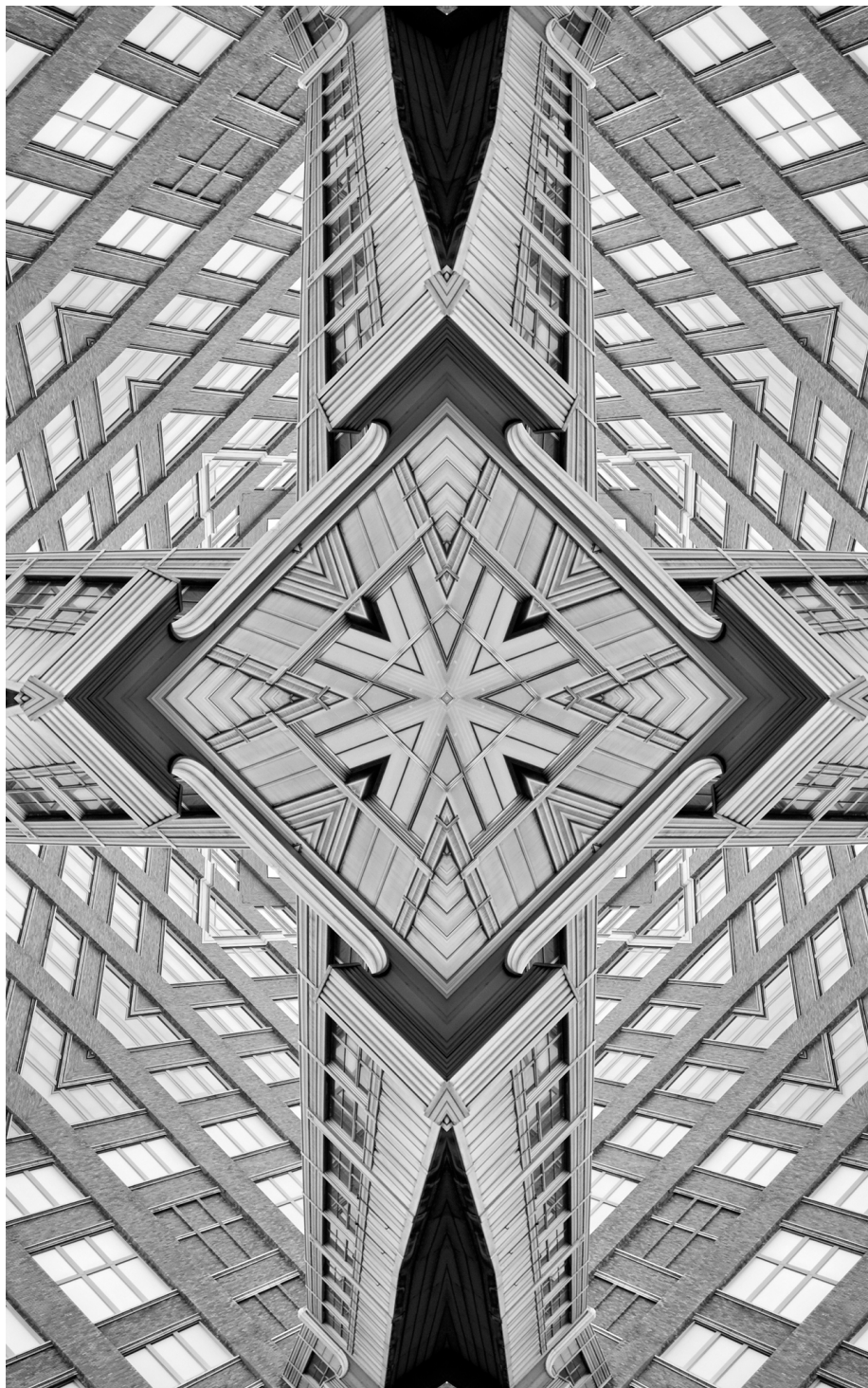


Issue Brief

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Post-Assad Syria's Search for Its Place in an Evolving International Order

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Abstract

Syria has been in turmoil since 2011 when the Arab Spring wave of protests spread across the Middle East-North Africa (MENA) region, challenging President Bashar Al Assad's longstanding, familial rule of the country which began with his father, Hafez Al Assad, who took over in 1971. In December 2024, the Assad family's power grip over Damascus ended, paving the way for Ahmed Al Sharra of the Hay'at Tahrir Al Sham (HTS) militant group to take charge. This brief examines the dramatic change of power in Syria and its regional and global implications, and analyses how Al Sharaa, a former jihadist, is quickly transforming himself into a regional statesman.

Since October 2023, the volatility of the Middle East/West Asia has been at the forefront of regional and global conversations on security. Amidst the turmoil in Gaza, Israel's war against Hamas and Hezbollah, security concerns in the Red Sea following attacks by the Houthis, and the prolonged Ukraine conflict, the international community was caught unawares as the Assad government in Syria disintegrated in December 2024.¹ This was especially true for the Western powers that have piloted international multilateral institutions since the Second World War.

At the end of December 2010, in the town of Sidi Bouzid in Tunisia, a fruit seller set himself on fire to protest corruption and intimidation by the police. The outrage it sparked was the beginning of a region-wide mass protest movement, popularly called the 'Arab Spring', which spread across the Arab world, challenging leaderships and monarchies that had been holding power for decades.² In Syria, people mobilised against the Assad family, who also belonged to the minority Alawite community in a majority Sunni state,^a challenging their rule. This popular mobilisation started with anti-Assad graffiti sprayed around the town of Dar'a by some teenagers, who had to face severe consequences for doing so.³

However, the mobilisation also attracted a plethora of non-state and regional actors into Syria. From Al Qaeda to the Islamic State (also known as IS, ISIS, or *Daesh* in Arabic), the Assad government faced existential challenges from not only its people, but other political ideologues as well. Some of them, like IS, were extremist groups that wanted this Levant region as part of their own *khilafat* (caliphate). To protect himself from all of them, including his disenchanted citizens, Assad leaned heavily on Iran and Russia.⁴

As it happened, it was a relatively small group challenging Assad's order, called the Hay'at Tahrir Al Sham (HTS), which started to gain influence during this period of turmoil. Started by the country's current president Ahmed Al Sharaa, who earlier went by his nom de guerre, Abu Mohammed Al Jolani, the HTS since 2017 had been running a quasi-state within the state of Syria in its north-western region. Al Sharaa taking over makes Syria the second state after Afghanistan (where the Taliban captured power in August 2021) to be run by former jihadists.

a Alawism is an offshoot of Shi'ite Islam, but varies from the Twelver Shia Islam practiced in Iran.

Who Is Ahmed Al Sharaa?

Al Sharaa honed his fighting skills under the founder of ISIS, Abu Bakr Al Baghdadi. Originally from the Golan region, the extended Sharaa family were pushed out of their land following the six-day war between Israel and Arab states in June 1967, when Israel captured the Golan Heights (barring a small portion to the east).⁵ They took refuge on the outskirts of Damascus, where Al Sharaa's father, Hussein Al Sharaa, an economist who had worked in Saudi Arabia's oil industry, grew interested in Ba'athism⁶ – an ideology that stressed pan-Arab nationalism, socialism, and secularism. During the Damascus Spring of 2000-01,^b he expressed his views forcefully and subsequently even denounced his son's extreme ideas.⁷

Many of these events shaped Ahmed Al Sharaa's early extremist views, which were further consolidated by the US invasion of Iraq in 2003. Subsequently, he was picked up by the Syrian secret police (the *mukhabarat*) for preaching extremism. After his release a few years later, he joined Al Qaeda's branch in Iraq, led by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. However, he soon left due to ideological and operational disagreements,⁸ and joined ISIS instead. In 2012, he returned to Syria to set up the Syrian branch of ISIS called Jabhat Al Nusra or Nusra Front. In its war against the Assad regime, Al Nusra, lacking military equipment, used suicide bombers. Unhappy with Al Sharaa's successes and growing fame, ISIS chief Al Baghdadi decided to cut him to size and dissolved al-Nusra, merging it with ISIS.⁹ Al Sharaa then decided to use his influence and relative popularity to go solo, this time abjuring violence and offering an alternative government, security, and power structure.¹⁰

The city of Idlib in northwest Syria, capital of the Idlib governorate, became home to HTS and its parallel government. For Al Sharaa, building public capacities ranging from military training centres to schools and hospitals, was a priority. While his ideological extremism did not necessarily diminish, his building of public amenities and reaching out to the local population, made him more acceptable. However, toppling Assad remained his primary goal.

During this period, HTS was listed as a terror group by both the United States (US) and the United Nations Security Council (UNSC).¹¹ Al Sharaa, however, soon began making friendly overtures to the West, giving interviews

^b The Damascus Spring was a brief period of political freedom that Syrians enjoyed following the death of Hafez Al Assad in June 2000. His son Bashar Al Assad, who took over from him, initially ran a relatively liberal regime. But it ended in mid-2001 after Bashar clamped down again, following an uprising against him.

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to the western media. The first appearance was in June 2021, when Al Sharaa (then still known as Al Jolani) met PBS network’s Martin Smith. Clad in Western attire, he even took Smith around Idlib to show him his organisation’s efforts at capacity building.¹² This was the beginning of Al Sharaa’s journey towards becoming a political figure rather than a militant leader.

Certainly there was forethought on Al Sharaa’s part—he knew that with his ousted predecessor having been close to Russia and Iran, the latter’s global rivals, the US and West Europe, could be his potential backers. James Jeffrey, US Ambassador in Baghdad from 2010 to 2012, and US Representative on Syria in 2018, who served in different capacities under the Bush, Obama, and Trump administrations, had already called HTS, despite its history, “the least bad option in Idlib” to engage with.¹³ To protect its turf around Idlib, HTS fought both ISIS and Al Qaeda affiliate Hurras Al Din, despite its ideological affinity with them. For the US, this made HTS even more acceptable.

When HTS began its mobilisation from Idlib towards Damascus in December 2024, it met with little to no resistance from the Syrian armed forces. President Bashar Al Assad fled to Syria’s Latakia province and sought refuge at one of Russia’s military bases in the country. Later, he escaped to Moscow, leaving Al Sharaa and HTS to stake its control of Damascus.¹⁴

However, many of Al Sharaa’s gravest challenges—running a West Asian state fragmented by sectarian divides and navigating a rapidly transforming global order—were only beginning.

Suits, Ties, and Jihad: Navigating Regional Challenges

After capturing Damascus in December 2024, Ahmed Al Sharaa did not take long to orchestrate an image makeover. Ditching military fatigues for suits and ties, and taking on the intricacies of diplomacy, completed his transformation.

Within a month, Al Sharaa was meeting world leaders in the Syrian capital. Foreign ministers from Germany and France were quick to visit him. During the initial years of the civil war, mass migration from Syria had created a political storm in Europe—on the one hand, there was global pressure to accommodate them, while on the other, there was plenty of domestic pushback against doing so. Of the 3 million refugees, Germany took in over 1 million, while Türkiye too, offered many of them shelter.^{15,16} In recent years,

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European politics has arguably been remoulded in part by the Syrian refugee crisis, as right-wing and populist political voices opposing their entry, often underpinned by anti-migration sentiments, have gained strength rapidly.¹⁷

The haste with which European states have rushed to open communication channels with Al Sharaa is largely to ensure that his victory does not lead to another wave of migrants moving towards Europe for safety. As it is, the Russia–Ukraine war continues unabated and holding at bay another crisis which could have implications for Europe was seen as a national security priority.

As noted earlier, given global geopolitics, Al Sharaa saw an opportunity to woo the West by sidelining Assad's main patrons, Moscow and Tehran. By the end of January, he had terminated all the agreements that allowed Russia to operate military bases in the country's Tartus region¹⁸ – a decision that impacted Russia since these were its only military outposts in West Asia, giving it critical access to the Mediterranean. He has also dealt blows to the network of proxies and political influencers Iran was operating in different parts of Syria, including those supporting Hezbollah in Lebanon. Al Sharaa has also publicly denounced Iran's 'Axis of Resistance' design and blamed the strategy for fuelling discord in Syria and its neighbourhood.¹⁹ No doubt, the routes Iran set up to smuggle money, ammunition, arms, fuel, and drugs into Syria still exist, but Al Sharaa has allowed the Western media to travel to the frontlines and see how his armed forces are trying to shut them down. The drugs being trafficked include the notorious Captagon, which used to be one of deposed ruler Assad's core revenue earners during the years of sanctions, its trade in Syria valued at nearly US\$5 billion annually.^{20,21,22}

However, HTS's roots should not be overlooked. When the Taliban overran Afghanistan in August 2021, sermons were aired over loudspeakers in Idlib celebrating its achievement. HTS ideologues and jurists such as Abd Al Rahim Atoun gave adulatory lectures with titles like "Jihad and Resistance in the Muslim World: the Taliban Model".²³ So too, HTS's victory in December 2024 was celebrated across the radical Islamist world, including by Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ). (Ironically, within months, Iran, which backs both Hamas and PIJ, was to lose its own strategic depth in Syria because of HTS.²⁴) Amidst the larger battle for control of the global order, with the US, Europe, Russia and China as the main players, Al Sharaa now faces the challenge of conducting deft diplomacy.

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How this new Syria works with its neighbours, such as Iran, Türkiye, and even Israel, will shape its own security future. The first trip outside Syria that Al Sharaa made as president was to Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, in early February 2025. Other visits have included Türkiye and the United Arab Emirates (UAE).²⁵ To maintain balance, Damascus will have to resume political dialogue with Tehran as well and placate Iran's anxieties. It might do so through the UAE, since Abu Dhabi has functional ties with the Iranian leadership. Following the fall of the Assad regime, Israel has also taken over parts of the eastern Golan Heights (which used to be under Syria's control). It has also conducted repeated air strikes within Syrian territories. Prevailing upon the US to restrain Israel is thus another challenge for the new administration.^{26,27} Managing the Arab–Israeli–Iranian–Turkish contestation over interests in Syria and still retaining its full sovereignty will be another tough challenge for Al Sharaa.

The other pressing diplomatic challenge will be to uphold Syrian interests as the international order changes. The good news for HTS is that the West no longer seems to have the will power or capacity to take on even designated terrorists and terror groups as vigorously as it did in the aftermath of 9/11. It is most likely that Ambassador Jeffrey's suggestion of coming to terms with the “least bad” option to maintain US strategic interests in West Asia is increasingly going to be US strategy. The US is recalibrating its role, realising it is not the sole global superpower, though it still wants to protect and refurbish the international order it helped build after the war. This is clear from the manner in which Donald Trump, in his second term as president, has been dealing with the Taliban. In December 2024, the US rescinded a US\$10-million dollar bounty it had placed on the head of Taliban's interim interior minister Sirajuddin Haqqani, a well-known militant, along with some others.²⁸

How should India respond to the situation, more so given its own stand against terrorism? New Delhi has, begrudgingly, opened direct talks with the Taliban, despite the Taliban's earlier record of supporting terror; in early January 2025, for instance, Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri met Afghanistan's foreign minister Mawlawi Amir Khan Muttaqi in Dubai.²⁹ In Syria, the HTS changed its national flag from the red, white and black bands under the Assad regimes to green, white and black—India has allowed the Syrian embassy in New Delhi to do the same, in effect accepting Ahmed Al Sharaa's stamp of authority.

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Afghanistan and Syria are both ‘para-states’, run by Islamic extremists, and both have forced the international order to engage with them for lack of options. New Delhi’s quiet diplomatic acceptance of Ahmed Al Sharaa’s government but not that of the Taliban in Afghanistan—the Afghan embassy in Delhi, shut following the Taliban takeover, has yet to reopen—shows that no one design fits all when it comes to political engagements. Afghanistan, as a neighbouring state, has direct implications for Indian security. Syria, under the rule of the Assads, had backed India’s position on Kashmir and been its ally; India will now have to recalibrate its broader engagements with the Arab world to ensure that it remains so under Al Sharaa.

Ethnic Groups and Rival Armies

Beyond the management of fractured and evolving geopolitics, long-term sustainability for Al Sharaa as a leader will depend mostly on how he tackles the thorny problem of national integration. This has both political and military facets.

Political: One of the main concerns of Al Sharaa will be the differences between the various communities^c that constitute the ‘secular’ fabric of Syria as promoted by Assad over the years,³⁰ and how to reconcile them. This does not only mean managing sectarian fault lines but also encompasses respecting human rights, making a transition to democracy and formulating a new Constitution.³¹ Currently, though HTS has captured Damascus, all of Syria is not entirely under its rule. The country is divided into influence zones, which includes that of the US. The US has nearly 2,000 troops still stationed in Syria, mostly in the country’s southern region, posted as part of its ‘Operation Inherent Resolve’ launched against ISIS in March 2018.

The second largest presence, both as a military and in the country’s politics, is that of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), a conglomerate dominated by the Kurds, who comprise 3-5 percent of Syria’s population. (The SDF is backed by the US since it had helped the US defeat ISIS during Trump’s first term).³² The SDF seeks a democratic post-Assad Syria with considerable autonomy for the Kurd-dominated regions. Perhaps Al Sharaa’s biggest achievement since ousting Assad has been the signing of an integration agreement with Gen. Mazlum Kobani, SDF’s leader, in late-March 2025, by which SDF agreed to withdraw troops from the regions it controls, allowing them to be integrated under Damascus.³³ In return, Al Sharaa promised to recognise Kurdish rights, ranging from identity to language and festivals, long denied under the Assad regime. The agreement could well become a model for political compromise with other, more Islamist factions.³⁴

Serendipitously, around the same time, Türkiye, which designates a host of Kurdish groups such as the Kurdistan Workers Party (popularly known as the PKK) operating in its Kurd-dominated southeast, as terrorist organisations, also signed a ceasefire agreement with the PKK.³⁵ The group’s jailed leader, Abdullah Ocalan, has called upon his supporters to surrender their arms in return for his eventual release.³⁶

^c The main religions in Syria are Sunni Muslim (around 75 percent), Alawite Muslim (10-15 percent), Christians (10 percent), Druze (3-5 percent), and small numbers of other faiths as well. The main ethnic groups are Arabs (90 percent) and Kurds (9 percent).

Ethnic Groups and Rival Armies

A final political contestation remains between the HTS government and the Alawite community. It comprises 10–15 percent of the population, but is a dominant minority owing to the Assads' long years in power. By the time he was ousted, Assad's popularity had sunk so low that even the Alawite-majority areas are said to have celebrated, but the community also fears retribution from the Islamist groups³⁷ which it had always opposed. Further, some among the Alawites have continued to support Assad, especially those who had served in his military, and there have been sporadic attacks by these pro-Assad Alawites along the country's western coast³⁸ after the HTS takeover in which dozens were killed. These attacks have tapered off at the time of writing.

Military: The other integration challenge is that of incorporating all the armed rebel groups into a new military. Soon after capturing Damascus, the HTS appealed to all armed factions to come together in a unified army under its Ministry of Defence. Along with the SDF, a number of others, all set up by former officers of the Syrian army who had broken away from Assad—the Syrian National Army (SNA), the Free Syrian Army (FSA),^d the former Eighth Brigade of the southern command of Assad's army led by Ahmed Al Awdeh³⁹—have committed their support to Al Sharaa.⁴⁰ There are still, however, armed groups that are holding out.

For now, Ahmed Al Sharaa seems to have met with success at marketing his integration plan for the next few years while running an interim government. However, all the senior positions in the new political setup, from Defence Minister Major Gen Murhaf Abu Qasra to the new Syrian intelligence chief Anas Khattab—both previously affiliated to Al Qaeda—have so far gone to Al Sharaa's inner circle of trusted men.⁴¹ It remains to be seen if ministerial portfolios and other key power positions in Syria will be equitably distributed as part of reconciliation processes. If not, the reconciliation is unlikely to last.⁴²

^d The Free Syrian Army (FSA) was a coalition of armed opposition groups formed in July 2011 by officers who defected from Assad's army. The Syrian National Army (SNA) emerged from the FSA in 2016, fully backed and funded by Turkiye.

Conclusion

The current euphoria in Syria stems entirely from Assad's brutal dictatorship having come to an end. The country's future under Al Sharaa remains uncertain. He is making all the correct overtures, domestically, regionally, and internationally, but his true test will come if and when he holds elections in this deeply divided country. For now, his inclusive agenda seems to be keeping Syria from collapsing back into anarchy, violence, and chaos. [ORF](#)

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