

# Syria's Post-Assad Future: A New Era for Governance and Geopolitics

Burak Elmalı



(Fateme Bahrami - Anadolu Agency)

The opposition offensive that began in Idlib on November 27 and reached its climax in Damascus on December 8 resulted in the collapse of the Assad regime. This pivotal event represents a significant turning point for Syria's future and the evolving balance of power in the Middle East. The optimism surrounding the transitional government's dedication to inclusivity and representation will largely depend on the governance model it implements, marking the dawn of a new era for the Syrian people. This Policy Outlook explores the regional implications of post-Assad Syria, focusing on Türkiye, Iran, Russia, and Israel, as well as the processes involved in establishing a new Syrian state.

## Introduction

The Syrian conflict, which began in March 2011 with peaceful protests embodying the Arab Spring's call for freedom, culminated on December 8, 2024, with the fall of Damascus and the decisive victory of opposition forces led by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS). This momentous development brought an end to the 61-year Ba'athist regime, most of which was under Hafez al-Assad (1971–2000) and later under Bashar al-Assad. Characterised by its complexity, the Syrian civil war evolved into a multidimensional conflict involving Türkiye, the United States, Russia, Iran, and other state and non-state actors pursuing divergent sets of interests over time. The opposition's victory represents a pivotal moment with far-reaching implications, revitalising hope for the Syrian people and opening a new chapter in Middle Eastern geopolitics. This critical juncture, marked by its timing and operational precision, has sparked significant debate in regional and global strategic circles. It also signals the start of Syria's state-building journey in the post-Assad era. This Policy Outlook explores Syria's reconstruction's political and military dimensions while underscoring Türkiye's pivotal role in reshaping regional power dynamics and contributing to forming a new Syrian state.

## Timing and Strategy

The opposition's military campaign, named *Operation Deterrence of Aggression*, which commenced in Idlib on November 27, 2024, and culminated in Damascus on December 8, achieved a decisive victory by capitalising on favourable regional and global dynamics. This operation, which marked the downfall of the Assad regime, stands as the most significant and strategically coordinated manoeuvre in Syria since the outbreak of the civil war in 2011.

From an international perspective, the campaign unfolded during a period of strategic vulnerability for Russia, one of the regime's principal backers. Russia's deepening entanglement in the Ukraine war—exacerbated by Western support for Ukraine's use of advanced missiles against Russian territories—intensified Moscow's inward focus, limiting its capacity to exert influence in Syria. Simultaneously, Iran, the Assad regime's other key sponsor, faced a substantial



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setback following the neutralisation of Hezbollah, its foremost regional proxy, through a series of Israeli strikes. This development eroded Tehran's strategic leverage in Syria, leaving the Assad regime militarily and politically isolated. The diminished support from Hezbollah and affiliated Shia militias rendered regime forces weaker than at any point since the start of the civil war.

Türkiye's counterterrorism operations have also been instrumental in shaping the conditions for the opposition's success. Prior to 2016, territorial gains achieved by opposition forces were frequently undermined as these areas fell under the control of YPG or Daesh. This destabilising move prevented full-scale opposition control, which was also challenged by the regime's forces. However, Türkiye's robust cross-border campaigns, particularly in northern Syria and the regions east of the Euphrates, considerably weakened these terrorist elements. This strategic degradation of their capacity prevented them from exploiting the opposition's advances during this latest operation, ensuring the continuity of the opposition's momentum.

On the opposition's side, critical tactical and organisational advancements underpinned the operation's success. Drawing lessons from their 2016 defeat in Aleppo, opposition groups overcame the fragmentation and poor coordination that had previously hindered their effectiveness. In the following period, the opposition groups initiated concerted efforts to foster a sense of unity while bolstering constructive relations with Türkiye, engage with international media, and facilitate humanitarian access. Despite some serious regime violations, the de-escalation zones secured through Türkiye's Astana Process provided a critical window for opposition forces to regroup and consolidate their strength.

By the end of 2024, a coalition of Syrian opposition groups known as the Military Operations Command, led by HTS, had evolved into a unified and well-organised force, united by their goal of toppling the Assad regime. On November 27, 2024, they launched a surprise offensive in the Aleppo area, rapidly advancing eastward through several villages on the outskirts of the city and breaking through regime lines that had remained largely unchanged for years.

One of the key commanders of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), Gen. Kioumars Pourhashemi, was [killed](#) in an attack by Syrian opposition forces in western Aleppo. Meanwhile, HTS successfully infiltrated the Assad regime's operations room in the northern region and managed to access the meeting location of the leaders overseeing the combat fronts from Afes in the south to northern Aleppo. During a critical meeting of the eight senior leaders responsible for these fronts, where they were discussing the latest military developments, they were neutralised. Meanwhile, targeted strikes via [drones](#) continued to demoralise the upper echelon of Assad's military. These successful surgical operations, in parallel to major bombings, paralysed the regime's military decision-making.

Subsequently, the opposition forces rapidly advanced along the Aleppo-Hama-Homs-Damascus line, resulting in swift territorial gains. This rapid progression not only inflicted severe logistical disruptions on the regime—exemplified by the capture of Saraqib, a vital junction on the M4 and M5 highways—but also highly demoralised regime forces along the Latakia-Tartus line, dissuading them from conducting a counteroffensive. Ultimately, the regime's forces, weakened and demoralised, retreated from Homs to Damascus without mounting significant resistance. The opposition's capture of the capital underscored a historic turning point in the Syrian civil war, cementing a definitive victory under HTS leadership.

## Geopolitical Realignment

The collapse of the Baath regime marks the beginning of a transformative geopolitical era, particularly for regional actors and the global powers entangled in Syria's civil war. However, the contours of this new balance will crystallise only gradually, with its full implications becoming clear following the establishment of a transitional government. For now, regional states are charting diverse paths.

### Türkiye

The regional dynamics of a post-Assad Syria underscore Türkiye's growing geopolitical significance in the Middle East. This assertion was notably credited by U.S. President-elect Donald Trump, who remarked, "Türkiye is going to hold the key to Syria," reflecting Ankara's pivotal role in the emerging regional order. There are compelling reasons to anticipate that Türkiye will gain significant advantages during this transformative period.

First and foremost, Türkiye has cultivated strong ties with Syrian opposition groups, serving as the principal supporter of the Free Syrian Army, now reconstituted as the

Syrian National Army (SNA) since the beginning. Demonstrating a commitment to active diplomacy, Türkiye has played a central role in initiatives like the Astana Process and the Sochi Agreement, which advanced the interests of opposition factions. Key figures such as President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan (formerly head of intelligence), and İbrahim Kalın (current head of intelligence) have consistently engaged with the opposition since the onset of the Syrian conflict in 2011 and held significant support to these groups.

Following the opposition's military advances and swift territorial gains started on November 27, President Erdoğan publicly endorsed their momentum, signalling Türkiye's tacit support. In the aftermath of the opposition's capture of Damascus, Erdoğan extended congratulatory messages emphasising unity and stability. Türkiye's diplomatic outreach gained further traction with intelligence chief Kalın's visit to Damascus, where he met with the leader of Syria's new administration Ahmed al-Sharaa (formerly known as Abu Mohammed al-Jolani). These developments culminated in Türkiye reopening its embassy in Damascus for the first time since 2012, appointing Burhan Köroğlu as chargé d'affaires. Foreign Minister Fidan reinforced this engagement with a December 22 visit to Damascus, where he conveyed Türkiye's support for Syria's political transition and the formation of a new Syrian government.

Türkiye's principal strategic focus in the new geopolitical landscape remains the eradication of the YPG-PKK presence in northern Syria—a critical red line for Ankara to prevent a terror corridor in its neighbours. The new Syrian government is expected to recognise and align with Türkiye's security concerns. However, the U.S. continues to support the YPG under the pretext of combating Daesh, rebranding the group as "Syrian Kurds" or the "Syrian Democratic Forces." Such actions risk exacerbating tensions between Washington and Ankara as in the past.

On the ground, the SNA is executing a comprehensive offensive, "Operation Dawn of Freedom," across northern



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Syria with robust UAV support from Türkiye. In [Manbij](#), now cleared of YPG presence, the SNA is conducting demining operations and neutralising terrorist tunnels with their search operations. Similarly, in Tel Rifaat, the SNA swiftly eliminated terrorist elements within ten hours and continued stabilisation efforts. Türkiye's consistent opposition to a terror corridor in northern Syria aligns with its security imperatives and supports the unity and sovereignty of the Syrian state. Unaddressed security vacuums during Syria's reconstruction phase could embolden separatist factions to declare autonomy, undermining the new government's authority.

Syria's reconstruction is both boon and bane. On the one hand, Syria's economy has been severely impacted by years of Baathist rule, ongoing conflict, and international sanctions, leaving critical infrastructure in ruins and economic indicators in decline, which is a major obstacle for the recovery of the country. On the other hand, Türkiye stands as a key partner in Syria's reconstruction as Ankara has the know-how and the capabilities to support this mammoth task, particularly in sectors like agriculture, construction, and energy. Türkiye's expertise in infrastructure development could prove vital in restoring roads, power plants, and communication networks, which are essential for revitalising the economy and creating jobs. This possibility depends on political stability, internal cohesion, and international support. The new Syrian government will need to stabilise the currency, negotiate for humanitarian aid, and attract foreign investments. In addition, Syria's oil, agriculture, and tourism sectors present opportunities for growth, with Türkiye's involvement being crucial in rebuilding the country's infrastructure and energy networks.

However, Türkiye's role is expected to go beyond rebuilding infrastructure to encompass political and economic revitalisation in the reconstruction phase. Türkiye's military presence, justified by legitimate security concerns, is fully aligned with Syria's territorial integrity and stands against all plots to undermine Syria's national and societal cohesion. Moreover, Türkiye's decade-long hosting of Syrian refugees has fostered goodwill, positioning it as a trusted partner in Syria's recovery. As voluntary repatriations continue, returning Syrians will likely retain cultural and linguistic ties to Türkiye, further solidifying bilateral relations.

As the regional balance of power shifts from Iran and Russia toward Türkiye, Ankara is poised to assume a central role as a natural ally and key stakeholder in shaping Syria's future and broader regional stability.

## Iran

Iran emerges as a significant [loser](#) in this new geopolitical reality. Its deep-rooted alliance with the Assad regime, established during Hafez al-Assad's ascent in 1971, has been a cornerstone of Tehran's regional influence since the Islamic Revolution. Syria served as a vital hub for Iran's revolutionary agenda and as a conduit for enhancing its military

and logistical operations, including bolstering Shia militias and the IRGC's footprint across the region. The loss of this strategic ally leaves Tehran at a pivotal juncture with two plausible strategic trajectories.

First, Tehran may seek to recalibrate its approach, steering its proxies toward a moderate path to foster relations with a new Syrian government and other [Gulf nations](#) concerned about regional stability. From the perspective of capabilities and resources, this path appears to be the most rational for the Iranian regime, whether by choice or necessity, until the formation of the new government in Damascus. Iran-backed Shia militia has been in turmoil since Israel's war on Gaza started to spill over across the region. For instance, it is well known that Lebanese Hezbollah suffered significant losses during its skirmishes with Israel, culminating in a ceasefire on November 27. Although the Houthis of Yemen seem to be largely unaffected by these developments, they might also choose a de-escalatory path to ease tensions with the West.

Meanwhile, Iraq's Shia Coordination Framework initially advocated military action against opposition forces to prevent the fall of the Assad regime, but this has not materialised. Today, Iraqi officials, Shia political factions, and the Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF) appear to gradually and cautiously [accept](#) the emerging new normal in Syria. Therefore, Iran is likely to adopt a non-aggressive stance in the short term, partly as a response to the heavy setbacks experienced by its proxy network. Nonetheless, risks remain, particularly concerning sectarian fragmentation in Syria, which could derail the prospects for achieving political progress based on democracy and inclusiveness. Therefore, a comprehensive political framework, emphasising multiparty representation and expanding the civil liberties of the Syrian people who fought for their freedom for more than a decade, will be crucial to pre-empt such destabilisation and deter Iran from reasserting its influence.

Alternatively, Iran may choose to escalate its nuclear program in the new era. It is worth noting that the IAEA's recent assessments highlight Iran's uranium enrichment levels at 60% U-235, [highly alarming](#) for developing a nuclear weapon. Should Iran accelerate enrichment to reach 90%, it could trigger serious consequences. However, many analysts argue that the new era of the Trump administration would counter such moves with a "maximum pressure" policy. Comprehensive sanctions could force the Iranian regime to abandon its nuclear aspirations. Given Iran's already struggling economy and energy crisis, pursuing an aggressive nuclear agenda seems unlikely. Recent statements by Mohammad Eslami, the head of the Atomic Energy Organisation of Iran, [expressing openness](#) to additional IAEA inspections, suggest that Iran is signalling a willingness to cooperate with the West, potentially aiming to avoid confrontation with new U.S. sanctions.

Whether Iran adopts de-escalation or an aggressive posture regarding its nuclear program, one reality remains: the

fall of Assad has dealt a significant blow to one of the most vital components of Iran's regional influence network, built to spread its revolutionary ideology. The loss of control over a territory that served as a gateway to the Levant and a transit hub for assisting Hezbollah represents not only a logistical setback but also a demoralising disappointment for Iran's ideological followers. With the opposition now in control, Iran's core geopolitical ambition of establishing a "Shia Crescent" faces serious challenges. The internal instability across the region, compounded by U.S. intervention in Iraq and earlier turmoil in Lebanon, had already increased Iran's ability to maintain its dominance. Losing its logistical access to the Levant will complicate any such ambitions.

It is also worth noting that during the Baathist regime, the near-totalitarian structures consolidated under both Hafez and Bashar al-Assad offered Iran a relatively easy avenue for influence. In the new era shaped by the opposition's victory, however, a governance structure prioritising inclusivity, pluralism, and democracy will likely empower Syrian civil society and politics in ways that sharply contrast with the previous regime that held vast control over the people via oppressive mechanisms. While democratic overtures theoretically constrain the space for authoritarian ideologies, in practice, they leave openings for various agent provocateurs to manoeuvre and attempt to destabilise the emerging democracy.

In fact, Iran has already begun this disruptive effort. Supreme Leader Khamenei recently highlighted the importance of Syria's new administration confronting resistance, especially from its youth, clearly signalling Iran's intention to overturn the opposition's victory. Tehran's agents insti-

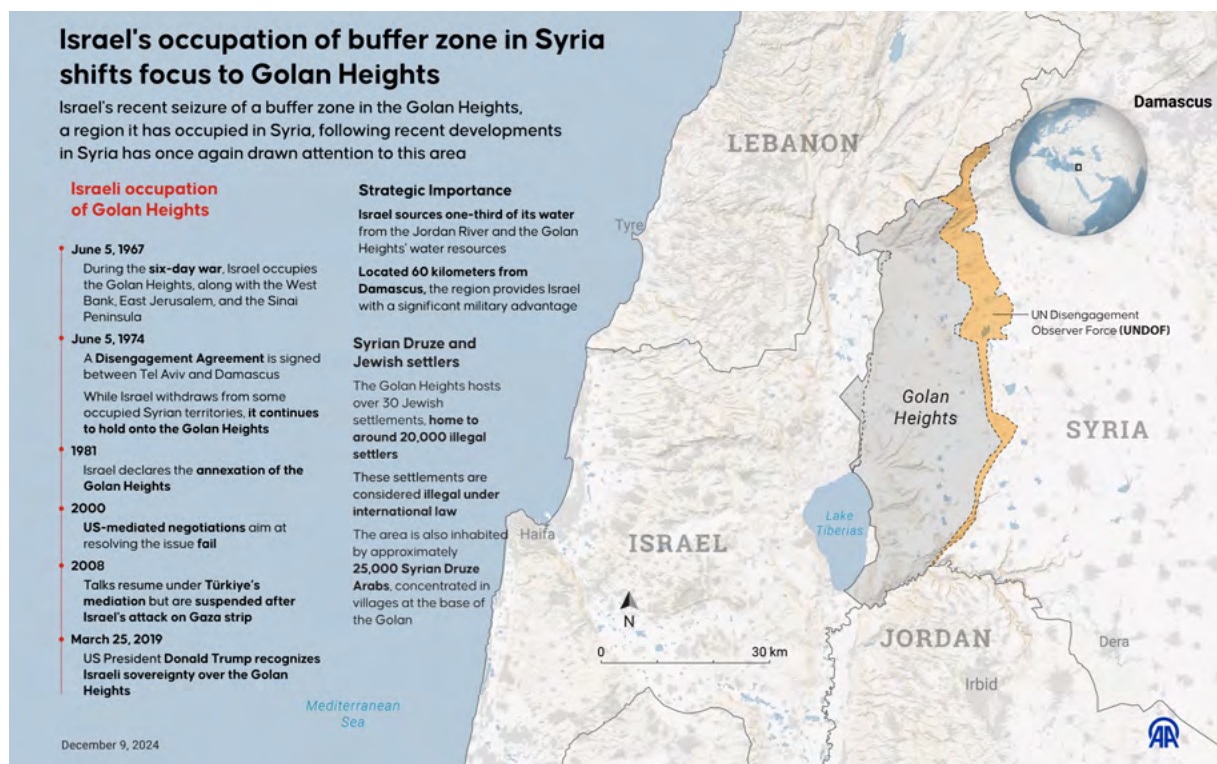
gated disinformation operations, circulating old videos claiming that an Alawite shrine located in the Hanano military base was desecrated. This perception management operation triggered protests in several areas and clashes with anti-riot forces. On the long run, though, destabilising actions like these are likely to backfire as the Syrian people suffered for decades from the yoke of Assad and its Iranian allies.

The resilience of the upcoming government in Damascus against sectarian divisions and potential chaos is paramount. While several states appear positive about the new era, Iran's attempts to undermine the opposition's success will be perceived as disruptive and chaotic, fostering unity both within Syrian society and across the broader region against such interference. This would only deepen popular antipathy toward the Iranian regime and its efforts to export revolutionary values, further isolating Iran.

In conclusion, Iran's strategic posture will hinge on the characteristics of the emerging Syrian governance framework. The absence of a regime to safeguard Tehran's regional interests and reassessments of its proxy network's vulnerabilities presents an opportunity for a more diplomatically integrated approach. Developments in Syria's political transition will largely dictate the trajectory of this shift.

## Israel

The fall of the Assad regime has highlighted Israel's expansionist policies within the context of the new regional realignment. While the regime's collapse has created opportunities for Israel to further its objectives, Tel Aviv's ex-



pansionist ambitions are part of a broader, long-standing strategic goal that extends beyond Assad's downfall.

In the wake of the Syrian opposition's victory on December 8, Israel began to make two major moves in Syria. The first involved precision airstrikes on critical regime-held military assets, [reportedly destroying](#) approximately 80% of the equipment. Among the targeted assets were fighter jets, helicopters, Scud missiles, UAVs, cruise missiles, and various surface-to-air, surface-to-sea, and surface-to-surface missile systems, alongside radars and rockets. Israel justified this pre-emptive operation as a measure to prevent advanced weaponry from falling into the hands of terrorist groups amid the perceived "power vacuum" in Syria.

The second initiative centred on extending Israel's territorial and settlement activities into the Golan Heights and adjacent Syrian territories. Israel formally annexed the approximately 1,200 square kilometres of the Golan Heights it occupies under the 1974 Disengagement Agreement and deployed troops to seize the area. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu argued that the 1974 agreement—which established a 75-kilometre demilitarised buffer zone between Israeli- and Syrian-controlled territories—has been rendered obsolete in the absence of a functioning Syrian government. Consequently, Israel [declared](#) its control over the buffer zone until the end of 2025.

Israeli expansionism, however, is not confined to the UN-supervised buffer zone. Military outposts have been established in the Quneitra and Daraa provinces, reflecting a [broader territorial strategy](#) bolstered by aggressive settlement policies. On December 15, the Israeli cabinet [approved](#) an \$11 million settlement funding package, with Prime Minister Netanyahu announcing plans to double the population in these areas.

Particularly in the Golan Heights, Israel's settlement activities have historically marginalised the local Druze community of approximately 20,000 people, subjecting them to forced displacement and [various oppressive measures](#) such as systematic discrimination. The current period marks a turning point in the visibility of Israel's expansionist policies, laying bare the long-standing aims that have shaped its actions in the region. Therefore, Israel's expansionist posture must be understood as part of its enduring strategic objectives rather than a choice or reaction solely to the Assad regime's fall. Over the past 13 years, Israel has conducted numerous airstrikes on Syrian territory, citing the presence of terrorist groups like Hezbollah and border security concerns as justification.

The ability to forecast Israel's expansionist posture with greater precision will depend on the extent to which the structure and operation of the new government under Al-Sharaa becomes much clearer and diplomatic relations gain a defined trajectory. At this stage, the security concerns cited by Israel to justify its actions are dismissed as unwarranted by officials within the emerging Syrian government. Should Israel persist in its expansionist agenda,

as exemplified by the unilateral recognition of its annexation decision under the first Trump administration in 2019, its notorious destabilising influence in the region will become increasingly evident. Such actions would constitute an occupation of the sovereign territory of a formally recognised Syrian state, contravening international norms and inviting renewed condemnation from the United Nations and the broader international community, as has been the case historically.

## Russia

Russia's regional posture faces a critical inflexion point in the wake of Assad's regime collapse, marking the loss of one of Moscow's foremost allies and strategic partners. Since 2011, Russia has been the principal backer of the Assad regime, with its military intervention in 2015 cementing its influence. The naval base at Tartus and the Hmeimim airbase were pivotal logistical and operational assets for projecting Russian power in the region and Africa. However, Assad's downfall has tilted the strategic equation for Moscow.

It must be stated that Russia's military priorities were constrained by its protracted war in Ukraine. This shift led to a [reduction](#) in military sites in Syria, from 132 in 2023 to 105, with a modest recovery to 114 by this year. Similarly, Moscow [relocated](#) its S-300 air defence systems from Masyaf, Syria, to the Russian port city Novorossiysk in August 2022, signalling its recalibration of military assets.

Ankara and the new leadership in Damascus were keen to prevent the Kremlin from losing face following the unexpected collapse of the Assad regime. Russia's military bases in Syria, especially in Tartous and Hmeimim, remained intact and were not attacked, which allowed President Putin to assert that Russia had not been defeated in Syria. Instead, the Russian president hinted at the lack of commitment and readiness of the regime's forces and their Iranian allies. Despite some early critical statements by [Obeida Arnaout](#), spokesperson for the HTS-led administration, who signalled some turbulence ahead: "I think that Russia should reconsider its presence on Syrian territory as well as its interests," Putin [stated](#), "we maintain relations with all the groups that control the situation there." In fact, President Vladimir Putin has [framed](#) Russia's military role in Syria as a success against terrorism, clarifying that Moscow has achieved its key objectives.

It is noteworthy that Putin still holds several advantages, including Assad's presence in Moscow and billions of dollars seized from Syria in Russian banks. This keeps the door open for Russia to play a role in Syria's post-Assad future. However, the Kremlin focuses on stabilising its position and mitigating risks while prioritising broader strategic interests. For Moscow, losing all presence after decades of investment would have been an even more significant setback.

While Russian officials assert their intent to maintain dialogue with Syria's transitional government, Moscow seemed to adapt to new political realities. Its reliance on the Tartus naval base and the Hmeimim airbase for strategic operations continues but in a different, albeit more subdued, way. There is speculation that the new Syrian government might leverage the continued presence of Russian bases as a negotiating tool, potentially exchanging [diplomatic recognition](#) or clarifying lease terms and usage conditions for their operation by Russian forces. Such a move could serve as evidence that Syria's new administration, under the leadership of Ahmed al-Sharaa, is neither radical nor isolated but instead advocates for openness in foreign policy and avoids revisiting past grievances in a retaliatory manner. In a recent BBC interview, the new leader of the transitional government, Ahmed al-Sharaa, pointed out that the shape of bilateral relations between Syria and Russia will determine the course of Russian bases in a way that they do not pose a threat to Syrian national interest, signalling a win-win formula could be found.

Under Assad, Russian military presence in Syria was legitimised through the [2017 lease agreement](#), granting Moscow free access to these facilities for 49 years and even full impunity, which means Russian troops could not be sued for their war crimes against the Syrian civil population. As the new government takes office in March 2025, how it will address this agreement remains to be seen. Potential scenarios include renegotiating the lease with revised terms, continuing operations under stricter conditions, or opting for a complete withdrawal of Russian forces.

The ongoing withdrawal of Russian personnel and equipment since December 8 underscores a clear shift in priorities. Recent [satellite imagery from Maxar](#) indicates a surge in cargo flights to Libya's Benghazi Airport and al-Khadim Airbase, transferring approximately 1,000 personnel and associated military hardware. These endeavours are designed to strengthen the operational capabilities of Haftar-aligned forces in Libya, offering logistical support to the Africa Corps mercenaries, as well as to the Sudanese secessionist group, the Rapid Support Forces (RSF). This redeployment reflects Russia's constrained strategic options, given its restricted Black Sea access due to the Montreux Convention and its commitment to sustaining its influence through Haftar, its closest regional ally.

These developments, however, heighten the risk of renewed hostilities between the Libyan National Army (LNA) and the Government of National Unity (GNU) under Prime Minister Abdul Hamid Dbeibah. The GNU has vocally opposed any Russian military presence, with PM Dbeibah strongly [denouncing](#) new Russian transfers from Syria to Libyan territories.

Should the new government pursue the latter, Russia may accelerate its ongoing relocation of assets to Libya, a process that currently accounts for 10% of its military equipment. Whether the remaining forces and resources at Tar-

tus and Hmeimim are fully transferred to Libyan territories, such as the [al-Khadim airbase](#), will depend on the unfolding dynamics of Syrian-Russian relations.

The recent dynamics carry broader implications for Moscow's strategic footprint in the Middle East and Eastern Mediterranean. In any case, Russia must redefine its engagement with Syria, aligning itself with the emerging government and recalibrating its regional strategy accordingly.

## Rebuilding the New Syrian State

The most prominent topic in the wake of the regime's defeat is the structure and functionality of the new Syrian government. Rebuilding a state that can regain full operational capacity across institutions is a complex and demanding task for any nation emerging from revolutionary upheaval. This challenge is magnified in a country like Syria, where a diverse socio-political mosaic includes Sunni, Kurdish, Alawite, Turkmen, Druze, Ismaili, Shia, and Christian communities.

Optimism prevails among these groups, many of whom have expressed satisfaction with the respect shown toward them by the HTS-led opposition during the conflict. Core demands include mutual respect, equitable representation, and justice for crimes committed under the Assad regime, which many view as a source of collective trauma.

The leader of Syria's new administration, Ahmed al-Sharaa, and other transitional government officials have outlined their vision of an inclusive governance model, emphasising that the Syrian people will be the sole source of authority. Interim Prime Minister Mohammed al-Bashir, leading the Salvation Government until March 2025, has initiated [consultations](#) with members of the former government and Idlib's administration to draft a constitution. This inclusive approach also involves assurances of minority and sectarian rights. The success of this governance model is critical for two interconnected reasons. Avoiding unrest in the aftermath of the opposition's victory would demonstrate public consent and grant legitimacy to the new regime, while a stable and unified governance structure could pave the way for diplomatic recognition and reintegration into the international community. In a significant policy statement following his meeting with Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan, the leader of Syria's new administration Ahmed al-Sharaa [declared](#) that all weapons would fall under the central government's control. This positions the emerging Syrian state as a unitary entity, contrary to federalist aspirations held by some groups. As the opposition successfully united various factions during the conflict, the political challenge now is to translate that unity into a democratic governance model with multiparty representation while firmly opposing separatist movements that threaten territorial integrity.

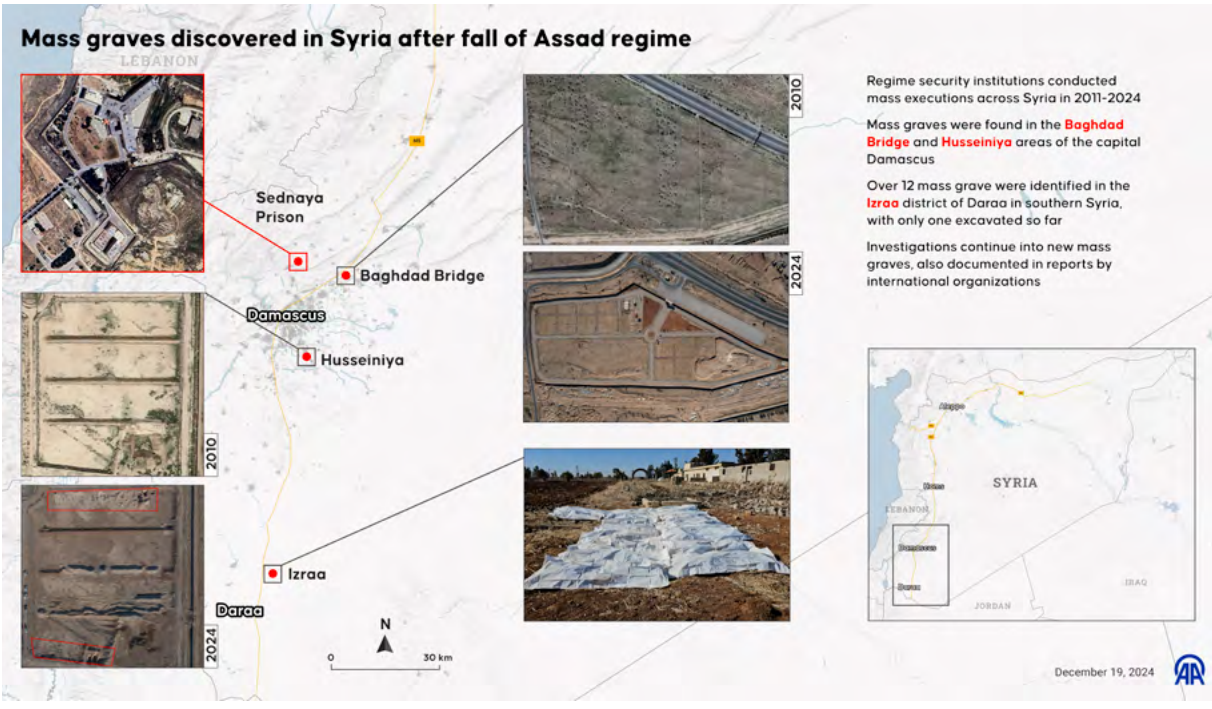
**POLICY OUTLOOK**

Transitional justice in post-Assad Syria must balance accountability for war crimes with fostering national reconciliation to rebuild trust among its diverse population. This multifaceted approach begins with the establishment of a Syrian-led Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), modelled after successful frameworks in countries like South Africa. Such a commission would aim to document atrocities, give victims a platform to share their experiences and recommend reparations. Coupled with this, specialised domestic courts could address high-profile cases of war crimes, ensuring that perpetrators from all sides of the conflict are held accountable. These courts must operate transparently and independently to gain the public's trust and prevent perceptions of victor's justice. Political reconciliation will also require integrating opposition leaders, civil society actors, and representatives from minority groups into the decision-making process, creating an inclusive national dialogue to shape the country's future. This dual focus on legal redress and reconciliation aims to heal the societal fractures caused by over a decade of violence.

The drafting of the constitution will also determine the legal framework for accountability, potentially in collaboration with international mechanisms such as the International Criminal Court (ICC) or ad hoc tribunals. Yet significant challenges loom in this regard. Many key regime figures, including members of the [Assad family](#), have fled abroad, necessitating diplomatic engagement with host countries to facilitate extraditions. Furthermore, Syria is not a signatory to the Rome Statute, limiting the ICC's reach. While the UN Security Council could refer the matter to the ICC, previous efforts in 2014 were [vetoed by Russia and China](#). According to the [Syrian Network for Human Rights](#), 16,200 individuals are implicated in war crimes,

including 6,724 from the former regime and 9,476 associated with allied militias. While Sednaya prison's atrocities and the discovery of mass graves underscore the urgency of justice, achieving it requires a comprehensive strategy. The current veto structure within the UN Security Council remains a formidable obstacle to establishing post-conflict accountability. However, some alternative pathways to transitional justice can be developed. For instance, the United Nations could establish an ad hoc tribunal with a specific mandate to prosecute atrocities committed during the Assad regime. Additionally, hybrid courts combining Syrian and international judges could offer a localised yet globally credible means of delivering justice. Beyond legal mechanisms, international support is vital in funding reparations programs, psychosocial rehabilitation services for victims, and capacity-building initiatives for Syria's judicial institutions. Civil society organisations and diaspora networks can play a significant role in documenting evidence, advocating for victims, and providing grassroots support for reconciliation efforts. Together, these measures aim to ensure justice is not only punitive but restorative, addressing the Syrian people's demands for dignity, accountability, and a collective path forward.

The success of Syria's transitional government will hinge on its ability to address these multifaceted challenges. Establishing inclusive governance, rebuilding state institutions, and ensuring justice for past crimes will not only determine domestic stability but also shape Syria's position on the global stage. The international community's support will be indispensable in this endeavour, particularly in facilitating transitional justice and mitigating the impact of structural barriers in the dysfunctional international system.



## Expert Views

### **What steps are necessary for the international recognition of the opposition-led Syrian administration under Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), and how might this recognition impact Türkiye's counterterrorism strategy and regional influence?**

The international community must formally recognise the opposition-led Syrian administration under HTS (Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham) under international law. This is the priority. How can this happen? First, HTS must be removed from the list of terrorist organisations by several countries, including Türkiye. Positive steps have been taken in this regard. For instance, the United States cancelled the \$10 million bounty it had placed on Ahmed al-Sharaa (formerly known as al-Jolani). U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken stated that they would engage with Syria's new administration, and Ahmed al-Sharaa himself mentioned his intention to establish contact with the United Kingdom. Other Western leaders and foreign ministers have also conveyed positive messages.

De facto, there is already support for Syria's new administration, but this needs to be formalised within the legal framework. Türkiye has discreetly indicated its position by sending a chargé d'affaires-level representative to the region, which can be interpreted as a step toward recognition. Thus, either, countries will remove HTS from their terrorist lists, or HTS will morph into another entity– the latter being a more likely scenario, in my opinion. Subsequently, the United Nations should recognise the new Syrian government led by Ahmed al-Sharaa. Türkiye will provide diplomatic support in this process. I believe this process will be completed by around March, and the West shares this perspective.

Once a legitimate government is established, steps can be taken to address counterterrorism. For example, an agreement similar to the 1999 Adana Accord with the Assad regime could be reached, allowing Türkiye to conduct military interventions or maintain military bases in Syria to counter terrorist organisations operating there. With the establishment of a new government, Ahmed al-Sharaa has stated that all armed groups should disarm. Türkiye, the U.S., and Russia already have military forces in the region; while Russia has pulled back to the coastal side, its presence remains. These forces must align their presence with international law and the new government's legal framework. I believe Türkiye might pursue such an agreement. Consequently, Türkiye would be able to adopt more effective legal measures against the PKK/PYD under this framework.

**Ali Burak Darıçılı**, Associate Professor of International Relations at Bursa Technical University

### **How might Iran adapt its strategy in a post-Assad Syria, considering the reversal of its fortune in Syria, from a main backer of the regime to a pariah state despised by the majority?**

In my opinion, Iran will focus on its nation-state priorities, such as keeping the integrity of its territories, its population state and security, and not spreading its power to other geographies that would further weaken its economy. More importantly, the regime in Iran is under a serious threat. This is the main threat perception of the Tehran government as far as I understand the Trump government will suppress the regime and Israel will target further Iranian nuclear sites. Despite Iranian President Pezeshkian's moderate attitude, Israel will not reconcile with the Tehran government. The United States, for now, pumps the idea that the Iranian people are under the suppression of the regime and therefore there should be a deep-rooted change in Iran.

**Professor Özden Zeynep Oktav**, Chair of International Relations Department at İstanbul Medeniyet University

**What role could the Saudis and Qataris play in Syria's post-conflict environment, particularly in terms of financial investment, political influence, and humanitarian aid, given their historical stance towards the Assad regime and current geopolitical dynamics?**

Both Saudi Arabia and Qatar, for sure, will play significant roles in the post-Assad era, albeit in different capacities. As an ideologically close state to the new administration, Qatar has the upper hand among the Arab states, as Doha never normalized relations with the Assad regime. Moreover, as Qatar played a significant role in funding the opposition throughout the 14-year civil war, they have good networks and leverage over many of the new Syrian groups that will rule the country. On top of these, Qatar recently played a mediation role between non-state actors or actors that soon became the state and the Western world. Therefore, economic, political, diplomatic, ideological, and even personal reasons indicate that Qatar will have a significant role in the reconstruction of Syria. Qatar has accumulated this at the top of the Syrian network by hiring Syrian intellectuals at different levels and in various institutions. On the other hand, Saudi Arabia is not baggage-free like Qatar in terms of its involvement with the opposition. While Saudi Arabia also severed its relations with Assad for almost a decade, it has recently made a rapprochement with Assad and played a significant role in bringing Assad back to the Arab League. One other challenge for Saudi Arabia compared to Qatar will be the ideological fear of Saudi fears of Islamist-inspired revolution. However, what is shared between both nations is that both Saudi Arabia and Qatar will attempt to be significant powers in the reconstruction of Syria, not only economically but also politically. As this is a timely opportunity for Saudi Arabia to detach Syria from Iranian influence, recognition and cooperation are expected.

**Hamdullah Baycar**, Assistant Professor at Karadeniz Technical University

## Conclusion

On November 27, an opposition offensive that began in Idlib and culminated in Damascus on December 8 led to the overthrow of the Assad regime. Although this rapid progression spanned less than two weeks, it culminated in sustained organisational planning, strategic manoeuvres, and shifts in the geopolitical landscape that had been evolving since 2016. The weakening of Russia due to its prolonged war in Ukraine, the significant setbacks Iran faced in its regional influence as Hezbollah sustained serious losses in clashes with Israel, and the superior organisational capacity of the opposition forces collectively paved the way for this outcome. This pivotal victory marks a critical juncture for Syria's internal future and the broader regional balance in the Middle East.

Post-Assad Syria presents many implications for the new Syrian state and the geopolitical trajectory of the region. Türkiye's influence has grown more prominent, while Iran faces a recalibration of its regional ambitions amid losses in strategic assets. Russia's global power projection has suffered a significant blow, highlighting a notable loss of prestige. Meanwhile, Israel's characteristic defiance of international norms continues with its expansionism and settlement policies.

The transitional government, set to govern until March 2025, is tasked with creating a democratic, inclusive, and equitable governance system that addresses the needs of all Syrian communities. This government must also meet popular demands for justice by holding accountable those responsible for war crimes during the previous regime. The structure and policies of this new administration will be critical not only for the reconstruction of Syria but also for clarifying regional uncertainties and shaping the future strategic outlook of the Middle East.



(Kasım Rammah - Anadolu Agency)