



RECONSTRUCTING THE ‘NEW SYRIA’: PEACEBUILDING AND POLITICAL TRANSITION AFTER ASSAD

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Abstract

The repercussions of dictator Bashar Assad's downfall continue to reverberate through Syria. Since December 2024, these events have unfolded against a backdrop of a region reeling from a 15-month long genocide in Gaza as well as a war and tenuous ceasefire in Lebanon. Additionally, there is widespread apprehension about the implications of a new presidency under Donald Trump, who maintains close ties with Gulf leaders—particularly Crown Prince and Prime Minister Mohammed Bin Salman of Saudi Arabia. Predicting Syria's future, whether in the near, medium, or long term, is fraught with uncertainty. It is possible, however, to identify some emerging dynamics and key challenges for both peacemaking and political transition in a country emerging from 14 years of revolution-turned war, where fighting in regions such as Northeast Syria is still taking place.

This report begins by mapping out the key actors and the latest political and security developments in the roughly three months since Assad's fall. It then moves to identifying extant issues necessary for the country's move out of war and into the uncertain terrain of political transition. Some policy recommendations for Syrian civil society and political as well as regional and international actors close off the report.

Introduction

The collapse of Bashar Al-Assad's regime on December 8, 2024 was so stunning precisely because of its breakneck speed. The opposition Hay'at Tahir al-Sham (HTS) forces led by Abu Mohamed Al-Jolani, aka Ahmad Al-Sharaa, joined a few days later by the Syrian National Army, a collection of militias loosely banded together and backed by neighbouring Turkey, ripped through the country from their stronghold Idlib in the north onto Aleppo, Hama, and finally Damascus in the course of only 11 days. To an extent, the whirlwind speed of another Arab dictator's demise reminded onlookers of the earliest Arab Spring revolutions. Back in 2011, Zin Elabedine Ben Ali and then Hosni Mubarak exited the scene more quickly than Tunisian or Egyptian protestors could have likely imagined.

What appeared to be a shocking development, one which many Syrians opposed to the regime had almost despaired of ever witnessing, was the result of a confluence of local, regional, and international factors. The wars in Ukraine and Gaza taxed Assad's Russian and Iranian allies respectively. Years of ill-rewarded fighting in regime-controlled areas beleaguered by paralyzing sanctions seem to have deepened corruption and depleted morale of the national (and loyal to Assad) Syrian Arab Army. Reports have slowly begun to uncover the back story of Bashar Al-Assad's abrupt Russian-aided departure to Moscow. Much more about the exact deal-making between HTS and the Syrian Arab Army, HTS and regional powers such as Turkey, and among regional (Turkey-Iran-Gulf) and international (United States and Russia) powers themselves will come to light in the months and years to come. What has taken place since the 8th of December, however, is an unforeseen rupture in Syrian politics after 54 years of dictatorial, repressive, and bloody Baath rule.

A post-Assad Syria: The road since December 8

INTERNATIONALIZATION: FROM REVOLUTION TO (PRE)-TRANSITION

For over a decade, the revolution in which Syrians, like their fellow Arabs, cried out for freedom and dignity took numerous twists and turns. The country plunged deep into a multi-sided, internationalized war in many ways exemplifying what political scientist Mary Kaldor has called “new wars”. The conflict involved both state and non-state actors, illicit economies, and sectarianized identities, and territorial fragmentation with numerous often externally backed de facto rulers (or what Syrians have called *sulatat al-amr al-waqi'*). In fact, it had not been uncommon to view the conflict in the country as a “frozen” one, and the revolution itself as a beautiful but unrealizable utopian dream for emancipation from the “internal occupier” of the state that was the Assad dynasty. Unlike the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt that appeared to leap into revolutionary success when their dictators were toppled, Syria’s uprising spiralled quickly into dual internationalization and militarization that rendered the project for self-liberation from authoritarian rule utterly more complicated.

For the first few years after 2011, the conflict seemed to be a priority for the US and Russia and their respectively competing interests. As part of a UN process, the Geneva Communiqué of 2012 signalled an agreement between the two global powers on a path to ending the war and establishing a political transition. This began a pattern that would continue for years. The uprising-war, from its military backing to its politicking, was torn out of Syrian hands – sometimes willingly, by those who sought support from potential allies whom they perhaps mistakenly thought valued people’s freedom as much as Syrians did. From the terrorist creep and subsequent terrorist designations, to the chemical weapons deal between the US and Russia, to the US-led military operation “Enduring Freedom” by the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS (the so-called “Islamic State”), major military and diplomatic processes regarding the fate of Syria have been led by international actors. Other milestones have included the United Nations Security Council Resolution 2254 that outlined a pathway to a ceasefire and political transition rooted in the 2012 Geneva Agreement. Then came the alternative UN trilateral Astana Process sponsored by Russia, Turkey, and Iran that effectively divided Syria into “de-escalation” zones in areas held at the time by various opposition forces. In light of such international initiatives, it is not difficult to view the conflict as one where Syrians themselves were long acting out roles underwritten by external actors, including the US, Russia, Iran, the Gulf States, and numerous foreign militias. Israel’s occupation of the Golan Heights has always been the gorilla in the room, shaping the interests and policies of not just the US but also Russia, whose cooperation with Israel has been one open secret of this long conflict. The swift defeat of Assad’s army and the fleeing of the man himself (who reportedly left his own visiting nephew behind on that fateful day) not surprisingly appears to have been shaped by deal-making between Turkey, Russia, and Iran. Clear backing for the military offensive came from Turkey. In supporting the HTS-led 11-day offensive, Turkey has carved out a capacious margin of influence not just in Syria’s future, but in the transition itself. Indeed, the first press conference held after the fall of the regime was by the Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan.

All this is to stress the point that one great irony of Syrians’ long struggle for liberation, popular sovereignty, and some would say territorial sovereignty itself, is that throughout its winding trajectory it has been shaped by non-Syrian actors. The fall of Assad late last year would not have been possible without interlocking circles of negotiation between these external and internal forces. The people want the toppling of the regime, *al-sha'b yurid isqat al-nizam*, yes. However, in Syria the people could not do it alone, in part because Assad himself could not alone stand against the peaceful and gradually armed protestor/rebels. The ‘butcher of Damascus’ not only responded to the revolution with characteristic if intensified violence and incarceration which was often fatal due to his regime’s notorious and systematic torture of at least 300,000 people in prisons including the dreaded Saydnaya. He eagerly sought external backing, beginning with Hezbollah and Iran in 2012 and then on to Russia in 2015, to stave off rebel offensives.

In some ways, then, the post-Assad order is as internationalized as ever, with more diplomacy and less coercion. Certainly the absence of a Syrian delegation at the 14 December Aqaba meeting of the Arab Ministerial Contact Committee on Syria, convened along with representatives of the US, the UK, and the UN, was notably familiar. It hearkened back to the sense that Syrians are not quite at the helm of their own affairs, as regional and international diplomats initially insisted on a UNSC 2254-type of political transition, originally intended for a “Syrian-Syrian” political settlement between the Assad regime and opposition forces, in the name of regional stability. Over two months later, the irrelevance of UNSC 2254 is now widely accepted. However, it is not always exactly clear exactly which decisions are being made by Sharaa himself and which are being made under external pressure-cum-negotiation with Turkey, the Gulf states, the US, or any other number of players. If Syria has for years been a theatre for both proxy and direct warfare by competing regional and international powers, Damascus seems now to be transitioning into a site of intense diplomatic activity with an important bearing on a shifting regional order after the Gaza war and under a second Trump presidency. Since the Aqaba meeting, the major development has been that the Syrian Foreign Minister Asaad Al-Shaibani and Interim President Asaad Al-Sharaa have been invited to regional and international meetings about their country’s future. These include the January meeting in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia and a Paris meeting in February, both resulting in general expressions of support for Syria’s transition. This kind of asymmetrical international-regional-local interplay is an important caveat to the discussion below.

CONFLICT OR POST-CONFLICT?

This internationalization of both the conflict and a changing political scene means that Syria faces the simultaneous projects of peacebuilding and political transition. Arriving at a state of relative peace, the move out of processes and dynamics of violent conflict is not a switch to turn off, as proponents of liberal, post-liberal, or hybrid peace variously demonstrate. Peacebuilding is instead a gradual process with mechanisms to reverse conflict, including putting in place legal frameworks, often aided (or driven) by external powers, through which parties in conflict resolve their disagreements. In a region as violent as the Middle East and as accosted by foreign intervention and occupation, there are no successful regional models for Syria to fully adopt. Since 1978, when Israel invaded the country in the midst of its civil war, neighbouring Lebanon has hosted a 10,000 strong force of international peacekeepers (UNIFIL). This force was attacked by Israel last October as war in Gaza spilled into Lebanon. Libya saw its own internationalized Arab Spring revolution in 2011, when NATO forces helped local rebels oust (and ultimately kill) dictator Muammar Gaddafi. Fourteen years later, the country is divided into the Haftar-led, and Russian-supported East and the Debiba-led, Turkey supported (and internationally recognized) East. Libya’s elections, an important step toward a comprehensive political transition, have been delayed numerous times. Peacebuilding in the wake of the 2003 occupation of Iraq is not likely to offer many lessons, either, except for the cautionary tale of consociationalism or sectarian power-sharing. And of course, the massive reconstruction awaiting a Gaza whose tenuous ceasefire with Israel seems to be unraveling, in an ongoing, decades-old conflict, is not instructive for the Syrian case either.

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The dearth of inspirational Arab examples for peacebuilding does not make the prospect any less urgent. In terms of actual violence, at least three sub-conflicts are still unresolved. One is the Israeli occupation of the Golan Heights in Syria’s Southeast. In theory this conflict has been at an impasse since the 1974 disengagement agreement, followed by its full annexation in 1981. In the days after Assad’s fall, Israel pounded Syrian territory, taking out most of its defence capabilities and moving deep into the buffer zone overseen by the UN. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu declared that the Golan would remain Israel’s “for eternity,” against protestations by the UN and even the Arab Gulf states. Furthermore, Israel announced plans to invest 11 million dollars to further develop its settlements in the Golan Heights, home to about 23,000 Syrians and 30,000 Israeli settlers. The occupying country is reportedly building six military bases in Syria’s south.

To the surprise of many, including Syrians celebrating Assad's downfall, the response by Al-Sharaa and his administration to Israel's expansionism has been rather tepid. The Syrian representative to the UN demanded Israeli withdrawal to the 1974 border. Ahmad Al Sharaa declared that Israel has "no justification" for incursions into Syria, now that its rivals Iran and Hezbollah have been driven out of the country. He added that Syria would welcome UN peacekeepers to see such de-escalation of the conflict. This understated reaction to Israel's massive attacks and land grab in the country seems to be in line with rather consistent messaging by the new powerholders in Damascus. Syria wants "peace and stability," the Foreign Minister Asaad Hassan Al-Shibani has repeated again and again, including in his conversation with former British Prime Minister Tony Blair during the Davos World Economic Forum in January. It is no longer a threat to its neighbours – including Israel, apparently. The close relationship the administration is (re)cultivating with Saudi Arabia, the US-allied regional heavyweight with deep pockets that Syria desperately needs, may have implications beyond the financial. If anything, there are murmurings that the new leaders, the length of whose tenure and the scope of whose political mandate is yet unclear, may follow in the footsteps of their Gulf patron, as Saudi Arabia is poised to become the next party to an Abraham Accords-style agreement which is anything but promising on the actual peace front. US President Trump's Special Envoy to the Middle East, Steve Witkoff, for example, hopes for Lebanese and Syrian "normalization" with Israel. Such Arab normalization that bypasses Palestine altogether, has proven disastrous for the Palestinians and for the region, as the Gaza example demonstrates. Additional Israeli airstrikes were matched by Prime Minister Netanyahu's statements that Israel would "demilitarize the South", conduct further airstrikes, and Israeli Defense Minister's warning about "defending" the Druze minority when clashes took place with security forces. These provocations have inflamed Syrians, spurring protests across the country in late February. These quickly unfolding dynamics make it less and less likely that Syria will credibly and justly resolve the mushrooming Israeli occupation problem any time soon.

A second open conflict in Syria is between the US-supported Kurdish Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in Northeast Syria. While most of Syria has been "liberated," in Syrian parlance, from the Assad regime and its allies, three governorates in the North-East (Al-Hasaka, Raqqa, and Deir El-Zour) in what is known as Al-Jazira, are still largely outside its control. Much of these areas populated by both Kurds and Arabs remain under the rule of SDF. The group is seen by Turkey, a major backer of the Detering Aggression offensive that brought down Assad and catapulted Al Sharaa and HTS to power in Damascus, as a major security threat due to its relationship with the PKK, designated by Turkey (and the US) as a terrorist organization. More than once, Turkish troops have seemed to be on the verge of invading Kobani, capital of the Kurdish autonomous region since 2015. The US has been mediating indirect negotiations between Turkey and the SDF, headed by Mazlum Abdi. In addition to the regionalized security element, the "Kurdish question" has been a difficult one in Syria. This non-Arab (but Sunni) minority has been largely repressed and deprived of both cultural and basic civic rights in postcolonial Syria, including under Assad.

At the moment, negotiations have stalled, which increases the possibility of Turkish or Turkish-backed violent escalation. The SDF is aiming to maintain some level of political control of Northeast Syria. They further demand retaining an SDF bloc if they join a new Syrian national army, as well as retaining a share of revenues from oil located in the Jazira region under their control. Most recently, Damascus reportedly offered the SDF protection of their cultural and language rights, decentralized political authority in which they would rule local councils, and participation in the Defense Forces and new national army if they disband their own military forces. Despite the spectre of uncertainty, on March 10, the (former HTS-led) interim government has been able to negotiate a deal with the SDF. If implemented by the end of the year as per the terms of the agreement, it would bring more territory, including oil fields in the northeast, and border crossings with Turkey and Iraq, under central government control. It is still early days to speculate on whether the signed deal will hold, and, more importantly, whether the SDF accepts merger into the newly created Syrian army and abandons its quest for an autonomous administration as part of a federalized Syria. Prior to signing the deal, the SDF refused similar proposals. The deal signed in neighbouring Turkey with the PKK may have had a demonstration effect. In a historic move, the commander of the PKK in Turkey, Abdullah Ocalan, recently called for disarmament and an end to conflict with Turkey. SDF commander Mazloun Abdi insisted, however, that the PKK's new stance was "not related to us in Syria." To some extent, the SDF issue is being negotiated by the US (which has not only military bases but also approximately 3000 troops in Syria, many of them in the Northeast) and Turkey via Damascus. Moreover, all await President Trump's decision about how many American troops will remain in Syria, and how much military support the US will continue to extend to SDF.

From a security standpoint, the Kurdish militias are valuable to the US, given its seemingly indefinite war on ISIS. The SDF oversees a number of prisons holding 9,000 or so ISIS fighters, and the Al-Hol refugee camp with about 40,000 ISIS-connected families, including children and even foreign nationals from Western countries. There are recent reports that the SDF has released 13,000 of these family members, allowing them to return to their hometowns in Syria. The security and political implications of this decision are unclear. Some commentators have suggested that this decision is to pressure both leaders in Damascus and Western allies, while others speculate that surely the SDF must have taken such a step only after consulting with Damascus. At the same time, fears of geographic and political fragmentation of Syria, and wariness of “federalism” as the gateway to the carving up of the country, are quite pronounced in the political imaginations of both masses and elites. The scope and substance of Kurdish participation in the new system is not yet clear and will likely be resolved only gradually. Achieving the mantra of a “unified Syria,” uttered by all and sundry since the outbreak of the 2011 revolution—even the SDF leadership at the present moment—will require extensive effort, negotiation, and compromise towards a just arrangement that bolsters, not impedes, peacebuilding. SDF was not invited to take part in the upcoming National Dialogue Conference, complicating prospects for a settlement.

One third task for peacebuilders is the sectarianized violence erupting periodically in the central city of Homs and the Western coastal city of Latakia. Clashes have taken place between remnants of the Assad regime or his supporters, often along sectarian (Alawite/Sunni) lines. The Central Army Command has been quite visible in both regions, attempting to clamp down on such violence and on attacks on Alawites and their sanctuaries. The administration has referred to these incidents as “transgressions” by individuals rather than the policy of the new authorities. Arrests ensued in the wake of these events. Such vigilante violence is recognized by both rulers and citizens as threatening the social peace *al-silm al-ahli*. At the same time, misinformation has been a consistent provocation to sectarian tensions. In late January, one such rumour was that Maher Al-Assad, Bashar’s brother and leader of the dreaded Fourth Division paramilitary group, had returned after seemingly fleeing along with his brother in December. Damascus authorities denied the rumour that had prompted sectarian rumblings on social media. Importantly, violent sectarian flare-ups dovetail with a significant task Syrians expect to be part of the political transition. Namely, transitional justice is awaited after a brutal war led by a state whose most characteristic feature has been “political sectarianism” wielded and instrumentalized by the Assad dynasty. Defying many expectations, the HTS rulers have signalled since the start of their military offensive that they are deliberately eschewing sectarian policies. Yet sectarianism and related transitional justice remain open portfolios. They are vital to peacebuilding and will require time, political acumen, creative policymaking in cooperation with local civil society and international legal experts, and public participation to treat successfully if gradually, by stages.

On 6 March, coordinated deadly attacks on Syrian security forces ignited the worst round of violence since Assad’s fall. The clashes, ongoing at the time of writing, have reportedly resulted in hundreds of casualties, most of them civilians, reflecting the high stakes and complexities inherent in peacebuilding.

Assad’s fall does not in fact seem to have left a political void or the worst-case scenario of a free-for-all where unbridled violence runs rampant. Instead, HTS is orchestrating what appears to be some carefully planned steps toward containment of the security situation, accompanied by intense diplomatic outreach.

A transition to where?

The wild speed of political developments since late November means Syrians as well as outside observers struggle to keep up with the latest state of play. Assad's fall does not in fact seem to have left a political void or the worst-case scenario of a free-for-all where unbridled violence runs rampant. Instead, HTS is orchestrating what appears to be some carefully planned steps toward containment of the security situation, accompanied by intense diplomatic outreach. However, the political transition seems largely improvised. In the early days and weeks after December 8, extremely high hopes and overwhelming joy were palpable among Syrians inside and outside the country. Emancipation, freedom, transitional justice, reconstruction, refugee return all seemed within unimaginable grasp. Syrian cities from Damascus to Aleppo and Hama have been sites of numerous local initiatives for cleaning the streets and administering neighbourhoods.

This civic fervour echoes similar patterns seen in Egypt and Tunisia in the wake of their respective revolutions. Some of these voluntary activities have been organized by reputable and highly trusted civil society organizations like the White Helmets (Civil Defense Forces), while others are less organized. The country is also awash with political salon-like discussions in cafes, cultural centres, and universities. The virtual quasi-public sphere, too, is undergoing a refreshing vitality with a number of new Syrian political podcasts. Syrian guests inundate regional television political talk shows and podcasts broadcast by Aljazeera, Alarabiya, and other channels. Such civic and political dialogism is not surprising in a country whose political activists and movements span the ideological spectrum but have long shared an opposition to authoritarianism, from the Muslim Brotherhood to the 'Damascus Spring' in the early days of Bashar Al-Assad's rule.

But what exactly is the country transitioning into? If containment is a clear direction in peacebuilding and security, a high level of improvisation has characterized the ambiguous direction of HTS's political transition so far. Initially, Al-Sharaa and his new administration claimed to be a caretaker government that would be serving until March. Then talk began of a national conference, sometimes called a National Congress and other times a National Dialogue, that would be held imminently. The expected timeline was reported to be late January, then February, both criticized widely by Syrians and even foreign delegations as too early for any serious and representative political discussions. Participants would be invited only as individuals, however, and not as political parties. Over the course of several media interviews and press conferences, Syrians have pieced together that the postponed conference would be the occasion where HTS disbands. Moreover, congregants at the conference will be tasked with selecting a constitution-drafting committee. A hurried National Dialogue Conference was held on 25 January, days after a seven-person organizing committee was announced. The non-binding recommendations by the 600 or so congregants largely confirmed the key tenets of a transition as outlined by Al-Sharaa and Al-Shaibani. During the next three or four years, Syria may be governed by a technocratic government that will oversee the drafting of a new constitution (or a modified version of earlier texts, possibly from 1950) and elections. What kind of political system HTS envisions, perhaps in coordination or consultation with Turkish officials, is as yet unclear. A new committee of experts (also seven in number) was announced in early March. Like the organizing committee for the National Dialogue Conference, this group was handpicked by Interim President Al-Sharaa. The legal experts are set to draft a temporary constitutional declaration to be approved by the President and come into effect until a new permanent constitution is written and ratified. There has been no move to pass a new law or executive decision for the registration of political parties, or even all civil society organizations, akin to steps taken in 2011 to kickstart Tunisia's initially highly successful democratic transition. In fact, Al-Sharaa and his administration, including the highly visible Foreign Minister Asaad Hassan Al-Shaibani, have been dancing around the question of democracy per se. They mostly avoid use of the term, although they have gradually uttered related terms such as parliament, elections, citizens, and rights.

In this often impromptu interim period, the new administration does seem to be exceeding its initially presumed mandate. Declarations by the Foreign Minister to the *Financial Times*, for instance about the future direction of the economic system—liberal and privatized in a reversal from a nominally socialist, internationally isolated economy under Assad—are surprising at this juncture. The more decisions this administration makes, the more questions emerge about how the transition will play out. So far, the political focus has been directed outward, to dozens and dozens of meetings and press conferences with regional and international leaders,

including Europeans and Americans. The thrust of these meetings has been, first, a consistently conciliatory message: the new Syria is eyeing “peace” and “stability,” openness to the world including the former Western rivals of Al-Sharaa and his followers. Second, the administration has been pleading on behalf of the Syrians for a reprieve from the sanctions placed on the Assad regime by the US and the EU, and even since 1979 as a “state sponsor of terrorism,” according to the United States. Some of this diplomacy, and that of the active group of Syrian American activists known affectionately by many as the “Syrian lobby,” seems to have been paying off at least in part. The US has issued [a License 24 “Authorizing Transactions with Governing Institutions in Syria and Certain Transactions Related to Energy and Personal Remittances.”](#) The license lifts sanctions on governments providing aid for electricity, water, and other humanitarian sectors. (Syrian Americans are still not able to do business or buy property in Syria, however.) The European Union has reportedly just followed suit, announcing a “step-by-step” plan that begins with a one-year period.

Full sanctions relief is a necessary condition for both Syrian reconstruction and its sovereignty.[1] Western foot-dragging on full easing of sanctions indicates that though the justification for sanctions including the Caesar Act—Assad’s repression and involvement with groups deemed terrorist—has gone, the rationale for keeping at least some of them has morphed. The prospect of sanctions *removal* is now leverage to be used in dealings with Damascus: for an inclusive political transition, and perhaps for pressure regarding Syria’s relations with its neighbours.

For Syrians anxious to see their country democratize, if gradually, the short- and medium-term outlook remains hazy. Sanctions relief has become a centrepiece of Al-Sharaa and his administration’s diplomacy. They seem to expect to reap domestic political dividends from such activity. However, the potential accomplishment of getting sanctions removed is not enough to set Syria on the path to a new representative and participatory political system that enshrines civic rights and political freedoms. The more time that passes without a clear roadmap laid out by Al-Sharaa, the more the “stickiness” of the new governing apparatus grows as the main challenge for the political transition: how long will the now (Interim) President Al-Sharaa stay in power? And under what conditions, exactly?

For weeks after 8 December, these questions floated among Syrians. HTS, and above all its leader Ahmad Al-Sharaa, often referred to as General Commander, had no formal title, no job description or delineated powers. The suspense about the transitional phase came to a sudden halt on 29 January 2025. In a “victory conference,” Al-Sharaa, dressed once again in military fatigues, gathered all the anti-Assad militias (except SDF) which were disbanded to form a new national army. At this conference he was declared President of the Republic for this interim phase. He and his Foreign Minister Al-Shaibani addressed the crowd of military men. At this event the Baath Party and its affiliates were declared disbanded, as was the Assad-era parliament and all revolutionary bodies (such as the Syrian National Coalition). Al-Sharaa would appoint members of a new legislature and rule the country during this transitional phase, until a new constitution (likely drafted by his hand-picked legislature) goes into effect. This fait accompli may confirm suspicions by some that the National Congress was never meant to be a serious national dialogue for debate and discussion and decision-making about Syria’s political future. For the foreseeable future, (most of) Syria is formally in the hands of Al-Sharaa and his administration. While people were still processing the dramatic announcements, the next day, Al-Sharaa addressed Syrians directly and offered an abbreviated roadmap for a transitional period. He would name a “mini” legislative council to put in place a temporary constitutional decree, after which a new constitution would be drafted and eventually, elections held. The National Dialogue Conference did not offer any new revelations. With Syria’s interim president signing on March 15 of a temporary constitution, put together by experts appointed by Ahmed Al-Sharaa, the country’s transition to more pluralist rule will take up to five years before any form of meaningful contestation over power can take place. The temporary constitution talks of provisions for gender rights, and laws for the creation of political parties and civil associations. However, during this transitional phase Al-Sharaa heads the newly established National Security Council and appoints one-third of the popular council that will oversee the transition. The transitional process remains firmly in the hands of Al-Sharaa and his close circle, shaped also by whatever advice they are receiving by friendly allies (e.g., Turkey).

[1] So is the removal of foreign troops, including those of the US, but that does not seem to be an HTS priority. Russian presence in Syria is dwindling, but at least one delegation from the Assad great power ally (and US rival) has met with Al-Sharaa. A surprisingly positive statement suggesting Russian cooperation with Damascus on transitional justice and reconstruction after Assad’s “brutal war” has surfaced.

Policy recommendations

A framework that speaks to both peace and democracy building may be fitting for further study of the Syrian transition. Democracy requires consent of the citizenry in any sustainable transition. Only a transition built on the mechanisms of such consent will likely guarantee that Syria stays the course of a peaceful transition. However, the caveat is that Syria's transition will be fraught with challenges, internal and external. Internally, for example, finding a modus operandi that keeps the Kurds committed to national unity with constitutional guarantees of inclusivity and cultural rights may be necessary. Externally, achieving a modicum of Kantian "perpetual peace", or peace based in some form of representative government as the German philosopher proposed, may prove difficult even if/when levels of democratic governance are realized. The case of "democratic" states shunning war, rehearsed amply in IR, lacks both conceptualization and empirical evidence in the context of countries experiencing occupation (by Israel in the case of Syria).

Syria's challenge today of attaining both democracy and peace remains an academic puzzle to be visited and revisited by IR and Middle East politics scholars to shed new light on how it pans out in non-Western and fledgling states of the Global South. Integral to this puzzle is not the twinning of peace and democracy but rather putting a brand of Salafi-Islamist rule in dialogue with both peace and democracy. It will be some time before one can venture initial meaningful observations about a dialogue that is yet to take place. In any case, democratic transition and peace studies have yet to offer accounts comparable to the Syrian case study. At a time when democracy itself is fading from the agenda of major powers and the Arab region—where the order of the day seems to be de-democratization (Egypt, Tunisia, Jordan, Kuwait, etc.)—democratic peace-building as elaborated in studies of 'liberal peace-building' makes no sense when applied to Syria. It is like putting the cart before the horse. As stated above, the language of liberal democracy or liberal peace hardly features in the narrative of the care-taker authorities that toppled Assad in December 2024. It will be quite some time before one can expect to witness democratic institution-building that makes use of the Euro-American models with their stress on rule of law, free market economics, political parties and free and fair elections. The democracy and peace models aided by neo-liberal assumptions of assured transition will not, for now at least, avail in the Syrian case. The recent Gaza war and Israeli expansion in Syria following the overthrow of the Assad regime have further added to familiar disappointments in relation to the quest for peace in the Middle East. Similarly, democratic backsliding, including in Tunisia following the 2021 coup, has temporarily doomed the region to populist and authoritarian rule, in the foreseeable future.

That Syria is wading so quickly into peacebuilding and transitional waters under the leadership of an HTS administration is a situation that nobody expected a mere two or three months ago. But Syrians, and the international community, are adapting quickly to the new (albeit shifting) status quo. Certainly, it will take the country years to stabilize and enter into the zone of peace. Whether or not democratization will ensue is still an open question. For now, at least, some decision-making related to peace-building is being negotiated directly and indirectly between the administration in Damascus and its allies in Turkey and Saudi Arabia – perhaps the United States, too. To facilitate a smooth transition that rises to the aspirations of Syria's revolutionary populace, key actors should consider the following:

- Al-Sharaa and his administration should **reach out to Syrian political and civic forces** outside his own narrow circle from Idlib. The sooner and more frequently they do this, and the more bottom-up representation and selection is involved, the better. Western calls for "inclusion" may understandably provoke cynicism, given the recent genocide in Gaza and the robust Western support of regional dictators like Egypt's Sisi. However, political inclusion is a necessary condition for making inroads towards a democratic political order that rises to the sacrifices and dreams of Syrians whose revolution was after all about *freedom* as well as *dignity*. This step is admittedly less likely since Al-Sharaa became self-appointed president, but it would be a pleasant and necessary surprise to make way for political participation and much-needed, actionable debate in this transitional stage. The highly controlled National Dialogue Conference was almost a missed opportunity, not going far in terms of two-way dialogue between the current powerholders and civil society.

- Syrian civil society should play its civic role to the fullest and continue to **apply pressure on the new administration** to become more transparent and inclusive. Even after the contours of a transition have been broadly spelled out, the threat of a new dictatorship or quasi-dictatorship taking shape is still real. Al-Sharaa and his close circle should not be left to rule Syria on their own until it is too late to dislodge them through institutionalized transfer of power. Whatever localized form it takes in a country like Syria, with its multi-ethnic citizenry and Arabo-Islamic culture, democracy is not merely a buzzword or a Western diktat. Democracy is—should be—the institutionalization of revolutionary calls for freedom and dignity. Assad’s fall has been the most major milestone on the road to emancipation to date. Few Syrians would disagree that peacebuilding, stability, and economic recovery are priorities at this stage. Still, the struggle for freedom must continue. Civil society organizations, both registered and unregistered, religious and secular, inside and outside the country, must not tire of offering constructive criticism and calling for concrete steps toward an inclusive, participatory transition in the country.
- On the foreign policy front, Al Sharaa should **prioritize the exertion of diplomatic pressure** on Israel, perhaps through his allies Turkey and maybe Qatar, to at a very minimum withdraw from the new territory into which it has expanded since December 9. This is a normative as well as a political and security imperative. Syrians shouting *freedom* for 14 years should not be made to see their dictator finally fall only to have Israeli occupation deepen in their own territory, at least not without their new rulers putting up a diplomatic fight. The past 75 plus years, and the past 16 months since October 2024 in particular, have confirmed that Israeli occupation and land grabs bring anything but the peace and stability the new Syrian administration constantly invokes.
- Foreign powers (and donors) such as the United States, the EU countries, and Japan should **avoid dispensing instructions** on the new Syrian polity. Gier Pederson, the UN Special Envoy to Syria, has been insisting that Syrians alone will decide their political future. Foreign powers should live up to this promise. (It is, however, up to the foreign powers to lift all sanctions on the country. They should readily do so, and quickly.) Syrians who have long derided members of the Syrian National Coalition and the High Negotiations Committee for representing disperse foreign interests, should fight civically and politically for no less than a Syrian-made and -owned transition. Like all countries in the region, Syria is not a “backyard” to be managed through the security prism of the United States that constructs the country as a volatile grouping of sects and ethnicities rather than a fully-formed state. Syrians do not require UN tutelage to hammer out a political transition that stems from their (shared as well as varied) interests. The transitional ordeal will be long, difficult and piecemeal, yes. But freedom and popular sovereignty are, after all, what Syrians have been fighting for ever since they rose up against a dictator.



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