

The New Syria and the Regional Balance of Power

by Amjed Rasheed

The sudden fall of Bashar al-Assad's regime on 8 December 2024 and the subsequent rise of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), now leading the Syrian interim government in the country, have dramatically shaped the regional balance of power. Remarkably, the HTS-led interim government has been making some serious attempts to consolidate its control, and boost legitimacy, but also rebuild Syria after 14 years of civil war and a half-a-century of Assad dynasty rule. In its pursuit to achieve these ends, the interim government has launched diplomatic efforts toward regional and international powerhouses. Everybody, including Russia, is currently welcome to visit Damascus. Yet there is also failure so far to open up the transition to others, which could generate grievances and lead to disruptive regional interference. While the success of such a policy remains to be gauged, the HTS approach to accommodate regional contradiction is worth explaining.

Ankara's (cautious) pivot to Damascus

First, the HTS-led government has sought a delicate balance with perhaps the most influential regional state in new Syria, Türkiye. For the latter, the new Syria without Russian and Iranian influence provides a strategic advantage. That said, Ankara's approach to the HTS-led interim government is based on caution, focusing especially on the Kurdish issue. Ankara perceives the YPG-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) as an existential threat to the state – given the alleged nexus between the YPG and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK).¹ Thus, its Syria policy revolves around a stable country with

¹ Joshua M. M. Portzer, "The People's Protection Units' Branding Problem. Syrian Kurds and Potential Destabilization in Northeastern Syria", in *Military Review*, Vol. 100, No. 3 (May-June 2020), p. 92-103, <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/Military-Review/English-Edition-Archives/May-June-2020/Portzer-Peoples-Protection-Unit>.

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a centralised government and a single Syrian army, and around ensuring the territorial integrity of the state.²

The significant meeting between SDF Chief General Mazlum Abdi and HTS leader Ahmed al-Shaara in December 2024 focused on military integration,³ with HTS advocating for SDF subordination under a future Syrian army's structure. Abdi, while supporting the vision of a united Syria, highlighted the SDF's unique model of self-governance and called for decentralisation and the preservation of its identity within the Syrian Ministry of Defence.⁴ The interim Defence Minister Murhaf Abu Qasra, who ambitiously and arguably dangerously aims to unify anti-Assad factions by March 2025, rejected SDF proposals for integration, insisting on hierarchical inclusion.⁵ A major obstacle to the integration of the SDF into a national structure is that SDF has its own chain of command, within which non-Syrian PKK cadres are still active. PKK had announced it will accept to leave Syria if the SDF maintains a leadership role.⁶

² Murat Yeşiltaş, "Pillars of Türkiye's Syria Policy", in *Daily Sabah*, 27 December 2024, http://sabahdai.ly/_25ow.

³ Kelly Campa et al., *ISW Iran Update, January 2, 2025*, <https://www.understandingwar.org/node/6717>.

⁴ "Hour of Dialogue: Special Interview with the Commander of the Syrian Democratic Forces" [video in Arabic], in *Al Arabiya Channel*, 19 January 2025, <https://youtu.be/VywoVPwMEH0>; Ali Saray, "SDF Commander to Asharq Al-Awsat: Syria Must Remain United", in *Asharq Al-Awsat*, 28 December 2024, <https://english.aawsat.com/node/5095870>.

⁵ "Syrian Minister Rejects Kurdish-led SDF's Proposal for Own Military Bloc", in *Al Jazeera*, 19 January 2025, <https://aje.io/3gejdh>.

⁶ Rashed Issa, "PKK Will Leave Syria if the SDF

More broadly, so far no real offer has been put on the table for Kurdish self-administration besides a mild offer on cultural and language rights.

Having the Turkish factor in the equation, tensions between SDF and HTS are expected to increase in the upcoming months. Besides, Ankara seeks to ensure the survivability and relevance of its Syrian National Army (SNA) entourage. Having funded and controlled SNA since 2017, Ankara uses it to counterbalance the SDF,⁷ shape a new Syria political structure⁸ and maintain a buffer zone to prevent the SDF from gaining ground in the north of the country.⁹ That said, Ankara's current attempts to engage in a broader peace process with the PKK could also help Türkiye's acceptance of self-administration in north-eastern Syria and ease negotiation talks between HTS and SDF.

At another level, Türkiye currently hosts nearly four million Syrian refugees and aims to facilitate refugee return, relocating them in the buffer zone – which caused concerns among the Kurds who view such a plan as ethnic cleansing that resembles the Arab belt

Maintains a Leading Role" [in Arabic], in *Al-Quds Al-Arabi*, 17 January 2025, <https://www.alquds.co.uk/?p=3445197>.

⁷ Riccardo Gasco and Samuele Abrami, "Turkey and the Syrian Conundrum after Assad: A Test for Ankara's Capacity and Credibility", in *IAI Commentaries*, No. 24|75 (December 2024), <https://www.iai.it/en/node/19295>.

⁸ Annika Ganzeveld et al., *ISW Iran Update, January 9, 2025*, <https://understandingwar.org/node/6734>.

⁹ Yusuf Can, "What Syria's Opposition Resurgence Means for Ankara", in *MENA360°*, 6 December 2024, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/node/125984>.

project of the United Arab State in the 1960s.¹⁰

Besides these security concerns, Ankara seeks to leverage power in Idlib and potentially other areas to further its strategic interests in the Mediterranean. A potential agreement with Syria would solve the coastal border issues and strengthen Ankara's regional effort to counter the Greek Cypriot administration's claims in the eastern Mediterranean, possibly having Syria recognise the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC).¹¹

A weakened axis of resistance

Perhaps the biggest loser in the new Syria is Iran. Hafez Assad had established a strategic alliance with Tehran in the 1970s to balance relations with Iraq and Israel. Iran also benefited from the alliance to establish a presence in Lebanon and pose a direct threat to Israel. This strategic alliance continued till the end collapse of Bashar al-Assad's regime.

¹⁰ Joshua Nevett, "Turkey-Syria offensive: What Are 'Safe Zones' and Do They Work?", in *BBC News*, 1 November 2019, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-50101688>; "Ethnic Cleansing in Syria: The Unseen Terror", in *The Bulletin*, 13 July 2007, <https://www.institutkurde.org/en/info/ethnic-cleansing-in-syria-the-unseen-terror-1185370405.html>.

¹¹ Euripides Evriviades, "The Eastern Mediterranean: Cyprus and the Geopolitics of Turkish Irredentism", in *RUSI Commentaries*, 15 January 2025, <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/eastern-mediterranean-cyprus-and-geopolitics-turkish-irredentism>; Yücel Acer, "The Potential of a Türkiye-Syria Maritime Border Agreement", in *Daily Sabah*, 17 January 2025, http://sabahdai.ly/_26em.

Therefore, the fall of Bashar al-Assad is a strategic setback for Iran. Tehran no longer has access to the land corridor to Lebanon and has its whole regional strategy at stake without a Syrian foothold. While it is still unclear how the new development in Syria will affect Iran's Yemen policy of supporting the Houthis, the axis of resistance has been substantially weakened.

Syria's future relations with Israel are also at the heart of regional (dis)order. For Tel Aviv, Assad's fall, coupled with the dismantling of Hezbollah's military capabilities and command structure, signifies a strategic victory against Iran and its regional proxies.

While it is unclear if the HTS-led interim government could pose a threat to Israel in the occupied Golan Heights, Tel Aviv's response to HTS's capture of power has been aggressive and largely provocative. Following Assad's fall, Israel embarked on an extensive air military campaign and is reported to have launched over 800 airstrikes across the country,¹² targeting primarily Syria's military capabilities such as weaponry depots, air defence systems, military airports, naval assets, chemical weapons sites and intelligence facilities. Israel Defence Forces have also occupied strategic positions in Mount Hermon to create a buffer zone with Syria.¹³

¹² Alessandra Bajec, "How Israel Is Trying to Weaken Post-Assad Syria", in *The New Arab*, 18 December 2024, <https://www.newarab.com/node/4903081>.

¹³ Peter Beaumont, "Netanyahu Says Israel Will Occupy Syria Buffer Zone for Foreseeable Future", in *The Guardian*, 18 December 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/p/xx6ffy>.

Riyadh's engagement and Abu Dhabi's concerns

The HTS-led interim government's foreign policy towards the Arab core of MENA, especially Saudi Arabia and the UAE, also provides a complex and nuanced picture. The interim government has been extremely cautious in the messages it is sending to these two countries, being aware of the sensitivity and impact of Arab uprisings and the Muslim Brotherhood on these monarchies. Hence, al-Shaara was clear since day one in saying that post-Assad Syria is *not* in continuity with the Arab spring wave.

Both Riyadh and Abu Dhabi suddenly find themselves in a precarious position following Assad's fall, especially considering the UAE's normalisation of relations with Damascus in 2018 and the restoration of Syria's seat at the Arab League in 2023 – a step that was branded as “a profound transformation in the broader Arab regional order”.¹⁴ Suddenly, these two Gulf states, which had been normalising relations with the Assad regime, face a new reality with HTS at the helm.

As for Riyadh, seeing a new Syria without Iran as a strategic opportunity, it has cautiously welcomed the new interim government with a combination of opportunism and caution. Riyadh was one of the first countries to host Syria's new foreign minister, Asaad al-Shaibani, in Riyadh.¹⁵

¹⁴ Sultan Alamer, “The Arab Regional Order and Assad: From Ostracism to Normalization”, in *Bawader*, 14 June 2023, <https://www.arab-reform.net/?p=26786>.

¹⁵ “Syria FM in Saudi Arabia on Maiden Trip as

From the HTS side, Ahmed al-Sharaa expressed optimism about the future role of Saudi Arabia in Syria, emphasising that the new Syria poses no threat to Gulf states and is open to investment.¹⁶ The decision to grant an exclusive interview to the Saudi-owned *Al Arabiya* first, traditionally more critical of Islamists than Qatar's *Al Jazeera*, in itself, signals a significant strategy shift in the HTS's approach.

Clearly, Saudi Arabia is making efforts to create regional and domestic conditions to implement its 2030 objectives.¹⁷ Its involvement in Syria¹⁸ likely falls into its larger regional vision. Also, Riyadh is likely to invest in post-war reconstruction projects worth billions of dollars and will also try to work with the Syrian government to end the production and smuggling of the drug Captagon into Saudi territories.¹⁹

New Rulers Reset Regional Ties”, in *Al Jazeera*, 2 January 2025, <https://aje.io/ux92qi>.

¹⁶ “Exclusive Interview with the Leader of the Transitional Administration in Syria, Ahmed al-Sharaa” [video in Arabic], in *Al Arabiya Channel*, 30 December 2024, <https://youtu.be/vRxLbKJbA4Y>; “Syria's New Elections and Draft Constitution: Al-Sharaa Outlines Timeline”, in *Al Arabiya English*, 29 December 2024, <https://ara.tv/3buah>.

¹⁷ Gertjan Hoetjes, “The Saudi-Emirati Axis and the Preservation of Regional Order”, in *CRU Reports*, January 2022, p. 16-37, <https://www.clingendael.org/pub/2022/the-saudi-emirati-axis-and-regional-order>.

¹⁸ Daniel Fountain and Zaynab Khojji, “‘We Need Syria to Be a Place of Peace and Development,’ FM Al-Shaibani Tells WEF”, in *Arab News*, 22 January 2025, <https://arab.news/yggek>.

¹⁹ Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, “Saudi Arabia's Cautious Embrace of the New Syria”, in *ACRPS Case Analysis Reports*, 12 January 2025, <https://www.dohainstitute.org/en/PoliticalStudies/Pages/saudi-arabia-cautious-embrace-of-the-new-syria.aspx>.

As for the UAE, Abu Dhabi shares greater reservations about its relations with Damascus than Saudi Arabia. While seeing significant economic potential in post-Assad Syria too, the Emirati leadership remains cautious in engaging with the HTS-led interim government due to its Islamist nature, despite the signs of change of the HTS leader. This scepticism stems from Abu Dhabi's strained history with the UAE's Muslim Brotherhood branch, *al-Islah*, which previously sought to expand its influence within the state institutions and to assume political power and overthrow the ruling family.²⁰

Thus, the UAE views its relations with the new Syrian leadership as potentially legitimising Islamist rule. Reflecting this stand, UAE presidential adviser, Anwar Gargash, expressed concern about the HTS's ties with Islamist groups, despite noting some pragmatic language about Syrian unity.²¹

The bordering Iraq

Finally, as for Iraq, Syria has always had zigzagging relations with Baghdad, alternating between cooperation and rivalry.²² The war on the Islamic State organisation (IS) changed these

dynamics. In 2014, the two countries established an operations room, along with Iran and Russia, and later the Lebanese Hezbollah, to fight IS.²³ Besides, the Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF) were deployed in Syria to guard the religious shrines. Evidence shows that the PMF fought alongside Assad's forces against the opposition groups.²⁴

Iraq's delayed response in sending a delegation to Damascus reflects hesitancy to engage with the HTS-led interim government, especially given Ahmed al-Shaara's past ties to terrorist activities inside Iraq and connection with former IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.²⁵ The fact that Iraq sent its intelligence Chief, Hamid al-Shatri, to engage with the new government highlights that Baghdad sees its Syria policy to be primarily a security policy. Indeed, the two sides discussed mutual security concerns,²⁶ particularly controlling their shared 600-kilometre border to prevent jihadist infiltration and attacks like those seen after 2003.²⁷

²⁰ Lori Plotkin Boghardt, "The Muslim Brotherhood on Trial in the UAE", in *PolicyWatch*, No. 2064 (12 April 2013), <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/node/5323>.

²¹ "Blinken Says Jordan Talks Agree on Need for 'Inclusive' Syrian Government", in *France24*, 14 December 2014, <https://www.france24.com/en/middle-east/20241214-live-russian-cargo-plane-leaves-syria-for-libya-more-departures-to-come>.

²² Amjed Rasheed, *Power and Paranoia in Syria-Iraq Relations. The Impact of Hafez Assad and Saddam Hussain*, London/New York, Routledge, 2023.

²³ "Iraq, Russia, Iran and Syria Coordinate against ISIL", in *Al Jazeera*, 27 September 2015, <https://aje.io/jytyb>.

²⁴ "Syrian Rebel Leader Urges Iraq to Keep Hashd al-Shaabi Factions out of Syria", in *Reuters*, 5 December 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/syrian-rebel-leader-urges-iraq-keep-hashd-al-shaabi-factions-out-syria-2024-12-05>.

²⁵ Seth G. Jones et al., "The Evolution of the Salafi-Jihadist Threat. Current and Future Challenges from the Islamic State, Al-Qaeda, and Other Groups", in *CSIS Reports*, 2018, <https://www.csis.org/node/49424>.

²⁶ "First Iraqi Delegation Meets New Syrian Leadership Following the Fall of Bashar Al-Assad", in *+964*, 26 December 2024, <https://en.964media.com/29845>.

²⁷ Abbas Kadhim, "As a New Syria Takes Shape, Iraq Will Need to Recalibrate Its Role in the

Uncertainty in the US's Syria policy

A key 'external' actor in navigating regional contradictions is the United States. The new Trump administration has already frozen US aid worldwide,²⁸ which reflects uncertainty regarding its commitment to keeping troops in Syria. The suspension of aid has disrupted the security and administration of key detention camps in northern Syria, which raises serious concerns about possible prison breaks among the 9,000 IS fighters in al-Hol and Roj.²⁹

More generally, the Commander of US Centcom Gen Michael Kurilla said that he had "not yet managed to come up with anything concrete, and does not know what President Trump wants", predicting that "Trump will no doubt say who benefits from all this – they should pay".³⁰

As the situation on the ground continues to unfold, the US policy will likely focus on balancing regional security and counterterrorism, while taking into account the multifold and layered regional alliances and interests.

Middle East", in *MENASource*, 15 January 2025, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/?p=818502>.

²⁸ Reuters, "Trump Administration Puts About 60 USAid Officials on Leave after Aid Freeze", in *The Guardian*, 28 January 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/p/xxe7be>.

²⁹ Patrick Wintour and Dan Sabbagh, "IS Fighters in Syria Could Break Free amid Trump Aid Cut, Terrorism Expert Warns", in *The Guardian*, 28 January 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/p/xxebat>; Amnesty International, *Syria: Mass Death, Torture and Other Violations against People Detained in Aftermath of Islamic State Defeat – New Report*, 17 April 2024, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/?p=209815>.

³⁰ Patrick Wintour and Dan Sabbagh, "IS Fighters in Syria Could Break Free", cit.

Syria at a crossroads

Within this nested game of power politics, security and rivalry, Syria has yet again demonstrated its key role in the geopolitics of the region. Yet ultimately, the country stands at a crossroads.

In addition to drafting a new constitution for the republic – which is potentially the most formidable task – the interim government faces issues of filling the power vacuum, governance, managing relations with rival factions, ending international isolation and sanctions, and rebuilding the economy and infrastructure. Key priorities currently are integrating SDF and various armed groups into a unified military body while balancing the interests with regional powers, first and foremost Türkiye. The interim government also faces challenges of judicial reform, concerns regarding inclusivity, human rights record and the ability to provide basic services to Syrians. All these tasks could significantly alter the regional balance of power and reshape relations with the key actors mentioned above.

These tasks are difficult to achieve, and no single actor can deliver them on its own. The international community has an ethical task not to leave Syria behind: it must help Syrians find Syrian solutions to Syrian problems.

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