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The Political Transition in Syria: Regional and International Interests

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On 8 December 2024, the Assad regime in Syria was overthrown by a rebel alliance led by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS). The transitional government under Ahmad al-Sharaa now faces enormous economic, social and political challenges. It has yet to establish control over the country as a whole; and jihadist groups such as the so-called Islamic State (IS) continue to pose a threat, as do (potential) insurgents linked to the former regime, among other groups. At the same time, the actions of various regional and international actors risk destabilising Syria or sabotaging the transition already under way. Regardless of whether that risk materialises, it is these external forces that are setting the bounds of the new rulers' room for manoeuvre. For its part, the interim government has started to lay off most members of the former regime's Syrian Arab Army and disband militias. It has also struck a deal with the Kurdish-dominated Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) about their integration into the new Syrian army and embarked on a political transition. Germany and its EU partners should support an inclusive transition process and help facilitate the comprehensive reconstruction of the country, not least by easing sanctions. Indeed, it is essential that geopolitical tensions surrounding Syria be de-escalated rather than exacerbated.

The previous SWP Comment 9/2025 deals with the regional and international power shifts in connection with the fall of the Assad regime.

After more than 60 years of dictatorship (of which 54 were under the Assad family) and more than 13 years of internationalised civil war, the new rulers in Damascus face huge challenges: political transition, social reconciliation, comprehensive reconstruction, economic transformation, the return of refugees and internally displaced persons, and daunting security-related issues. The last-named include the disarmament of militias and/or their integration into a restructured army and the fight against a resurgent IS and armed Assad loyalists. Further, there is the question of how to deal with both the IS fighters (and their families) detained in SDF-run detention centres and camps and the foreign fighters within the ranks of HTS and allied groups.

What is more, the transitional government under Ahmad al-Sharaa (formerly known as Abu Mohammed al-Jawlani) does not control all of Syrian territory. The Kurdish-dominated SDF still exercises control over the northeast, while Turkish occupation continues in several regions in the north. In the southwest, Israel has been

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occupying the buffer zone — established in 1974 and previously under UN control — as well as the summit of Mount Hermon since December 2024 and has set up checkpoints in adjacent areas. Meanwhile, armed clashes persist in the north and northeast between the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (SNA) and the SDF, which is aligned with Washington in the fight against IS.

Initial steps of the transition

The transitional government has taken measures to lay off most members of the former regime's Syrian Arab Army as well as disband militias and integrate them into the new Syrian army. Those groups include the SDF and Druze militias of the Southern Operations Room, with which Damascus struck agreements in the second week of March in the wake of the worst sectarian violence Syria has witnessed since the fall of the regime. Following an Assad loyalist insurgency against the new security forces, more than 800 Syrians, mainly from the Alawite sect, were killed, partly in clashes and partly in subsequent revenge killings of captured personnel and civilians. Such developments underscore the prevalent sectarian ideology as well as the lack of discipline and clear command structures in the new security services. They pose a serious threat to the reconciliation process between Syria's ethnic and sectarian communities. Even before the latest wave of violence, there were reports of serious human rights violations by the new security forces against members of the former Assad regime, many of which are perceived as acts of retribution against Alawites.

The new leadership has also pushed forward with the political transition. In late January 2025, Ahmad al-Sharaa, after having been declared interim president by the victorious rebels, emphasised that the new Syria should be a country for all its citizens, that there should be no acts of retribution and that an inclusive government should be formed by early March. In mid-February, al-Sharaa established the Preparatory Committee for the National Dialogue Conference, which included representatives of the former "Salvation Government" in Idlib and two members of civil society. Convened at short notice, the conference took place on 24—25 February in Damascus and brought together some 900 Syrians to lay the groundwork for the constitutional process. In early March a committee was formed to draft an interim constitution. But there was little deliberation: by 13 March, al-Sharaa had already signed a constitutional declaration covering a five-year transition period. The document identifies Islamic jurisprudence as the main source of legislation and provides for the separation of powers, judicial independence, equality before the law and freedom of expression. In the transition period, the responsibility for legislation is to lie with an appointed parliament (one third of whose members will be appointed directly by the president). The president has executive powers and can declare a state of emergency. A transitional justice commission is to be established as well as a committee to draft a permanent constitution, while elections are pushed back until 2030. The declaration immediately drew criticism from minority groups. Although it provides for freedom of religion, it does not reflect the ethnic and religious diversity of the country as it maintains the name of the state (Syrian *Arab* Republic), names Arabic as only official language and asserts that the president be a Muslim. There can be no doubt that striking a balance between the diverse expectations of the majority population, the minority groups, civil society activists, various foreign supporters and the radical factions within the transitional leadership's own base is proving — and will continue to prove — extremely challenging.

At the same time, the new leadership is seeking to reposition post-Assad Syria both regionally and globally. The aim is to break the country's extensive isolation and establish friendly relations with neighbouring states. The new Syria wants to avoid being perceived as a threat at either the regional or international level. A key priority is securing support for the country's recon-

struction. To this end, al-Sharaa has reached out not only to the Arab monarchies of the Persian Gulf — above all, Saudi Arabia — but also to Western countries. He congratulated Donald Trump on the latter's return to the White House, expressed hope that the US president would bring peace and proposed an early exchange with the new administration in Washington. While al-Sharaa keeps a distance from Iran, he has emphasised his interest in maintaining good relations with Russia. Further, he has called on Israel to withdraw from Syrian territory while reaffirming Damascus' commitment to the 1974 ceasefire agreements and its intention to peacefully resolve conflicts with its neighbours. Close ties are expected with Turkey, in particular.

Interests of regional and international actors

The interests, priorities and actions of regional and international actors will set the stage on which the new rulers will have to navigate the challenges of Syria's transition. Following the fall of the Assad regime, some of those external actors have changed their stance, while others — such as the United States — have yet to clarify their position. But one thing is clear: national interests, along with domestic political and economic considerations, are the main concern of all of them. And that underscores the potential for conflict, which could hamper efforts to stabilise Syria.

Turkey

Official statements from Turkey point to three main objectives vis-à-vis Syria: the country should not support terrorism (a reference to the Kurdish PKK and IS), it should not pose a threat to its neighbours and it should be ethnically and religiously inclusive and diverse. Thus, Ankara regards the stabilisation of the transitional government in Damascus as essential and wants to play an active role in building a strong and allied Syria. In line with its primary interests, it aims to be involved in two key areas in the short to medium term.

First, Turkey's focus is on its own security interests. It has already offered to support the reform of Syria's security sector. According to Turkish Defence Minister Yaşar Güler, Ankara is prepared to assist the transitional government with military training if necessary. In early February, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan met with al-Sharaa in Ankara to discuss close cooperation in various fields, including a possible defence pact. Additionally, Turkey, Syria, Jordan and Iraq aim to jointly fight against IS. A first meeting to discuss that objective was held in Jordan on 9 March; however, no concrete roadmap was announced.

Meanwhile, Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan has called on all Syrian militia fighters in the north of the country who are aligned with Turkey — more than 80,000 in total — to join the new Syrian army. This is in line with Ankara's broader strategy to disarm the SDF, which is led by the Kurdish People's Defence Units (YPG), and/or integrate individual fighters into a national army under the full control of Damascus. The objective is also to expel Turkish (and other non-Syrian) PKK and YPG fighters from Syria. In pursuit of that goal, Turkey has taken military steps through its proxy, the SNA, and used its own air support to disrupt SDF supply lines around Kobane in northern Syria, thereby weakening the combat capabilities of that group.

At the same time, Ankara is exerting diplomatic pressure on the SDF and PKK. In late February, Abdullah Öcalan, the imprisoned PKK founder in Turkey, announced the disbandment and disarmament of the organisation with unexpected conviction. The PKK subsequently declared a ceasefire, endorsed Öcalan's announcement and demanded his release. Leading Kurdish players in Iraq, including the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), welcomed Öcalan's initiative. For his part, SDF Commander-in-Chief Mazloum Abdi clarified that the disbandment and disarmament would not apply to the SDF; but he none-

theless expressed openness to a peaceful resolution in Syria.

Öcalan's announcement holds out the prospect of a settlement between Turkey and the SDF. Against this background, Ankara's insistence that Syria should be ethnically and religiously inclusive can be interpreted as a signal that a new representative body for the Kurdish population may be negotiated. Indeed, Turkey has long sought to foster rapprochement between the SDF and the Kurdish National Council, which is supported by the KDP in Iraq. In a phone conversation with Abdi, KDP leader Masoud Barzani reportedly declared support for the recent agreement between Damascus and the SDF, emphasising the importance of Kurdish unity. Turkish officials, too, have cautiously welcomed the agreement but have stressed the need for its full implementation. Meanwhile, Turkish airstrikes continue in Iraq and Syria.

The second main area in which the Turkish leadership wants to play a prominent role is the reconstruction of Syria. Beyond the potential economic opportunities for Turkish construction firms, which could boost Erdoğan's popularity amid Turkey's economic malaise, Ankara views Syria's reconstruction as a key condition for facilitating the return of Syrian refugees.

Arab monarchies of the Persian Gulf

If HTS and its allies succeed in consolidating their own position, Qatar will play a significant role in Syrian politics, too. It is no coincidence that Emir Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani was the first head of state to visit Damascus after the fall of Assad. Thereafter, there were many visits to Syria by Qatari politicians and delegations in December 2024 and January 2025. In mid-December 2024, the Qatari Embassy was the second to reopen, after the Turkish mission, following the suspension of diplomatic ties by many countries in 2011–12 in response to the regime's crackdown on the opposition. And Qatar's prime minister has pledged support for Syria's reconstruction and called for an end to sanctions against the country. Doha is clearly positioning itself as a key mediator between Syria and third-party states — a role that will become increasingly important if those states remain hesitant to engage with the new rulers in Damascus.

Another country that could play a crucial role in Syria's diplomatic landscape is Saudi Arabia. HTS appears to have a strong interest in fostering good relations with what is the most powerful Arab state. The kingdom has already signalled its openness to détente by dispatching its foreign minister, who promptly called for the lifting of sanctions and offered to support the new government. Riyadh also appears willing to acknowledge the new realities in Damascus and to promote dialogue and cooperation to manage the consequences of HTS's takeover for the region. A key consideration for Saudi Arabia is likely to be preventing Syria from becoming too dependent on Qatar and Turkey. The fact that in early February 2025, al-Sharaa undertook his first foreign visit following the overthrow of Assad to Riyadh rather than Ankara suggests such dependency may be averted.

It is possible that the United Arab Emirates (UAE) will remain on the sidelines of all these developments as its opposition to HTS is too fundamental for it to engage directly. Abu Dhabi is likely to closely monitor whether the Islamist victory in Syria sparks further unrest in the region and will make every attempt to prevent any spillover effects. However, if its concerns prove unfounded, the UAE could be among those states seeking to renew relations with Damascus.

Russia

A key supporter of the Assad regime in the past, the Kremlin has shifted to a policy of damage control while simultaneously seeking to regain political leverage in order to secure its key interests in Syria, in particular the use of military bases. Russia has offered to cooperate with the new leadership in Damascus and wants to position

itself as a pragmatic actor willing to adapt to the new power dynamics. Until 7 December 2024, Moscow classified HTS as a terrorist organisation, but on 8 December 2024 — the day on which the Assad regime fell — it referred to the group as "Syria's armed opposition" and later as the "new authorities". In a bid to engage with HTS, Russia's ambassador to the UN, Vasily Nebenzya, claimed that Russia's alliance with Syria "was not connected to any regime".

However, Moscow may well find it difficult to fully "normalise" relations with the HTS-led government, as became evident when Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov visited Syria in late January 2025. During that visit, al-Sharaa made it clear that Russia must acknowledge its "past mistakes" in order to "rebuild trust". Two demands from Damascus are likely to pose serious challenges for Moscow, particularly in the context of the ongoing war in Ukraine: the extradition of Assad and reparations. The former is highly improbable, as handing over Assad would undermine Russia's credibility as a reliable protector of authoritarian allies. With regard to the latter demand, Moscow could offer to write off part or all of Syria's sizable debt to Russia or to supply grain and/or oil — without officially acknowledging any obligation to make reparations. Meanwhile, in a bid to improve its image, Russia provided refuge for Syrians fleeing the communal violence in March and offered to use its military bases as a logistical hub for humanitarian aid. For their part, the Syrian armed forces will remain dependent on Russian maintenance and spare parts for the foreseeable future.

There can be no doubt that Russia's ability to shape Syria's transition process has diminished significantly. Moscow has neither strong political allies in Syria nor the military capabilities to protect such allies. Furthermore, the Astana process — through which Russia, Turkey and Iran previously coordinated their positions on Syria's future — appears to have lost its relevance. Nevertheless, Moscow retains some political leverage. The Kremlin hopes that its continued — albeit reduced — military and political presence both in Syria itself and in the wider region will be of strategic interest to the transitional government, as it could counterbalance Turkey's growing influence. As a veto power on the UN Security Council and a key player in international forums such as BRICS+ and regional groupings like the Shanghai Cooperation Council (SCO), Russia can either contribute to or complicate the process of achieving international recognition of the Syrian new leadership.

Given the possible rapprochement between Russia and the US under the Trump administration, Israel's call to keep Russian bases in Syria and the massacres against Alawites and Christians in Syria in March 2025, it is clear that the Kremlin perceives the conditions to assert its stance as increasingly favourable. Together with the US, Russia called an emergency meeting of the UN Security Council in mid-March at which Moscow's ambassador warned of the rise of jihadism in Syria and compared the killing of Alawites and Christians to the genocide in Ruanda. The fact that the meeting took place behind closed doors is a sign that Russia does not want to risk its still fragile relationship with the new leadership in Syria. At the same time, it demonstrates Russia's continued willingness to exploit tensions within Syria to its own advantage and to exert pressure by implicitly toying with the idea of supporting autonomy for Syria's western region. The comment by al-Sharaa that he wants to preserve "deep strategic ties" with Russia and that there should be no "rift between Syria and Russia" is seen as a sign of the success of Moscow's damage limitation policy.

Israel

While Israel's political establishment generally supports the right to autonomy for ethnic and religious minorities in Syria, its main worry vis-à-vis its neighbour remains its own national security rather than Syria's transition process or emerging political system. The extremist background of the new

rulers in Damascus is a source of concern for the Israeli government, as is the growing influence of Turkey, which Jerusalem perceives as hostile and promoting extremism. According to media reports, Israel has actively lobbied the United States to ensure that Russian military bases in Syria stay intact. What it would like is for Russia to serve as a counterweight to Turkey and Syria to remain a weak and decentralised state.

Moreover, Israel has not only announced its intention to maintain a military presence in Syria for the foreseeable future; it also aims to strengthen its ties both with communities in the border region and with the Kurds. At the end of February 2025, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu called for the complete demilitarisation of the three southern Syrian provinces of Quneitra, Daraa and Suweida, saying that Israel would not tolerate a Syrian army presence in those regions. In early March, amid armed clashes between the security forces of the new rulers and Druze militias in the Damascus suburb of Jaramana, Israel threatened military intervention in support of the Druze. In mid-March, a delegation comprised of Druze religious figures was allowed to visit religious sites and Druze communities on Israeli-controlled territory for the first time since the 1973 war. Israel has also offered the Druze both aid and work opportunities.

United States

The future course of the Trump II administration regarding Syria has not yet been decided, nor have discussions about the country been a priority in Washington. However, US policy could shift abruptly; and, in particular, this could affect the American military presence in Syria and cooperation with the SDF. Early indications suggest that the Trump administration is less focused on an "inclusive transition" and more concerned about security and geopolitical interests. The primary objectives are to ensure that Syria does not become a "source of international terrorism" and to guarantee Israel's security.

At the same time, there are the complications arising from the Trump II administration's decision to (temporarily) suspend all US foreign aid, including to facilities such as the detention centre and camps in al-Hol and Roj, where IS fighters and their families are being held. While an interim solution has been found to remunerate the security personnel at those facilities — previously they were paid from USAID funds — severe disruptions could ensue if the transfers were to be halted indefinitely. The suspension of US foreign aid has also significantly impacted the operations of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in Syria as well as various initiatives of Syrian civil society.

Iran

With the fall of the Assad regime, Iran has now lost its direct influence in Syria. Currently, it is seeking to establish first-hand contacts with the transitional government in Damascus. Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi has said that Iran's approach "depends on the behaviour of the other side", signalling Tehran's willingness to restore the ties severed by Assad's overthrow if the opportunity were to arise. Even Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei has changed his initially hostile stance towards the new rulers in Syria and is now focused on the demand to "liberate the country from foreign occupation". However, Damascus has shown little interest in re-establishing relations with Tehran; and even if such ties were to be revived, Iran's influence would be significantly weaker than previously. Given that the Islamic Republic lacks the economic resources to offer meaningful incentives, its role in Syria is likely to remain limited. Reconstruction efforts will be led by actors with greater financial resources at their disposal.

One plausible scenario for Iran maintaining its influence is through the exploitation of sectarian tensions. Tehran is likely to step up its contacts with the Alawite communities in western Syria. Reports of arrests and executions of Alawites by HTS-linked factions could fuel the activities of resist-

ance cells, which Iran might covertly support as a means of exerting pressure. The success of such a strategy would depend largely on how the new rulers handle transitional justice and Syria's sectarian dynamics.

Another potential approach for Iran would be to strengthen ties with the SDF. Speculation about a US withdrawal from Syria could prompt that group to seek other partnerships. According to reports, Esmail Qaani, commander of the Quds Force of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, held talks with SDF commander Mazloum Abdi in the Iraqi city of Sulaymaniyah in early January 2025. The meeting was said to have been facilitated by Bafel Talabani, the leader of the PUK. A partnership with Syria's Kurds would not only allow Iran to maintain leverage over Syria's internal dynamics; it would also counter Turkey's regional influence and curb Israel's growing ties with Kurdish factions. However, the recent agreement between the HTS-led government and the SDF could prove a spanner in the works here. That said, owing to uncertainties surrounding the implementation of the agreement and the potential for renewed tensions between Syrian Kurdish forces and Damascus/Ankara, Tehran is likely to maintain open communication channels with the Kurds.

Finally, Tehran could seek to redefine its role in Syria via the anti-Israel "resistance". Shortly after Khamenei's speech on 22 December 2024, a previously unknown group calling itself the "Islamic Resistance Front in Syria" emerged, declaring its mission to be the expulsion of Israeli troops from the country. This development could provide Iran with new ways of maintaining its presence in Syria. For example, Tehran might opt to rely on new proxy forces or use the pretext of "fighting the occupation" to justify cooperation with the new Syrian government.

Conclusions and policy options

Germany and its EU partners have a strong interest in securing the stabilisation of Syria and ensuring the country ceases to pose threats to its neighbours and Europe. The fall of the Assad regime offers a unique opportunity to achieve those goals. But there is a high risk of failure. Armed conflicts in Syria could reignite, prompting regional and international actors to intervene militarily once again. Such a scenario would perpetuate the war economy and drug trafficking, thereby triggering new waves of displacement. At the same time, Syria would continue to serve as a safe haven and recruitment ground for IS and other jihadist groups.

Germany and the EU should therefore seize the current opportunity to contribute to Syria's stabilisation while closely coordinating their approach within a multilateral framework. Cooperation is particularly necessary with the US, Turkey and the Gulf states, not least Saudi Arabia. The objective should be to de-escalate geopolitical rivalries rather than exacerbate them, with support for Syria's territorial integrity and sovereignty serving as a guiding principle.

The announced dissolution of the PKK, on the one hand, and the agreement between the Syrian interim government and the SDF, on the other, provide the opportunity for resolving the tensions in Syria's north. Their implementation should be closely watched and supported, not least because the failure of each of the processes would negatively reflect on the other. In this context, it will be crucial to take into account the respective interests of the parties involved: the Kurds' desire for adequate representation in Syria's future government and for broad autonomy, Turkey's security concerns and Damascus' interest in disbanding militias and ending Turkish occupation of parts of Syrian territory.

Germany and its EU partners should also work towards ensuring that Israel and the new Syrian government reaffirm their commitment to the 1974 ceasefire agreement. This would involve Israel withdrawing its troops from the buffer zone and Mount Hermon and returning the region to the control of the United Nations Disengagement Observer Force. Additionally, Berlin and appropriate European partners could,

in consultation with the US, facilitate contacts between the Syrian leadership and Israel in order to reduce the risk of military confrontations. Such contacts are needed given that the Russian-Israeli deconfliction mechanism in Syria is no longer functioning.

Further, Germany and the EU should pave the way for increased humanitarian aid and the reconstruction of Syria, which has been devastated by years of civil war. A rapid improvement in the country's economic situation is crucial for its stabilisation. In late January, the EU Foreign Affairs Council took a step in the right direction when it approved a roadmap for the gradual easing of sectoral and institutional sanctions; and in late February, some European sanctions in the energy, transport and financial sectors were suspended, albeit not lifted entirely. These are important first measures but remain wholly insufficient. US sanctions continue to pose the main obstacle to reconstruction and economic recovery. Germany and the EU should therefore put pressure on Washington to lift those sanctions and, in the event that they remain in place, develop viable mechanisms to bolster humanitarian aid and pave the way for an early recovery. Furthermore, frozen assets of the former Assad regime should be redirected towards reconstruction efforts.

At the same time, sanctions against individual senior figures of the Assad regime and HTS should remain in place. Before the latter is removed from the terror lists of Germany and the EU and sanctions against its representatives lifted, there are clear conditions that have to be met. The new rulers in Damascus must demonstrate that they have genuinely distanced themselves from jihadism — for example, by fostering peaceful foreign relations, preventing sectarian violence, investigating the March 2025 massacres and bringing the perpetrators to justice, committing to transparent transitional justice and demonstrating respect for human rights.

For their part, Germany and the EU should refrain from pushing for the rapid return of Syrian refugees currently residing in Europe. Not only must the principle of voluntary, safe and dignified return be upheld; Syria must have first been sufficiently stabilised so that it can accommodate returning citizens. European policy should prioritise enabling refugees to make a constructive and sustainable contribution to Syria's reconstruction — a contribution that can also be made from abroad. At the same time, Germany should support the UNHCR in facilitating voluntary returns. What is needed here (according to the dissenting opinion of Guido Steinberg and Margarete Klein) is a middle way between Germany's interest in the stabilisation of Syria and its interest in being able to deport terrorists and criminals, in particular, but also Syrians who do not fall into those categories.

The new Syrian army should take responsibility for the fight against IS, as it has indeed committed to doing in an agreement reached with Turkey, Iraq and Jordan in early February. Looking ahead, a role in the Global Coalition Against IS should be considered for Syria. Meanwhile, Damascus will have to address the issue of the prison facilities and camps in which IS fighters and their families are being held. Germany and the EU should urge the US to continue supporting the fight against IS and funding detention facilities. At the same time, European countries must seek to repatriate IS fighters with European citizenship so that they can be brought to trial in their home countries.

Finally, Germany and the EU should actively support the formation of an inclusive government and the drafting of a permanent constitution that reflects Syria's ethnic and religious diversity. This is not only essential for a successful way forward; it would also prevent Iran from exploiting sectarian and ethnic tensions to regain influence in Syria. Not least for this reason, a central European priority should be contributing to Syria's social and political reconciliation.

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