



The Evgeny Primakov
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Policy brief

Another Syria: whither goest thou? (Quo Vadis)

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Aksenyonok

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Main points

- The successful blitzkrieg from Idlib can't be seen as a military coup like those that took place in Syria during the 1950s and '60s. The state had decayed from within: the Assad regime had lost the trust of the army and much of the impoverished population, while the exiled opposition had discredited itself. In this atmosphere of general decline and despair, the armed resistance, enhanced by external support, seized its opportunity in a country burdened by a troubled legacy but rooted in secular traditions.
- The power vacuum was filled with the adoption of a constitutional declaration, signed by the president on March 13, followed by the formation of a new government on March 29, in line with the document's provisions. Amid domestic uncertainty and growing chaos, the government prioritized securing regional and international legitimacy as quickly as possible. Their main focus was placed on multilateral diplomacy aimed at lifting sanctions to be achieved at any cost.
- The Arab monarchies of the Gulf made a strategic decision to support post-Assad Syria economically, guided by broader regional considerations. At the same time, Turkey assumed responsibility for security, military and intelligence training, and advisory roles.
- A real breakthrough came on May 13, when Donald Trump, during his meeting with A. Al-Sharaa in Riyadh, announced plans to begin lifting sanctions on Syria. This stunning move by the eccentric and unpredictable U.S. president, backed by the European Union, removed a number of obstacles on the way of Syria's economic recovery. Most likely, Trump made this decision based on the assumption that, with Russia and Iran pushed out of the equation, Syria would be easier in handling to ensure Israeli integration into the Arab world by force.
- Relations with the Alawite minority, which experienced mass killings in March, are more problematic from both political and psychological perspectives. For the ruling elite, this is a test of resilience: whether they can maintain even a semblance of internal unity in the face of numerous existential challenges.

1. Features of regime change

Radical changes in a country that traditionally had political clout in the region yet was dependent on external support have their own particularities. It seems that, somewhat unexpectedly even to themselves, militants from the northwestern province of Idlib have come to power, united in a coalition led by the radical group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS). It is widely recognized around the world that this organization, which was part of ISIS and al-Qaeda (2003–2016) and operated under various names, has engaged in terrorist activities. Later, its leader, known as Abu Muhammad al-Julani, settled down in Idlib and said he would break with the past, working toward establishing a separate Islamic «emirate» in this Syrian province. In recent years, with some help from Western NGOs, he has also begun a «rebranding» of his political image.¹ After seizing power, he reclaimed his real name, Ahmed Al-Sharaa, and changed his military uniform for smart civilian clothes.

◆ **However, the successful blitzkrieg from Idlib cannot be considered a military coup like those in Syria during the 1950s and '60s. The state had decayed from within: the Assad regime lost the trust of the army and most of the impoverished population, while the opposition abroad discredited itself.**

In this atmosphere of widespread decline and despair, armed resistance, strengthened by external support, found its opportunity in a country burdened by a heavy legacy but rooted in secular traditions. Islamist political forces of a similar connotation had been previously coming to power in the Arab world, but through peaceful means, after winning general elections, as was the case in Tunisia and Egypt. As for attempts to grab power through force and civil wars, they all ended in failure; Algeria, Libya, and Yemen serve as examples. Even within Syria, the army brutally crushed an armed coup attempt by the Muslim Brotherhood in 1982. However, Ahmed Al-Sharaa does not associate his movement with the Brotherhood, despite certain ideological similarities.

Another key feature of the events of December 8, 2024, is that it wasn't just a change of leadership in the presidential palace in Damascus. With Bashar al-Assad in power, not only did the ideology and practice of Ba'athism fade into the past, but so did the rule of Syria's Alawite minority, which makes up 10–12% of the country's overwhelmingly Sunni population. The sectarian balance

¹ Malek Hafez. Britain's Hidden Hand in Syria: How Jonathan Powell and Inter Mediate Shaped a New Order \\ The Syrian Observer. – 26.05.2025. – URL: <https://syrianobserver.com/foreign-actors/britains-hidden-hand-in-syria-how-jonathan-powell-and-inter-mediate-shaped-a-new-order.html>

within the political system itself has shifted, something that, as the Iraqi experience shows, rarely happens without internal upheavals.

Although the Assad clan handled inter-sectarian relations with a degree of sensitivity and enjoyed support from a significant portion of the Sunni population, key positions in the state apparatus, the party, the military, and the intelligence services were consistently held by Alawites.

The Syrian situation has put several Middle Eastern countries in an awkward position, as they still remember the unpleasant experience associated with the Muslim Brotherhood, ISIS, and al-Qaeda. The United States and Europe also faced a tough choice. Russia lost its ally in the region. But it wasn't the guys the West had counted on; instead, power shifted to those listed on terrorist blacklists. Once again, the question arose: how should Islamist forces in power be treated? Where, or even if, is there the line between political Islam and radical Islamism? And is the new government willing to play by the rules accepted in modern national states and civil societies?

Another important development is worth noting. Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, in alliance with other militant groups, including those with pro-Turkish leanings, effectively came to monopolize power in the country, largely due to and amid an unprecedented escalation in regional and international tensions.

In terms of military and political affairs, major Arab states, along with Iran and Turkey, were gradually adjusting to a "new normal." Public displays of solidarity with the Palestinians did not prevent Saudi Arabia from building bridges with Israel and maintaining dialogue with Iran, despite Tehran's weakening position in the region. The *ancien régime* in Syria also tried, as much as possible, to distance itself from direct confrontation with Israel and to curb Iranian influence. But the rapidly shifting landscape consistently outpaced the regime's slow and reactive decision-making.

This became especially evident, in particular, when Bashar al-Assad, who by then was already losing his grip on power, again and again failed to properly assess Turkey's growing influence and the shifts in its relations with the Arab states of the Gulf. Well before the events in Gaza on October 8, 2024, Erdoğan had already begun laying the groundwork for strategic dialogue with Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) as a whole, treating it as a key subregional organization.

The agreements and understanding reached during the ongoing military escalation in the region also included coordination of policies regarding Syria. Frustration grew on both sides over Damascus's inability to engage in serious negotiations on normalizing relations with Turkey and over delays in meeting the conditions under which Syria's membership in the Arab League had been reinstated. Russia's attempts to make the "sovereign" Syrian president comply were ultimately unsuccessful.

The emerging Turkey-GCC partnership coincided with the weakening of the Astana format on Syria. Turkey grew increasingly disinterested in the process and began pursuing its own agenda in the border province of Idlib. For Russia, the Syrian issue slipped down the list of foreign policy priorities, while Iran and its proxies in Lebanon came under intense military pressure from Israel.

2. Transition of power

Syria is once again undergoing a painful experiment in state-building. This is what some Syrian political analysts, borrowing from the French tradition, are calling the Third Republic. Which direction the country will take during this pivotal period remains unclear. In the statements and actions of its new rulers, what is strategy and what is merely tactics? Or are they testing the reactions of Syrian society and key international players before making final decisions at a more opportune historical moment? These questions consistently arise when analyzing the situation inside the country, with all its contradictions and political coloured complexity.

The timeline and sequence of events following December 8 suggest that Ahmed Al-Sharaa and his inner circle may have their own deeply held sacred vision, a kind of a blueprint for how Syria's future should unfold. They appear to be well-versed in the history of Islamist movements in the Arab world and in Syria itself, with all their achievements, mistakes, naïve illusions, and miscalculations.

But first, the immediate priority was to quickly restore basic order and ensure essential services in urban centers, relying on their own armed forces and by promoting administrative structures from the Idlib province to the national level. At that point, there were simply no other viable options. The first interim government was composed almost entirely of trusted members of HTS². At the same time, Prime Minister Muhammad Bashir immediately announced that his term would be limited to three months, until March.

The consolidation of power was accompanied by public assurances of a commitment to civil peace, guarantees of security for all segments of Syrian society, and a clear denial of any plans to impose Islamic rule³. The transition at the top was facilitated by the fact that the removal of a bankrupt and increasingly toxic regime gave the new leadership a kind of psychological credit of trust. The suddenness and speed of the takeover, along with the discipline shown by the militants, also played a significant role. Prisoners were immediately released, the army, security services, parliament,

2 Ruslan Mamedov. From anti-elite to elite: new Syria amid global transformations – M.: Journal of the Belarusian State University. History, 2025. – 48-60 pp. URL: <https://journals.bsu.by/index.php/history/article/view/7069>

3 Azhari T., Gebeily M., Perry T. Syrian rebel leader, after Assad's ouster, tightens his grip on the state. \ Reuters. – 12.12.2024. – URL: https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/after-assads-ouster-syrian-rebel-leader-puts-his-stamp-state-2024-12-12/?utm_source=Sailthru&utm_medium=Newsletter&utm_campaign=Daily-Briefing&utm_term=121224&lctg=655c821723b9ec514d

ruling party, and other remnants of the old regime were disbanded. A mood of nationwide celebration, hope for a better future, and an unprecedented sense of freedom of expression swept through the streets of Syria.

Another top priority, namely achieving both domestic and international legitimacy, proved to be far more difficult. How to fill the power vacuum while preserving the dominant role of the victors, without undermining their reassuring declarations toward ethnic and sectarian minorities? Judging by the fact that **in December and January Al-Sharaa mentioned various timeframes (three and four years), the eventual announcement of a five-year transitional period likely came after internal debate.** For many Syrians, that interval felt too long.

On the other hand, holding quick elections in a country with such a heavy legacy is no easy task, even from a purely logistical standpoint. The absence of reliable data on the size and composition of the population that dramatically altered in the years of civil war, could seriously hurdle a smooth transition. Similar situations have occurred elsewhere in the Middle East. Elections in Libya, held soon after the fall of Gaddafi, only deepened instability. The rushed adoption of a new constitution in Iraq in 2005, just two years after the U.S. invasion, put more oil to sectarian tensions. Egypt's experience, even as a relatively homogeneous society, also does not support the case for accelerating a transitional process.

Surprisingly, it didn't take much time to establish the transitional governing bodies, just over three months, from December 24, 2024, to March 29, 2025, despite widespread expectations to the contrary.

The process began with the official recognition of Al-Sharaa's leadership during a meeting at the presidential palace with the majority of fighters from a dozen armed groups. These groups announced their self-dissolution and agreed to unite under the command of the interim government's defense minister, forming the core of a future national army. For the first time, a firm and public warning was issued: from now on, all armed formations must be brought under state control⁴. On January 29, the same military coalition formally nominated Al-Sharaa for the presidency of Syria. In his victory speech, delivered in a moderately conciliatory tone and calling to build a Syria "for all," he announced the convening of a National Dialogue Conference as a platform for consultations and the exchange of views. The conference's recommendations were to serve as the foundation for drafting a constitutional declaration. The dialogue, held on February 24,

4 Amr M., Porter L. Syrian armed groups agree to disband and join defence ministry, says new administration. \ The National. - 24.12.2024. - URL: <https://www.thenationalnews.com/news/mena/2024/12/24/syrian-armed-groups-agree-to-dissolve-and-join-defence-ministry-says-new-administration/>

turned out to be little more than a one-day event with a tightly controlled agenda, the fact that prompted disappointment among segments of civil society and minority communities who had expected broader representation and more open discussion^{5 6}.

◆ **The power vacuum was formally filled with the adoption of a constitutional declaration, signed by the president on March 13, and the formation of a new government on March 29 in accordance with the document's provisions.**

This entire five-stage process, which critics have described as largely pro form one, took place under strict top-down control. The drafting and enactment of the transitional «constitution» were carried out quickly and without substantive debate on the political system or the structure of the state. The president was vested with absolute powers, **despite a nominal reference to the separation of powers in the declaration. He holds full executive authority (the position of prime minister is not mentioned in the text), as well as the power to appoint one-third of the legislature and to shape the judiciary entirely at his discretion^{7 8}.**

The transitional government led by President Al-Sharaa differs significantly from the initial interim cabinet. Politically and functionally, its composition reflects four distinct groups holding ministerial posts. The first group consists of technocrats from the younger generation of the Syrian community, educated and professionally trained in the West, primarily in fields like economics, finance, and transportation. The second group is made up of security-sector ministers, figures from the president's inner circle since the formation of HTS, who have accompanied him through every stage of the civil war. They oversee portfolios such as defense, internal affairs, and energy. The third group was selected on an individual basis to ensure confessional representation. It includes ministers from minority communities: Alawite, Kurdish, Druze, and Christian. The Minister of Social Affairs is a Christian woman. The fourth group represents the so-called ideological bloc, which

5 The View from Damascus – The Syrian National Dialogue Conference: A Critical Political Analysis. \ The Syrian Observer. – 26.02.2025. – URL: <https://syrianobserver.com/syrian-actors/the-view-from-damascus-the-syrian-national-dialogue-conference-a-critical-political-analysis.html>

6 Al Jazeera. Syria's interim leader launches national dialogue on political transition. \ ALJAZEERA. – 25.02.2025. – URL: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/2/25/syrias-interim-leader-launches-national-dialogue-on-political-future>

7 Syria's Constitutional Declaration. - 01. 05.2025. – URL: <https://constitutions.ru/?p=29501&yclid=mbj9j6dok594935453>

8 Ziadeh R. Challenges Facing Syria's Constitutional Declaration. \ Arab Center Washington DC. – 04.04.2025. – URL: <https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/challenges-facing-syrias-constitutional-declaration/>

includes the Minister of Justice (a scholar in Sharia law), along with the Ministers of Education and Tourism^{9 10}.

Although the newly reshuffled government was met with cautious optimism, it failed to garner sufficient political support domestically. Representatives of the Kurdish and Druze minorities have tied their cooperation to reaching fundamental political agreements on the degree of decentralization within the state structure. Such an approach clashes with the government's firmly centralized course. Calls are growing for the president to back up his pledges to respect Syria's ethno-confessional and religious diversity by meaningfully expanding political representation in the state apparatus, starting with local governance structures.

During the first two to three months, the consolidation of the new leadership proceeded relatively smoothly. However, beginning in March, the domestic political situation sharply deteriorated¹¹.

Outbreaks of armed clashes and widespread acts of revenge were taking place along the Mediterranean coast where Alawites compose the majority (Baniyas, Jableh, Latakia) as well as in central regions with mixed populations (Homs, Hama), in the Druze-majority south (Daraa, Suwayda), and in the suburbs of Damascus. These events revealed that one cannot rely solely on force to maintain security and highlighted the presence of powerful Salafist factions within the ruling structure itself, the groups that appear to operate beyond central control. At the same time, dormant cells of terrorist organizations previously disavowed by HTS leadership began to show up.

For his part, Al-Sharaa appears to have adopted a strategy of balancing between the radical sentiments within his inner circle and the need to address the demands of the secular segments of society, which reject sectarian division. There is a clear tendency to postpone decisions on key issues such as the role of religion in the state, political guarantees for the civil rights of ethnic and sectarian minorities, the structure of local governance, the role of political parties, electoral procedures, and more, while maintaining a stance of constructive ambiguity.

◆ **The collapse of security, the looming threat of financial and economic breakdown, and the inability to swift transition to inclusive governance**

9 The Syrian Observer. Syria's Economic Reboot: Three Ministers, One Mission. \ The Syrian Observer. – 25.04.2025. – URL: <https://syrianobserver.com/syrian-actors/syrias-economic-reboot-three-ministers-one-mission.html>

10 The Syrian Observer. The View From Damascus – The New Syria? Navigating Power, Reform, and Reality in the Translational Era. \ The Syrian Observer. – 01.04.2025. – URL: <https://syrianobserver.com/syrian-actors/the-view-from-damascus-the-new-syria-navigating-power-reform-and-reality-in-the-translational-era.html>

11 Balanche F. Geography of the Alawites Massacre. \ Fabrice Balanche. – 25.03.2025. – URL: <https://www.fabricebalanche.com/en/analysis/geography-of-the-alawite-massacre/>

amid a fragile balance of power at the top have confronted the transitional government and the president personally with a bunch of complex, interconnected challenges that cannot be resolved quickly. As time went on, the risk of a social explosion became increasingly real¹².

Even if it had full autonomy, the government's internal capacity remained limited. Emergency measures helped temporarily stabilize the situation, improving access to energy, securing food and fuel supplies, regulating food prices, and raising wages. At the same time, spending on the bloated public sector was brought under control, and restrictions on private enterprise were lifted.

But more was needed to buy time and it needed something tangible. The initial public trust is short-lived, and there seems to be an awareness of that at the top. It became essential to show the population how the new leadership differs from its predecessors and to offer hope for the near future.

Amid growing internal uncertainty and mounting chaos, the government focused its efforts on securing regional and international legitimacy as quickly as possible. At the center of its agenda was multilateral diplomacy aimed at lifting sanctions at any cost. This was seen as the key to immediate survival, to launching long-term economic reconstruction, and to reshaping the state according to the new leadership's vision for the future.

12 Dr. Haid Haid. Where Does Syria's Transition Stand? \\ Arab Reform Initiative. – 24.04.2025. – URL: <https://www.arab-reform.net/publication/where-does-syrias-transition-stand/>

3. External framework

April and May witnessed an unprecedented surge in the foreign policy activity of the Syrian authorities and a wave of multilateral diplomacy surrounding Syria. Officials declared that the country was no longer a conflict zone, but now adhered to a policy of “regional convergence” within the broader framework of “positive neutrality.”

The process of legitimizing the new Syrian leadership began to gain momentum rapidly. In the early stages, Turkey played a decisive role in facilitating Syria’s reentry onto the international stage. Having quietly backed the rise of Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham, Turkey, which came of no surprise, moved to build a new foundation for relations with Damascus following HTS’s victory. Although Ankara officially denies direct involvement in the offensive, pro-government media outlets suggested that Turkish military and intelligence services not only monitored the situation but also actively supported the Syrian National Army and Arab tribal groups fighting alongside HTS militants.¹³

Notably, not all the Gulf states that used to be Syria’s primary source of financial aid and investment rushed to take a clear stance. Qatar quickly threw its support behind the new regime, with Emir Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani becoming the first head of state to visit Damascus, already in January.

The UAE, however, given its long-standing wariness of militant Islamism, preferred to act cautiously. Saudi Arabia and Egypt also adopted a wait-and-see approach.

The final statement issued at the first meeting of the Arab ministerial group on Syria after Assad’s ouster, held on December 14 in Aqaba, stopped short of full recognition. While it expressed support for Syria’s stability, territorial integrity, and sovereignty, it also called on the new leadership to form an inclusive, consensus-based governing body as a pathway toward a new political system through free and fair elections¹⁴. It was fully in line with UN Security Council Resolution 2254.

In a short span of time, Erdoğan managed to build an Arab bloc in support of the new reality and helped rebrand Al-Sharaa as a public political figure.

13 Adar S., Asseburg M., Azizi H., Klein M., Strainberg G. The Fall of the Assad Regime: Regional and International Power Shifts. \\ SWP Comment. 2025. № 9. URL: https://www.swp-berlin.org/publications/products/comments/2025C09_Fall_Assad_Regime.pdf

14 The National. Arab states pledge to support Syria in transition from Assad rule. \\ The National. – 14.12.2024. – URL: <https://www.thenationalnews.com/news/mena/2024/12/14/arab-states-pledge-to-support-syria-in-transition-from-assad-rule/>

The Syrian president embarked on a series of visits to Gulf capitals, starting in February with Saudi Arabia, where he was formally introduced to the Crown Prince. This first foreign visit served as a clear signal of HTS's and that of its leader whitewashing in the Arab world. The newly formed transitional government was soon fully recognized, accompanied by pledges of emergency aid and long-term investments in infrastructure, energy, transportation, oil production, housing reconstruction, and other sectors. Business delegations began arriving in Damascus in growing numbers. Saudi Arabia and Qatar paid off Syria's \$15 million debt to the World Bank, opening the door for new loans. They also pledged to cover the salaries of Syrian civil servants for a three-month period thus effectively placing parts of the state payroll under temporary foreign sponsorship.¹⁵

A de facto division of roles began to take shape. **The Arab monarchies of the Persian Gulf made a principled decision to support post-Assad Syria economically and politically, driven by broader regional considerations. At the same time, Turkey assumed responsibility for security, training the army and intelligence services, and providing advisory support.** Yet for this arrangement to function, one crucial element was still missing: the lifting of U.S. sanctions. Without that, or at least a partial easing of the sanctions regime, it would be almost impossible to implement support plans.

Turkey and Saudi Arabia focused their efforts on comforting the United States. Washington initially has been taking the rise of Islamists of all shades, from moderates to jihadists, with mixed sentiments. After the Arab Spring, when Islamist movements that had garnered the support of tens of millions of voters in the Arab world were ultimately defeated in Egypt and Tunisia, global interest in political Islam sharply declined. The pragmatism has prevailed, especially as an autocratic trend had been gaining ground across the region ever since. Within the U.S. administration, there had long been internal divisions over Syria. However, as Israel tightened its military grip, relations with Turkey improved, and Russian influence receded, voices calling for scaling back the American military presence grew louder, in line with an overall recalibration of U.S. policy in the Middle East.

◆ **When Donald Trump met Al-Sharaa in Riyadh on May 13 and announced that he intended to launch the process of lifting sanctions on Syria, it marked a real breakthrough. This dramatic move by the eccentric and unpredictable American leader, later backed by the European Union, removed several key obstacles to the start of Syria's economic recovery.**

¹⁵ Oweis K. Y. Syrian President Ahmad Al Shara in Kuwait amid drive for Gulf investment. \\ The National. – 01/06/2025. – URL: <https://www.thenationalnews.com/news/mena/2025/06/01/syrian-president-shara-meets-kuwaiti-emir/>

For Syria and its Arab backers, it was not necessarily the expansion of previously granted exemptions that mattered, but rather the six-month suspension of secondary sanctions under the Caesar Act. This opened the door for genuine economic and financial engagement with the outside world. The first financial transactions have already begun.

At the same time, the full lifting of sanctions is a complex and slow-moving legislative process, even if the president is determined. U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio explained Trump's unexpected decision before Congress in the most dramatic terms. He warned that if the transitional government does not receive support, Syria faces the risk of a large-scale civil war: within weeks or a few months, the country could face potential collapse¹⁶. Even if this drama was sufficiently justified, **it is likely that Trump took this step based on the belief that after Russia and Iran are pushed out, Syria will be easier to manipulate within the new regional power balance, thus serving the interests of Israel's integration into the Arab world.**

To test the genuine intentions of the Syrian Islamists, the U.S. State Department presented eight conditions in March, framed as confidence-building measures. Soon, the Syrian side submitted a written response. Meeting most of these conditions was not particularly difficult (such as granting access to chemical weapons production sites, clarifying the fate of missing Americans, repatriation of families of ISIS militants from the Al-Hol camp, expulsion of Palestinian militias and banning their political activities, and countering Iran's military presence). Accepting other American demands posed serious internal challenges that threatened to undermine the regime's socio-political support base, including the removal of several thousand foreign fighters from the army, cooperation with the U.S.-led coalition, and consent to U.S. independent counterterrorism operations inside Syria. But these were issues to be discussed among the victors, touching on militant Islamists, criteria for Syrian self-identification (what were they fighting for?), and state sovereignty. Still, with the help of Turkey and Saudi Arabia, the Syrians managed to reach agreements with the Americans to move gradually toward mutual understanding. Regarding foreign fighters, a compromise was soon found: the U.S. approved their "integration" into the new army, provided the process would be transparent. To oversee the "proper" course of the transitional period, Trump appointed his trusted envoy for Syria, the U.S. ambassador to Turkey, Tom Barrack, who regards Al-Sharaa as a supporter of "moderate Islam."¹⁷

16 Watkins T. Syria sanctions relief vital as risk of 'epic' civil war looms, Rubio warns. \ The National. – 20.05.2025. – URL: <https://www.thenationalnews.com/news/us/2025/05/20/syria-civil-war-sanctions-rubio/>

17 The Syrian Observer. U.S. Envoy: Syria's President Sharaa Faces Assassination Risk, But Offers a Path to Stability. \ The Syrian Observer. – 12.06.2025. – URL: <https://syrianobserver.com/syrian-actors/u-s-envoy-syrias-president-sharaa-faces-assassination-risk-but-offers-a-path-to-stability.html>

The external support provided to Syria by the United States is tied to a set of core conditions concerning the country's policy direction during the transitional period. These include Syria's relationship with Israel, the development of an inclusive, election-based political system, guarantees for the safety of religious and ethnic minorities, and the decentralization of administration¹⁸. Progress in this direction is slowly taking shape. At the same time, many Middle East experts point out a growing mismatch between the statements made by Syrian authorities, which are tailored to appeal to Western audiences, and their actual steps on the ground. Often, these steps appear more like attempts to simulate compliance, while interpreting the conditions in ways that suit their own agenda.

At Trump's insistence, direct contacts began between Syria and Israel, including discussions on the possibility of normalizing relations. During the "air war" between Israel and Iran, Damascus pointedly refrained from condemning Israeli strikes and instead deployed troops to the Iraqi border to prevent the infiltration of Shiite militias. Syria also had to take Israeli interests into account when de-escalating sectarian clashes in southern Syria and the Damascus suburbs, especially since Israel had taken a strong stand in defense of the Druze community.

In dealing with the Kurdish minority, the Syrian authorities opened talks with the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) on integrating Kurdish armed groups into the new national army. However, much like their predecessors, Syria's new Islamist rulers remain unwilling to accept the kind of decentralization the Kurds are demanding in the hope of the U.S. support.

When it comes to elections, the new leadership favors a system closer to the Islamic principle of shura, a consultation with society through its "worthy representatives", rather than full democratic voting. A decree issued by the interim president on June 13 launched preparations for elections to a transitional parliament (People's Assembly), but it does not envision direct voting. In addition to a central election commission, expert committees made up of legal professionals^{19 20} have been set up, establishing a new layer of oversight at the provincial level.

18 Azhari T., Gebeily M. Exclusive: Syrian letter delivers response to US conditions for sanctions relief. \\\ Reuters. – 26.04.2025. – URL: <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/syrian-letter-delivers-response-us-conditions-sanctions-relief-2025-04-26>

19 The Syria Report. Presidential Decree Number 66 on the Formation of the Higher Committee for the Election of the People's Assembly. \\\ The Syria Report. – 17.06.2025. – URL: <https://syria-report.com/presidential-decree-number-66-on-the-formation-of-supreme-committee-for-the-election-of-the-peoples-assembly/>

20 SYRIA TV. Syria's Parliamentary Elections: Jury Committees Replace Public Vote in Two-Phase System. \\\ The Syrian Observer. – 17.06.2025. – URL: <https://syrianobserver.com/syrian-actors/syrias-parliamentary-elections-jury-committees-replace-public-vote-in-two-phase-system.html>

- ◆ **Relations with the Alawite minority, which suffered mass killings in March, are far more sensitive, both politically and psychologically. For the ruling elite, it's a major test of resilience: whether they can maintain even the appearance of internal unity while facing a range of existential challenges.**

Here too, Al-Sharaa has been forced, at least in terms of rhetoric, to heed international calls to avoid sectarianism. He's pursued a cautious line, both in foreign policy and within his own inner circle, in order to defuse the threat of collective punishment. A commission has been formed to investigate the March violence. Unlike in Iraq, where de-Baathification entailed bloody consequences, Syria has avoided a sweeping purge, fearing that it could be seen as de-Alawitization. At the same time, despite internal pressure, the authorities have been slow to release the findings of the justice commission set up to investigate the crimes of the previous regime. Some dismissed civil servants are being reinstated, and committees on national reconciliation and property disputes continue their work.

Post-Assad Syria remains heavily dependent on external players whose interests, while aligned in preventing renewed escalation, diverge on key questions about the country's political future and its role in the region. In the current balance of power, the main actors are Turkey, the United States, Israel, and the Gulf states.

Still, Syria today can hardly be called a country held under direct foreign control, even though its territory remains divided into zones of influence. Israel's expanding military footprint, Washington's open support for that policy, which marks a shift from previous administrations, Turkey's pragmatic approach, and persistent U.S.-Arab disagreements over the Palestinian issue all that gives Damascus more room to maneuver. The gradual drawdown of American forces, along with talk of a full withdrawal, further opens space for Syria's new rulers to consolidate power at home while playing external partners off one another.

Too little time has passed for any definitive judgments. The early signs of stabilization in Syria remain extremely fragile against the backdrop of a volatile Middle East. Still, both externally and, to some extent, within the country, a tacit consensus seems to have emerged: the Islamists in power should be given a chance, a kind of test of their moderation and ability to sideline or neutralize the jihadist wing. It remains to be seen whether they can seize this opportunity to ease the burden on ordinary Syrians and begin building a modern state, one with an Islamic character, representative institutions, and an inclusive political system.

The role of individual leaders has always been decisive in times of upheaval, especially in the Arab world. Syria's new leader, Ahmed al-Sharaa, has emerged as a charismatic figure, capable of balancing extremes by combining decisive action with political flexibility and an ability to speak directly to the public. The upcoming elections to the People's Assembly and the question of how Sharia-based jurisprudence will be positioned in public life may serve as key indicators of how Syria's statehood will take shape going forward in an increasingly turbulent world.



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