# Syria's New Dawn:
## Lessons from Libya's Transition and the Road to Stability

Ferhat Polat



(Emin Sansar - Anadolu Agency)

The collapse of Bashar al-Assad's authoritarian regime in Syria marks a pivotal moment in the country's turbulent history. After over a decade of civil war, the Syrian people now face both opportunities and challenges as they seek to rebuild their shattered nation and transition towards a more stable, democratic future. This research paper provides critical insights into the lessons that can be drawn from Libya's post-Gaddafi experience, cautioning Syria against repeating the same mistakes. It highlights the importance of establishing security, building consensus on a new constitutional framework, and holding free and fair elections to legitimise the transitional government. With the right approach and international support, the collapse of the Assad regime presents a unique chance for the Syrian people to forge a more hopeful, united path forward.

# Introduction

The toppling of Assad's regime, ending 53 years of his family's rule, represents a pivotal moment in the country's turbulent history. While the collapse of this brutal dictatorship is undoubtedly a positive development, the path forward is fraught with uncertainty and challenges that must be navigated carefully.

The Syrian civil war began in 2011 as a nationwide protest movement against the Assad government, which responded with violent crackdowns. The Syrian people faced immense hardships and suffering as the regime brutally repressed peaceful protesters. As protests then escalated into an armed rebellion that Assad's forces struggled to contain, the country descended into a devastating civil war that lasted over a decade. The ensuing conflict took the lives of more than 350,000 Syrians and displaced at least 13 million, and the country's infrastructure was devastated.

At one point, the opposition was closed to overthrow the Assad regime. However, the intervention of Assad's allies Iran and Russia proved pivotal in stabilising the government's military position and enabling it to regain control over much of the country gradually. Between 2015 and 2020, the Assad government systematically bombed opposition-held enclaves, forcing them into submission and allowing the regime to retake the majority of Syrian territory. This period of the Syrian conflict demonstrates the crucial role of external actors in shaping the trajectory of the civil war.

Without the military support provided by Iran and Russia, the Assad government may very well have collapsed in the face of the armed rebellion. The regime's ability to ultimately prevail, despite the initial strength of the opposition, underscores how foreign intervention can tip the balance of power in a complex, protracted internal conflict.

Syria's opposition seized an opportunity as Iran and Russia, the key backers of the Assad regime, have become entangled in other conflicts. Russia has been distracted



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in Ukraine, and the Israeli war on Gaza and Lebanon has weakened Iran. In the Turkish-protected bastion of Idlib province in north-western Syria, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), also known as the Syrian Liberation Group and other opposition factions like the Syrian National Army (SNA) had been organising for years. On November 27, these groups launched an offensive on the northern city of Aleppo. When they broke through the Syrian army's defences and seized the city, it set off a cascading failure and collapse of Syria's military nationwide. The HTS-led forces then pushed south from Aleppo toward the capital, Damascus, as Syrians in the country's centre and south, including in formerly opposition-held areas, also rose. On December 8, as opposition factions closed in on Damascus from both north and south, Assad fled to Russia. After more than 13 years of grinding civil war, the Assad government had crumbled in less than two weeks.

# Healing or Widen the Rifts in the Post-Assad Era

The fall of Bashar Al-Assad's regime in Syria presents a bright and promising future for the Syrian people. While the transition from the Assad government is undoubtedly complex, with various factions vying for influence, there are reasons to be cautiously optimistic about Syria's path forward.

Assad left a shattered country in his wake, and a new transition government would struggle in these circumstances. The different groups involved in toppling the Assad regime, including HTS, have expressed a desire to work towards a stable and inclusive transition. The HTS leader's statement that they will collaborate with all minorities, including the Kurds, is a positive sign that they recognise the importance of unity and reconciliation. This suggests a willingness to compromise and put the interests of the Syrian people above individual agendas.

The 2015 UN resolution outlined a clear political roadmap. While implementing this plan may face challenges, it provides a framework for a structured and inclusive transition that could help heal the deep societal divisions within Syria. With the international community and regional actors working together to support this process, there is a real opportunity to forge a new, united Syria that represents the aspirations of all its citizens.

With the collapse of the Assad regime, HTS has now taken charge in Damascus, seeking to oversee an orderly political transition. To this end, HTS has installed the Syrian Salvation Government, which it had previously established in Idlib, as a national transitional authority. HTS has also deployed its security forces throughout the capital, setting up nationwide checkpoints at key transportation hubs. Additionally, the group has issued warnings to the victori-

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ous opposition militants, cautioning them against abusing civilians or engaging in looting. Through these measures, HTS is positioning itself as the primary force guiding the political transformation in post-Assad Syria.

It is imperative to note the crucial role that Türkiye can play in providing security and stability in the post-Assad era. As the second-largest army in NATO, Türkiye has extensive experience in training and supporting militia forces, which could be invaluable in establishing a standing army and restoring order in Syria. The Syrian people have endured over a decade of war and conflict, and they strongly desire to achieve stability and democracy.

With the international community's support, Syria has a great chance of becoming more stable and prosperous. Türkiye's involvement, in particular, could be a game-changer, as it has the resources, expertise, and regional influence to help guide the transition and ensure that the various factions within Syria work together towards a common goal.

The suffering endured over so many years has given Syrians much more time to prepare for this moment and consider how to navigate a post-Assad transition. The potential role of the Syrian diaspora, particularly the millions of refugees who have been living in Türkiye. These individuals have gained valuable experiences and skills while residing in Türkiye, and their return to Syria could be a significant driver of the country's economic and social recovery. The influx of human capital and entrepreneurial spirit could help rebuild Syria's institutions and revitalise

its economy, laying the foundation for a more stable and prosperous future.

The HTS leader, Abu Muhammad al-Jolani, sought to project an image of moderation and readiness to play a statesman role. To reassure Syria's diverse ethnic and sectarian constituencies, as well as various international stakeholders, HTS issued statements outlining its commitment to inclusive governance. Jolani interviewed many media outlets, reaffirming Syria's history of coexistence and pledging to build institutional governance structures.

Tactically, HTS showed how adept they are in handling media narratives. As the HTS-led troops reached Damascus and the regime collapsed, the Israeli propaganda machine and its relays in the West began focusing on the narrative of Al-Qaeda's presence in the capital city, providing justification for Israel's attacks against Syria and the occupation of additional territories in the Golan Heights. However, the new masters of Syria pursued a different media strategy by highlighting the horrors of Sednaya Prison and the plight of the prisoners and the disappeared. This shift in narrative helped shift the focus on the human dimension and victimhood rather than politicised accounts about the HTS' control of Damascus.

This strategic messaging by HTS suggests an attempt to position the group as a responsible and pragmatic actor in the post-Assad transition. By emphasising its respect for Syria's pluralism, putting the victimhood at the centre stage, and reaffirming its intentions to govern through formal institutions, HTS appears to be trying to allay concerns

about the return of autocratic rule while also working to build broader legitimacy for its role in shaping the country's future, as Syrians do not want another autocratic family dynasty. Despite these positive statements, how the HTS will deliver on its promises remains to be seen.

However, it is important to acknowledge that certain groups within Syria may have different agendas and priorities that could deepen the country's divisions rather than foster unity. Some regional or international powers may also prioritise their own economic or geostrategic interests over the well-being of the Syrian people, which could present challenges for the transitional government. Instead of exacerbating the division, these countries must take all necessary steps, such as promoting a peaceful and inclusive transition and offering sufficient humanitarian and economic support, to prevent the worst-case scenarios of post-Assad Syria from materialising.

# Lessons from Libya's Post-Gaddafi Transition

Libya's experience after the overthrow of Muammar Gaddafi in 2011 provides several critical lessons for Syria as it navigates the transition following Bashar al-Assad's departure. First and foremost, the Libyan case demonstrates the immense challenge of rebuilding a functional state apparatus after the collapse of a long-standing authoritarian regime.

More than a decade after the upheavals of the Arab Spring, Libya's transition from autocratic rule to democracy continues to be undermined by various internal and external forces. The overthrow of Libya's longtime ruler, Muammar Gaddafi's regime, offered Libyans a significant opportunity to craft a new state after a history of dictatorship. Following his overthrow, various militia groups emerged; they did not possess a cohesive vision for restoring peace and establishing state institutions. Worse still, they lacked a unified voice to express their societal project, committing many blunders in terms of messaging.


*(Fırat Yurdakul - Anadolu Agency)*

Libyans expected that the collapse of Gaddafi's regime would bring stability and democracy to their country. Those who hoped for a swift transition to a stable democracy in Libya faced several obstacles, including a lack of civic and democratic culture, an oil-dependent rentier economy, a lack of institutionalism, significant splits between competing parties, and a growing foreign influence. As a result, the country's fledgling democratic process has struggled to move forward and slipped ever deeper into conflicts and instability. The ongoing crisis in Libya results from multiple variables, including the rift between diverse groups, regional dimensions, and external interference. Governments in transition since 2011 have failed to ensure permanent security and establish efficient state institutions.

# Negative Meddling of External Forces

In Libya, the counter-revolutionary alliance within the Arab world, supported by major powers such as Russia and France, sought to destabilise the post-Gaddafi order in Tripoli. General Khalifa Haftar quickly emerged as a key figure in this counter-revolution, establishing control over the oil-rich eastern region of Libya and launching repeated campaigns to seize Tripoli and overthrow the UN-recognised government. These attempts ultimately failed due to the decisive intervention of Turkish forces.

A similar pattern of foreign interference is likely to unfold in Syria. External actors, including Israel, European leaders, and certain U.S. lawmakers, have voiced support for restructuring Syria's governance along federal lines, advocating for significant autonomy for Kurdish, Alawite, and Druze regions. Such a model risks further fragmenting Syria, leaving it vulnerable to prolonged instability and weakened national cohesion.

Just as the UN-recognised government in Libya has worked to reunify the country under a single administration, the future of Syria's stability and unity relies on the establishment of a strong, centralised state. Only through a cohesive government can Syria overcome external interference, address its internal challenges, and build a foundation for lasting peace and national resilience.

The future stability and unity of Syria hinge on the establishment of a strong, centralised state. This model offers the most effective solution to the country's challenges, fostering a cohesive government capable of managing its diverse population and countering internal and external threats. Unlike federalism, which risks deepening divisions among ethnic and religious groups, a centralised state prioritises national unity, ensuring that governance is not fragmented by competing local interests. It also serves as a bulwark against prolonged conflict and external manipulation, providing the necessary infrastructure to restore law, order, and essential services. Furthermore, a strong

central authority is better positioned to safeguard Syria's sovereignty, counter external pressures, and create a foundation for rebuilding its economy. While there are challenges in implementing such a system, it remains the most viable path for Syria's stability and prosperity.

# Challenges of State Building

Gaddafi's legitimacy was established based on his leadership position as a stabilising force for a deliberately divided social environment. His institutions were only the by-product and channel through which a negotiated social compact constructed around a sense of entitlement to the oil money was preserved. However, after Gaddafi was removed from power, it became clear that Libyan society was deeply divided and lacked a clear relationship with its central government. The country's elite was either unable or unwilling to create a new state structure that could move beyond the institutions established by Gaddafi. For the transitional government to lay the groundwork for progress in the political and economic realms, ensuring continuous security in the broadest sense is paramount. At the time of writing, however, the interim administration remained frail, with limited capability and authority, and the inability to impose security remained a significant obstacle.

The state-building theory asserts that a state is essential for maintaining stability, ensuring security, and promoting progress. However, creating a functional state is a complex and difficult process that demands thoughtful planning, strong institutional capacity, and political determination. Building a state requires careful, consistent effort to reinforce the citizens' relationship with their government. To achieve this, it is essential to have a deep understanding of the causes and manifestations of fragility and how this understanding should shape the policies and actions involved in state-building.

In this regard, Libya's transitional governments have so far failed to build effective state institutions that could bring stability to the country. Syria is likely to face similar challenges to those experienced by Libya. Therefore, the process of establishing democratic states after conflicts presents a highly complex challenge for both transitional authorities and the international community.

# Civil-Military Relations

Security is one of the main aspects of bringing stability, which includes issues such as disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration of former combatants (DDR), as well as, linked to this, security sector reform (SSR), a functioning system of law and order, and questions of redress for past crimes.

Post-Assad Syria and post-Gaddafi Libya share significant parallels, particularly in the aftermath of the collapse of long-standing authoritarian regimes. Both countries are left with fractured political landscapes, characterised by competing militias, external influences, and the challenge of rebuilding a cohesive state apparatus.

In Libya, the failure to reintegrate armed groups and the absence of a unified political vision have hindered the development of a functioning state. Hybrid armed groups, which control large swathes of territory and engage in illicit activities, continue to challenge the central government's authority, similar to the challenges Syria faces in the wake of Assad's fall. Both states also struggle with the issue of military control; in Libya, various armed factions wield significant power, while in Syria, external actors like Israel and Iran are already grooming some factions.

The key to stability in both countries lies in successful DDR efforts, but these are fraught with difficulty due to entrenched political, ethnic, and military divisions. While Libya's path has been obstructed by regional fragmentation and foreign meddling, Syria's future hinges on whether its various factions can find a way to collaboratively build a democratic and centralised state, learning from Libya's ongoing struggle for peace and unity. Both nations need international support to prevent further fragmentation and ensure a sustainable transition, but with each experiencing the unique challenge of reconciling disparate, powerful groups vying for control.

# The Absence of Constitution and the Failure to Hold Elections

The absence of a constitution remains at the core of Libya's problems concerning elections. The lack of a clear constitutional framework outlining Libya's government structure and division of powers has been a hurdle to the electoral process. There are various reasons for the failure, including domestic and external challenges encountered by the constitution-making body and ongoing disagreements among rival sides regarding different aspects of the final draft constitution. Until now, Libyan rival parties have not agreed on a constitutional framework. Creating a new constitution should outline the governance structure, define the roles and powers of the central authority, and establish clear rules for presidential, parliamentary, and electoral processes.

Elections are important for two main reasons. First, they allow a country to move beyond its current political structure and gain legitimacy from its people after a long period of dictatorship. In the case of Libya, however, the presence of two separate parliaments and governments, along with

*(Hazem Turkia - Anadolu Agency)*

the lack of unity, hinders state institutions from functioning effectively. To avoid repeating the same mistakes, Syria should ensure that, once an interim government is established, it works with all groups within the country to build consensus on the constitution and provide security across the country before holding elections.

# Achieving Long-Term Security

Since the fall of the Gaddafi regime, a lack of security has been a major issue in Libya. This has hindered the development of effective political and administrative systems, restricted international involvement, and allowed criminal groups to thrive.

Over the past thirteen years, Libya's unstable security situation has allowed criminal syndicates to thrive, exacerbating the chaos created by political divisions and the failure to consolidate rival militias into a unified, professional force. As these militias failed to integrate into state structures, they increasingly turned to organised crime as a means of funding and maintaining power. With key control over trafficking routes, ports, and even migrant detention facilities, these groups became integral to illicit economies.

This involvement in organised crime has expanded to include fuel smuggling, drug trafficking, and even piracy, with powerful armed groups, especially in the Eastern part of the country, solidifying their dominance by controlling these illicit markets. Their reach extends into politics, as some of these elements have infiltrated government positions, using their power to shape or control state budgets and secure their place in the political structure. This criminal-political nexus has perpetuated insecurity and undermined efforts to restore order, leaving the country vulnerable to further instability. The lack of a functioning security apparatus has allowed criminal activity to flourish without fear of accountability, impeding the UN-recognised government's ability to assert control and build the state's institutions. This has led to a fragmented, anarchic environment in which armed groups profit from criminal enterprises, making it increasingly difficult to address the root causes of insecurity and build a stable, cohesive state.

Therefore, the new Syrian authorities must prioritise establishing security and asserting control throughout the country to prevent similar challenges from emerging. Providing security could be the most pressing challenge for the Syrian new authority. A new leadership should have plans to unify the country's state institutions, with utmost priority given to law and order.

# Conclusion

The collapse of the authoritarian regime in Syria presents both opportunities and challenges for establishing stable, democratic governments. The experiences of Libya's post-Gaddafi transition offer critical lessons that Syria must heed to avoid repeating the same mistakes. In Libya, the lack of a cohesive vision and institutional capacity among the various militia groups that emerged after Gaddafi's overthrow led to a protracted power struggle and the failure to rebuild effective state institutions. This security vacuum allowed criminal and militia groups to thrive, undermining the rule of law and threatening the country's stability. Similarly, the absence of a clear constitutional framework in Libya hindered the electoral process and prevented the consolidation of a legitimate, representative government.

Türkiye's role in ensuring security and stability in the post-Assad era is critical. As NATO's second-largest army, Türkiye possesses vast experience in training and supporting militia forces, making it uniquely positioned to assist in the creation of a standing army and the restoration of order in Syria. After more than a decade of war and conflict, the Syrian people yearn for stability and democracy. With the backing of the international community, Syria has a significant opportunity to become more stable and prosperous. Türkiye's involvement, similar to its supportive role in Libya where it aided the UN-recognised government, could be transformative. Türkiye has the resources, expertise, and regional influence needed to guide Syria's transition and help unite the various factions toward a shared goal.

Syria faces the daunting task of rebuilding its shattered state apparatus after over a decade of civil war. To succeed where Libya falters, the Syrian transitional authorities must prioritise establishing security and asserting control throughout the country. This will require a concerted effort to unify the country's military and security forces, disarm and reintegrate former combatants, and restore law and order. Alongside these security measures, the interim government should collaborate with all factions within Syria to build consensus on a new constitution that outlines a clear governance structure and division of powers.

Only by providing a stable, constitutional foundation can Syria hold free and fair elections that grant legitimacy to the new government. With the right approach, the collapse of the Assad regime presents a unique opportunity for Syria to embark on a more hopeful, democratic path. By learning from Libya's mistakes and establishing a stable, inclusive political framework, Syria can heal the deep divisions of the past and emerge as a more united, prosperous nation. However, this will require unwavering commitment, coordination, and a steadfast focus on the needs and aspirations of the Syrian people.



*(Mostafa Alkharouf - Anadolu Agency)*