

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. Here are three expert views on the post-Assad era with a particular focus on key issues such as international recognition, regional realignment, and the prospects of rebuilding a new state.

Question 1

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 Darıcılı, Associate Professor of International Relations at Bursa Technical University

Question 2

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

Question 3

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.

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