

Beyond Assad: Can Syria Reach Stability?

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With Bashar al-Assad out of power, Syria's brutal thirteen-year civil war is effectively over. However, the situation in the country remains as volatile as ever as regional and international powers continue to vie for political and military influence. What will it take to heal Syria's wounds and prevent another humanitarian disaster?

On 30 November 2024, rebel forces led by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) captured Aleppo, Syria's second-largest city, in a lightning offensive. The capital Damascus fell only eight days later. After thirteen long years, Syria's civil war – and with it, Bashar al-Assad's dictatorial rule – was over.

The conflict, which started in 2011 with pro-democracy protests, has claimed over 600,000 lives and displaced more than half of Syria's population. Millions of Syrians inside and outside the country celebrated the end of Assad's regime, which wore down the Syrian people and transformed their country into a Russian stronghold and a base for Iran's regional ambitions.

The Syrian government's demise was largely due to the absence of significant support from Assad's key backers – Russia, Iran, and Hezbollah – during the critical offensive of late 2024. As the HTS-led military campaign unfolded, Russia was heavily engaged in its conflict in Ukraine, and thus unable to divert sufficient resources to prop up its longtime ally. Similarly, Hezbollah's attention was consumed by escalating tensions with Israel, while Iran found itself stretched thin between supporting the Lebanese paramilitary group and managing its own confrontations with Israel.

As Syria emerges from a brutal civil war and more than 50 years of repressive rule under the Assad family, Ahmed al-Shara'a, the head of HTS, has become the country's de facto leader. But what are the origins of the Sunni Islamist political organisation and former militia group, and can it bring peace to Syria?

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A more moderate force?

HTS traces its roots to the early years of the Syrian civil war, when it formed as a splinter group of the Nusra Front, al-Qaeda's affiliate in Syria. In 2016, the Nusra Front publicly severed ties with al-Qaeda and became Jabhat Fateh al-Sham. A year later, it merged with other groups to form HTS. Under this new banner, it shifted its priorities from pursuing global jihadism to consolidating power in Syria, focusing on local governance, economic issues, and humanitarian aid within the country.

As of now, HTS is still designated as a terrorist group by several countries and entities, including the European Union and the United States. The EU included HTS in its list of terrorist organisations in

September 2020, while the US designated it as a foreign terrorist organisation in May 2018.

According to an EU foreign affairs spokesperson, Brussels maintains two separate lists for sanctioning terrorists: one is autonomous, while the other is based on United Nations designations. HTS is listed under the latter.

Despite these designations, there have been discussions, including at the UN level, about reassessing the group's status following the recent changes in Syria's political landscape. Geir Pedersen, the UN Special Envoy for Syria, has suggested that HTS's terror designation needs reviewing, saying the group "has been sending good messages to the Syrian people; they have also been sending messages of unity, of inclusiveness." Should the UN decide to remove HTS from its list, the EU would likely follow suit. Some politicians in the UK and the US have also suggested a reassessment, but the debates have mostly remained behind closed doors.

Yet, although HTS claims it has become more moderate, there have been increasing signs of Islamic principles influencing state governance after the group took control of Syria. The new authorities are using Islamic teachings to train the police force, with officers questioning people on their beliefs and focusing on Islamic Sharia law in the training sessions they offer recruits.

This trend is becoming more evident in the education system as well. Recent changes in school curricula include measures such as replacing "path of goodness" with "Islamic path" and altering "those who have gone astray" to specifically refer to "Jews and Christians."

Rights groups have cast doubt on HTS's claims of tolerance due to its history of brutality and restrictions on religious freedom for non-conforming Sunni Muslims and minorities like Christians and Alawites. Documented cases of property confiscation from Christians date back to 2015. Furthermore, reports of arbitrary detention and prosecution of religious dissent have raised concerns about the group's commitment to religious freedom. Since gaining power, the group has also engaged in arbitrary detention and criminal prosecution, including by treating private conversations on religious matters as "slander and blasphemy."

Still, in terms of social policy, HTS has shown signs of pragmatism. For instance, when governing Idlib, a province it took control of in 2017 near the Turkish border, the group refrained from imposing strict religious codes on women, allowing them access to education and choosing not to mandate face veils. The dissolution of its religious police force signaled a departure from the heavy-handed enforcement of religious laws seen in other militant-controlled areas.

Is HTS's shift towards ideological moderation a strategic move to consolidate power or a genuine change in ideology? Only time will tell.

Easing restrictions could strengthen HTS by providing it with both material resources and, perhaps more problematically, a degree of international legitimacy.

The West's strategic tightrope

In response to the ongoing developments, the US has eased some restrictions on Syria. In January, the US Treasury Department issued Syria General License 24, a six-month authorisation which broadens

the scope of permitted activities relating to providing essential services and continuity of governance functions across the country, such as electricity, energy, water, and sanitation. It also lifts the ban on previously prohibited transactions with Syrian “governing institutions”.

However, Washington will not release the assets of any designated person or entity, including Assad and his associates, the Syrian government, the Central Bank of Syria, and HTS. Sanctions linked to Syria’s designation as a state sponsor of terrorism also remain in place.

Similarly, the EU – which first imposed sanctions on Syria in May 2011 in response to the violent repression of protests during the early stages of the civil war – has adopted a cautious approach to the country’s changing political landscape. EU foreign ministers have agreed to gradually ease sanctions while maintaining clear conditions: restrictions will be reimposed if the new leadership violates minority rights or fails to uphold democratic principles.

The sanctions relief will follow a structured “roadmap” in order to eliminate restrictions that most significantly obstruct the country’s early recovery. The first sanctions likely to be eased concern the banking, energy, and transport sectors, which are considered essential to accelerating the war-torn country’s reconstruction, strengthening stability, and normalising financial relations between Syria and the EU.

Proponents of these measures argue this shift is justified, as the original sanctions targeted a regime that no longer exists and that easing them will send a positive signal that Damascus is no longer an international outcast. A stronger Syrian economy could contribute to political stability by fostering a sense of normalcy and improving living conditions, potentially reducing support for extremist groups. Fewer restrictions could also mean that humanitarian organisations may find it easier to deliver aid, improving access to essential services such as healthcare, education, and food for the Syrian population. Moreover, sanctions relief will enable foreign companies to participate in reconstruction efforts, particularly in rebuilding critical infrastructure like electricity generation and transportation networks, which have been heavily devastated during the war.

However, the policy shift also carries significant risks. Easing restrictions could strengthen HTS – still internationally designated as a terrorist group – by providing it with both material resources and, perhaps more problematically, a degree of international legitimacy.

The potential economic risks are equally complex. Without robust governance structures in place, a sudden influx of resources and investments could destabilise Syria’s fragile economy. The risks include rampant corruption, spiralling inflation, and the emergence of a parallel black-market economy – all of which could exacerbate existing poverty and deepen inequality among an already vulnerable population.

This precarious situation demands swift and comprehensive reforms in governance, transparency, and the rule of law. Yet, even with such reforms, Syria faces a delicate balancing act. Reducing sanctions without a clear roadmap for sustainable development risks creating long-term dependency on international aid. Should the new government fail to establish effective governance and economic self-sufficiency, Syria could find itself trapped in a cycle of external reliance that undermines its long-term recovery.

At the same time, lifting sanctions without iron-clad guarantees of human rights protections and Inclusive governance could enable a resurgence of systemic abuses against minority groups and dissenters. The EU has recognised this danger, emphasising that continued sanctions relief will hinge on the new government’s demonstrable commitment to these principles.

But there is also an uncomfortable truth about Europe's approach towards Syria. Despite the continued volatility in the country, EU countries have already started thinking about and planning ways to send Syrian refugees and asylum seekers to their homeland.

Several EU countries have already taken concrete steps in this direction. Immediately after the fall of Assad's regime, Germany, Belgium, Greece, and Italy suspended new asylum applications from Syria. Meanwhile, Austria has announced plans for a deportation programme and is even considering offering a 1,000-euro "return bonus" to Syrian refugees who agree to leave. Similarly, Germany is considering deportations for criminal offenders and reviewing the refugee status of Syrians currently under protection, though Berlin says "well-integrated" individuals will be permitted to stay – whatever that may mean.

At the EU level, officials have discussed voluntary returns and the need to ensure that they are conducted in a safe and dignified manner. The UN Human Rights Office projects that over one million Syrians may attempt to return home independently in the first half of 2025.

The US Factor

Beyond sanctions relief and its possible impacts, the situation in Syria is further complicated by potential cuts in US foreign aid under the new Trump administration. Current aid freezes have already disrupted vital services, affecting water distributions and forcing medical clinics to cease emergency assistance. Thousands of humanitarian workers have lost their jobs as critical programmes shut down.

This is particularly worrying given that, within the Syrian borders, 16.5 million people need some sort of assistance, with the US providing approximately a quarter of the 2024 UN-coordinated aid funding. In 2024 alone, US humanitarian contributions to Syria reached 1.2 billion dollars – a lifeline that now hangs in the balance. While the European Union has pledged 235 million euros in humanitarian aid for Syrians both inside Syria and in neighbouring countries for 2025, this commitment may fall short of filling the void left by potential US cuts.

Of special concern are two northeastern Syrian camps holding tens of thousands of suspected Islamic State (IS) affiliates. These are closed camps, meaning that people are not detained or charged as IS fighters but cannot independently leave the premises. This could lead to riots or breakout attempts or even allow IS to recruit new forces from the camps.

The precarious situation in Syria demands swift and comprehensive reforms in governance, transparency, and the rule of law.

Regional Powers and Syria's Fate

As was the case before the end of Assad's rule, Syria remains a point of high tension with both neighbouring states and regional powers that have a vested interest in the country.

Russia's involvement in Syria reflects a complex web of military, economic, and geopolitical interests that extend far beyond its intervention to preserve the Assad regime. At the heart of Moscow's strategy lies the naval base at Tartus and the Khmeimim airbase – the only Russian military installations outside

the former Soviet Union.

These bases are crucial to Russia's power projection in the Middle East and beyond. Tartus, providing Russia access to the Mediterranean, serves as a vital hub for operations stretching from Libya to the Red Sea and West Africa. Russia has also used Tartus for naval exercises and deployments to shadow NATO forces in the Mediterranean, with the aim of challenging Western dominance in the region.

The fall of Assad has forced Moscow to recalibrate its regional strategy. While currently focused on the Ukraine war, Russia is actively cultivating relationships with Syria's new leadership. These diplomatic efforts serve a dual purpose: securing Russia's military presence and positioning Moscow for potentially lucrative reconstruction contracts, particularly in Syria's energy and infrastructure sectors.

This strategic pivot could gain momentum as the Ukraine conflict potentially winds down, with US President Donald Trump pushing for a ceasefire in direct engagement with Vladimir Putin. As attention shifts back to Syria, Russia's primary objective remains clear: ensuring the new Syrian leadership maintains a stance favourable to Moscow's interests, preserving its critical Mediterranean foothold and regional influence.

Another country with high stakes in Syria is Iran. Since Iran's 1979 Islamic Revolution, Syria has served as Tehran's most reliable regional ally and a crucial counterweight to Saudi Arabia and the US – Iran's regional rivals. The fall of Assad's regime has diminished Tehran's influence in the region.

Syria provides the Islamic Republic with a vital "land bridge" to the Mediterranean, connecting Tehran to Baghdad, Damascus, and Beirut. This route is vital for supplying arms to the Islamic Republic's proxy forces across the region, such as Hezbollah in Lebanon. However, it also poses a heightened risk of escalation in conflicts involving Israel and other regional powers.

Access to the Mediterranean is also economically important for Iran, serving as an avenue to export oil and gas. It would also help mitigate the country's international isolation, especially given the sanctions and diplomatic pressures imposed by Western nations due to the country's nuclear programme.

Iran's commitment to Syria runs deep: over the past thirteen years, Tehran has invested an estimated 30-50 billion dollars in Syria. In January 2019, the two countries signed agreements to bolster long-term strategic economic cooperation, and Tehran has made efforts to stabilise the Syrian economy and meet its energy needs. For instance, during the Syrian Civil War, Iran supplied Syria with oil at subsidised prices.

Following Assad's downfall, Tehran has expressed its intention to sustain its connections with Damascus. Still, the Iranian government has refrained from addressing claims of having initiated direct communications with the armed groups that have dismantled Syria's ruling dynasty.

But arguably, the regional power with the biggest influence on recent events in Syria is Türkiye. Despite a period of rapprochement with Syria from 2007 to 2011 which reflected Türkiye's "Zero Problems with Neighbours" policy, Ankara emerged as an early opponent of Assad when the Syrian Civil War broke out. Türkiye was among the first countries to condemn Assad's violent response to the 2011 protests and asking for his resignation alongside other governments.

*Instead of rushing returns, the EU should build upon its
sanctions relief strategy to support Syria's recovery*

from thirteen years of brutal civil war.

While officially designating HTS as a terrorist organization, Türkiye aided the group during the Syrian Civil War by providing it with crucial support during military operations against Assad. Even when HTS was accused by the UN of committing war crimes in Idlib – such as detaining, torturing, and executing civilians for expressing dissent – Türkiye continued supporting the group.

Türkiye's approval and tacit support were crucial for HTS's recent offensive that led to the fall of Assad. In 2020, Ankara even intervened militarily to prevent the group's collapse during a Syrian regime and Russian incursion in Idlib. Türkiye also allowed HTS control over border crossings, enabling the group to sustain itself economically while advancing Turkish regional ambitions.

Türkiye's strategy towards Syria has focused on two key objectives. First, Ankara sought to stabilise Syria's Idlib province along its border, where HTS has held control since 2017, to prevent a humanitarian crisis that could trigger another refugee exodus affecting its own territory. Second, and perhaps more critically, the Turkish government has viewed and used HTS as a valuable counterweight to Kurdish groups like the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), a coalition of rebel groups fighting to create a secular, democratic, and federalised Syria.

Ankara considers the SDF a threat due to its connections with the PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party), which advocates for greater Kurdish autonomy within Türkiye – a position that Ankara sees as a direct threat to its national security. Kurds are Türkiye's largest minority, representing about 20 per cent of the population.

Türkiye strongly opposes the idea of a Kurdish-controlled autonomous region on its border, fearing it could empower the PKK to push for independence or aim to unite with the autonomous region. Although Ankara signed a ceasefire with PKK at the beginning of March, halting decades of hostilities, the stability of this agreement is uncertain. Turkish Kurds remain cautious about trusting the Turkish government, recalling the collapse of a previous peace process in 2015.

Even when HTS only controlled Idlib, these strategic calculations had already led to closer coordination between Turkish authorities and HTS leadership, allegedly also facilitating intelligence sharing and operational coordination. With HTS's influence expanded following Assad's fall, Ankara is likely to strengthen these ties further, particularly given the group's indebtedness to previous Turkish support.

And lastly, Israeli forces, which captured more territory in the Golan Heights right after Assad's fall, are continuing their advance in Syria south of the capital Damascus and in the Daraa province. Israel claims this is part of a broader strategy to assert control over what Tel Aviv regards as its "security zone" in the region. Israeli authorities have announced plans to maintain the invasion of Syria at least through the end of 2025, with the possibility of continuing beyond that if needed. However, with regional powers strongly opposed to Israel's military presence in Syria and accusing it of territorial expansion, this is likely to cause further tension.

What Comes Next for Syria?

The complex web of competing interests among regional powers suggests Syria's stability remains precarious. As Russia, Iran, Türkiye, and other regional actors pursue their sometimes conflicting agendas, the potential for renewed clashes and shifting alliances continues to threaten Syria's path to recovery. The situation will likely remain volatile for the foreseeable future, requiring careful diplomatic

navigation from the EU and other international actors to prevent further escalation.

Syria's stability is far from assured. The current European push for refugee returns appears to be driven more by political pressures within EU member states than by the reality on the ground. This raises grave concerns about both the safety and sustainability of sending back Syrian asylum seekers, whose lives would be at risk in a country still struggling with instability.

Instead of rushing returns, the EU should build upon its sanctions relief strategy to support Syria's recovery from thirteen years of brutal civil war – a conflict that began with hopes for democracy but ended far from it. Brussels could play a vital role in stabilising Syria through multiple channels: providing humanitarian support, offering technical assistance in building governance structures, and helping establish stable state institutions.

This approach requires the EU to maintain its current path of cautious and conditional engagement and avoid falling into the trap of sending refugees and asylum seekers back home. In the long term, such a measured strategy would better serve both Syrian stability and European interests than a premature push for refugee returns.



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