to assess the diversity of the country's population. According to 2022 estimates by the U.S. Department of State, of the around 21.6 million people living in Syria, 74% are Sunni Muslims (including Arabs, Kurds, Circassians, Chechens, and Turkmen), other Muslims (Alawites, Ismailis, and Shiites) account for about 13% of the population, Christians about 10%, and Druze around 3%. However, some estimates point out that the dynamics of refugee movements have contributed to a significant decrease in the number of Christians in Syria, who currently constitute about 2% of the population.²¹ Apart from Sunnis, religious groups are concentrated in specific geographical areas of Syria. Shiite Muslims live mainly in rural areas, especially in the provinces of Idlib and Aleppo, and in cities such as Damascus, Aleppo, and Homs. Most Alawites live in the mountainous areas of Latakia, but also on the coast in the cities of Latakia, Tartous, Homs, and Damascus. The largest concentration of Ismailis is in the city of Salamiyeh in the province of Hama. Most Christians live in Damascus, Aleppo, Homs, Hama, and Latakia, or in the province of Hasaka in the northeast of the country, while Druze live in the south of the country around Suwayda.

During the offensive, HTS undertook diplomatic efforts to establish contact with representatives of various religious groups, reflecting their experience in governing Idlib. After the recapture of Damascus, Sharaa emphasised his willingness to cooperate with Syrians of all faiths and to work towards building an inclusive state. However, this is undermined by groups exploiting the slow and limited process of accountability to stir up public sentiment and inter-religious tensions. One of the pretexts for these actions is the primacy given to Muslim law in the constitutional declaration of March this year.

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²¹ "2022 Report on International Religious Freedom: Syria," U.S. Department of State, <https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-report-on-international-religious-freedom/syria/>, [accessed on 11 August 2025].

The Kurdish Aspect

The Kurdish issue is particularly important in the context of building new security forces. The Syrian Democratic Forces, a Kurdish-dominated military formation, has around 100,000 fighters, and the Kurdish administration controls almost 30% of Syrian territory and 70% of the oil and gas resources necessary for the reconstruction of the Syrian economy. This group is reluctant to fully integrate into the state without guarantees of institutional autonomy. This is a consequence of concerns about Türkiye's intentions towards Syria and the history of Syrian Kurds, who, after decades of marginalisation, gained independence and international recognition thanks to an effective model of governance and the fight against IS.

Syrian Kurds, estimated to number around 2 million under the rule of Hafez and Bashar al-Assad, were subjected to systematic repression and looting, and some of them were stripped of their citizenship. The mass protests of 2011 provided an opportunity for the Kurds to change their status and strengthen their representation.²² The Democratic Union Party (PYD) was formed at that time and consolidated public support by advocating for its own political representation in the autonomous administration of northeastern Syria.²³ The religiously and ethnically diverse community living in this area demanded decentralisation and self-government within the Syrian state, referring to the idea of "democratic confederalism"²⁴ by Abdullah Öcalan, founder of the Turkish Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK).²⁵ The PYD acts as a representative of the interests of Syrian Kurds, although Türkiye considers it a Syrian offshoot of the PKK due to the fact that relations between these formations have been developing since the 1980s,

22 H. Alsopp, W. van Wilgenburg, *The Kurds of Northern Syria. Governance, Diversity and Conflicts*, I.B. Tauris, London, 2019.

23 "The Kurdish Project, Syria (Rojava or Western Kurdistan)," <https://thekurdishproject.org/kurdistan-map/syrian-kurdistan/>, [accessed on 6 April 2025]. A. Adamczyk, F. Jomma, "Demokratyczny konfederalizm jako alternatywny ustrój dla Autonomicznej Administracji Północnej i Wschodniej Syrii" (Democratic confederalism as an alternative system for the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria), *Przegląd Sejmowy*, No. 3(170) 2022, p. 24.

24 A. Adamczyk, F. Jomma, "Demokratyczny konfederalizm," *op. cit.* pp. 26-27.

25 The PKK was formed by Öcalan in 1978 to fight for the establishment of an independent state for the Kurds. Öcalan fled Türkiye in 1979, was expelled from Syria in 1998, and captured by Turkish forces in cooperation with the American CIA in 1999. Since then, he has been imprisoned on the island of İmralı in Türkiye. The PKK is recognised as a terrorist organisation by Türkiye, the U.S., and the EU. M. A. Salih, "Syria's Kurdish Northeast Ratifies a New Constitution," *New Lines Magazine*, 31 January 2024, <https://newlinesmag.com/argument/syrias-kurdish-northeast-ratifies-a-new-constitution/>. [accessed on 1 April 2025]. D. Gerber, S. Brincat, "When Öcalan met Bookchin: The Kurdish Freedom Movement and the Political Theory of Democratic Confederalism," *Geopolitics*, Vol. 26, 2021, pp. 3-4.

when Öcalan was in Syria.²⁶ In July 2013, the PYD announced a Kurdish constitution and proclaimed the establishment of the Kurdish Autonomous Region, whose leadership council consists of representatives of the Arab, Kurdish, Turkmen, and Armenian communities.²⁷ The preamble contains inclusive rhetoric and references to the ethnic and religious diversity of eastern Syria. According to the provisions of the constitution, the territory of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES²⁸) is part of the Syrian Republic, and the official languages of the autonomous territory are Arabic, Kurdish, and Syrian.²⁹

The AANES constitution is an innovative example in the political tradition of modern Syria. It refers to the cultural, religious, and ethnic diversity of the region, introduces principles of respect for minorities and strengthens the position of women. It grants them the right to co-lead the political and social administrative structures of the autonomy, introduces the principle of gender equality and prohibits violence and discrimination against women.³⁰

The Syrian Kurdish movement also has a military wing, the People's Self-Defence Units (YPG). They were formed in the wake of the outbreak of the civil war in 2011 and were legalised after their military victory in Kobane, the first city to be recaptured from IS in 2015. The success of the Kurdish militia has gained recognition from the U.S., which supported the armed wing of the PYD in its fight against the jihadist movement in Syria.³¹ Due to their experience on the battlefield, the People's Self-Defence Units form the

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²⁶ In 1998, Syria signed the so-called Adana Agreement with Türkiye, under which it closed PKK bases on its territory and expelled Öcalan, leading to his capture in 1999. Under the agreement, the Syrian government also agreed not to allow the PKK to operate on its territory. In the opinion of the Turkish side, the autonomous activities of the Kurds in northern Syria, based on the political solutions promoted by Öcalan, should oblige the Syrian authorities to expel PYD members from the country. S. Cengiz, "Why is the 1998 Adana pact between Türkiye and Syria back in the news?," *Arab News*, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1441931>, [accessed on 6 April 2025].

²⁷ L. Radpey, "The Kurdish Self-Rule Constitution in Syria," *Chinese Journal of International Law*, 2015, Vol. 14, Iss. 4, pp. 835–836.

²⁸ AANES consists of the cantons of Cezire, Kobane, and Afrin and has a population of about 4.6 million. It covers the provinces of Hasakah, Raqqqa, Deir ez-Zour, and Aleppo, mainly east of the Euphrates River. M.A. Salih, "Syria's Kurdish Northeast...", *op. cit.*,

²⁹ Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, "Social contract of the Democratic Autonomous Administration of the North and East Syria Region," <https://links.org.au/social-contract-democratic-autonomous-administration-north-and-east-syria-region>, 18 January 2024, <https://links.org.au/social-contract-democratic-autonomous-administration-north-and-east-syria-region>, [accessed on 1 April 2025].

³⁰ L. Radpey, "The Kurdish Self...", *op. cit.*, pp. 835–836.

³¹ J.P. Lefief, "Three questions to understand the Kurds' situation in Syria," *Le Monde*, https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2025/01/19/three-questions-to-understand-the-kurds-situation-in-syria_6737183_4.html, [accessed on: 07.04.2025].

core of the SDF, which also includes representatives of the Arab and Christian communities and women.

The takeover of power in Syria by HTS in December last year called into question the continued functioning of the Kurdish administration and armed formation as contrary to the idea of rebuilding a unitary Syrian state. From the Kurdish perspective, the dissolution of the SDF would increase the risk of an offensive by Türkiye or paramilitary groups affiliated with it against their territories, which is an existential threat to this community. For this reason, the SDF and AANES are working to secure the territorial and military autonomy of these regions. However, their tools in this regard remain limited. First, they face pressure from pro-Turkish groups, which continue their armed operations against the SDF. Second, the Syrian public largely rejects the division of the state. Third, the Americans, who have so far provided a protective umbrella for the Kurds, are signalling their willingness to withdraw from Syria, which was already left by about 1,000 of the 2,000 American soldiers in April this year.³² In addition, during his visit to Syria in July this year, Tom Barrack, U.S. Special Envoy for Syria and Ambassador to Türkiye, explicitly rejected the possibility of U.S. support for the creation of a federation in Syria and pressed the SDF to integrate into state structures.³³ For these reasons, on 10 March this year, SDF commander Mazloum Abdi signed an agreement with Syrian interim president Ahmed al-Sharaa on the integration of the Kurdish-led group into the new Syrian army, to be implemented by the end of 2025. This agreement is a breakthrough in Syrian political history; it is the first to recognise the Kurds as an integral part of Syrian society and guarantees them civil rights. It also provides for the integration of all civil and military institutions in northeastern Syria into the Syrian state administration, including border crossings, airports, and oil and gas fields, and support for the SDF in combating terrorism, remnants of the regime and any threats to the security and territorial integrity of Syria. It also introduced a ceasefire between the SDF and the Syrian state throughout the country. However, the agreement did not end the disputes between the SDF and the Syrian government over the model of governance (the SDF insists on decentralisation), the form of integration of the formation's members into the army (the Kurds demand the creation of a separate unit), or the future of the camps where IS fighters and their families are kept.³⁴

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³² More in the section: *United States*.

³³ R. I. Turan, S. Cetin, "US envoy says SDF is YPG/PKK, rules out separate SDF state in Syria," <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/americas/us-envoy-says-sdf-is-ypg-pkk-rules-out-separate-sdf-state-in-syria/3628638>, [accessed on: 28.07.2025].

³⁴ More in the section: *IS*.

The successful de-escalation of the situation in Aleppo, where the SDF attempted to maintain control over the Kurdish part of the city, can be seen as a test of goodwill on both sides. Clashes and mutual arrests occurred there on a regular basis. In early April, the Syrian authorities and the SDF signed an agreement under which Kurdish units withdrew from Aleppo, gradually being replaced by government forces, and prisoners were exchanged. In addition, in the same month, the Syrian authorities also took control of oil fields and wells and the Tishreen dam in the AANES territory.

Alawites

Alawites constituted the overwhelming majority of officers in the army and intelligence services of the previous regime: after its fall, there were probably only one or two Sunnis among the 40 highest-ranking officers in the Syrian army. They were also significantly overrepresented in some elite units specifically designed to protect the regime from internal threats, such as the Republican Guard and the Fourth Armoured Division. These units, and the Fourth Division in particular, were also responsible for the most egregious war crimes and crimes against humanity during the war. In addition, in areas with large Alawite populations, such as Homs or the coast, there was preferential recruitment into the public sector. These jobs were generally low-paid, but given other economic factors (such as widespread unemployment and poverty in Syria), they contributed to disparities in poverty rates between Alawite-inhabited regions and the rest of the country. The UNDP report showed that consumer spending was 30% to 50% higher than the national average, depending on the province.³⁵ The mainly Alawite towns on the Syrian coast were also not areas of armed conflict, which allowed them to avoid destruction.

After the fall of the Assad regime, cases of violence against Alawites began to be reported. These actions were not met with a response from the new authorities, mainly due to their still limited control over Alawite-inhabited territories. This was compounded by mass layoffs in the public sector, justified by the fact that, according to estimates by the then finance minister, Muhammad Abazid, only 900,000 of the 1.3 million registered employees were actually working (the phenomenon of “ghost workers”). Given the dominance of state sector workers among Alawites, this group was particularly affected by this process. At the same time, in Tartus and Latakia, there were

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³⁵ K. Abu-Ismaïl, A. Abdel-Gadir, H. El-Laithy, “Poverty and Inequality in Syria (1997–2007),” *Arab Development Challenges Report Background Paper 2011/15*, United Nations Development Programme, https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/migration/arabstates/BG_15_Poverty-and-Inequality-in-Syria_FeB.pdf [accessed on 11 August 2025].

constant clashes between Assad loyalists and pro-government forces from December 2024, accompanied by disinformation campaigns fuelling hostility between different religious groups. These conditions laid the groundwork for the massacres of Alawites in Latakia in early March this year. As a result of these events, about 30,000 Alawites fled to Lebanon, and according to Russian sources, several thousand took refuge in one of the Russian bases.

In response to the massacres, the new government appointed a commission of seven judges (including two Alawites) to investigate the circumstances of the events and identify the main perpetrators. It also decided to deploy troops to the coast and intensify efforts to disarm and integrate militants with the security forces in the area. Representatives of the Alawite community expressed their support for the steps taken by the government. This helped to pacify the warring parties and calm the situation, although sporadic acts of violence still occur there. This contributes to the continuing fear and distrust of the Alawites towards the government, which is exploited in further information manipulation by Russia, Iran, and Assad loyalists. The continued influence of Assad loyalists and Iran-affiliated groups in Alawite-populated regions was also evidenced by the discovery of a warehouse containing sophisticated and difficult-to-detect improvised explosive devices in May this year.

The intensification of the activities of Assad loyalists and other anti-government groups is facilitated by the fact that when the government-appointed commission completed its investigation in July this year, the full version of its summary report was not made available to the public. Only a press conference was held, during which the commission stated that it had documented the names of over 200 members of the Alawite community who were involved in anti-government activities and about 300 representatives of the security forces who committed crimes against Alawites. Independent reports (e.g., prepared by Reuters and the non-governmental organisation Syrian Centre for Media and Freedom of Expression) have accurately identified the security forces and SNA-affiliated organisations involved in massacres against civilians in individual cities. The contrast between the information provided by independent sources and the government makes it difficult to rebuild trust in the new authorities, especially among religious minorities who still feel threatened by the ideological background of the former HTS.

The Druze

The Druze remained on the sidelines of the 2011 demonstrations and opposition activities during the civil war until 2023, when demonstrations motivated by deteriorating

living conditions began in Suwayda. In addition, Suwayda's location on the border with Jordan also contributed to the concentration of drug production and trafficking in the province. This activity was mainly linked to the Assad regime, Hezbollah, and Iran, and the gangs involved also engaged in arms smuggling and human trafficking. This contributed to the growth of anti-regime sentiment among the population, but also, together with the threat posed by IS, led to the emergence of numerous Druze militias, of which there were around 160 operating in the Suwayda province until recently.

The leaders of most Druze militias established contact with the new authorities shortly after Assad's fall. On 24 February this year, a delegation of representatives of this community, including the leaders of the largest militias, met with Ahmed al-Sharaa, emphasising that the Druze want to be involved in building the state under the new authorities. However, this did not prevent divisions among Druze leaders over relations with the Syrian authorities and the future of the Suwayda area. Some of them support the centralisation of the political system in Syria, while others seek to maintain control over the southern region. There are also separatist tendencies, promoted, for example, by the Suwayda Military Council, and conflicts with the new armed forces.³⁶ These divisions are exploited by members of the former regime. This was evident, among other things, in the failed assassination attempt on 8 March on Suleiman Abdul Baqi in Suwayda, one of the leaders of the Syrian Druze, who supports cooperation with the new authorities and rejected any external interference in the interactions between the Druze and the new government. Given Baqi's support for anti-Assad protests and his efforts to secure the release of prisoners held by the regime before Assad's fall, the assassination was most likely organised by loyalists of the former president.

Apart from former members of the regime exploiting these divisions, Israel is also interfering. After Assad's fall, the Israeli government announced that it would take military action to protect the Druze and supports separatist tendencies among the population through religious contacts. Among those promoting such ideas is the Israeli Druze Mowaffaq Tarif, who in January this year held a series of meetings with representatives of countries in the region and from the U.S. to promote Israel's vision for the future of the Druze in the Middle East, and in March organised a pilgrimage of more than 100 Druze to Israel.

On the Syrian side, a similar role is played by Hikmat al-Hijri, patron of the Suwayda Military Council who is most likely cooperating with Tarif and Israel. On 11 March this year, the government reached an agreement with leaders of the Druze community on the

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³⁶ More in the section: *Building Armed Forces*.

principles of integrating local fighters into the state security services. The agreement provided for, among other things, their full integration into state structures, the transfer of control over security in Suwayda to the Ministry of the Interior, and that police officers assigned to work in the region would come exclusively from the local community. However, those who prefer the decentralisation of Syria, including Hijri, rejected cooperation with the authorities, especially after the publication of the Constitutional Declaration, which slowed down the implementation of the 11 March agreement. In the following months, the government made three more attempts to negotiate with the Druze on contentious issues, but Hijri always withdrew at the last minute. His actions increase the risk of renewed destabilisation in Syria, especially since the Suwayda Military Council has recruited members of the Assad regime and most likely taken over some of its activities related to drug production and trafficking.

At the turn of April to May, violence broke out between the security forces and Druze militias. The source of tension was the widespread circulation of fabricated recordings of a Druze cleric committing blasphemy against Islam. About 100 people were killed in the violence that followed. The government and Druze leadership eventually managed to de-escalate the situation, agreeing to the presence of state security forces in Druze centres and the partial disarmament of local militias. However, another escalation occurred in July this year, the result of a long-standing conflict between Bedouin and Druze groups (most likely linked to Hijri and the SMC) that were involved in criminal activities and competing with each other. The immediate trigger for the violence was the kidnapping of a Druze vegetable seller, which sparked a series of mutual abductions that escalated into armed clashes. The scale of the violence prompted a response from government forces, although they delayed direct involvement in the hope that local leaders would be able to resolve the matter. Once the operation was launched, though, Druze fighters kidnapped nearly 20 soldiers, killing 10 and subjecting the rest to public humiliation. Hijri's supporters also escalated attacks against other Druze groups and Bedouins (including civilians). This was followed by the escalation of the army's attacks including on civilians. Massacres were reported and some military men were seen wearing IS badges. When, after two days of fighting, the army took control of some of the territories controlled by Hijri, a ceasefire was announced, but Hijri unexpectedly withdrew from it, coinciding with the start of Israeli airstrikes on Damascus, including on the Ministry of Defence and General Staff headquarters. Altogether around 1400 people died during the outbreak of violence, however it is not confirmed how many of them were combatants.

Israel considered the Syrian army's takeover of centres previously dominated by subversive groups cooperating with it as a threat to its presence in Syria. It therefore used

its previously promoted narrative of protecting the Druze minority to legitimise the air-strikes on Damascus and force the Syrian army to withdraw from Suwayda. The operation was also accompanied by increased activity on the part of Israeli Druze, both citizens and residents of the Golan Heights. On 17 July, Sharaa announced an agreement ending the conflict, which sanctioned the withdrawal of government forces from southern Syria, deepened divisions in Suwayda and forced the Bedouins to leave the region. This escalation and Israel's support for Assad-linked separatists posed one of the most serious challenges to the transition and could become a source of destabilisation that actors such as Russia, Iran, and Hezbollah could exploit to return to Syria.

Other Religious Groups

Drawing on its experience of cooperation with various groups in Idlib, HTS established contact with the Syrian community and diaspora leaders just a few days after launching its latest military offensive in late 2024. Discussions, which took place mainly in the first week of December last year, resulted in a strong relationship between HTS and Syria's Christian and Ismaili minorities. The Ismailis supported HTS in its negotiations with regime forces and paramilitary groups on the mainly Alawite coast. These negotiations laid the foundation for the development of positive relations between the government and this group after the fall of the Assad regime. The effectiveness of this cooperation was reflected in the donation of \$100 million to Syria by the Ismaili Aga Khan Foundation at a conference in Brussels in March this year.

Christian leaders in the coastal region of Syria also emphasise their positive relations with local authorities appointed by HTS and security service officials. Christian leaders across Syria were among the first to engage in the integration of the new security forces after Assad's fall.³⁷ Although there are reports of violence and destruction targeting Christian sites (e.g., the Greek Catholic church in Hama in December last year) or of the imposition of separation between men and women at security checkpoints or in churches, these actions are rather isolated cases. So far, the authorities have not interfered with the celebration of Christian holidays, and there are no grounds for suspicion of systematic persecution or discrimination against this group, although there have been incidents of this kind on the part of radical groups linked to HTS, such as the burning of a Christmas tree in Hama in December, to which the city's residents,

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³⁷ G. Waters, "Inside Hayat Tahrir al-Sham's diplomatic offensive with Syria's Christians and Ismailis," Atlantic Council, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/hts-diplomatic-offensive-with-minorities/>, [accessed on 11 August 2025].

regardless of their religion, reacted with mass protests. Most Christian community leaders support the new authorities' efforts to build a cohesive state. This was reflected above all in the statement by Bishop Hanna Jallouf, who, after the massacres in Latakia, emphasised the importance of Syrian unity, confirmed that there was no threat to Christians from the government, and called for the full integration of all minorities into state structures to continue.

At the same time, the activities of terrorist organisations that have emerged from the radical wing of HTS remain a serious threat to Christians and other minorities. This was demonstrated by the attack on St. Elias Church in Damascus on 22 June, in which 25 people were killed and 63 wounded. The Saraya Ansar al-Sunna (SAS) organisation claimed responsibility for the attack. It most likely split from HTS when the latter failed to implement a radical version of Muslim law in governing Syria. SAS also most likely carried out the attack in Hama in February this year, in which nine people were killed. The organisation justified its June actions with the ban on attempts to convert Christians to Islam in Syria, introduced in March. Although SAS claims to be an independent organisation, it is likely linked to IS, emphasising that the latter will likely attempt to use the transition process to rebuild its organisational capabilities and recruit more radical members of the former HTS.



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Building a New State

From the perspective of relations between the authorities and society, as well as between different parts of society, the priority issues are improving the economic situation and ensuring a just transition. Implementing reforms in this direction is becoming the main source of legitimacy (or lack thereof) for the new authorities. The level of repression under the Ba'ath Party, especially after 2011, was unprecedented and affected (directly or indirectly) the majority of Syrian society. According to a March 2023 report by the Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR), from the start of the civil war in 2011 to the end of 2022, the Assad regime was responsible for the deaths of at least 202,000 civilians³⁸ and the disappearance of at least 136,000 people.³⁹ During the war, the Assad regime arrested and released about 1.2 million people. In the period, 6.8 million people left Syria and 7 million were internally displaced.

According to the new president's statements, his main goal is to rebuild Syria as a coherent state where there will be no room for territorial divisions or political sanctioning of the isolation of individual ethnic and religious groups (as, for example, in the consociational democracy of Lebanon). In subsequent statements, Sharaa pointed to the need to build an inclusive Syria where the rights and freedoms of individual Syrian groups will be guaranteed. However, his past and the strong presence of conservative Sunni Islamists among the new authorities raise doubts as to the willingness to actually implement these principles, further exacerbated by events such as the massacre of Alawites in Latakia and other incidents of violence. Nevertheless, Syrians have so far responded positively to the actions of the new authorities. In a poll conducted by *The Economist* on 29 March this year, 81% of respondents had a favourable opinion of Sharaa's leadership, 70% said they were optimistic about the future of the country, and

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³⁸ "Summary of the Assad Regime's Crimes Against the Syrian People Over the Last 14 Years," Syrian Network for Human Rights, <https://snhr.org/blog/2024/12/20/summary-of-the-assad-regimes-crimes-against-the-syrian-people-over-the-last-14-years/>, [accessed on 11 August 2025].

³⁹ "Record of Arbitrary Arrests," Syrian Network for Human Rights, <https://snhr.org/blog/2024/08/30/record-of-arbitrary-arrests/>, [accessed on 13 August 2025].

60% said they felt safer than under Assad.⁴⁰ This is confirmed by representatives of the Druze, Christian, and to some extent Kurdish and even Alawite communities, who indicate that they also want to see the situation stabilise under the new authorities and the establishment of an administration centred on state institutions rather than local ones.

New Constitution

At the political level, the central element of the Syrian transition process is the adoption of a new constitution to replace the 2012 constitution, which was abolished during the Revolution Victory Conference in January this year by the new authorities. The establishment of rules for the new political system emerging in Syria after more than 50 years of rule by the Assads (Hafez and Bashar) may help to overcome social divisions, which were often exploited politically by the previous regime to consolidate power and suppress opponents. Important signals for change were, first of all, the peaceful transfer of power from Assad's prime minister, Muhammad al-Jalali. His involvement in the formal transfer of control over Syria to HTS members emphasised the desire for a peaceful transition and institutional continuity.

The second important element was the inclusion of the leaders of the two main organisations representing the Syrian political opposition in exile in the formation of a new government. Bader Jamous, leader of the Syrian Negotiation Committee, and Hadi al-Bahra, president of the Syrian National Coalition,⁴¹ met with Sharaa on 12 February. The meeting resulted in a declaration dissolving both organisations and incorporating their members into the transitional authorities.

Another important step towards including representatives of various social groups in the transformation was Sharaa's convening of a National Dialogue on 25 February. However, both the preparation of the conference and the final statement were met with ambivalence by Syrian society. The dialogue failed to bring together a full representation of Syrian society. It was boycotted by representatives of the Kurdish administration and some of those invited received their invitations only one day before the event.⁴² The organisation of the event without adequate notice was a consequence of growing pressure on the government. This was linked, first, to calls for separatism by

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⁴⁰ "Syrians are still surprisingly upbeat," *The Economist*, <https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2025/04/02/syrians-are-still-surprisingly-upbeat>, [accessed on 11 August 2025].

⁴¹ Both organisations were involved in the Geneva process.

⁴² Own interview with a representative of one of the civil society organisations.

some representatives of the Druze community living in the south, which coincided with an intensification of Israeli military operations in the area. Second, it was the result of a lack of agreement with Kurdish groups, and third, the approaching Ramadan, when government work is traditionally limited. Although this contributed to the incomplete representation of Syrian society, the government managed to gather around 600 people at the conference, including representatives of all ethnic and religious groups, civil society, traditional clans, and business. The final declaration was general in nature, did not announce any specific measures, and did not have the potential to become the foundation for transformation. Nor did it mention the possibilities for democratisation in Syria. However, it was the first official document developed through compromise, which promised guarantees of equal rights, freedoms and liberties for religious and ethnic minorities.

On 13 March, Sharaa signed the Constitutional Declaration. Its provisions are to remain in force for the next five years, after which a new constitution should be ratified, completing the process of state transformation. The Constitutional Declaration states that Syria's political system is a presidential system in which the head of state exercises executive power and appoints ministers. It abolished the office of prime minister in Syria. In addition, the president appoints one-third of the members of the Provisional People's Assembly, with the members of the committee appointing the remaining two-thirds, nominates all seven judges of the Constitutional Court, and has the power to appoint and dismiss ministers.

The Declaration maintained the condition, also present in the previous constitution, that anyone running for president must be a Muslim. This contradicts the principle of equality of citizens expressed in Article 10 of the Declaration, according to which: "Citizens are equal before the law in terms of rights and obligations, regardless of race, religion, gender, or origin." Furthermore, the constitution recognises Islam as the main source of law, which has highlighted the potential marginalisation of other religions. There is no clear standard for the application of this law, given the multitude of different interpretations and schools of law within Islam. In this context, the differences between ethnic and religious groups in their approach to the emerging legal order in Syria are important. According to a survey by *The Economist*, over 90% of Sunnis support the full or partial restoration of Islamic law, with only 7% favouring an exclusively secular legal system. Among the remaining groups, the proportions are reversed, with about 86% of Druze and Christians and 73% of Kurds preferring a secular system. Among women,

support for a system based entirely on Muslim law is also low, at 29% (compared to 40% among men).⁴³

The above factors contributed to the rejection of the Declaration by the Kurdish administration, as was the case with the National Dialogue. According to the SDF, the constitution does not sufficiently guarantee equal rights for representatives of minorities and, moreover, is contrary to the organisation's preferred model of decentralised governance. Controversy was also sparked by the retention of the full name of the state, "Syrian Arab Republic", which maintained the link between Syrian nationality and Arab identity, even though part of Syrian society (Kurds, Assyrians) are not Arabs.⁴⁴

Like the final statement of the National Dialogue, the Constitutional Declaration makes no mention of democracy, which, together with the consolidation of power in the hands of the president, emphasised that the direction of Syria's transformation will most likely be linked to an authoritarian system. In this context, however, the provisional nature of the Declaration and the post-war conditions in which it was drafted remain important. Representatives of Syrian civil society emphasise that despite their partly critical attitude towards such extensive presidential prerogatives, some members of NGOs dealing with the protection of human rights and civil liberties are currently involved in the government's work on the Syrian transition.⁴⁵ However, their involvement is not formally sanctioned, which limits its durability and the liberal part of society's trust in the new authorities, bearing the hallmarks of tokenism.

A Just Transition

The scale of the cruelty and widespread nature of the crimes committed by the Assad regime have been confirmed in successive reports published by the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Syria, established by the UN, and local observers, such as the Syrian Network for Human Rights, which last year indicated that of the 202,000 people killed by the Assad regime, 10,000 were children and at least 15,000 died as a result of torture. Last year's UN commission report on the systematic use of

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⁴³ "Syrians are still surprisingly upbeat," *op. cit.*

⁴⁴ *Al-I'lan ad-Dusturi lil-Jumhuriyya al-'Arabiyya as-Suriyya* (Constitutional Declaration of the Syrian Arab Republic), Presidency of the Syrian Arab Republic, <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/sites/default/files/2025-03/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A5%D8%B9%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%86%20%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AF%D8%B3%D8%AA%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%20%D9%84%D9%84%D8%AC%D9%85%D9%87%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A9%20%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A8%D9%8A%D8%A9%20%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A9.pdf>, [accessed on 11 August 2025].

⁴⁵ Online interview with a representative of a Syrian NGO, Warsaw, April 2025.

arrest and detention as tools of repression highlighted the widespread involvement of employees of many institutions at various administrative levels in crimes committed by the Assad regime. It found that the scale of involvement of officials and security forces in crimes against humanity and human rights violations created a system based on fear in which most of the population was subject to surveillance and threatened with arrest. The rest were (directly or indirectly) part of the system of repression, which will pose a challenge in determining the scope of accountability. This is because the new authorities will have to strike a balance between the need for justice and the need to avoid antagonising and radicalising former service personnel.

As reports indicate, every intelligence agency, official, courts, and even hospitals were involved in actions against oppositionists, including collecting data, compiling and distributing lists of wanted persons, assisting in arrests, detaining and interrogating prisoners, and transferring them to other branches or intelligence agencies. The police and other employees of the Ministry of the Interior ran civilian prisons and checkpoints, broke up demonstrations, arrested suspects, including protesters, detained arrested persons at police stations before transferring them to other government units, and conducted joint patrols and interrogations. Employees of most institutions comprising the Ba'ath Party, including the Central Crisis Management Cell, the National Security Bureau, security committees, numerous investigative committees, and *ad hoc* committees formed after the 2011 protests were also involved in coordinating arrests, interrogations, and prisoner transfers. General committees, as well as individual party loyalists, often set up grassroots groups to support institutions in this regard. Party members, estimated at around 1.2 million in 2010, were also often involved.

In addition to the security agencies, courts and hospitals (mainly military) were an important element of oppression, as they were part of a system of prisoner transfers, also carried out on a massive scale within and between centres controlled by various security agencies. Transfers usually allowed for new charges to be brought, investigations to be reopened and, consequently, court proceedings to be extended, prolonging the detention and torture of prisoners.

For the purposes of the report, a special medical commission analysed photographs of 6,821 corpses of prisoners held by the regime. In its opinion:

About half (51.4%) of the bodies showed signs of injuries. A full 90% of these showed evidence of blunt impact traumas likely caused by blows from "elongated implements" such as cables, rubber hoses, plastic tubes, or something similar. Evidence shows that some of the people who were beaten "may have been severely and repeatedly beaten while tied up." Injuries observed on (...) the photographs are consistent with the victims having been held in the shabeh (bound in stress positions) and dulab

(squeezing body into a tire) positions, and with the practice known as *falanga* (foot whipping). Injuries to the faces, legs, torsos were likely caused by “recurrent beating within a clearly defined time period.” Other injuries to the arms and torsos of the bodies depicted were likely caused by somebody kicking, stomping, or jumping on the person. (...) There were many “indications of suffocation by mechanical pressure on the neck, in particular considerable force against the front of the neck”, which could have been caused by severe blows and kicks to the neck, standing on the neck, or objects having been pressed against the neck. The photographs revealed occasional cases of mechanical removal of finger or toenails (...) ⁴⁶.

In view of the widespread crimes committed by the regime and the level of brutality of the repression, bringing the previous authorities and administration to account became an integral part of the transition. It was therefore included in the Constitutional Declaration, and some of its articles allowed for the repeal of legal acts introduced under Assad’s rule, which had formed the basis for the repression. Among other things, the Constitution abolished emergency laws that were incompatible with human rights and the consequences of unfair sentences handed down by the Anti-Terrorism Court, which was established in 2012 as a body to convict activists and other opposition figures, releasing those arrested by it. ⁴⁷ It also established a commission to develop legal and organisational principles for accountability and to determine the consequences of crimes committed. At the same time, it excluded the application of the principle of non-retroactivity of the law to war crimes, crimes against humanity, genocide and all other crimes committed by the previous regime.

The new authorities’ support for the UN Human Rights Council Resolution of 4 April this year confirmed their willingness to carry out the transformation in line with the expectations not only of the Syrian population but also of the international community. It called on the new Syrian government to support the investigation of crimes committed during the civil war. It also extended the mandate of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Syria by another year, which will allow human rights observers to support the government in investigating Assad’s crimes and to monitor the state transformation and potential violations committed during it.

Given the composition of Syrian society, the new authorities’ priority during the accountability process is to avoid antagonising any group, especially in view of the risk that they could be exploited by external actors to destabilise the country. For this reason, actions in this area are progressing slowly, resulting in growing public pressure on

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⁴⁶ “The Syrian Government Detention System as a Tool of Violent Repression,” IJIM, UN, p. 53, https://ijim.un.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/IJIM_DetentionReport_Public.pdf, [accessed on 11.08.2025].

⁴⁷ “Syria: Counterterrorism Court Used to Stifle Dissent,” Human Rights Watch, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2013/06/25/syria-counterterrorism-court-used-stifle-dissent>, [accessed on 11 August 2025].

the government, vigilante justice and outbreaks of violence between different groups. Assad loyalists who remain at large are also using the experience they gained during their service and their access to weapons to carry out destabilising activities and organise armed opposition. An example of such groups is the Military Committee for the Liberation of Syria, founded in March this year by former Assad officers. It was responsible for the attacks on armed services personnel on patrol in the Latakia area, which ultimately led to the massacre of Alawites.

Another challenge to a just transition remains the involvement of other groups, including those currently part of the government, in war crimes and human rights violations. For example, according to an August 2024 SNHR report, 157,634 people went missing in Syria since 2011. The Assad regime is responsible for about 87% of these disappearances, with IS responsible for a 5.5%, the SDF for 3.2%, HTS for 1.7% and other Syrian opposition factions for 2.8%.⁴⁸ This means that when settling accounts, the new authorities may also be obliged to investigate their allies and, what may cause even more controversy, members of opposition groups with whom they are trying to reach an agreement, such as the SDF, although with limited success.

The Importance of Civil Society

The involvement of civil society will be crucial for the smooth transition. Not only will it limit potential human rights violations by the new administration but also it will ensure its access to the foundations of the peace process and the tools developed, for example, within the Geneva process or through cooperation between Syrian NGOs and the opposition in exile.

This is particularly important in light of the isolation to which HTS has been subjected by the international community due to the organisation's former affiliation with IS and Al-Qaeda. Representatives of Syrian civil society point out that years of isolation have contributed to limited trust among HTS members towards NGOs outside Idlib.⁴⁹

For this reason, there are still no established rules for cooperation between the so-called third sector and government institutions. As a result, the new authorities prioritise engaging NGO activists on an individual level, at the expense of systemic engagement. This has also translated into a greater willingness on the part of the new

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⁴⁸ A. Fleck, "Counting the Disappeared of Syria," Statista, <https://www.statista.com/chart/30717/number-of-people-detained-forcibly-displaced-in-syria/>, [accessed on 11 August 2025].

⁴⁹ Interview with a representative of a Syrian NGO, Beirut, February 2025.

authorities to cooperate with organisations supporting access to basic services, such as food, running water, healthcare, etc., than with those dealing with human rights and civil liberties.⁵⁰ This is also partly due to attempts to draw on the experience of Idlib, where cooperation with similar organisations was one of the elements of the system of governance that functioned there. Given Syria's extremely difficult economic situation, the attempt to replicate this model on a national scale may also stem from a desire to transfer responsibility for services to NGOs, as well as from a shortage of competent personnel in the ranks of the former HTS. However, NGOs emphasise that this is an undesirable state of affairs from their perspective and are attempting to cooperate with the government to strengthen its capacity to provide public services, perhaps even by integrating some of these organisations into state structures.⁵¹ This is reflected in the integration of the White Helmets into the state services in May this year. At the same time, they point to differences in competences between organisations operating in the area controlled by the Assad regime and those in northern Syria, where the latter are much better integrated with international organisations. In both cases, a change in the attitude of civil society, which for years has been in opposition to the authorities and now has an opportunity to cooperate with the government, will also be important for future interactions with the authorities.

The expertise of civil society, including NGOs and media, will be essential in investigating the crimes of the Assad regime. Since the beginning of the civil war, they have been collecting data and witness testimonies on violations in Syria, which have formed the basis of reports by international organisations. They have also developed mutual relations and relations with global actors. A good example is Madaniyya, a platform for dialogue between Syrian civil society activists. It has become an important voice in the debate on the future of the country, and its members have been invited to international conferences, including those organised by the EU on support for Syria. Members of these organisations and media outlets also participated in the Geneva Process, for example as part of the Syrian Constitutional Committee, from which HTS was excluded. Currently, these organisations, together with journalists, are trying to actively participate in the changes in Syria. Some of them (e.g., Syrian Forum and Jusur) participated in the National Dialogue. They are also working on proposals on how to use the mechanisms of the International Criminal Court (ICC) to bring Assad to justice, for example, through a state party referral.⁵² Media platforms that were forced to operate outside the country during the war are now reopening their offices in Damascus.

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⁵⁰ Online interview with a representative of a Syrian NGO, Warsaw, March 2025.

⁵¹ Interview with a representative of a Syrian NGO, Beirut, February 2025.

⁵² Interview with a representative of a Syrian NGO, Beirut, February 2025.

However, some of them report that the new authorities are reluctant to give interviews to independent media and sometimes question their work in response to criticism of the new authorities.⁵³ So far, however, no systemic restrictions on the work of journalists have been introduced and media freedom has been enshrined in the Constitutional Declaration. According to statements by some Western journalists working in Syria, they are able to operate freely in areas fully controlled by the new government. However, this is not possible, for example, in territories controlled by the SDF, where journalists are assigned an official to monitor their work.⁵⁴



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⁵³ M. Leake, "The pioneers rebuilding Syria's fragile news ecosystem: 'The media needs to break these walls between people,'" Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/news/pioneers-rebuilding-syrias-fragile-news-ecosystem-media-needs-break-these-walls-between-people>, [accessed on 11 August 2025].

⁵⁴ Interview with a journalist from a European country, Beirut, May 2025.



Economic situation

The economic consequences of the war have affected Syrians from all segments of society. Nearly 90% of the estimated 25 million population currently lives below the poverty line, and between 9 and 10 million face food insecurity, including 3 million in severe poverty.⁵⁵ About 16 million people are in need of humanitarian assistance. Nearly one-third of residential buildings were destroyed or severely damaged during the years of conflict, leaving 5.7 million people in Syria in need of shelter.⁵⁶ Across the country, about 14 million Syrians have inadequate access to water, sanitation, and hygiene facilities. The scale of these problems remains one of the most important challenges for the new authorities and resolution of them is not helped by sanctions, years of systemic corruption, the dominance of Assad-linked business people in the Syrian economy, and war damage, with the cost of rebuilding Syria estimated at between \$250 billion and \$400 billion.

The Aftermath of Assad's Rule

In the 2010s, Assad initiated a series of neoliberal reforms aimed at widespread privatisation and liberalisation of the economy. However, the state continued to play an important role in the economy, employing a large number of Syrians. Assad also allowed the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund to intervene in Syria's economic transformation. He did not privatise major state assets, although the aim of the strategy at the time was to commercialise and withdraw the state from the provision

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⁵⁵ "Syrian Arab Republic," World Food Programme, <https://www.wfp.org/countries/syrian-arab-republic>, [accessed on 11 August 2025].

⁵⁶ "The impact of the conflict in Syria: a devastated economy, pervasive poverty and a challenging road ahead to social and economic recovery," United Nations Development Programme, ReliefWeb, <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/impact-conflict-syria-devastated-economy-pervasive-poverty-and-challenging-road-ahead-social-and-economic-recovery-enar>, [accessed on 11 August 2025].

of public services, the payment of subsidies, and the reduction of employment in the public sector, which exacerbated socio-economic problems.⁵⁷

The beneficiaries of this policy were the Syrian upper class and foreign investors, especially from the Persian Gulf monarchies and Türkiye, at the expense of the majority of Syrians, who were affected by inflation and rising living costs. This became one of the most important causes of the 2011 protests and the civil war, which led the Syrian economy into an extremely difficult situation. A UN report from February this year estimated that Syria lost \$800 billion in GDP during the conflict. The sectors that suffered the greatest losses were mining, including energy extraction (a loss of about 90% of its value between 2010 and 2018), and agriculture (the rural population declined by 50% and the value of damage to the sector is estimated at \$16 billion).⁵⁸ Oil production in Syria, which before the war was around 400,000 barrels per day, is now only around 20,000 barrels per day. In addition, production at the country's two operating refineries, which previously stood at around 230,000 barrels per day, has fallen to 70,000, while the Syrian economy consumes around 160,000.⁵⁹ The power grid and gas refineries have been destroyed. This translates into extremely difficult access to electricity. At the end of February, Damascus residents had access to electricity for only three hours a day. The exception is Idlib, where electricity is available almost around the clock due to the importing of electricity from Türkiye.

Differences in access to electricity are one example of the regional economic inequalities that have arisen during the conflict. While poverty rates have risen in all provinces, those most affected are those where the fighting has been most intense and which historically had higher poverty rates, such as Raqqqa, Deir ez-Zour, Aleppo, Idlib and Rural Damascus (Rif Dimashq). The lowest poverty rates were recorded in Suweyda, Latakia, Damascus, and Tartus, which coincide with regions where the population was mainly pro-Assad. Maintaining the better economic status of the part of the population that was most supportive of the criminal regime is often a source of escalating tensions between Syrians.

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⁵⁷ J. Dalher, "The political economic context of Syria's reconstruction: a prospective in light of a legacy of unequal development," European University Institute, Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies, Middle East Directions, <https://cadmus.eui.eu/server/api/core/bitstreams/2ae39891-e03d-5ff5-b737-2230f54448a7/content>, [accessed on 11 August 2025].

⁵⁸ J. al-Attar, "Syria's Agricultural Crisis," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/2024/01/syrias-agricultural-crisis?lang=en>, [accessed on 11 August 2025].

⁵⁹ B. Shapira, "The Energy Crisis in Syria—Opportunities and Implications," Alma Research and Education Center, <https://israel-alma.org/the-energy-crisis-in-syria-opportunities-and-implications/>, [accessed on 11 August 2025].

The conflict in Syria led to the loss of over 3 million jobs in the first five years. This was caused by the destruction of businesses and infrastructure, the public finance crisis, and the deteriorating security situation. Already in the first years of the war, massive job losses contributed to intensified migration (a total of around 6.8 million people left Syria). The unemployment rate rose from 8% in 2010 to 24% in 2023, and in 2015–2016, at the height of the fighting, it exceeded 50%.⁶⁰ In addition, the confiscation of the property of detainees was also part of the government's repression. The Association of Prisoners and Missing Persons in Sednaya Prison estimated that between 2011 and 2021, the regime seized \$1.5 billion worth of assets from people accused of participating in anti-government protests. The organisation reports that the property of about 40% of those detained was seized, with some forced to sign documents for this purpose, sometimes while blindfolded.⁶¹ These seizures were intended to help Assad gain access to income after Western sanctions were imposed.

Challenges for Reform

The extremely difficult situation of the population and domestic business on the one hand, and the need for foreign support and investment on the other, are forcing the new authorities to balance liberal reforms with the protection of Syrian producers.

This was evident in some of the first changes in the area of trade after Assad's overthrow, when in January this year the new government equalised customs duties on products imported through all border crossings (previously they differed depending on the organisation controlling the area). The decision covered most imported goods and reduced customs duties by 50–60% compared to those previously introduced by the regime. In turn, customs duties applied in northern Syria, where goods imported from Türkiye were destined, increased by up to 300%.⁶² This decision was criticised by Turkish decision-makers and the business community, forcing the authorities to take their interests into account in the new customs policy and exclude 269 Turkish goods from customs duties,⁶³ which in turn was criticised by Syrian producers.

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⁶⁰ "The impact of the conflict in Syria," *op. cit.*

⁶¹ "Assad regime has confiscated \$1.5 billion in assets from detainees," Association of Detainees and Missing Persons of Sednaya Prison, <https://www.admsp.org/en/assad-regime-has-confiscated-1-5billion-in-assets-from-detainees/>, [accessed on 11 August 2025].

⁶² "The impact of unified customs tariffs in Syria," *Enab Baladi*, <https://english.enabbaladi.net/archives/2025/01/the-impact-of-unified-customs-tariffs-in-syria/>, [accessed on 11 August 2025].

⁶³ R. Soyulu, "Syria slashes tariffs on 269 Turkish goods to ease trade tensions," <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/syria-slashes-tariffs-269-turkish-goods-ease-trade-tensions>, [accessed on 11 August 2025].

The preference for liberal economic change in the country was confirmed by the appointments of the ministers of economy and finance, who were involved in the liberalisation of the Syrian economy under Assad. This direction is primarily intended to facilitate the resumption of cooperation with international financial institutions, which is essential given the high costs of rebuilding the country.⁶⁴ The economy minister of the previous transitional government, Basel Abdal Hanan, met with the World Bank's director for the Middle East, Jean Christophe Carret, at the end of February, and the then finance minister, Muhammad Abazid, received a delegation from the World Bank in March to discuss the terms of potential assistance from that institution. In June, a delegation from the International Monetary Fund concluded its first mission to the country since 2009, which lasted several days and included discussions with the government on Syria's budget, tax reforms and sources of state revenue. However, the dominance of the economic transformation by the agenda of liberal institutions raises the risk of a return to the mechanisms of the early years of Assad's presidency, when reforms contributed to deepening social inequalities. It may also increase the country's foreign debt, which currently stands at around \$23 billion (compared to GDP of \$17.5 billion in 2023) and requires restructuring.⁶⁵ This amount is most likely underestimated and does not include Syria's debt to Iran and Russia incurred by Assad. While the debt to Russia is likely to be around \$1 billion, the Iranian authorities claim that the Syrian state should repay around \$50 billion. However, in 2019, journalists from Reuters and *Asia Times* estimated that Syria owed Iran between \$4.5 billion and \$7.6 billion, indicating that the remaining amount may be related to undisclosed military support.⁶⁶ However, the new Syrian government is itself demanding that Iran repay \$300 billion for its role in destroying the country during the civil war.

Another challenge for reform is the situation of business people loyal to Assad, whose long-standing activities have dominated key sectors of the Syrian economy, such as transport, energy, and telecommunications. In January this year, the Central Bank of Syria ordered the freezing of assets of individuals and companies supporting the Assad regime. The government also set up a special committee to analyse the assets and financial transactions of businesspeople linked to the regime. However, many of

64 "Al-Bashir: Suriya fi wada' mali si' (Al-Bashir: Syria is in a bad financial situation)," *Enab Baladi*, <https://www.enabbaladi.net/728562/%d8%a7%d9%84%d8%a8%d8%b4%d9%8a%d8%b1-%d8%b3%d9%88%d8%b1%d9%8a%d8%a7-%d9%81%d9%8a-%d9%88%d8%b6%d8%b9-%d9%85%d8%a7%d9%84%d9%8a-%d8%b3%d9%8a%d8%a6/#>, [accessed on 11 August 2025].

65 A. Mazarei, "Syria needs a debt restructuring, but that will be difficult," <https://www.piie.com/blogs/realtime-economics/2025/syria-needs-debt-restructuring-will-be-difficult>, [accessed on 11 August 2025].

66 "Syria in Figures, Making Sense of Syria's Economy," Karam Shaar Advisory Limited, https://storage.googleapis.com/karam_viz/Syria-in-figures/February/Syria%20in%20Figures-Issue%205%2C%20Feb%202025-PC.pdf, [accessed on 11 August 2025].

them have managed to transfer their assets abroad, to Russia or the United Arab Emirates, to avoid the consequences of the new authorities' actions. The risk in this context remains their importance to the Syrian economy and the impact of the potential liquidation of their businesses on the availability of basic products and the progress of the country's reconstruction. Without new investment, the government must choose between holding them accountable and restricting economic activity in key sectors.

Impact of Sanctions

The suspension of most U.S. sanctions and the lifting of EU sanctions on Syria in May this year was a breakthrough on the country's road to recovery. U.S. sanctions covered virtually the entire Syrian institutional and economic apparatus, including as a state sponsor of terrorism and a producer of captagon (under a 2024 Act of Congress). Sanctions were also imposed on the HTS leadership for its activities while part of IS and Al-Qaeda (including its inclusion on the State Department's list of terrorist organisations). In addition, the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act of 2019 introduced secondary sanctions that restricted cooperation between the U.S. and foreign entities and the Syrian authorities. These sanctions affected the banking, energy, transport, insurance, and IT sectors. Since December 1979, Syria has also been on the list of state sponsors of terrorism, which not only limits access to U.S. foreign aid but also introduces a number of financial restrictions. It makes it difficult to obtain support from international financial institutions and introduces a requirement to obtain a waiver from the U.S. Treasury Department for any financial transaction with the Syrian government. EU sanctions, in turn, excluded cooperation with key sectors and state institutions. Additionally, despite the official dissolution of HTS's military-political structures in January 2025, as well as the group's actions against Al-Qaeda, IS, and Iranian militias in the region, it remains a recognised terrorist organisation.

Initially, the suspension or lifting of sanctions in connection with the change of power in Syria was slow, especially on the U.S. side. Supporters of the change, such as some European and Middle Eastern countries, as well as expert circles, faced resistance mainly due to the terrorist past of the new Syrian government. This situation meant that the sanctions imposed to weaken Assad and, consequently, bring about regime change and transformation had the effect of slowing down and destabilising this process. Among other things, they delayed the transfer of funds for public sector salaries as pledged by Qatar and Türkiye. Ultimately, it was not until six months after Assad's fall, so at the end of May 2025, that the U.S. declared that it would suspend sanctions on Syria, and shortly after this announcement, the EU also lifted most of its sanctions.

Initially, it was the EU that took more decisive steps towards opening up economic cooperation with Syria. After the summit on 24 February 2025, the EU Council lifted sanctions on the energy and transport sectors, introduced exceptions to the ban on establishing banking relations between Syrian banks and financial institutions in the territories of Member States, and authorised transactions related to the energy and transport sectors, as well as transactions related to humanitarian aid and reconstruction. It introduced an exception to the ban on the export of luxury goods to Syria for non-commercial use and removed five financial institutions from the list of entities subject to the freezing of funds and economic resources, and also allowed them to be made available to the Syrian central bank. Although the U.S. had previously (in January this year) approved General License 24, which was also intended to facilitate the functioning of key sectors in Syria, the impact of this regulation on cooperation with Syria was negligible.

The suspension of U.S. sanctions in May confirmed the dominance of the U.S. administration's decisions for the reconstruction of the country. It also emphasised how the effectiveness of EU policy in its southern neighbourhood is linked to U.S. decisions. It was only the temporary lifting of U.S. restrictions that gave the impetus to investment decisions from Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Türkiye and also increased interest in the reconstruction of the country among European investors. Moreover, shortly after Trump's statement on the matter, the EU also decided to lift most of the remaining sanctions. In this context, the months of pressure and initiative on the part of European countries, which from the beginning of the overthrow of the Assad regime had been making increasingly intensive attempts to develop cooperation with the new Syrian government, are not without significance.

A New Syria, a New Middle East?

The fall of the Assad regime in Syria is among the structural changes in the Middle East that have been underway since the start of the war in the Gaza Strip in October 2023. That war has severely limited Iran's influence in the region by hindering the transfer of support to paramilitary organisations cooperating with it. It has also limited Iran's cooperation with Russia in the Middle East, restricting the latter's ability to use Syrian territory as a key logistics hub for its military operations in Africa. Second, it highlighted the ineffectiveness of the strategy of those Arab countries that based their policy towards Syria on normalisation with Assad and a complete rejection of cooperation with Islamist organisations. The change in regime has emphasised that actions based on ignoring internal factors and social aspirations are ineffective in the long term and has strengthened the position of those countries that have consistently supported the Syrian opposition, such as Türkiye and Qatar.

At the same time, the new Syrian authorities have made the diversification of foreign relations a priority. Therefore, Sharaa and members of the Syrian cabinet have undertaken to establish relations with the entire Arab world and EU countries, while maintaining contacts with Russia and avoiding taking a firm stance on the future of Syrian-Israeli relations. However, the often conflicting interests of Syria's immediate neighbours threaten the stability of this approach, especially in light of the exploitation of religious divisions and institutional weakness by Syria's neighbours to further their own interests by hindering the reconstruction of the state and undermining its sovereignty.

Who are the Big Winners?

Türkiye

During the Arab Spring, Türkiye supported Islamist movements ideologically close to its own Justice and Development Party (AKP) in order to strengthen its position in the region. An example of this was the support given by decision-makers to Sunni anti-Assad rebels. In the summer of 2011, the Syrian anti-regime opposition movement consolidated on Turkish territory, leading to the formation of the Free Syrian Army (FSA), which in 2019 transformed into the Syrian National Army, which, according to reports by, among others, Human Rights Watch, was responsible for war crimes against the Kurdish population in northern Syria.

Türkiye's role in the overthrow of Assad's regime is ambiguous. On the one hand, although HTS was recognised as a terrorist organisation by a Turkish court in 2018, primarily because of its links to Al-Qaeda, it continued to operate on Turkish territory. These activities included smuggling foreign fighters into Syria across the Turkish border, kidnapping for ransom, and illegal trade. It is also likely that HTS received ideological and logistical support through Turkish aid organisations such as the Turkish Human Rights, Freedom and Humanitarian Aid Foundation (İHH). It is also likely that the Turkish intelligence agency provided HTS with military training and weapons.⁶⁷ On the other hand, in the period immediately preceding the HTS offensive on Aleppo on 29 November this year, Türkiye was focused on reaching an agreement with Assad, as its previous policy of supporting Islamist movements in the region linked to the Muslim Brotherhood had failed (as evidenced by the overthrow of Türkiye-backed Mohamed Morsi in Egypt in 2013, among other things). Assad rejected Türkiye's diplomatic attempts to normalise relations with his regime, even though his allies, Iran and Russia, insisted on talks with Türkiye. After strengthening his position by resuming relations with Arab countries, Assad began to demand the complete withdrawal of Turkish forces from Syria. This demand was unacceptable to the Turkish side, which uses its military presence in Syria to weaken Kurdish groups.

Given the failure of talks with Assad on the future of Syria, it can be assumed that Turkish decision-makers took advantage of the favourable circumstances and supported HTS's offensive actions. The progress made by HTS in gaining territory in cooperation

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⁶⁷ A.Bozkurt, "A Secret Turkish Intelligence Deal with Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham Included No Attacks in Turkey," <https://www.meforum.org/mef-online/a-secret-turkish-intelligence-deal-with-hayat-tahrir-al-sham-included-no-attacks-in-turkey>, [accessed on 14 April 2025].

with the SNA, which participated in the capture of Aleppo, most likely exceeded the expectations of the Turkish authorities. Türkiye's original intention was to put pressure on Assad to start negotiations on normalising Turkish-Syrian relations.

The rebels' victory strengthened Türkiye's position and intensified political contacts between the parties. On 12 December 2024, the head of Turkish intelligence, İbrahim Kalın, appeared publicly in Damascus, and the head of Turkish diplomacy, Hakan Fidan, became the first foreign minister to visit the new rulers in Damascus on 22 December 2024.⁶⁸ In January this year, his Syrian counterpart Hassan al-Shaibani visited Türkiye.⁶⁹ The first meeting between Assad and Erdoğan took place in Ankara on 4 February 2025. Additional context for Türkiye's involvement is the ongoing political conflict with Israel over the war in the Gaza Strip.⁷⁰

The Turkish authorities' key interest in Syria remains the creation of a buffer zone free from Kurdish influence, which during the civil war led Türkiye to carry out four military operations between 2016 and 2020. These actions exposed the Kurdish community to persecution and expulsion. They served both to consolidate Erdoğan's power and to bring Türkiye closer to Russia, with the aim of gaining greater influence over a potential agreement to end the war. This was to be achieved through trilateral talks in the so-called Astana format, in which Iran also participated. Although they brought relative stability to some parts of Syria, for example, by establishing de-escalation zones between the regime and the rebels (including in Idlib), they did not lead to a comprehensive approach to resolving the conflict, however.⁷¹ On the other hand, Türkiye's attitude towards the Kurds has contributed to increased tensions in relations with the United States, which supports the Syrian Democratic Forces in their fight against IS.⁷²

The Turkish authorities believe that the fall of Assad's regime and the seizure of power by HTS are an opportunity to disarm the YPG, which Türkiye considers a threat to its national security. It therefore opposes federalism in Syria or any form of administrative and military autonomy for Kurdish territories, pressing for the

68 Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan: "Suriye'de yeni süreci en iyi okuyan ülkeyiz (President Erdoğan: We are the country that best understands the new process in Syria)," <https://www.bbc.com/turkce/articles/cq62zlyrmgjo>, [accessed on 6 April 2025].

69 "Turkey is next stop in Syrian Foreign Minister Al Shibani's regional tour," <https://www.thenationalnews.com/news/mena/2025/01/15/syria-foreign-minister-shibani/>, [accessed on 6 April 2025].

70 More in the section: *Israel*.

71 A.M. Spancerska, "Türkiye Exerting Influence on Post-Assad Syria," *PISM Bulletin*, No. 14, 10 February 2025, <https://pism.pl/publications/t%C3%BCrkiye-exerting-influence-on-post-assad-syria>, [accessed on 8 September 2025].

72 *Ibidem*.

creation of a unitary state in Syria. In June this year, AKP spokesman Ömer Çelik did not deny reports of secret talks between the Turkish authorities and the SDF, mediated by the Americans. According to Türkiye's expectations, SDF members would be incorporated into the new Syrian army and respect Syria's territorial integrity.⁷³

Türkiye's second main interest in relations with the new authorities in Syria is the return of refugees. According to data from the Turkish Migration Agency from April 2025, there are 2.79 million Syrians under temporary protection in Türkiye (in December 2024, the number was 2.9 million).⁷⁴ In addition, more than 238,000 Syrians have been granted Turkish citizenship.⁷⁵ On 17 March 2025, Turkish Vice-President Cevdet Yılmaz announced that between 9 December 2024 and 16 March 2025, 145,639 people had voluntarily returned to Syria. In total, between 2017 and 2025, 885,642 Syrians had returned to Syria.⁷⁶ In addition, at the end of December 2024, the Turkish Ministry of the Interior indicated that between January and July 2025, one person from each Syrian family would have the right to enter and leave Türkiye three times to prepare for relocation.⁷⁷

The desire to speed up relocation stems from tensions related to the presence of Syrians in Türkiye. With the conflict in Syria dragging on, Turks have started to see them as a burden on the economy and a security problem.⁷⁸ With growing xenophobia and

73 E. Akin, "Ankara's direct talks with Syrian Kurds," Al-Monitor, <https://www.al-monitor.com/newsletter/2025-06-06/ankaras-direct-talks-syrian-kurds>, [accessed on 12 June 2025].

74 Republic of Türkiye, Ministry of Interior, Presidency of Migration Management, "Temporary Protection, Distribution of Syrians under temporary protection by year," <https://en.goc.gov.tr/temporary-protection27>, [accessed on 8 April 2025].

75 "Türkiye'deki Suriyeli Sayısı Aralık 2024," Mülteciler Dernegi, <https://multeciler.org.tr/turkiyedeki-suriyeli-sayisi/>, [accessed on 08.04.2025].

76 "Cumhurbaşkanı Yardımcısı Yılmaz: Aralık 2024'ten beri 146 bin Suriyeli ülkesine döndü," Diken, <https://www.diken.com.tr/cumhurbaskani-yardimcisi-yilmaz-aralik-2024ten-beri-146-bin-suriyeli-ulkesine-dondü/>, [accessed on: 08.04.2025].

77 "Suriyelilerin gönüllü geri dönüşü: Her aileden bir kişiye 3 kez giriş-çıkış hakkı," BBC, <https://www.bbc.com/turkce/articles/cn0xk2e5ydzo>, [accessed on: 08.04.2025].

78 According to a 2012 survey by the independent Turkish polling company Metropoll, 66% of Turkish respondents said that new Syrian refugees should be sent back; more detailed data showed that 52% disagreed with the decision to settle Syrians in the country. See: J. Parkinson, A. Albayrak, "Turkey Hits 'Limit' of Syrian Refugees," *The Wall Street Journal*, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10000872396390443675404578058103242571138>, [accessed on 08.04.2025]. A survey conducted by the same polling company in August 2021 showed that as many as 81.7% of respondents want refugees to return home. Among supporters of the ruling AKP, this figure was 84.5%, and among voters of the opposition CHP, 89.9%. See: "Halkın yüzde 82'si Suriyelilerin geri dönmesini istiyor," *Türk Haber*, <https://www.turkhabergazetesi.com/haber/halkin-yuzde-82si-suriyelilerin-geri-donmesini-istiyor-33284.html>, [accessed on 9 April 2025].

violence,⁷⁹ both supporters of the ruling party and the opposition have been expressing greater hostility towards refugees, making it one of the main topics of the political rivalry. Attempts to speed up returns are accompanied by a narrative about the potentially positive impact of Syrians returning from Türkiye on Syria's economic situation. This is supposed to be evidenced by the entrepreneurial successes of Syrians in Türkiye. According to data from the Turkish Economic Policy Research Foundation, Syrians established 34,210 companies between 2010 and 2024. Most of the companies set up by Syrians are located in Istanbul and in border provinces such as Gaziantep, Mersin and Hatay.⁸⁰ These data also indicate the importance of Syrians' activities for the economies of selected regions of Türkiye, suggesting that their return may have a negative impact on them.

Qatar and Saudi Arabia

The choice of Saudi Arabia as the destination for Sharaa's first foreign visit on 2 February reflected, first, the political will of the new authorities to integrate Syria into the bloc of Arab states led by the Saudi monarchy and, second, their efforts to pursue a diversified foreign policy.

The new authorities wanted the visit to help convince Mohammad bin Salman to accept an Islamist-dominated government in Syria, which was at odds with Saudi Arabia's sceptical attitude towards similar groups in the past. The monarchy viewed the Muslim Brotherhood and similar organisations as the greatest threat to the stability of its rule and actively fought these groups on its territory and, after 2011, also in the region. Among other things, its attitude towards Islamists and its rivalry with Iran influenced the decision to normalise relations with Assad and restore Syria's membership in the Arab League. For the Saudi monarchy, stabilising Syria under Assad's rule was supposed to weaken these actors. Saudi Arabia's dominant role in this process confirmed its ability to effectively influence the regional policy of other Arab states (except Qatar), which contributed to Sharaa prioritising relations with the monarchy. Sharaa also hopes that

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⁷⁹ One of many examples is the riots that took place in Kayseri, a stronghold of the ruling AKP, in July 2024. The demonstrations were sparked by allegations of sexual abuse of a minor by a Syrian. During the events, protesters attacked businesses and set fire to vehicles belonging to Syrians. The police used tear gas and water cannons to disperse the crowd, which was chanting "We don't want Syrians in our country". See: E. Akin, "4 dead in northern Syria protests following Turkey's anti-refugee riots," *Al-Monitor*, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2024/07/4-dead-northern-syria-protests-following-turkeys-anti-refugee-riots>, [accessed on 08.04.2025].

⁸⁰ Information obtained during a study visit to Türkiye in January 2025.

closer ties with the monarchy will facilitate obtaining support for the reconstruction of the country and investments from other Gulf states.

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) remains a particular challenge in this regard, as, on the one hand, it has opened contacts with the new Syrian authorities, but, on the other hand, it fears that the government, which has its roots in Islamist groups, will strengthen similar organisations in the region, which the UAE considers an existential threat. As in the case of Saudi Arabia, this was motivation for the UAE to normalise relations with Assad, which it had been advocating since 2018, but also to support anti-Islamist armed groups in Libya and Yemen and autocrats in Tunisia and Egypt. In addition, some representatives of the Syrian elite from the Assad era fled to the UAE.⁸¹ The effectiveness of Sharaa's cooperation with the Saudis to date was demonstrated by the suspension of U.S. sanctions on Syria, announced during Trump's visit to Riyadh in May 2025, and the Saudi investments in the country announced in July. These are expected to amount to \$6.4 billion, including \$2.9 billion for infrastructure and housing projects (including the construction of a metro in Damascus) and \$1.1 billion for the telecommunications and technology sectors.

The Saudi authorities have taken steps to stabilise the country, for example, by mediating in Syrian-Lebanese talks on the escalation on the border between the two countries. The monarchy also declared that it was willing to provide "unlimited" support for the reconstruction of Syria and announced that it would repay its debt to the World Bank (\$15.5 billion), which it ultimately did together with Qatar to enable new loans to be taken out. Qatar and Saudi Arabia also jointly lobbied the U.S. for the lifting of sanctions on Syria. The openness to the new authorities also became a platform for Saudi-Turkish cooperation, despite rivalry between the two countries in other areas. This aspect was the focus of Turkish Foreign Minister Fidan's visit to Riyadh at the end of January this year. Both countries support the establishment of a unitary and inclusive state in Syria, oppose the maintenance of Western sanctions, want to cooperate in the area of reconstruction and seek to limit Iranian influence in the region. However, Saudi Arabia and Türkiye's differing attitudes towards political Islam, their inconsistent stance

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⁸¹ "Samir Fawz yughadir al-bilad ila al-Imarat ba'd fashal at-taswiya ma'a al-hukuma as-Suriyya" (Samer Fawz leaves the country and heads to the United Arab Emirates after the failure of the agreement with the Syrian government)," Syria TV, https://www.syria.tv/%D8%B3%D8%A7%D9%85%D8%B1-%D9%81%D9%88%D8%B2-%D9%8A%D8%BA%D8%A7%D8%AF%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A8%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%AF-%D8%A5%D9%84%D9%89-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A5%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A8%D8%B9%D8%AF-%D9%81%D8%B4%D9%84-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AA%D8%B3%D9%88%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%85%D8%B9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AD%D9%83%D9%88%D9%85%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A9?utm_source=substack&utm_medium=email. [accessed on 11 August 2025].

on Türkiye's military presence in Syria, and Türkiye's rivalry with Israel may disrupt this cooperation and limit its effectiveness.

Among Arab countries, Qatar is the second-largest beneficiary of Assad's downfall. The emirate has consistently opposed normalisation of relations with Assad and supported the opposition since the beginning of the rebellion, hosting its representatives and opening an official opposition mission. It supplied weapons and organised training for armed Islamist groups in Syria (e.g., Ahrar al-Sham). This was part of Qatar's long-standing regional policy, under which it, together with Türkiye, supported groups linked to the Muslim Brotherhood and other organisations promoting political Islam. These activities were cited in 2017 by the so-called Quartet of Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt as an argument for imposing a blockade on Qatar. The blockade was intended to force Qatar to change its policy towards Islamist organisations, but Qatar's diplomatic and economic efforts allowed it to outlast the blockade without any significant changes in this regard.

The Doha Forum, organised in December 2024, which coincided with the advancing offensive of Syrian rebels, became a platform for talks between the foreign ministers of Russia, Iran, and Türkiye on the situation in Syria, after which Iran and Russia refused to continue supporting Assad. At that time, representatives of other countries, including Saudi Arabia, also supported the proposal for Qatar to take the lead in opening channels of communication with HTS. This strengthened Qatar's position in the region, but also increased the legitimacy of its independent regional policy, which had previously been viewed with ambivalence by most of its Arab partners. The head of Qatar's security services, Khalfan bin Ali bin Khalfan Al-Bati Al-Kabi, and the head of Turkish intelligence, Kalin, who accompanied him, were the first high-ranking officials to visit Syria after the change of power, accompanied by a group of experts. This signalled a willingness to provide support in the area of intelligence gathering and security structure building in Syria. Qatar also became involved in providing economic support to Syria—in March, it began supplying gas to Syria via Jordan, and after the lifting of sanctions, together with Saudi Arabia, it provided funds for the salaries of public sector employees.⁸²

The change of power in Syria has lent credibility to Qatar's policy of cooperation with Islamist groups. At the same time, the emirate's priority is to stabilise the situation in Syria and ensure that the new authorities gain international legitimacy and acceptance by the leaders of other influential Arab countries, especially Saudi Arabia. For this reason,

82 Interview with a representative of a European diplomatic mission, Damascus, February 2025.

Qatar will push for a reduction in Islamist rhetoric in the Syrian government's policies and for a focus on strengthening the sovereignty and inclusiveness of the state.

Immediate Neighbourhood

The Significance of Assad's Fall for Israeli Policy

The defeat of the Assad regime and the takeover by forces originating from HTS has not changed the perception of the Israeli authorities, who still view Syria as a security threat, albeit now justified differently.⁸³ Historically, Syria has been one of the Middle East countries most antagonistic towards Israel, although direct confrontation after the 1973 war remained limited. The decisive factor influencing the state of the conflict in recent years was Syria's participation in the Iranian-led "Axis of Resistance" together with Hezbollah, Hamas, the Houthis, and other groups benefiting from Iranian support, which was further strengthened after the outbreak of the Syrian civil war in 2011. During the war, Israel launched an air campaign to prevent Iran from increasing its influence. Targets included arms shipments to Hezbollah, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, and Syrian military infrastructure.⁸⁴ At the same time, Israel established contacts with part of the Syrian opposition and provided limited humanitarian support in the immediate vicinity of the Golan Heights.

The context of Israeli operations changed after the Hamas attack on 7 October and the start of the war in the Gaza Strip, in which the "Axis of Resistance" became involved. Although the Assad regime tried to minimise its direct involvement against Israel,⁸⁵ Syrian territory became an area of armed confrontation between Israel and the U.S. on the one hand, and Iran and its partners on the other. This resulted in a serious weakening of Assad's regional allies, primarily Hezbollah, which was one of the factors

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⁸³ L. Berman, "PM: Israel wants 'correct' ties with new Syrian regime, but will attack if necessary," *The Times of Israel*, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/pm-israel-wants-correct-ties-with-new-syrian-regime-but-will-attack-if-necessary/>, [accessed on 11 August 2025].

⁸⁴ E. Kaduri, "The Campaign between the Wars in Syria: What Was, What Is, and What Lies Ahead," The Institute for National Security Studies, <https://www.inss.org.il/publication/war-between-the-wars-syria/>, [accessed on 11 August 2025].

⁸⁵ S. Nowacka, "A Still Unstable Syria Attempts to Stay out of the War in Gaza," *PISM Bulletin* No. 137 (2445), <https://pism.pl/publications/a-still-unstable-syria-attempts-to-stay-out-of-the-war-in-gaza> [accessed on 11 August 2025].

influencing the stability of the regime and its ability to defend itself against the Syrian rebel offensive that began in November 2024.⁸⁶

Israel's response to the fall of the Assad regime focused on military action. In December, the Israeli air force carried out massive airstrikes on Syrian army targets, destroying its air force fleet and arsenals (including chemical weapons). On 8 December, Israeli troops occupied the Syrian demilitarised zone along the occupied Golan Heights and, in the following weeks, extended their control to adjacent areas. Initial declarations of a temporary military presence were replaced by announcements by the Israeli authorities that it would be maintained indefinitely.⁸⁷ In February this year, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu announced Israel's assumptions and demands towards the new authorities in Damascus: the demilitarisation of southern Syria and the protection of the local Druze population.⁸⁸ In the following months, there were further airstrikes on elements of Syrian military infrastructure linked to Palestinian terrorist groups (e.g., Palestinian Islamic Jihad, PIJ), as well as military operations in the occupied areas of southern Syria.⁸⁹ The Israeli intervention during the clashes in July this year, when the airstrikes targeted the new government's facilities in Damascus, had particular potential for escalation.

Israel's strategy towards its immediate neighbours is currently determined by the ongoing war in the Gaza Strip against Hamas and the political consequences of it in the region. One of the key factors is the growing conflict between Israel and Türkiye, which is one of the most vocal critics of Israeli military operations in the Palestinian territories. Hence, the seizure of power in Syria by groups supported by the Turkish authorities is perceived by Israel as a *de facto* extension of Turkish influence to Israel's borders.⁹⁰ It is therefore seen as a security threat, potentially greater than the previous activity of Iranian forces due to Türkiye's military potential, its stronger international position, including as a NATO member, and Türkiye's support for other supporters of political

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⁸⁶ S. Nowacka, "Syrian rebels take over Aleppo," PISM Spotlight No. 79-2024, <https://www.pism.pl/publications/syrian-rebels-take-over-aleppo>, [accessed on 11 August 2025].

⁸⁷ E. Fabian, "Atop Mt. Hermon, Katz says Syrian leader will see indefinite IDF deployment," *The Times of Israel*, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/atop-peak-of-mt-hermon-katz-says-syrian-leader-will-see-indefinite-idf-deployment/>, [accessed on 11 August 2025].

⁸⁸ More in the section: *Druze*

⁸⁹ E. Fabian, "IDF strikes alleged Islamic Jihad nerve centre in Damascus, said to be leader's house," *The Times of Israel*, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/idf-strikes-alleged-islamic-jihad-nerve-center-in-damascus-said-to-be-leaders-house/>, [accessed on 11 August 2025].

⁹⁰ "Turkey and Israel are becoming deadly rivals in Syria," *The Economist*, <https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2025/04/07/turkey-and-israel-are-becoming-deadly-rivals-in-syria>, [accessed on 11 August 2025].

Islam (often hostile to Israel) in the region. Hence, Israel's goal is to maintain as long as possible the current presence of external forces that can counterbalance Türkiye's presence, namely the U.S. and Russia.⁹¹ In the context of the latter, Israeli diplomacy was to lobby, among others, in talks with the Americans on maintaining the presence of Russian troops in their existing bases, justifying this with the effectiveness of the coordination mechanism in place since 2015. At the bilateral level, initial statements immediately after the fall of the Assad regime indicated a willingness to reach an agreement with the new authorities, but over time, Israeli rhetoric has hardened. Israeli diplomacy strongly emphasised the new authorities' terrorist past and Islamist character.⁹² Israel also argues for the federalisation of Syria as a means of strengthening minority groups, which contradicts the unitary approach of the new Syrian government and the majority of the population. Israel's actions thus undermine the effectiveness of the Syrian authorities and weaken their credibility in the eyes of the public, which may strengthen radical groups operating in the country or Assad loyalists. Paradoxically, by continuing these actions, Israel is creating conditions conducive to forces openly hostile to it, such as Hezbollah, which is seeking to rebuild its potential. What is more, even the groups whose situation Israel uses to justify its actions—the Druze and the Kurds—are mostly distancing themselves from Israeli support.

For the Sharaa government, Israel's aggressive policy is one of the most important political challenges. Weakness and the ongoing consolidation process limit the new government's response options and result in a cautious tone in official statements on Israeli actions and the situation in the Gaza Strip, the West Bank, and southern Lebanon. The Trump administration's approach is key. On the one hand, it shows far-reaching support for Israel in the context of its actions in the region after 7 October 2023 (including airstrikes on targets in Syria since December 2024), and President Trump himself has repeatedly emphasised his decision to recognise Israel's annexation of the Golan Heights, which Israel took over during his first term. At the same time, the U.S. stresses the need for stability in the region. In April this year, it called for de-escalation between Israel and Türkiye, offering mediation. During a meeting with President Trump in Riyadh, President Shaara reportedly assured him of Syria's willingness to join the so-called Abraham Accords, i.e., the *de facto* normalisation of relations with Israel. In the context of relations with the U.S. and Israel, an important factor is the actions taken by the

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⁹¹ M. Gebeily, H. Pamuk, "Israel lobbies US to keep Russian bases in a 'weak' Syria, sources say," Reuters, <https://www.reuters.com/world/israel-lobbies-us-keep-russian-bases-weak-syria-sources-say-2025-02-28/>, [accessed on 11 August 2025].

⁹² "Katz calls new Syria president an 'al-Qaeda terrorist' after reports Alawites executed," *The Times of Israel*, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/katz-calls-new-syria-president-an-al-qaeda-terrorist-amid-crackdown-on-alawite-rebels/>, [accessed on 11 August 2025].

Syrian security services, which arrested members of Palestinian terrorist groups, including PIJ and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine–General Command, which was also one of the U.S. conditions for support. Diplomatic support on relations with Israel is also provided by countries in the region. President Sharaa confirmed that informal talks with the Israeli side are taking place with the mediation of the UAE and Azerbaijan,⁹³ and most recently—France. Israeli-Turkish talks are also underway through Azerbaijani mediation to clarify the formulas for communication and de-escalation.

Syrian-Lebanese Connection

The security situations in Syria and Lebanon are closely linked. This is due to Iran's long-standing support for both Hezbollah in Lebanon and the former Assad regime in Syria. From Iran's perspective, its activities in both countries were a key element of its strategy in the region, which consisted of building a network of connections between states favourable to it and organisations whose destabilising activities weakened governments hostile to it. In the Syrian-Lebanese section, these activities were facilitated by the presence of the Lebanese Shiite community, and thus Hezbollah, along the border with Syria in the Beqaa Valley. This facilitated the establishment of smuggling routes, including tunnels stretching for several kilometres through which Iran transferred weapons, drugs, and money to both countries.

Relations between Syria and Lebanon also had their own dynamic, the main element of which was Syria's long-standing occupation of Lebanon (1976–2005) and its consequences. The Assad family regime (both Hafez and Bashar) built close relations with some political parties in Lebanon, such as the Shiite Amal and Hezbollah and the Christian Free Patriotic Movement (the former president of Lebanon, for example, came from this party). With their help, it repeatedly pursued its interests in that country, even resorting to the assassination of Lebanese political leaders, which allowed it to sign bilateral agreements that were unfavourable to Lebanon.

For this reason, the Lebanese hope that a change of regime in Syria will allow for a new opening in mutual relations and a revision of some bilateral agreements. Another priority for the Lebanese authorities is to facilitate the return of Syrian refugees. The number of Syrian refugees in Lebanon exceeds 1 million, which represents between 15–20% of the native population. Given the ongoing financial crisis in Lebanon and the

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⁹³ N. Yohanan, "Syria confirms backchannel dialogue with Israel on security matters," *The Times of Israel*, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/uae-said-to-set-up-backchannel-talks-between-israel-and-syrias-new-regime/>, [accessed on 11 August 2025].

rapid decline in the quality of life in recent years, hosting such a large number of refugees has further reduced the capacity of an already ineffective state to provide basic services and has become a tool for some politicians to manipulate public sentiment.

The restoration of relations between Lebanon and Syria is partly facilitated by factors such as the weakening of Hezbollah and the strengthening of institutions by the new authorities in both countries, as well as a consistent perception of threats to their own stability in the actions of Israel and Iran. However, these same factors remain a potential source of challenges in the process of rebuilding relations. Israel's continued presence in Lebanon and its violation of the ceasefire undermine the Lebanese army's ability to control the country's territory, thereby restoring Hezbollah's popularity. Hezbollah, in turn, provides shelter to Iranian-backed loyalists of the former regime, who are strengthening the organisation's ranks and supplying it with weapons left over from Assad's army.⁹⁴ In March this year, clashes broke out on the border after armed residents of areas near the Syrian border (it has not yet been determined whether they were Hezbollah members) kidnapped three Syrian soldiers and killed them on Lebanese territory. These actions, aimed at undermining the legitimacy of the new authorities of both countries, and in particular their efforts to strengthen the state's monopoly on the use of force, forced both armies to intervene. After several days, the armed forces of both countries signed a ceasefire agreement. The Lebanese army reinforced its presence along the border with Syria and secured the crossings to counter increased Hezbollah activity. At the same time, Syrian security forces intensified arrests of former members of the regime, including near the border with Lebanon. They also intercepted numerous attempts to smuggle weapons, money, and drugs to Hezbollah. In early April, the Syrian and Lebanese defence ministers, Murhaf Abu Kasra and Mishel Mansi, signed an agreement in Saudi Arabia on work to demarcate a common border and de-escalate tensions. At the same time, Joseph Aoun, the president of Lebanon, was visiting Paris, where he and President Emmanuel Macron held an online conference with President Sharaa. The meeting also focused on the situation on the Lebanese-Syrian border, while expressing France's support for Lebanon in its relations with Syria. Seeking foreign support in this context is linked to continuing concerns about maintaining Lebanon's independence in the event of Syria's consolidation, particularly given the unstable situation in Lebanon and the limited capabilities of its army. In the spirit of "adjusting" the nature of Lebanese-Syrian relations, Lebanese Prime Minister Nawaf Salam's first visit to Damascus in mid-April 2025 was also maintained. This emphasised the Lebanese authorities' prioritisation of guarantees to protect Lebanon from potential attempts by the Syrian government to dominate its politics.

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⁹⁴ Online interview with a representative of an international think tank, Warsaw, March 2025.

Jordan

For the Jordanian monarchy, Assad's defeat and the takeover by former rebel groups is an opportunity to improve its position following the elimination of the Assad regime, which was a destabilising factor in the region. Jordan was one of the countries most affected by the Syrian civil war, in particular by the influx of refugees (about 710,000 as of 2024),⁹⁵ security threats resulting from armed operations and the activities of terrorist groups, and in recent years, the smuggling of captagon, for which the Syrian leadership was responsible. These factors influenced the attitude of the Jordanian authorities, which were one of the main supporters of normalising relations with the Assad regime in the region in order to neutralise these problems. Given the grassroots desire of the new authorities to combat them as well, the political transformation in Syria offers an opportunity for a more favourable resolution of the challenges in bilateral relations. However, Jordan remains aware of the high risk of instability and escalation in connection with the internal situation in Syria. Currently, this area is a priority in foreign policy and in cooperation with other countries in the region and key strategic partners, in particular the U.S., alongside the escalation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.⁹⁶

Jordan's initial reactions to the capture of Aleppo and the continued HTS offensive were preventive in nature, including the closure of border crossings and the mobilisation of military forces. After the fall of the regime, Jordanian diplomacy quickly established contacts with the new authorities, assuring them of support for further stabilisation of the country. At the end of December 2024, Jordanian Foreign Minister Ayman Safadi was the first Arab minister to visit Damascus, where he met with Sharaa. The Syrian leader paid an official visit to Jordan at the end of February, where he met with King Abdullah. An aspect of the bilateral talks that was emphasised in particular was the need for the new authorities, which have roots in Islamist groups, to reach an agreement with other opposition groups centred on the SDF and other Kurdish groups with which Jordan has been working closely. There are also converging interests in limiting Iranian influence and combating criminal groups involved in drug trafficking. Both of these threats are part of the fundamental issue of border security from Jordan's perspective. There has not yet been a significant change in the dynamics related to the return of Syrian refugees. A total of around 52,000 had returned between December

95 "Intention of Syrian Refugees in Jordan," Reliefweb, <https://reliefweb.int/report/jordan/intention-syrian-refugees-jordan>, [accessed on 13 August 2025].

96 J. Salhani, "As Jordan's King Abdullah meets Trump, can he resist US pressure on Gaza?" *Al Jazeera*, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/2/11/as-jordans-king-abdullah-meets-trump-can-he-resist-us-pressure-on-gaza>, [accessed on 11 August 2025].

2024 and March 2025 (UN data⁹⁷). The new Syrian government wants to have as much control as possible over the repatriation process and to make it orderly, while Jordan may push for it to be accelerated in order to calm public sentiment against the refugees remaining in the country. The Jordanian authorities have also consistently provided diplomatic support to their Syrian partners with regard to Israeli military intervention.

Jordan's long-term goal is to rebuild mutual economic ties. Syria was one of Jordan's most important trading partners before the outbreak of the civil war, mainly due to access to Syrian ports (the borders were partially opened in 2018).⁹⁸ Restoring Syria's role as a transit country is therefore key to addressing the internal economic problems of both Syria and Jordan, particularly in view of the planned (but suspended by war) construction of energy transmission networks from the Persian Gulf to Türkiye, in which Jordan would also participate.

Iraq

After the capture of Damascus by HTS, the Iraqi authorities' attitude towards the new government in Syria reflected the polarisation between ethnic and religious groups and the clash of foreign interests in the country. Dominated by a coalition of Iranian-backed Shiite parties (the so-called Coordination Council), the government remained critical of the changes in Syria. The armed wings of these parties supported Assad during the war, and some of them called for armed involvement in the defence of the regime after the rebels launched their offensive last year. However, the Iraqi authorities closed the border with Syria after the rebels captured Aleppo, citing security concerns, which prevented the militia from intervening. Sunni leaders, on the other hand, welcomed the changes in Syria, which they see as an opportunity to limit Iran's influence in their country. The Speaker of the Iraqi Parliament Mahmoud al-Mashhadani (customarily a Sunni), emphasised that the will of the Syrian people must be respected. Kurdish

leaders, in turn, pointed to the need to protect this ethnic group in Syria, welcoming Sharaa's announcement of the creation of inclusive state institutions.

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⁹⁷ "Jordan, March 2025," UNHCR, <https://www.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/2025-05/3%20-%20March%202025%20Operational%20Update.pdf>, [accessed on 13 August 2025].

⁹⁸ M. Ersan, "Jordan seeks foothold in new Syria to boost economy and secure borders," *Middle East Eye*, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/jordan-seeks-foothold-new-syria-boost-economy-and-secure-borders>, [accessed on 11 August 2025].

Beyond the context of ethnic and religious divisions and the protection of Iran's interests, Iraq's reaction was influenced by the terrorist activities of Sharaa when he was one of the leaders of Al-Qaeda in Iraq in the early 2000s. This is linked to a genuine desire to hold Sharaa accountable for the crimes he committed at that time. At the same time, parties and militias linked to Iran are using Sharaa's history to undermine the legitimacy of his authority and prevent his full acceptance as Syria's leader by Iraqi and Arab leaders. However, the Iraqi authorities have engaged in limited dialogue with the new Syrian government in view of the consolidation of its power in Syria and the intensification of its contacts with other Arab leaders. It has remained focused on security aspects, hence the first Iraqi representative to visit Damascus was the head of Iraqi intelligence, Hamid al-Shatri (at the end of December last year). The meeting focused primarily on cooperation in the fight against IS, which for now will form the core of relations between these countries and their regional cooperation. Despite its controversial past, HTS's history of fighting IS, its effective operations against IS since coming to power, and its cooperation with U.S. intelligence facilitate relations. This was emphasised at the meeting of the foreign ministers of Syria, Iraq, Türkiye, Jordan, and Lebanon on regional cooperation focused on combating IS on 9 March in Amman. From the Syrian government's perspective, the priority will be to support Iraq in managing camps for IS fighters and families and to withdraw the protection granted by the Iraqi government to Assad's soldiers who fled Syria after the HTS offensive began.

Despite limiting the dialogue to security issues, the Iraqi government has not managed to avoid controversy. In April, Iraqi Prime Minister Muhammad Shia al-Sudani invited Sharaa to the Arab League summit on 17 May in Baghdad and met with the Syrian president in Qatar, with Emir Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani acting as mediator. This was met with opposition from part of the Iraqi population, and more than 50 parliamentarians from pro-Iranian groups filed criminal complaints accusing Sharaa of terrorism in an attempt to prevent his visit. Although Iraqi courts have not confirmed whether, as claimed by pro-Iranian politicians, an arrest warrant had been issued for Sharaa in Iraq, he ultimately did not attend the summit. Instead, Syria was represented by Shai-bani.

Assad's Former Partners

The fall of the Assad regime and the weakening of Hezbollah in Lebanon after the Israeli attacks show that *Iran's* policy towards the Middle East was based on miscalculations. During the 13 years of civil war, Iran invested about \$30-50 billion in Syria as part of its commitment to ensuring the survival of the Assad regime. Iranian military

advisers, soldiers, and Afghans recruited by Iran were also involved on the side of the regime, supporting the regime's military. This allowed Iran to enter the structures of the military and paramilitary organisations in Syria, such as the National Defence Forces (NDF), a pro-regime militia network that Iran helped to organise, arm, and train. Created in 2013 under the supervision of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), it helped integrate local fighters into Assad's army. Iran also maintained close relations with some units of the Syrian army, such as the 4th Armoured Division (commanded by Maher al-Assad). It was the main recipient of Iranian training, weapons, and financial aid. Similarly, the Republican Guard, whose task was to protect the regime and key infrastructure, benefited from Iranian logistical and operational support.

However, since 2023, Iran's control over the situation in Syria has been under increasing pressure, resulting from Israel's intensified actions against the "Axis of Resistance", as well as Assad's efforts to regain independence in the management of the state. This translated into an increase in deadly Israeli attacks on high-ranking IRGC commanders (including on 1 April 2024 on the Iranian consulate in Damascus) in Syria, Assad's violation of the 2020 Idlib ceasefire agreement, and a crisis of confidence in the regime following a series of leaks revealing IRGC movements in Syria, which ended in Israeli attacks. In addition, Assad rejected the possibility of using Syrian territory for attacks on Israel, which Iranian forces were seeking, and began to restrict Shiite religious activity. This influenced Iran and Russia's decision to withdraw their support for the regime after the rebel offensive began at the end of November last year. However, Iran has not completely abandoned its presence in the country, continuing to support Assad's loyalists⁹⁹. Part of the Iranian establishment hopes that by destabilising and undermining the transition process, they will be able to rebuild their influence in the region and prevent Türkiye from consolidating its power. However, this is opposed by those parts of the elite who see the involvement in Syria as costly and burdensome for the state, and Assad's fall as an opportunity to end an ineffective policy.¹⁰⁰

From *Russia's* perspective, support for Assad was a tool for restoring its influence in the Middle East and forcing the countries of the region to take decisions favourable to it, including on issues beyond the Middle East. The Russian military intervention, which was crucial for Assad to regain control over most of Syrian territory, forced Israel to reach an agreement with Russia on its actions in Syria and became an argument for the Arab states (which had originally supported the opposition) to normalise relations

99 More in the section: *Forces of the Former Regime*.

100 D. Sabaghi, "Borderline disorder: Is Iran attempting a comeback in post-Assad Syria?" *The New Arab*, <https://www.newarab.com/analysis/borderline-disorder-iran-destabilising-post-assad-syria>, [accessed on 11 August 2025].

with Assad. Despite divergent interests in Syria, it also fostered rapprochement between Türkiye and Russia. It also played a significant role in the decisions of countries in the region regarding their response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Apart from airstrikes, the actions were mainly carried out by mercenaries from the Wagner Group and the Redut company. Since the beginning of the intervention, about 550 Russian military personnel were killed, and the cost of the operation peaked at \$2.5–4 million per day.¹⁰¹

Following the change of regime in Syria, a key element of Russian policy towards the new authorities is the possibility of maintaining its military bases in Tartus (naval) and Hmeimim (air). Russia has used them to conduct military operations in Africa, transport natural resources extracted there and project force in the Mediterranean. Although the Russians are negotiating with the new government about the future of these bases, most of the equipment and troops have already been transferred away. On 28 January, a Russian delegation met with Sharaa in Damascus, declaring its support for the transformation of the state and its willingness to cooperate with the new authorities. Sharaa, in turn, demanded that the Russians hand over Assad to the Syrian authorities. At the same time, the Russians used the massacres in Latakia to spread disinformation aimed at undermining confidence in the new authorities as a threat to the security of minorities and emphasising the need for Russia's presence to protect them. Allegedly, several thousand Alawites took refuge from the violence at the base in Hmeimim. Apart from the possibility of bringing the former president to justice, it is in the interest of the new authorities to secure Russia's support for the potential removal of HTS from the UN list of terrorist organisations, which requires a decision by the Security Council, including the consent of all its permanent members. Furthermore, the introduction of sanctions against the Assad regime resulted in the termination of a contract for the printing of Syrian currency by a company subordinate to the Austrian central bank. Therefore, since 2017, Syrian banknotes have been supplied to Damascus by the Russian state-owned company Goznak (the contract is currently to be taken over by the UAE). Although Sharaa seeks to maintain relations with Russia, he is keen to reduce dependence on that country, and that has contributed to efforts to cooperate on such matters with EU countries and Türkiye.¹⁰²

However, the new authorities adopted an unequivocally critical stance towards Iran. Sharaa has emphasised that the militias supported by Iran are a threat to the en-

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¹⁰¹ F. Bryjka, "Assad Regime's Rapid Fall Rattles Russia's Middle East Strategy," *PISM Bulletin* No. 1 (3004), 2 January 2025, <https://pism.pl/publications/assad-regimes-rapid-fall-rattles-russias-middle-east-strategy>, [accessed on 11 August 2025].

¹⁰² Interview with a European diplomat, Lebanon, February 2025.

tire region and has demanded that Iran compensate for the damage caused by its involvement on Assad's side. It has also intensified efforts to intercept Iranian arms smuggling from Syria to Lebanon.¹⁰³ This is a consequence of prioritising rapprochement with Türkiye, the Arab monarchies in the Persian Gulf, and Western countries that are critical or openly hostile towards Iran and its actions in the region in its foreign policy.



Syria, February 2025, Author: Sara Nowacka

103 "Tartus: Interior Ministry foils weapon smuggling attempt to Lebanon," *Enab Baladi*, <https://english.enabbaladi.net/archives/2025/01/tartus-interior-ministry-foils-weapon-smuggling-attempt-to-lebanon/>, [accessed on 11 August 2025].

The Role of Western Countries

The EU and Its Member States

The change of power in Syria represents a new beginning for the European Union and its Member States, most of which did not maintain relations with Bashar al-Assad's regime after 2011. His downfall is an opportunity to achieve some of the EU's strategic objectives in its southern neighbourhood, in particular to stabilise its eastern part, reduce migration, and weaken Russia's harmful activities in the region. At the same time, European leaders see unconditional cooperation with the new authorities as risky due to HTS's jihadist past and the presence of radical groups and figures in the new government and among its supporters. For this reason, the EU and its Member States are seeking, on the one hand, to facilitate Syria's transition and reconstruction and, on the other, to maintain pressure on the new authorities, particularly with regard to policies on ethnic and religious minorities and women's rights. At the diplomatic level, the EU is actively seeking to build relations with Syria's new government. A few days after Assad's overthrow, it established diplomatic contacts with the interim government to support the peaceful transition of the country, thereby breaking the previous isolation of HTS among Western partners. In May, the Commissioner for the Mediterranean Region, Dubravka Šuica, paid her first visit to Syria. At that time, the EC pledged €175 million for reconstruction and expressed its willingness to integrate Syria into EU policy towards the region, including work on a new Mediterranean Pact to be published in September this year.

The German and French governments exerted the most pressure on EU institutions to cooperate with the new government. These two countries have been the most active among EU members in engaging with the new Syrian authorities. In December, the German government drew up an eight-point plan for Syrian transformation, which was to serve as a basis for cooperation between the two countries. It addressed issues such as the peaceful transfer of power, protection against external intervention, and a

pragmatic approach to the new authorities.¹⁰⁴ This was a clear signal of acceptance of HTS as an actor that will determine the direction of change in Syria, despite its designation as a terrorist organisation. In early January, the French and German foreign ministers, Jean-Noel Barrot and Annalena Berbock, visited Syria as the first heads of diplomacy of EU Member States. In February, the third international conference on Syria since the overthrow of the Assad regime was held in Paris. The conference emphasised France's ambition to become the Western leader in talks with the new Syrian government. This was influenced by the partial lack of coherence between the American and European approaches to Syria, expressed by the U.S. administration's failure to sign the final conference statement calling for the lifting of sanctions and the intensification of efforts to combat terrorism. This left room for a more proactive approach by EU Member States that want to give the new Syrian authorities international legitimacy in order to reduce the risk of radicalisation and the resumption of conflicts between Syrian factions. This was also emphasised in a telephone conversation between Macron and Sharaa in early February, which was the first direct contact between a Western leader and the new Syrian president. Macron invited Sharaa to Paris. On 20 March, Baerbock visited Damascus again to officially reopen the German embassy. On 6 May, Sharaa visited Paris, where he met with President Macron. Macron declared at the time that, as progress was made in the transition, European leaders would lift further EU sanctions and press the U.S. administration to join them. The visit was preceded by the signing of an agreement between the Syrian government and the French shipping company CMA CGM, which is to develop and manage the port of Latakia for the next 30 years, indicating the synergy between French business and political activities towards Syria.¹⁰⁵ From the perspective of the Syrian authorities, the most important EU decisions to date were, first, the invitation to Brussels of the foreign minister in the interim government, Asaad al-Shaibani, to the ninth international conference on aid to Syria and Syrian refugees. This increased the international legitimacy of the government and allowed a representative of the Syrian authorities to participate for the first time in one of the most important international events concerning that country. During the conference, the EU and its partners pledged €5.8 billion to support the Syrian transition and neighbouring countries hosting Syrian refugees (including €2.5 billion from the EU alone),¹⁰⁶ which was a decrease of 22 percentage points compared

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¹⁰⁴ "A difficult new beginning—Syria amid hope and challenges," Federal Foreign Office, <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/en/aussenpolitik/syria-2690600>, [accessed on 11 August 2025].

¹⁰⁵ A. Dziubińska, S. Nowacka, M. Wojnarowicz, "France Seeks Greater Role in Political Transitions in the Middle East," PISM Strategic File No. 1 (140), <https://www.pism.pl/publications/france-seeks-greater-role-in-political-transitions-in-the-middle-east>, [accessed on 11 August 2025].

¹⁰⁶ "Standing with Syria—Brussels ninth conference, 17 March 2025," European Council, Council of the European Union, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/international-ministerial-meetings/2025/03/17/>, [accessed on 11 August 2025].

to the €7.5 billion raised a year earlier,¹⁰⁷ resulting from, among other things, the suspension of U.S. foreign aid after Trump came to power. The event also provided an opportunity to strengthen Syria's cooperation with the international community. For example, on the sidelines of the summit, Shaibani met with a representative of the UN Independent Commission of Inquiry on Syria to discuss cooperation on a preliminary project to search for Syrians missing during the war and the handover of these activities to the Syrian authorities.

However, the EU's ability to influence the shape and efficiency of Syria's transformation is limited by the dominant role of the U.S. in this process. This is due to the importance of the dollar and the U.S. for the global economy, which means that the presence or lifting of U.S. sanctions is crucial for investment decisions or decisions on financial support for Syria by other countries. Second, the U.S. also has key influence on security in Syria through its continued military presence, cooperation with the SDF (e.g., U.S. involvement was decisive for the success of mediation between the SDF and the interim government in March) and its dominant role in combating IS. This was particularly evident in the failed attempts by the new Syrian administration to join the Global Coalition against IS. The government submitted its first application shortly after Sharaa was appointed president. After it was rejected, France and Germany cooperated in encouraging Syria to try again to join the coalition and publicly supported its efforts. However, the U.S. rejected this possibility, which sealed the failure of this initiative.

At the same time, Trump's ambivalent policy towards Syria—delaying the decision to lift sanctions, signalling his intent to withdraw U.S. forces from the country—and the suspension of foreign aid allowed the EU to take the lead in changing the West's approach to Syria. It also forced the EU to become more involved in the areas of aid and security. Given the impact of the situation in Syria on the stability of the EU through the potential resurgence of emigration or terrorist activities, it is in the EU's vital interest to maintain an active and guiding involvement in limiting the factors destabilising the country's transformation. For this reason, the EU stands out from the U.S. with a more nuanced approach to events in the country, focused on the legitimacy of the new government. This was evident, for example, in the reactions to the escalation in Latakia in which the EU condemned primarily the actions of Assad loyalists as the root cause

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¹⁰⁷ "Brussels VIII Conference renews international support for Syria and the region raising more than €7.5 billion," EU Neighbours South, <https://south.euneighbours.eu/news/brussels-viii-conference-renews-international-support-for-syria-and-the-region-raising-more-than-e7-5-billion/>, [accessed on 11 August 2025].

of the events, which was not reflected in the statement by U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio.

United States

The fall of Bashar al-Assad and the establishment of a new government coincided with the return of Donald Trump to the U.S. presidency. Hence, the adaptation of U.S. foreign policy was strongly influenced by the radical style characteristic of the new administration, combined with personal and often inconsistent messages from Trump himself. U.S. policy is also a result of its relations with the actors involved in Syria, both allies, including the Arab Gulf states, Türkiye, and Israel, and enemies, mainly Iran and Russia.

Initial statements on the changes in Syria made by the outgoing Biden administration showed caution towards the new leadership originating from HTS. As in the case of Israel, one of the first decisions in December 2024 was military action—a series of air-strikes, together with other countries of the anti-terrorist coalition, on targets linked to IS, aimed at preventing any attempts by the organisation to exploit the internal chaos.¹⁰⁸ U.S. diplomacy established contacts with representatives of the new HTS authorities, and representatives of humanitarian organisations and the non-governmental sector appeared in Damascus and other major cities.¹⁰⁹ The key tool used by the U.S. against Syria during the Bashar al-Assad period was the sanctions regime, which was partially eased at the beginning of this year to allow for the delivery of humanitarian aid.¹¹⁰

A breakthrough moment in Syrian-American relations came during President Trump's visit to Riyadh in May, during which he met with President Sharaa. Trump announced at the time—after consultations with the leaders of Saudi Arabia and Türkiye—that U.S. sanctions against Syria would be lifted. Among the conditions that the new authorities would have to meet would be the destruction (with necessary external verification of the process) of remaining chemical weapons and related infrastructure, the takeover of prisons for IS members from the SDF, the normalisation of relations with Israel, and

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¹⁰⁸ "CENTCOM Forces Kill ISIS Leader During Precision Strike in Syria," U.S. Central Command, <https://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/PRESS-RELEASES/Press-Release-View/Article/4014610/centcom-forces-kill-isis-leader-during-precision-strike-in-syria/>, [accessed on 11 August 2025].

¹⁰⁹ H. Sallon, "Western, Turkish and Arab diplomats flock to Damascus," *Le Monde*, https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2024/12/23/western-turkish-and-arab-diplomats-flock-to-damascus_6736388_4.html, [accessed on 11 August 2025].

¹¹⁰ "US Allows More Humanitarian Aid to Syria After Assad's Downfall," Bloomberg, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2025-01-06/us-set-to-allow-for-more-humanitarian-aid-to-flow-to-syria>, [accessed on 11 August 2025].

the expulsion of members of Palestinian terrorist groups. Trump is also said to have insisted on maintaining the closest possible cooperation with Kurdish groups and securing the situation of minorities, especially Christians. The new authorities are also to establish full coordination in the fight against terrorism and ensure the removal of all foreign armed groups and Iranian forces from Syrian territory. Originally, foreign fighters were to be excluded from participation in the new institutions, but Sharaa managed to convince the U.S. administration to accept their presence in the army structures as part of a specially created unit. Religious and ethnic minorities, especially the Christian population, are to receive special protection. An additional condition is assistance in the release or location of American citizens who may be in Syria (including journalist Austin Tice, who has been missing since 2012). The meeting with the president, while maintaining official diplomatic relations at a limited level, was a clear success for the new authorities. The lifting of sanctions is a key factor in gaining legitimacy, rebuilding the economy, and unifying the state's institutional apparatus.

The future of U.S.-Kurdish relations remains ambiguous. It will largely determine the effectiveness of further efforts to combat terrorist groups (including maintaining prisons for IS members and their families in Al-Hol and Al-Roj¹¹¹) and limiting Iranian influence. Maintaining U.S. support for Kurdish forces (and military presence) increases the chances of success for the process announced in March to integrate the SDF into the military and security forces, strengthening their position vis-à-vis other armed groups, especially the Turkish-controlled SNA. It is precisely the Turkish context that plays an important role in a possible revision of the U.S. approach to further support for Kurdish groups.¹¹² The U.S. has also signalled its willingness to mediate between Israel and Türkiye in the face of the growing conflict between the two sides, which encompasses Syrian territory. At the same time, the U.S. authorities have shown that they are less inclined to take into account the demands of the Israeli government, which has emphasised the need to maintain sanctions and the US military presence in Syria.

Another key element of the U.S. strategy, at least in declarative terms, is the desire to limit U.S. involvement in the Middle East. In terms of security, this may mean ending the U.S. military presence and operations in Syria. There are still around 1,000 American troops present on Syrian territory, but at the same time, the evacuation of most of the eight bases, primarily in northeastern Syria, has been initiated. However, such actions are causing concern among regional allies, including Israel and Jordan, where U.S.

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¹¹¹ More in the section: *The Situation with IS*

¹¹² More in the section: *Türkiye*

forces are stationed at the al-Tanf base.¹¹³ The U.S. withdrawal also raises concerns about the support provided by the U.S. military in managing the camps for IS fighters and their families. The absence of U.S. troops will leave exposed the Kurdish forces, whose clashes with pro-Turkish groups could lead to chaos and, consequently, the escape and reorganisation of IS fighters. At the same time, possible changes in the security environment are accompanied by a consistent process—dictated by internal conditions—of limiting the external aid dimension of U.S. policy. Cuts or suspensions of development and humanitarian programmes limit the potential effectiveness of U.S. engagement and necessitate greater activity by other actors in parallel with other challenges in the region, such as the reconstruction of the war-torn Gaza Strip and support for Lebanon, which is in financial crisis.¹¹⁴ The broader context is provided by global economic turmoil resulting from the trade war initiated by the U.S. in April 2025.



Syria, February 2025, Author: Sara Nowacka

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¹¹³ J. Arraf, "Syria's U.S.-trained opposition fighters wait to learn of their role in a new Syria," NPR, <https://www.npr.org/2024/12/31/g-si-39955/syria-opposition-fighters-hts-military-us>, [accessed on 11 August 2025].

¹¹⁴ P. Kugiel, "Crisis in International Humanitarian Aid Offers Opportunities for Poland," PISM Bulletin No. 43 (2544), <https://pism.pl/publications/crisis-in-international-humanitarian-aid-offers-opportunities-for-poland>, [accessed on: 11 August 2025].

Conclusions and Recommendations

- **The unexpected success of the new Syrian authorities forces them to seek compromise solutions, which increases the chances of success for reconciliation efforts. EU support for this process will increase the chances of a lasting improvement in the situation in Syria, which until recently was one of the most significant sources of risk to EU stability.**

Assad's downfall was determined not only by the rebel offensive, but above all by the weakness of the regime and the limited ability of its existing partners to continue supporting it. As a result, HTS came to power, which, despite its consolidation in recent years, did not have the military strength to take control of the whole of Syria on its own. While this increases the possibility of tensions between the government, which is mainly composed of HTS, and other groups, the new authorities must take into account the opinions of communities that are not always favourable to them when making decisions about the future of the state. The agreement between the government and the SDF emphasised that such conditions necessitate compromises, which is conducive to building a coherent and relatively inclusive state.

These conditions mean that the success of Syria's transition requires the involvement of foreign partners, focused on preventing the escalation of tensions between different groups, which cannot be completely avoided. The strategic premise of the EU's approach to the new Syrian government should be to recognise that political change in the country will give rise to conflicts and possible acts of violence, which do not necessarily reflect ill will on the part of the authorities, but will be the result of their still limited control. At the same time, the EU should try to use this situation to strengthen the agency of vulnerable groups, while simultaneously strengthening the new government against actors seeking to destabilise Syria, such as loyalists of the former regime. This is particularly important in light of the former regime's ties to actors acting against the EU's interests, such as Russia and Iran. A lasting reduction in their presence will

improve the situation in Syria, which until recently has hampered the EU's policy objectives in its entire southern neighbourhood. In this context, it is crucial that the majority of Syrian society supports change in the country, regardless of ethnic or religious affiliation, and that there is a growing sense of security and freedom from HTS takeover.

- **Constructive engagement in the development of mechanisms for a just transition in Syria will have a positive impact on security in the EU's southern neighbourhood.**

Holding to account members of the regime responsible for war crimes is essential for stabilising and improving the security situation in Syria. These measures are fundamental to preventing retaliation and vigilante justice and undermining the authority of the authorities. Organising a systematic response to crimes committed during the civil war by all parties to the conflict will strengthen the legitimacy of the transition process under the new government. These actions are hampered by the new authorities' still incomplete control over the full territory of the state and by the ongoing negotiations with other parastatal groups (SDF, Druze) and awareness of violations committed among pro-government groups, as well as by the significant influence on the economy of businesspeople linked to the Assad regime.

The EU's nuanced but unequivocal support for the new authorities, as reflected in its statement following the escalation in Latakia, the lack of particular interests in Syria linked to any of the groups, and the large Syrian diaspora in EU Member States, favour the EU's involvement in supporting the Syrian transition. Furthermore, a just transition is no longer a goal of U.S. policy towards Syria, which makes the EU the actor most interested in this process. Support in this area would also be in line with the objectives of the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument, which includes a commitment to strengthening peace and reforming the justice system. It will also be important to involve representatives of both the government and Syrian civil society in the creation of a new Pact for the Mediterranean. The EU and its Member States could support Syrian civil society in their territory in their contacts with the new authorities and in their efforts to engage international institutions (such as the ICC) and their Member States in the prosecution of members of the Assad regime. It could also engage in strengthening the Syrian government's capacity in the areas of the judiciary and international law. Furthermore, it could intensify efforts to search for Assad regime war criminals on its territory (through cooperation with Interpol) and put pressure on Middle Eastern countries that are sympathetic to the regime (such as Lebanon, Jordan and Egypt) not to allow them remain in hiding on their territory. In this context, it will also be important to implement mechanisms of accountability for

economic crimes committed under Assad's rule, whose perpetrators have transferred their assets abroad. The EU and its Member States should consider using the frozen assets of these individuals for the reconstruction of Syria or to support organisations working for a just transition, although, as the experience with Russian assets shows, this is a highly problematic process.

- **The EU and its Member States should provide support for the reform of the security services and the building of social resilience in Syria against threats from Assad's supporters, who often also act in the interests of Europe's adversaries, Russia and Iran.**

Groups linked to the Assad regime remain the main threat to security stabilisation. Their primary aim is to undermine the legitimacy of the transition process by destabilising the security situation and weakening the trust of ethnic and religious minorities in the new authorities. To this end, they exploit cooperation with external actors (Iran, Hezbollah), links with arms and drug smugglers, and the dissemination of messages emphasising the terrorist past of HTS. This is also facilitated by Israel's military actions and similar rhetoric. Events such as the massacres in Latakia provoked by Assad's supporters have contributed to hardening the position of some Kurdish and Druze groups seeking the federalisation of Syria and have reduced the willingness of Western politicians to ease sanctions against the country.

Extending the authorities' control over the entire territory of the country is crucial to limiting the chances of renewed violence. Progress made by the security forces in this regard has reduced the chaos in Latakia, but other problematic regions include southern Syria (where separatist organisations are active, the Israeli army is operating, and militias are refusing to disarm) and the border with the territory controlled by the SDF. In order to increase security in its southern neighbourhood, the EU could provide expert support for the Syrian security services in disarming non-state actors. Given the effectiveness of the SDF and AANES in managing north-eastern Syria and their importance in combating IS on the one hand, and the threat to the Kurds from Türkiye on the other, it would be important to involve the SDF in this process. In the context of the expected withdrawal of the U.S. from Syria, it will be important to strengthen the agency of Kurdish groups in their integration with the army and to provide financial support for the management of camps where IS fighters and their families are staying. EU Member States, especially those experienced in countering Russian manipulation in the infosphere, could in turn engage in building the resilience of Syrian society to disinformation and foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI), which

are an important element of attempts to destabilise the political process in Syria, in which Russia is also involved.

- **The EU and its Member States should work to prevent the marginalisation of their efforts to combat IS in light of the risk that its resurgence poses to European security.**

The fight against IS in Syria is inevitably linked to the political interests of foreign actors involved in that country, such as (from the Turkish perspective) the presence of the SDF in border areas or (from the U.S. perspective) the maintenance of American military engagement in the region. For this reason, the latter are withdrawing some of their support for counter-terrorism operations in Syria, while Türkiye is attempting to create a regional alliance against IS, positioning itself as an alternative to the SDF, which it considers a threat to its national security. The new authorities have so far been able to prevent most IS attacks, but they are not prepared to take control of the camps of fighters and their families, which pose one of the greatest threats to the security situation in the country in view of the ongoing radicalisation of their inhabitants. This phenomenon is exacerbated by the reduction in U.S. aid to the camps.

Given Türkiye's limited competence in the fight against terrorism and the political agenda accompanying its involvement, the EU and its Member States should step up their activities in this area. This is particularly important given the European origin of some of the militants and their potential ability to infiltrate Europe. The EU's actions could take the form of training, material support for camps housing fighters and their families, intelligence cooperation and increased military presence, as well as support for regional formats. The possibility of maintaining military cooperation between the new Syria and European countries could also be an incentive to maintain an inclusive direction of change and actions for a just transition, especially since the process is no longer taken into account by the U.S. administration.

- **The fall of Assad, accompanied by the weakening of Hezbollah, is an opportunity to stabilise the eastern part of the EU's southern neighbourhood and limit Russia's presence.**

The destabilising influence of Assad's rule on the Middle East was reflected shortly after his fall in an improvement in the fight against IS, drug trafficking, and the disruption of Hezbollah's activities on the Lebanese-Syrian border. The convergence between the change of power in Syria and Lebanon also provides an opportunity to limit the activities of paramilitary groups and strengthen the state as the dominant form of government in the region. This also makes it easier to limit Russia's influence in Syria, given

the importance of such organisations and their ideological links to specific religious groups for Russian interventions.

However, Russia will try to exploit the EU and U.S. hesitation towards Syria to make co-operation with it in the areas of energy, finance and imports of basic foodstuffs essential for Syria's functioning under Sharaa. Furthermore, it will present itself as a *defender of minorities* (especially Orthodox Christians and Alawites), as it has already done in Latakia, in order to politically complicate any potential decision to close Russian bases. The destabilising nature of this approach threatens the EU's strategic interests in its southern neighbourhood. The EU should therefore support the development of state institutions and strengthen their resilience to internal divisions and disinformation by promoting ethnic and religious diversity among their staff and providing material or financial support. It will be particularly important to exert pressure to limit the influence of radical groups on the direction of political change. Supporting stabilisation in Syria will also allow the EU to diplomatically exploit Russia's misjudgement of the situation and highlight the destructive impact of its policy on the Middle East in its communication with countries in the region.

- **Given the authoritarian nature of the policies proposed so far by the new government, the EU should exert pressure on it to protect Syrian civil society. Strengthening this protection will help prevent migration and criminal activity in the country, the negative consequences of which are felt in Europe.**

The manner in which the government was formed and the Constitutional Declaration emphasised that Syria's transition will be linked to an authoritarian model of governance. Given the model of governance in Idlib and the signals coming from the first systemic decisions of the new authorities, Sharaa will seek to consolidate his position and maintain a dominant influence on state policy with the minimal participation of elected bodies in general elections. On the one hand, he wants to reap the political dividends of managing Idlib, developing HTS's capabilities, and preparing an effective offensive; on the other, he fears that democratic processes would deepen the polarisation of society and be exploited by radical groups. He is also keen to secure cooperation and financial support from regional powers such as Türkiye and Saudi Arabia, which are hostile to democracy. The latter, in particular, has viewed potential democratic change in the region as an existential threat to the ruling monarchy since 2011.

The strengthening of authoritarianism in Syria should be the subject of deeper political reflection in the EU and its Member States, which have so far focused mainly on threats to individual ethnic and religious groups. The violence perpetrated by HTS in recent

years was primarily the result of coercion to ensure loyalty. While protecting the lives and freedoms of religious groups is particularly important in Syria due to the presence of radical groups, the EU should also focus on protecting the space for civil society to operate, strengthening its engagement and ability to influence government work, and supporting the rule of law. Given the direct impact of the situation in Syria on the EU (migration, drug trafficking) and regional circumstances, abandoning cooperation with the new authorities because of their authoritarian tendencies would be ineffective. However, it will be important to take advantage of the window of opportunity offered by the ongoing consolidation of the system in Syria and, consequently, the still relatively weak authorities, to strengthen civil society organisations in their relations with the authorities. This will reduce the risk of social discontent turning into escalating tensions with the authorities and, consequently, migration or intensified criminal activity.

- **Israel's actions undermine the credibility and stability of the new authorities in Syria through the use of military force, violations of sovereignty, and support for separatist tendencies. The EU should make its approach to Israel more conditional on the curbing of its aggressive policy towards its neighbour and support channels for de-escalation between the parties.**

Israel's approach is largely a result of the national and regional crisis triggered by the Hamas attack on 7 October 2023. Hence, the focus on security, primarily through the use of military tools and diplomacy from a position of strength in the context of Syria. Violations of sovereignty, including territorial sovereignty, of neighbouring states are not *novum* in Israeli politics, but at a time of unprecedented instability in the region and opportunities offered by changes in Syria (and Lebanon), they increase the possibility of disrupting and halting potentially stabilising processes. Israeli actions calculated for short-term political gains or preventive measures against (virtually non-existent) threats may have long-term consequences, e.g., due to attempts to exploit divisions among ethnic minorities in Syria.

By undermining the transformation in Syria, Israel risks creating a *de facto* security vacuum that could continue to be exploited by Iran or those groups that openly call for confrontation with Israel. The new Syrian authorities are still trying to maintain a restrained attitude towards Israeli actions and are not exploiting the conflict with Israel, for example, for greater internal mobilisation. At the same time, Israel's contribution to the possibility of HTS taking power is clear, through its involvement and weakening of Hezbollah. The pressure from the U.S. and its allies in the region to limit Israeli actions is also significant. It is possible that formats for cooperation, including full normalisation,

will be developed, but the chances of this are limited by the confrontational approach of the current Israeli government and are currently unlikely.

However, the EU's direct tools of influence on Israeli-Syrian relations remain limited. The pressure can be strengthened by actions taken within broader formats, for example, jointly with Arab countries, especially to get Israel to leave Syrian territory. The EU's influence could increase through activity in related areas, such as supporting the Lebanese army or intensifying measures against Hezbollah and Iran, which would indirectly affect the situation in Syria and weaken Israel's arguments. The direct involvement of EU Member States offers great potential, whether through diplomatic initiatives or in the area of security, such as participation in peacekeeping missions (including UNDOF). Israel's actions in Syria, which violate international law and are contrary to the EU's interests, should also be included in the debate on the possible suspension of trade agreements between the EU and Israel.

- **The intensification of the Turkish-Israeli dispute in Syria will have a negative impact on the security situation in the Middle East. It is in the EU's interest to support the de-escalation talks initiated between the parties.**

Türkiye's non-negotiable interests in Syria include protecting its borders from the armed presence of Kurdish groups, preventing the influx of Syrian refugees, and maintaining its status as a regional power with a key influence on the post-Assad transformation of Syria. Türkiye sees its presence in Syria as necessary to stabilise the regional situation, which simultaneously puts it on a collision course with Israel. The Israeli authorities want to retain the freedom to conduct air operations over Syrian airspace against Iran, which conflicts with Turkish plans to deploy Turkish air defence assets in central Syria to strengthen its military position in the region. The ongoing war and humanitarian disaster in the Gaza Strip will also contribute to the tensions. In addition, Türkiye sees an opportunity to work with the new Syrian authorities to create alternative formats for regional cooperation to those supported by Israel, such as the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum. At the same time, Türkiye remains one of the key countries influencing Syria's political future,¹¹⁵ and Sharaa's rise to power has brought Turkish and EU interests in the country closer together, particularly with regard to its reconstruction and the fight against IS.

Although the EU has limited scope to influence the Turkish-Israeli dispute, its continuation will hamper the EU's interests in Syria. EU support for de-escalation talks, in which

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¹¹⁵ "Türkiye, EU agree to work together for Syria's future," *Hurriyet*, <https://www.hurriyetaidailynews.com/erdogan-receives-eus-von-der-leyen-in-ankara-203703>, [accessed on 10 July 2025].

actors closely associated with both sides of the conflict and interested in cooperation with the new authorities, such as the U.S., Azerbaijan, and the UAE, would play a leading role, would be a step towards improving stability in the region.





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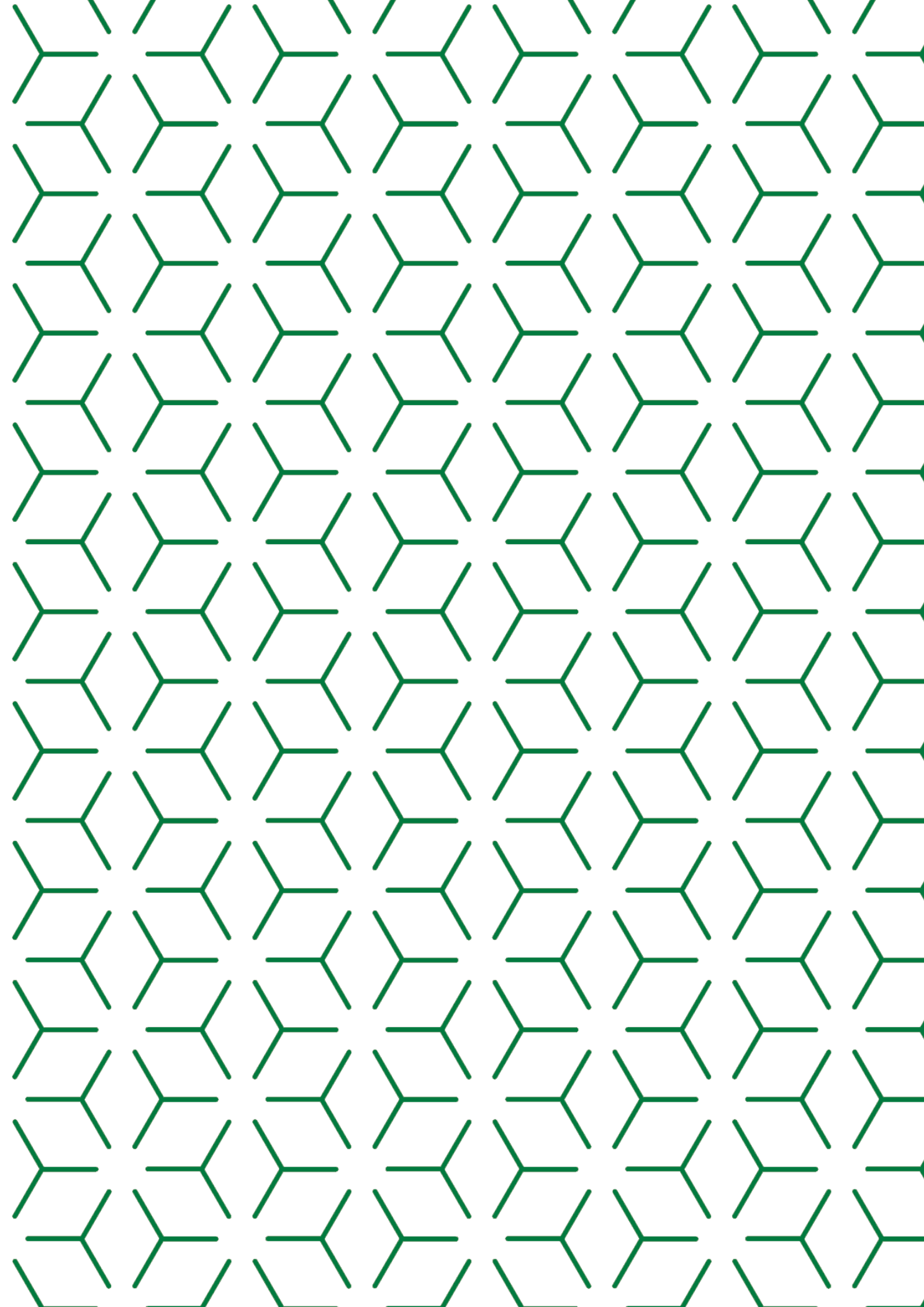
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