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The Evolution of Power and Governance in Syria: from Hafez al-Assad to Bashar al-Assad to Ahmed al-Sharaa

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Brief Historical Background

The history of Syria as a state spans at least six millennia; historically, it is one of the world's most ancient centers of civilization. It was once a hub of trade routes connecting Asia, the Mediterranean, and the Persian Gulf. It has been a key player in Arab nationalism, especially during the mid-20th century. Syria occupies a central place in Middle Eastern geopolitics due to its strategic location, history, and regional alliances. Geographically, it sits at the crossroads of the Levant, bordering Israel, Lebanon, Turkey, Iraq, and Jordan — a position that has made it a focal point of both cooperation and conflict.[1]

Over the course of its long history, Syria came under the rule of many powers: the Akkadians, Hyksos, Hittites, Arameans, Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, Macedonians, Seleucids, Romans, Byzantines, Crusaders, Mamluks, Turks, and French. The last in this long — and likely incomplete — list of conquerors were the Turks and the French. Ottoman rule, beginning with Sultan Selim I, lasted four centuries until 1918[2], when Damascus briefly came under Arab control led by Faisal ibn Hussein — the first and only King of Syria, as well as the founder of the Kingdom of neighboring Iraq (1921–1933).

In 1920, at the San Remo Conference a session of the Supreme Council of the Entente powers (without Russia) and their allied states — France was granted the mandate to administer Syria[3]. This mandate was formally confirmed by the League of Nations only three years later, on 29 September 1923. Yet, even prior to the League's formal confirmation, France asserted control over the territory following the Battle of Maysaloon in July 1920, where Minister of War Yusuf al-Azma led a small, under-equipped Syrian force against the advancing French army. Although the Syrians were ultimately defeated, the battle stands as a defining moment in Syrian national memory, symbolizing resistance, sacrifice, and the emerging struggle for sovereignty. The French divided Syria into several statelets along ethnic and sectarian lines, a policy that sowed the seeds of future instability and conflict. The mandate period also saw the rise of nationalist movements and repeated revolts against French authority.[4] The long-awaited independence of Syria was proclaimed on 27 September 1941. The mandate officially ended in 1946, when Syria achieved full independence following the final withdrawal of French troops from its territory.[5]

The following decades were marked by instability and frequent power struggles. The young republic experienced a series of military coups, reflecting deep divisions among political factions, the army, and society. In the 1950s, Syria gravitated toward Arab nationalism and socialism, aligning closely with the Soviet Union. In 1958, it merged with Egypt under President Gamal Abdel Nasser to form the United Arab Republic, but the union collapsed in 1961 after a military coup restored Syria's independence. In 1963, the Ba'ath Party rose to power, promoting Arab unity, socialist reforms, and a stronger central state. However, internal rivalries within the Ba'ath leadership continued to destabilize the country, which will be further elaborated in the next session.

[1] B. White. "Refugees and the Definition of Syria, 1920–1939." Past & Present, 235 (2017): 141-178.
[2] M. Tofan. "Main stages of state-legal development of Syria during the period of Ottoman domination and the French protectorate." Juridical Journal of Samara University (2024).
[3] Abid A. Al-Marayati. "THE QUESTION OF SYRIA AND LEBANON BEFORE THE UNITED NATIONS." (2016).
[4] A. T. Fildiş. "France's Imperial Ambitions and The Establishment of the French Mandate in Syria." , 3 (2018)
[5] B. Turner. "Syria: Jumhuriya al-Arabya as-Suriya (Syrian Arab Republic)." (1999): 1503-1508.

Presidency of Hafez al-Assad (1970-2000)

Hafez al-Assad rose through the ranks of the armed forces. His first attempt was unsuccessful. In 1963, the Ba'ath Party — of which he was a member — came to power, and Assad was appointed head of the air force. Three years later, he supported General Salah Jadid, who assumed leadership of Syria, while Assad himself became Minister of Defense. Finally, in 1970, Assad staged a bloodless coup against his former ally. Jadid remained in custody until his death in 1993, while Assad went on to rule Syria, laying the foundation for decades of Assad family rule.

Since the independence of Syria, the country started experiencing some kind of political stability prior to the rise of the Assad family. During the period until 1970, democratic institutions were formally established, and the press as well as political parties with diverse ideologies competed with one another. Yet this same democracy also generated chaos and frequent military coups that undermined the political system.

The ascent of Hafez al-Assad marked the beginning of a new era in every sense. He broke with the traditional image of a distant, detached president. Following the announcement of his victory, Assad embarked on a tour across the country, meeting directly with citizens. Upon returning to Damascus, he instructed his staff to sort through and analyze the sacks of complaints and petitions collected during the tour. Every action and speech was carefully designed to cultivate the image of a democratic, just, and approachable leader.[6] While Syrian society under Hafez al-Assad was officially secular and state ideology emphasized Arab nationalism over sectarian identity, many observers note that the regime built networks of loyalists, including key figures from Alawite communities, particularly within security and military structures.

Another defining trait of Assad's leadership was pragmatism, which permeated all aspects of his governance. Despite his long and close partnership with the Soviet Union, he did not attempt to replicate socialism in Syria, but rather adopted selected elements of it. At the same time, he could not be considered a proponent of capitalism either, as his economic reforms avoided wholesale privatization of state enterprises. He clearly understood that Syria could not transform into a modern, advanced economy within a short timeframe. By the late 1980s, as the decline of the Soviet Union became evident, Damascus shifted toward strengthening ties with Iran. This move caused unease among Sunni-dominated states in the Middle East, yet Assad pressed ahead, emphasizing the doctrinal proximity of Alawism and Shi'ism. This rapprochement with Iran translated into open Syrian support for Hezbollah[7] in Lebanon, which was a resistant movement. Syria also supported the Palestinian resistant movements.

Although Hafez al-Assad's domestic policies faced criticism and generated tension among segments of the population — including parts of the Sunni urban elite — attributing this solely to sectarian governance oversimplifies the situation. Syria's internal economic difficulties in the 1980s were shaped not only by structural governance challenges but also by external pressures, including a prolonged Western embargo and the financial burden of military engagement in Lebanon and continued confrontation with Israel.

Before Assad's presidency, Israel had occupied the Golan Heights. Yet during the 1973 Arab–Israeli War, Assad succeeded in reclaiming part of the territory.

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[6] S. N. Kulueva, «The Political Portrait of Damascus Lion. Syria's President Hafez Assad», available at https://cyberleninka.ru/article/n/politicheskii-portret-damasskogo-lva-prezident-sirii-hafez-asad

[7] Hezbollah is a Shi'ia group created in Lebanon mainly mobilizing itself for the right of Palestinians and against the Zionist occupation.

When comparing the Syria that emerged from the dismemberment of the post-Ottoman Middle East with the one reshaped under Hafez al-Assad's leadership, the transformation is evident. Supporters argue that he preserved stability and relative peace in a multiethnic, multiconfessional country situated in one of the world's most volatile regions. Critics, however, emphasize that this stability came at the cost of authoritarian rule, suppression of dissent, and limited political freedoms. His legacy therefore remains deeply contested—seen by some as the work of a stabilizer and nation-builder, and by others as that of a dictator who entrenched a repressive system.

He initially considered his brother Rifat to be his successor, but during his illness, his brother tried to take power into his own hands, therefore, it created a conflict within the family. It is also worth noting, that the eldest son Basil died in a car accident, so the youngest son Bashar became the successor. He earned a medical degree and initially planned to pursue a career in ophthalmology. However, when his brother died, he had to interrupt his residency in London to return to Syria, where he later enrolled in a military academy.

Bashar al-Assad presidency (2000 - 2024)

On June 10, 2000 the People's Council (Parliament) adopted an amendment to the Constitution, according to which the age limit for presidential candidates was lowered from 40 to 34 years. This allowed Bashar al-Assad to become the new president for a seven-year term. His education abroad and reputation for open-mindedness made him highly appealing to society, ultimately contributing to his re-election for a second term on May 27, 2007.

The early years of Assad's presidency were marked by several reforms. Independent newspapers were allowed to operate, non-governmental universities were established, and private banks and a stock market were introduced. Despite these measures, conservative political forces constrained him from significantly liberalizing the authoritarian system inherited from his father. In foreign policy, Assad maintained a hard line on the Israeli-Syrian conflict, repeatedly demanding the return of the Golan Heights.

On the eve of the 2011 uprising, Syria was often perceived as politically stable and economically improving compared to the turmoil that followed. However, the system also contained unresolved socioeconomic and governance challenges that would later shape the trajectory of the conflict. Corruption, lack of systemic reforms, and the dominance of family ties in government structures, especially in the army and special services — had long existed in Syria, but the Arab Spring made these problems impossible to ignore. As society's attention increasingly turned to these issues, the belated and partial measures introduced by Bashar al-Assad proved insufficient to address the deep-rooted structural challenges.

On March 15, 2011, following the wave of protests in neighboring countries during the Arab Spring, major unrest erupted in cities including Deraa, Damascus, and Aleppo. Protesters called for democratic reforms and the release of political prisoners. The demonstrations were initially triggered by the arrest and alleged torture of a group of teenage boys in Deraa who had painted graffiti criticizing the regime. The government responded with a violent crackdown, which led to widespread repression. Even the new constitution and some reforms that affected the legislative, administrative and political areas seemed insufficient to many Syrian citizens, especially against the background of the revolutionary changes in other Arab countries.

Thus, the reasons for the expansion of the protest potential were the belated and superficial nature of the reforms, as well as drastic political changes in neighboring countries. Unrest soon spread throughout Syria, and calls for the overthrow of the president were added to the old "anti-corruption"

slogans. The Ba'ath party preferred the traditional, forceful method of suppressing discontent. And with this he further aggravated the crisis. This is the end of the peaceful "spring" demonstrations, and Syria has plunged into civil war. Since July 2011 it quickly covered almost the entire territory of the country.

Under this framework, the country held its first alternative elections on June 3, 2014. Bashar al-Assad won 88% of the vote, officially beginning his third term; however, according to the new constitution, this was considered his first term under the revised rules. The elections were widely criticized by the United States and European Union countries as illegitimate and undemocratic.

Fragmentation of Syria

The Syrian conflict involved a wide array of non-state actors, each backed by different regional and global powers. Over time, Syria fragmented into zones of influence, with cities and provinces falling under competing authorities.

1. The Assad Regime and Allies

Bashar al-Assad's government retained control over Damascus, the capital, and gradually consolidated its hold over other major urban centers such as Aleppo (west), Homs, Hama, Latakia, and Tartus. The rise of the Islamic extremist group ISIS further intensified the gravity of the conflict. By occupying vast territories across Iraq and Syria and declaring a self-proclaimed caliphate, ISIS transformed the civil war into one of the bloodiest and most destabilizing crises in the region. Confronted with this existential threat, Damascus formally invited Iran and its allied forces to intervene and assist in combating Daesh. Russia provided decisive military support from 2015 onward, through airstrikes, weapons, and diplomatic cover. Iran deployed Revolutionary Guards and organized foreign Shia militias. Both countries were present at the request of the Syrian government. It's worth mentioning that Ali Akbar Velayati, the head of the Strategic Research Center of Iran's Expediency Council, former foreign minister, also said in an interview with Mehr news agency on 14 February, 2018, that Iran is in Syria legitimately and based on the invitation of the Syrian government. He continued, «those who have to leave Syria are the ones who have not been permitted by the Syrian government».[8] Hezbollah also played a crucial ground role, particularly in battles near the Lebanese border.

2. Free Syrian Army

Initially represented by the Free Syrian Army and later political bodies like the Syrian National Council and Syrian National Coalition, the opposition controlled wide stretches of territory during the early years, especially in Idlib Province, rural Aleppo, Daraa, and parts of Homs. They received varying degrees of support from: Turkey (training, arms, sanctuary); United States, EU states, and Gulf monarchies (financial and limited military aid).

3. Islamic Extremist and Jihadist Groups

- **Jabhat al-Nusra (later Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, HTS)** created by Abu Mohammed al Joulani, current interim president of Syria, adhered to the global jihadist ideology of Al-Qaeda. It gained dominance in Idlib Province, establishing quasi-governance structures. This terrorist group goal did not quiet end by removing the Assad regime, their main goal was to create a Salafist-oriented Islamic State in Syria, as well as create an Islamic Caliphate across the Levant region.

[8] Mehr News Agency. (2018, February 14). Iran's presence in Syria on Syrians 'invitation.

- **ISIS (Islamic State)** was born out of Al-Qaeda in Iraq, founded in 2004 by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, after his death in 2006, AQI rebranded itself as the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI). In 2011, amid the Syrian civil war, it expanded into Syria, becoming ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham/Levant) under Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. ISIS seized vast territories in Raqqa, Deir ez-Zor, eastern Aleppo, and parts of Homs and Hasakah, declaring Raqqa its «capital.» It drew thousands of foreign fighters and revenues from oil fields. Interestingly, in 2016 Donald Trump called President Barack Obama and Democratic rival Hillary Clinton the «co-founders» of ISIS, ratcheting up his assertion that they are responsible for the rise of the militant group and sparking renewed criticism of his leadership ability. Clinton's White House campaign called the remarks a «false claim»[9]. However, it is worth mentioning that back to 2010 in her interview to Fox News, Clinton admitted the US's fault in helping to create the Al Qaeda. «The United States, to be honest, helped create the problem that we are currently fighting. When the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan, we had a brilliant idea <...> about creating Mujahideen forces, arming them with Stringers and whatever else,» she admitted. – And we did it. The Soviets withdrew from Afghanistan. <...> But we left these trained people <...> well armed, creating, frankly, a mess that we did not realize at the time.»[10] «Al-Qaeda is «the result of the activities of our American friends,» it's just that what they were doing "got out of control,» « President Vladimir Putin said in 2017 in an interview with director Oliver Stone in a film shown on Showtime. In an interview with Al-Jazeera on the 31st of May 2016 the former head of Israel's intelligence agency, Efraim Halevy, has stated that the state of Israel did indeed give medical and other humanitarian aid to Al-Qaeda militants and that they would not deny them this aid, He continues by saying: «It is always useful to deal with your enemies in a humane way». One has to note that Al-Qaeda has not been an enemy of Israel but has been fully supported by Israel for its terrorist activities in the Middle East. When Efraim Halevy was asked if they would ever treat Hezbollah fighters medically or offer them any other aid, he said no, as Al-Qaeda has never attacked Israel, and therefore, they have a different account with Al-Qaeda than the one with Hezbollah.»[11]

4. Kurdish Forces

The Kurdish PYD and its armed wing, the YPG, emerged as dominant in northern and northeastern Syria, including Hasakah, Kobane, and later Raqqa after ISIS was driven out. In 2015, they established the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), an umbrella coalition of Kurdish, Arab, and Assyrian fighters. They were backed strongly by the United States (presumably against ISIS), but faced hostility from Turkey, which views the PYD/YPG as linked to the PKK (Kurdistan Workers 'Party).

5. Civil Society and Humanitarian Actors

Amid the chaos, non-military groups played important roles:

- The **White Helmets** also known as Syria Civil Defense, was founded by volunteers in 2013. They were the civilian branch of HTS. They gained international recognition for rescuing civilians in opposition-held areas, especially in Aleppo and Idlib. They received significant funding and support from the United States government. «They have had a "great partnership"

[9] Reuters. "Trump Calls Obama, Clinton Islamic State 'Co-Founders, 'Draws Rebuke." *Reuters.*https://www.reuters.com/article/world/trump-calls-obama-clinton-islamic-state-co-founders-draws-rebuke-idUSKCN10M1C9/.

[10] *Vedomosti.*" Chashka Petri dlya fashizma." *Vedomosti,* March 27, 2023. https://www.vedomosti.ru/politics/articles/2023/03/27/968189-chashka-petri-dlya-fashizma.

[11] Hind Azby, Amb. Soltanieh, «How Imposed War on Syria Unfolded. Why Syria did Not Collapse? What Next? Holistic Assessment of the Role of Key Players», 2024, VIIMES

with USAID – the organization's largest donor – for nearly 10 years»[12], admits Farouq Habib, the deputy general manager of the organization.

- **Local Coordination Committees (LCCs)** organized protests, aid distribution, and media coverage in early years, before many collapsed under military pressure.

During the military confrontation, by mid-2015, only about 20% of the territory remained under government control. Under these conditions, at the request of President Assad, operations of the Russian Aerospace Forces began in Syria in September 2015. The Syrian army retook about 70% of the country's territory.

Multilateral diplomatic initiative

Due to the changed military situation, Russia, Turkey and Iran, which had influence in Syria (Tehran also provided military assistance to the Syrian government), initiated a new format of negotiations - **the Astana process.** The Astana Process is a series of negotiations launched in January 2017 by Russia, Turkey, and Iran to address the Syrian conflict. It includes Russia, Iran, and Turkey as the guarantor countries of the process, as well as representatives of the Syrian government and opposition, the United Nations, and observer countries USA, Jordan, Iraq, and Lebanon. Astana focused on military de-escalation, establishing ceasefires, and creating «de-escalation zones» to reduce violence and facilitate humanitarian aid. The negotiations have brought tangible results in stabilizing the situation. These were the first negotiations involving both the Syrian Government and the armed opposition.

According to experts, during a series of negotiations in the Astana format, it was possible to significantly reduce tensions in Syria, the level of armed confrontation and direct the development of the situation in a peacemaking direction.[13] By the end of spring 2020, the hot phase of hostilities was completed. Most of the country was controlled by the government. The northwestern province of Idlib remained in the hands of the armed Syrian opposition and terrorists, including from Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, while areas of the eastern bank of the Euphrates River were occupied by Kurdish forces.

From 2017 to 2024, 22 meetings were held within the framework of the Astana format. Within the framework of the XXII International Meeting in the Astana format, held on November 11-12, 2024, the guarantor countries adopted a Joint Statement[14]. Russia, Iran and Turkey noted that the escalation of violence in the Middle East negatively affects the situation in Syria, and called for the development of response measures for Lebanese refugees in Syria. The countries reaffirmed their commitment to the sovereignty, independence, unity and territorial integrity of Syria, and stressed that these principles are subject to universal observance and respect. It was stated the importance of continuing efforts to restore relations between Syria and Turkey, multilateral cooperation to combat terrorism, as well as assistance in resolving issues through political means rather than military means.

The XXIII International Meeting on Syria in Astana was scheduled for the first half of 2025. The last time the foreign ministers of Turkey, Iran, and Russia met was in Doha, on 7 December, 2024 along with ministers of Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Iraq, Jordan and Egypt. They issued a joint statement warning

[12] CNN. "Trump Administration Terminates Syria White Helmets Funding." *CNN,* March 27, 2025. https://edition.cnn.com/2025/03/27/politics/trump-admin-terminates-syria-white-helmets-funding

[13] *Informburo.*" Astaninskii format: Dlya chego on nuzen i naskol'ko seichas aktualen." *Informburo.*https://informburo.kz/stati/astaninskii-format-dlya-cego-on-nuzen-i-naskolko-seicas-aktualen

[14] Joint Statement by Representatives of Iran, Russia and Türkiye on Outcomes of the 22nd International Meeting on Syria in the Astana Format, Astana, 11-12 November 2024, available at - https://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/1981205/?lang=en

about the threat the Syria crisis posed to regional security, as rebels threatened Bashar al-Assad's rule from north and south. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov emphasized that the Islamist insurgent group Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham in Syria is a terrorist group. He called for dialogue between the Syrian government and the «legitimate opposition», urged an immediate end to hostile activities in Syria, and added that Russia is doing all it can to prevent terrorists from prevailing in the country.[15]

The end of Bashar al-Assad's rule

In July 2020 and July 2024, parliamentary elections were held in the country, as a result of which twice more than 180 out of 250 seats went to the pro-government National Unity bloc led by Bashar al-Assad. In the next presidential election in 2021, Bashar al-Assad was re-elected for a fourth term with 95% of the vote.

After the end of the hot phase of the conflict, the political dialogue between the Syrian leadership, led by Bashar al-Assad, and the opposition did not lead to political changes. Assad refused to carry out political reforms. Additionally, attempts have not been made to integrate other political forces into the governance system and form an inclusive Government. The socio-economic situation in Syria, despite the cessation of active hostilities, continued to be difficult. This was facilitated, among other things, by the sanctions imposed by the United States and European countries. According to the UNDP report 2024 nine out of ten Syrians lived in poverty and faced food insecurity.[16]

While some view Bashar al-Assad as a resilient leader who maintained the unity of the Syrian state amid regional turmoil and external pressures, others argue that his leadership has come at an immense human cost.

At the end of November 2024, the rebels launched an offensive against the Syrian government forces. In less than two weeks, the country's largest cities came under their control, and on the night of December 8 they captured Damascus and overthrew the government of President Bashar al-Assad. The HTS militants seized the public radio and television building and made the following announcement: «The city of Damascus has been liberated. The tyrant Bashar al-Assad has been overthrown. All prisoners have been released from Damascus prison.»[17]

Later, the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced that Assad had decided to step down from the presidency and leave the country. It was soon revealed that he had been granted asylum in Russia.[18]

Many observers today question why Iran and Russia did not come to Assad's aid. The answer perhaps lies in the aftermath of the rebels 'actions and the subsequent statements from officials in both countries.

In Damascus, rebels stormed the Iranian Embassy, leaving behind scenes of destruction—smashed furniture, scattered papers, and torn portraits of Hassan Nasrallah and Qassem Soleimani, the slain

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[15] *Iran International. Turkey, Iran, Russia, five Arab states warn of threat posed by Syria crisis. Available at* - https://www.iranintl.com/en/202412070946

[16] United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). *Syria SEIA Final Report.* February 2025. https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/2025-02/undp-sy-seia-final_0.pdf

[17] *Al Jazeera.*" Syria War Live News: Govt Says President al-Assad Has Not Fled Damascus." *Al Jazeera,* December 7, 2024. https://www.aljazeera.com/news/liveblog/2024/12/7/syria-war-live-news-govt-says-president-al-assad-has-not-fled-damascus.

[18] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. Telegram post. https://t.me/MID_Russia/49342

commander of the Quds Force of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps[19]. By that time, Iran had already evacuated its diplomats and military personnel from Syria. Explaining Tehran's position, Mehdi Rahmati, a prominent Iranian government analyst who advises on regional strategy, stated:

"Iran is withdrawing its troops and military personnel because we cannot fight as advisory and auxiliary forces if the Syrian army does not want to fight on its own."

This highlights the limitations of Iran's role: while willing to provide support, Tehran was neither prepared nor able to shoulder the conflict without the active participation of Syrian Army.

Russia, Assad's other major ally, likewise showed restraint. The rapid collapse of the Syrian regime underscored Moscow's overwhelming focus on the war in Ukraine, a conflict that has absorbed nearly all of Vladimir Putin's political and military attention. Russia initially downplayed the crisis, with its embassy in Damascus insisting that staff were «working normally». Yet official rhetoric soon hardened. Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov denounced the opposition's victory as a «carefully planned operation from abroad», accusing the United States and its allies of «creating chaos and disorder, then fishing in muddy waters». «We are very much sorry for the Syrian people who became a subject of another geopolitical experiment. We are absolutely convinced of inadmissibility to use terrorists like Hayat Tahrir al-Sham to achieve geopolitical purposes, as it is being done now with the organization of this offensive from the Idlib de-escalation area»[20],- said Lavrov at the 22th Doha Forum one day before the rebels took Damascus.

Despite this condemnation, Moscow signaled little intention of direct intervention. Konstantin Kosachev, Deputy Speaker of Russia's Federation Council, stressed that Russia would continue to "support the Syrian people if necessary," but also made clear that Syria would now have to manage its descent into civil war largely on its own.

Russian–Syrian relations have recently entered a period of renewed cooperation and optimism. President Vladimir Putin and Syria's new leader met in Moscow during what was intended to be the first-ever Russian–Arab Summit—an event Putin had announced in May, inviting all members of the Arab League. Although the summit was ultimately disrupted after several key guests declined to confirm their attendance, the bilateral meeting between Moscow and Damascus still carried significant symbolic and political weight. During the talks, Putin emphasized the continuity of Russian support for Syria, stating: «Throughout all these decades, we have always been guided by one thing – the interests of the Syrian people. I know that very recently, on October 5, parliamentary elections were held. I believe this is your great success, as it contributes to the consolidation of society. Despite the difficult times Syria is going through, it will strengthen unity and cooperation among all political forces in the country». In response, al-Sharaa expressed gratitude for Moscow's longstanding support: "We rely on many achievements that Russia has helped us reach. It has assisted us in various spheres, and we are connected by strong bridges of cooperation, including material ones. Mr. President, we indeed share deep historical ties linking Russia and Syria. Today, we live in a new day for a new Syria. We are introducing this new Syria to the world, and the world is getting to know it."

[19] *IranWire.*" The Fall of Assad: Armed Men Storm Iranian Embassy in Damascus." *IranWire.*https://iranwire.com/en/news/136933-the-fall-of-assad-armed-men-storm-iranian-embassy-in-damascus/.

[20] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. "Press Release." Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's answers to questions at the 22th Doha Forum, 07 December 2024, *MID Russia. Available at* - https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1986144/.

For Putin, the meeting with Syria's new leader—who has now gained recognition across much of the region, from Turkey to the Arab monarchies of the Persian Gulf—represents an opportunity to reaffirm Russia's influence in the Middle East. Moscow probably wants to demonstrate that, unlike Iran, it has not lost ground in Syria following years of conflict.

Despite this renewed diplomacy, security remains the central challenge for the Syrian authorities. Former jihadist groups continue to struggle to maintain stability and order on the ground. To address these concerns, Damascus has expressed readiness to host Russian military patrols in certain regions of the country. According to Reuters, during his talks at the Kremlin, al-Sharaa requested that Russian troops return to southern Syria to help stabilize the situation.

Overall, the meeting signaled both a pragmatic continuation of the Russia–Syria partnership and an attempt by Moscow to reassert its role as a key regional power broker in the post-war phase of Syrian reconstruction.

As for Iran, After Assad's fall, the country strongly condemned Israeli attacks on Syria, calling them aggressions and crimes. Iran's Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, also suggested that Assad's ouster was orchestrated by the U.S. and Israel. Meanwhile, Iran's Foreign Minister urged regional countries to unite against these attacks. Despite this, Iran's relations with the new Syrian leadership remain limited, which is mostly because of the new Syrian government who is not willing to have ties with Iran.

Ahmed al-Sharaa's government

Ahmed al-Sharaa, Syria's interim president, has pledged to form an inclusive transitional government and respect all religious sects[21]. However, concerns remain about his leadership. Formerly known as Abu Mohammed al-Jolani, Sharaa led the Islamist and al-Qaeda-aligned militant rebel group Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, whose insurgency toppled Assad. In recent years, Sharaa has shifted his rhetoric, presenting HTS as a more nationalist entity advocating for Syrian interests. He has sought to reinvent himself by renouncing his ties to al-Qaeda, using his real name instead of his war name, adopting a more Western-style wardrobe, and making moderate public statements in interviews with international media.[22]

On 29 January, the Military Operations Administration (a new structure composed of HTS and affiliated groups) in Syria announced the appointment of Ahmed al-Sharaa as President of the new Syrian Republic for a transitional period. A provisional (transitional) government was formed under the leadership of Mohammed al-Bashir (an associate of A. al-Sharaa who had held various positions in the so-called "Syrian Salvation Government" in Idlib).

The following day, al-Sharaa, in the presence of commanders of armed groups within the Military Operations Administration, pledged to complete the unification of Syrian territories and achieve "civil peace." Back then he announced plans to suspend the Syrian Constitution and Parliament for three months, as well as to establish a committee to review the country's fundamental law.

[21] Reuters. "Syrian Leader Sharaa Pledges to Form Inclusive Government." *Reuters,* January 30, 2025. https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/syrian-leader-sharaa-pledges-form-inclusive-government-2025-01-30/

[22] BBC News. "Article." *BBC News.* https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c0q0w1g8zqvo.

The question of minorities

Syria's diverse population, which includes Sunnis, Alawites, Christians, Kurds, and Druze, became increasingly fragmented during the conflict as the Assad regime and regional and international actors exploited divisions to advance their interests. Similarly, the prospect of Islamist rule poses the threat of marginalizing non-Sunni groups, particularly Alawites and Christians. Sharaa has launched a national dialogue on political transition and pledged to safeguard various minority communities and enhance religious tolerance. Describing "a new era far removed from sectarianism," the interim president upheld that no sects would be excluded in Syria. [23]

The Alawite

Sectarian violence, however, has already resurfaced in Syria. In March 2025, sectarian violence erupted following a demonstration carried out by Assad loyalists against government positions. The retaliation that followed quickly spiraled into one of the deadliest episodes of post-Assad Syria. According to the UN Commission of Inquiry on Syria, approximately 1,400 people — mostly Alawite civilians — were killed in the ensuing massacres across Syria's western coastal region.[24]

The UN report described acts of extreme brutality: men singled out for execution, bodies mutilated, and victims tortured before being killed. "The vast majority were adult men," the Commission noted, "but victims included approximately 100 women, the elderly and the disabled, as well as children." Video footage circulated on social media showed civilians being humiliated, beaten, and sometimes executed publicly. Families were denied the right to bury their dead according to religious rites, with many victims instead buried in mass graves without official documentation.

The massacres revealed the persistence of deep sectarian grievances and cycles of revenge that outlasted Assad's regime. To many, the killings were not just acts of vengeance against remnants of the old order but also a warning signal — that the new leadership under al-Sharaa, despite its rhetoric of unity and reconstruction, had either lost control of its security forces or tacitly allowed such violence to unfold.

The Druze

The Druze of southern Syria, centered in Suwayda province, initially welcomed Assad's fall and even cooperated with opposition forces from Daraa. Yet, optimism quickly turned to mistrust as al-Sharaa's government, dominated by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham affiliates, sought to disarm Druze militias and fold them into new state structures. The policy, viewed in Damascus as national unification, was perceived in Suwayda as an assault on local autonomy.

Although the appointment of the Druze politician Muhsina al-Mahitawi as governor in December 2024 aimed to calm tensions, discontent deepened. By February 2025, Tariq al-Shufi formed the Suwayda Military Council, calling for federalization, closer ties with Israel, and Druze self-

[23] *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs.*" The Fall of Bashar al-Assad: Winners, Losers, and Challenges Ahead." *GJIA,* May 7, 2025. https://gjia.georgetown.edu/2025/05/07/the-fall-of-bashar-al-assad-winners-losers-and-challenges-ahead/

[24] United Nations News. "UN Chief Urges Calm after Escalation in Syria." *UN News,* August 2025. https://news.un.org/en/story/2025/08/1165649.

governance — with the backing of spiritual leader Sheikh Hikmat al-Hijri. Around the same time, six Druze villages near Jabal al-Sheikh expressed a desire to align with Israeli-controlled territory, prompting Tel Aviv to declare it would "protect the Druze population" and refuse recognition of Damascus's control over southern Syria.

As clashes erupted in March between Druze fighters and HTS-aligned forces near Jaramana and Sakhnaya, Israel launched airstrikes in early May on Syrian air-defense sites near Damascus, reportedly close to the palace of Ahmed al-Sharaa. Sheikh al-Hijri responded by urging international intervention, accusing al-Sharaa's government of betrayal. Damascus, in turn, accused Israel of exploiting sectarian fault lines under the guise of humanitarian concern.

By July 2025, tensions had turned into open conflict. Fighting erupted between Druze formations and local Bedouin groups — longstanding rivals in the south — and soon spread into urban centers. On July 15, Damascus deployed Interior Ministry troops and army units to Suwayda, to restore order. The intervention, however, produced a humanitarian disaster. According to human rights monitors and The New York Times, over 500 people were killed, mostly Druze civilians, in what observers called "the worst sectarian violence to seize this corner of Syria since the height of the civil war." Witnesses reported summary executions, home demolitions, and indiscriminate shelling. In retaliation, Israel launched airstrikes on Syrian tanks, Ministry of Defense facilities, and military complexes in Damascus, escalating tensions to their highest point since Assad's fall.

Many regional analysts argue that Israel's strategy increasingly relies on exploiting Syria's internal divisions—whether through outreach to the Druze in the south or quiet coordination with Kurdish actors in the north—to ensure that Damascus remains fragmented and unable to re-emerge as a consolidated regional actor. Such efforts align with Israel's long-standing goal of limiting hostile state power on its borders by fostering zones of instability or semi-autonomous entities. In contrast, the United States has publicly supported Syria's territorial integrity, marking a rare divergence from Israeli policy. Ultimately, the crisis in Suwayda demonstrates how Syria's sectarian and regional fault lines remain vulnerable to external manipulation.

The Christians

A number of Christians have also been killed. Notable incidents include the burning of a Christmas tree in Suqaylabiyah by Islamist fighters[25] and an attack on a church by unidentified gunmen in Hama city in December, 2024[26]. These incidents prompted widespread concern among the Christian population and sparked protests in Damascus that demanded protection for minorities and the expulsion of foreign fighters from Syria. After the pogrom against the Alawites, Christians in Syria are deeply concerned because, as the old Syrian phrase has it, «first the Alawites, then the Christians».

Many Christians in Syria fear the new Islamist-led government is not doing enough to protect them. On 22 June 2025, a terrorist attack on the Greek Orthodox Church of the Prophet Elias in Damascus left 22 worshippers dead and many more injured. However, the Syrian authorities blamed the attack on the ISIS group. It was the first targeting of the Christian community in Syria since a massacre in 1860, when a conflict broke out between Druze and Maronite Christians under Ottoman rule.

[25] BBC News. "Article." *BBC News. Available at* - https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cx27yx1y0deo.

[26] Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR). "Unidentified Gunmen Attack a Church in Hama City, December 18, 2024." *SNHR,* December 19, 2024. *Available at* - https://news.snhr.org/2024/12/19/unidentified-gunmen-attack-a-church-in-hama-city-december-18-2024/.

Israel and the New Syria

The historically adversarial relationship between Syria and Israel — marked by multiple wars and longstanding hostilities — has entered a complex and uncertain phase. Rather than ushering in stability or asserting sovereignty, al-Sharaa's administration has so far projected a tone of indecision and tactical silence — particularly in response to Israel's ongoing military incursions deep into Syrian territory.

This evolving dynamic reveals a troubling reality: while Israel operates with near impunity across Syrian borders, conducting strikes and reconnaissance missions at will, the new Syrian leadership hesitates between rhetorical pacifism and quiet compliance. The pattern invites a deeper question — whether al-Sharaa's restrained stance is a genuine pursuit of peace, or the calculated inaction of a leader constrained by external influence.

Recent reports from Quneitra province indicate a significant intensification of Israeli military activity inside Syrian territory. Israeli army patrols have reportedly been seen roaming the Koudeneh–Briqueh road without interference, while reconnaissance aircraft operate freely in Syrian airspace. Simultaneously, Israel continues its campaign of targeted strikes, most recently hitting a former army barracks in Kiswa, southwest of Damascus, as confirmed by Syria's state-run *al-Ekhbariya* TV.[27]

These operations highlight Israel's strategy of perpetual dominance — a blend of deterrence and demonstration of superiority. The Defense Minister, Israel Katz, reinforced this position with a photo-op from the occupied Golan Heights, declaring, "We will not budge from the Golan Heights." The statement was both symbolic and provocative — a reaffirmation of Israel's long-standing defiance of international law, which continues to recognize the Golan as Syrian territory.

Israel's military actions, often justified as preemptive measures against Iranian influence in Syria, effectively underscore a deeper intent: to maintain complete strategic control over southern Syria and to ensure that no new government — including al-Sharaa's — can alter the balance of power in Syria.

In sharp contrast to Israel's assertiveness, al-Sharaa's political behavior is defined by ambiguity. Publicly, he has called for "friendly relations with all countries, including Israel," citing Syria's need to focus on reconstruction and stability. While acknowledging that the Golan Heights remain Syrian under UN documentation, al-Sharaa has simultaneously expressed willingness to discuss normalization once a "security agreement" is reached.

Such statements, at first glance, may appear pragmatic — a leader seeking to move beyond decades of hostility with fundamental differences. Yet the tone and timing suggest something else: a deliberate avoidance of confrontation that borders on complacency. Al-Sharaa's silence in the face of repeated Israeli aggressions — over a hundred in recent months, by Syrian accounts — is not neutrality; it is paralysis.

Critics within Syria argue that this restraint is not self-imposed but externally orchestrated. Al-Sharaa's ascent to power, facilitated in large part by Western backing and a network of political intermediaries, has left him tethered to an unspoken set of conditions — among them, the containment of Syria's resistance posture toward Israel. His leadership, therefore, represents a paradox: a

[27] Al Jazeera, Israel launches new operations in Syria after strike kills soldiers, Available at - https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/8/27/israel-launches-new-operations-in-syria-after-strike-kills-soldiers

government born from coup d'etat but constrained by the geopolitical framework that enabled its existence.

Al-Sharaa's domestic decisions further expose his alignment with external expectations. In a highly controversial move, he ordered the removal of three national commemorations — Teacher's Day, Martyrs 'Day, and the October Liberation War Anniversary — from Syria's official calendar. The erasure of the October War anniversary, a day symbolizing Syria's victory against Israel in 1973, is especially telling. It marks not only a symbolic distancing from anti-Zionist sentiment but also a deeper ideological retreat from the foundations of Syrian nationalism.

Such measures, far from fostering unity, have been interpreted as acts of appeasement — gestures meant to signal a willingness to rewrite national memory in exchange for political legitimacy in the eyes of the West.

The recent meeting between Ahmed al-Sharaa and Ronald Lauder, President of the World Jewish Congress, at the Syrian mission in New York, further deepens suspicions about external orchestration[28]. The meeting, which took place during the 80th session of the UN General Assembly, focused on possible avenues for Syrian–Israeli dialogue.

Lauder known for his decades-long efforts to broker Israeli–Syrian peace under Prime Ministers Netanyahu and Barak, represents the enduring Western tendency to engineer "controlled normalization" — peace on terms favorable to Israeli and Western strategic interests. That such discussions occur as Israel openly violates Syrian sovereignty only underscores the asymmetry of this emerging order: military aggression paired with diplomatic conditioning.

Israel, emboldened by its military and diplomatic leverage, continues to act unilaterally within Syrian borders. Al-Sharaa's government, meanwhile, appears to have exchanged sovereignty for survival, adopting a cautious rhetoric of reconciliation that masks deeper dependencies. Whether al-Sharaa's posture stems from a genuine belief in coexistence or from the silent instructions of his Western supporters remains unclear.

Syria is still divided, and real legitimacy remains contested, even now. If countries support a single factional project to unify Syria—without pressing Damascus to account for its missteps to date—they risk new instability and bloodshed.

International reaction

Al-Sharaa's new government received a warm welcome abroad as foreign ministers rushed to re-establish ties with Damascus. Initially, the Trump administration was hesitant, mirroring Israel's skepticism toward Syria's new leader. However, after Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman brokered a meeting between Trump and Sharaa on 14 May 2025, the U.S. position shifted dramatically. Trump praised Sharaa as "a tough, attractive guy," and Washington soon became one of his strongest backers.

[28] *The Media Line.*" World Jewish Congress President Ron Lauder and al-Sharaa Discuss Impasse in Syrian-Israeli Talks." *The Media Line. Available at* - https://themedialine.org/headlines/world-jewish-congress-president-ron-lauder-and-al-sharaa-discuss-impasse-in-syrian-israeli-talks/.

The strategy paid off. Sharaa secured broad international recognition for Syria's post-Assad political system and, crucially, won long-sought sanctions relief. The US Senate on 10 October, 2025 approved its version of the Department of Defense budget for 2026, which includes a repeal of the 2019 Caesar Act, which put sanctions on entities and officials tied to Syria's deposed regime.

Ironically, the former militant soon arrived in New York for the first appearance as a Syrian head of state at the UN General Assembly since 1967. A day earlier, he had met with former CIA director and U.S. General David Petraeus — once his enemy in Iraq[29]. Smiling, Sharaa remarked, «It is good that once we fought, and now we talk. Only those who know war understand the value of peace.»

Interestingly, Russian President Vladimir Putin is set to host Arab leaders and diplomats in Moscow on October 15, 2025 for the first Russia–Arab League Summit. And this new Syrian president will arrive there too, which will be the first meeting between him and Putin.

The 2025 Parliamentary Elections

Parliamentary elections were held on 5 October 2025 to select 121 of the 210 members of Syria's People's Assembly. Yet the vote was far from universal: only a restricted electorate, vetted by authorities in coordination with local leaders, was allowed to participate.

Under the new hybrid system, 140 seats were contested, while the remaining 70 were appointed directly by President al-Sharaa. In practice, only 119 MPs were chosen, as elections could not be held in Kurdish-controlled areas of the northeast or in the Druze province of Suwayda.

Al-Sharaa's retained tight control over the process, reserving one-third of parliamentary seats for his own bloc and requiring his personal approval for other representatives to assume office. The arrangement raised doubts about genuine pluralism and the future independence of the legislature.

Conclusion

The new Syria under Ahmed al-Sharaa stands at a crossroads, reshaping itself day by day amid uncertainty and division. While al-Sharaa's government has succeeded in presenting an image of renewal and reconstruction, its authority remains uneven and contested. Large swaths of the country — from the Kurdish northeast to the restless Druze south — lie beyond Damascus's full control, and simmering discontent among minorities continues to challenge the fragile post-war order.

What was once hoped to be the beginning of national recovery increasingly resembles a state caught between consolidation and fragmentation. The suppression of dissenting voices, particularly in regions resistant to al-Sharaa's central authority, underscores the persistence of old authoritarian patterns under a new guise.

Syria's future stability remains shaped not only by regional powers such as Turkey and Israel but also by the continued involvement of international actors, including the United States, whose diplomatic engagement — notably through figures such as Tom Barrack — continues to influence political

[29] U.S. Embassy Syria. "Twitter Post." *X (formerly Twitter).* https://x.com/USEmbassySyria/status/864144602584035328?lang=en.

dynamics, which risk prolonging the country's instability and complicating efforts toward a sustainable peace.

In essence, Syria's transformation under al-Sharaa remains unfinished and deeply unstable: a nation seeking peace but still haunted by the legacies of war, foreign intervention, and fractured identity. In less than a year, Syria's new leadership has managed to reenter the sphere of international dialogue, yet trust within its own society remains fragile. The country stands seemingly at the threshold of renewal, though behind this image lie persistent challenges — inflation, social distrust, and territorial fragmentation. Many scholars maintain that the present hardships of Syrians are, to a significant extent, the result of ongoing Western sanctions, which continue to shape the country's economic and social landscape. Still, there are signs of cautious optimism.

The Vienna International Institute for Middle East Studies (VIIMES) remains deeply hopeful that the long years of suffering endured by the Syrian people will, at last, give way to a new era — one defined by peace, recovery, and the gradual restoration of dignity and prosperity to a nation that has borne immeasurable loss.

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