

New Syria in the Making – Challenges and Opportunities for Israel

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Abstract:

The Hay'at Tahri al-Sham (HTS) surprise attack that began on November 27th and took Damascus in less than two weeks, caught many by surprise, including President Bashar al Assad, who fled the city on December 7th. Ahmed ah-Sharaa, aka Mohammad al-Joulani, the leader of HTS, has expressed pragmatism thus far as he seeks to build a “new Syria”; an inclusive Syrian National Project that aims to guarantee the rights of Syria’s diverse ethnic and ideological groups. While this new vision is in sync with the moderate regional partners, the challenge is enormous. Success requires a power-sharing model to win the support of most Syrians. While not everyone is willing to share power, and many question the leadership of a former Jihadi backed by Islamists, now is the time to engage with those working to forge a new and different future for Syria.

The Turkish interest in Damascus, and the region at large, goes back centuries. In the 16th century, Sultan Selim used his relatively short reign to significantly expand the territory of the Ottoman Empire. In 1516, Sultan Selim I conquered Syria at the end of a swift campaign. Selim I then threw his forces southward in the Ottoman–Mamluk War, and defeated the Mamluks in Syria. Syria would remain in Ottoman possession for four hundred years. He entered Damascus in October 1517 and continued to Egypt. Although white Toyota pickups were unavailable at the time, his swift victory was achieved partially thanks to his artillery.¹ Selim I conquered the Mamluk Sultanate of Egypt, expanding the empire from Syria and Palestine to Hejaz and Tihamah in the Arabian Peninsula. Five hundred years later, and about a century following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, it appears that Damascus may again be in the hands of the (Neo)-Ottomans, or at least what seems to be a Neo-Ottoman proxy. Turkey has already promised to build five military bases in Syria and assist in the

development of the new Syrian army. Is this the beginning of a new Pax-Ottomana in the Middle East? Or might this be another short chapter in the bloody Syrian conflict? More importantly, what are the ramifications of these new dynamics to Syria and Israel, as well as the regional agenda?

The HTS surprise attack that began on November 27th and that had taken Damascus in less than two weeks caught many by surprise, including President Bashar al Assad, who fled the city on December 7th. Syria, still fractured and struggling to recover from the “Syrian Spring” that devolved into a civil, proxy, and interregional war, now has a new ruler seated at Mt. Mezze Palace in Damascus. Nevertheless, the old problems still remain.

Ahmed ah-Sharaa, aka Mohammad al-Joulani, has taken a pragmatic approach thus far. He has commented on the vision of the new Syrian project: “The Syrian population has lived together for thousands of years.”² Moreover, “we will have dialogue

and ensure everyone is represented.” “The old regime always played with sectarian divisions, he added, “but we will not... I think the revolution can contain everybody.” These ideas are pivotal for the success of a possible Syrian National Project that Mr. ah-Sharaa seeks to create. However, they also hint at the challenge that lies ahead of bringing a divided country, still not recovered from a sectarian war, together.

Between Old Syrian Divisions and a New Syrian Project

Syria is home to a mosaic of ethnic groups, with most of the population being Arab and Sunni. These groups comprised over 70% of the country’s pre-war population. In addition to Arabs, Syria has significant Kurdish, Armenian, and Assyrian populations. The Kurds, primarily in the northeastern regions, have distinct languages and cultures and have used the vacuum created by war to further establish their autonomy in northeastern Syria, where a de-facto Kurdish enclave was created. The Armenian community, many of whom are descendants of survivors of the Armenian Genocide, is concentrated in several urban centers. Assyrians, an ancient ethnic group, also have a presence, particularly in the northeast. Other minorities, such as Alawites, Druze, and Turkmen, further add to the country’s ethnic complexity. Under the Assad regime, the Alawites, comprising roughly 12% of the pre-war population, aligned with other minority groups, recognizing the need for allies to maintain control over the Arab Sunni majority. Twelve years of war have changed the demographic composition of Syria. The majority of those killed – over 600,000 according to most estimates and close to a million according to some – in the rebellion were Sunni Arabs.³ The same applies to the number of refugees who left Syria, which is estimated to be between 6-7 million out of the 23 million pre-war population.⁴

Unfortunately, Syria’s divisions do not end with ethnic or religious tensions. The conflict, an all-out, civil, ethnic, and proxy war that has tarnished Syria since 2012, created additional divisions that manifested in new armed groups with local, regional,

or ideological agendas. At the peak of the war, estimates counted more than 1,000 local armed groups throughout the country with over 100,000 armed rebels (separate from the 200,000 soldiers of the pre-war Syrian military).⁵ While most ethnic groups, specifically the Kurds, the Druze, and the Alawites (who until recently controlled the Syrian military) have significant fighting forces, other forces exist on the ground as well. Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, the Turkey-backed Islamic group that has taken Damascus and formed a new government, was formed in 2017. The group is a merger between several armed factions such as Jaysh al-Ahrar, Jabhat Fateh al-Sham (JFS), Ansar al-Din Front, Jaysh al-Sunna, Liwa al-Haqq, and others. This is not a unitary military force, and its commander, Ahmed ah-Sharaa, will need to work hard to make sure that he has control not only of his own men, but also of the hundreds of other local militias who still hold weapons in Syria.

A Regional Outlook

Moderates in the region who have worked in the past few years to bring Assad closer to the Arab fold, have largely welcomed the transition in Syria, despite having some reservations about the dominance of the Qatari-Turkish axis that has replaced the Russian-Iranian one. Following the years of war, in which the Arab league recognized the rebels as the representatives of Syria, the Arab world gradually began to accept the failure of the revolution and recognized Assad as the de facto leader of Syria. The UAE led this process. It opened its embassy in Damascus in 2018 and invited Assad for an official visit in 2022. Assad was welcomed back to the Arab League in 2023 following a decade of absence, and even the Saudis opened an embassy in Damascus in 2024. Qatar was the last to join, and announced the opening of its own embassy this past December, only after Assad’s defeat (and just to add to their hedging, Khalifa Abdullah Al Mahmoud Al-Sharif, brother of the Qatari ambassador to Iran, was appointed as the ambassador). Bringing Assad closer to the Arab league, or having him removed from power, serves a similar objective; the weakening of the Iranian axis which continues to cause tension in the Gulf. Ahmed ah-Sharaa already flirted with Saudi saying, “I am proud of

everything Saudi Arabia has done for Syria, and it has a major role in the country's future."⁶ Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, and Oman have all resumed their diplomatic activity and endorsed the transitional government.

Qatar's first commercial flight to Damascus in 13 years landed on January 7, 2025. This comes amidst initial reports about Qatar's willingness to invest in Syria's energy infrastructure and ports, as well as to support the rebuilding of Damascus's international airport.⁷ Despite the current state of carnage in Syria, a stable Syria opens the door to a number of regional endeavors, placing Syria as a commercial hub between Europe, Turkey, and the Gulf, with effects that can positively impact Israel's economy as well. Plans for an overland trade route from Turkey and the Port of Haifa are now more plausible. There is also talk of potentially connecting the existing Arab Gas Pipeline to the developing Eastern Mediterranean LNG pipeline that connects Israel, Egypt, Cyprus and Greece.

Nevertheless, officials in the Gulf are hesitant to throw all of their support behind ah-Sharaa. Anwar Gargash, senior diplomatic advisor to the President of the UAE has said, "We don't know about the shape of developments in Syria. Is this going to be a sort of a wiser group that will be able to actually transcend, as I mentioned, Syria's tortured history, or are we going to go back into a reincarnation of radical and terrorist organizations playing a role."⁸ The potential strengthening of more emboldened Muslim Brotherhood actors, considering the origin of HTS, is a red-flag to the moderate countries of the Gulf, who already banned the Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist organization in 2013 and 2014.

A New Syrian National Project

The vision of a Syrian National Project—a sovereign country that provides a safe home for its diverse ethnic, religious, and ideological groups—is ah-Sharaa's key proposition. He has made a point to meet the leaders of Syria's ethnic and religious communities, as well as to engage with the armed groups which he believes should join the new Syrian army. He speaks softly and is careful not to comment on the Levant or the Umma, but rather

about the more modest and peaceful Syria that he seeks to create. Nevertheless, his vision is not shared by all.

In a recent party speech, Turkish President Erdoğan talked openly about his ambitions to revise the outcome of World War I and annex Syrian territories (formerly Ottoman provinces) into Turkey. Contrary to Western Europe, where a post-modern and post-nationalist approach is still dominating the elite mindset, the rest of the world is moving on to a neo-imperialist mindset.

Turkey supports and trains the Syrian National Army (Jaish al-Watani), which is an offshoot of the Free Syrian Army that began its activities in Syria in 2017.⁹ This faction consists of over 30 armed groups that do not necessarily operate under a unified command, but still operate under a broad mission of regaining their country which, from a Turkish perspective, means to fight against the Kurds. Other factions of the Free Syrian Army, mainly secular groups that rejected Turkish patronage, are spread throughout Syria and beyond, receiving support from various parties, including the United States and Gulf nations. The statement released on December 24th regarding an agreement between the leaders of former rebel factions to consolidate all groups under a new Syrian Defense Ministry is undoubtedly promising, but also revealing. Many armed groups have resisted surrendering their weapons due to ideological differences or fear for their safety.¹⁰ Some of these groups are aligned with political factions that do not recognize the ah-Sharaa-led Syrian National Project. The recent armed clashes in Syria reflect both the challenges and dangers that lie ahead. If the Syrian National Project fails, or if a formula cannot be developed to unite the diverse minorities into an effective power-sharing arrangement, Syria will face further fragmentation. This could lead to the continuation of violence and ultimately threaten to plunge the country back into turmoil.

In 1918, German sociologist Max Weber defined the state as a "human community that (successfully) claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory."¹¹ State monopoly on violence is widely regarded as a defining characteristic of the modern state.¹² It has been

reported that the new Syrian government aspires to form a 300,000-strong army with the help of Turkey within a year and a half, with Turkish military advisors playing a central role. Turkish Armed Forces personnel will oversee the process at five strategic locations.¹³ While Syria's new rulers have called for the disbanding of all armed groups, few have adhered to the challenge. The fighters from the Druze religious minority say they prefer to rely on their own men, rather than the promises made by Syria's transitional authorities.¹⁴ The Kurds, and especially the secular groups once formally backed by the West, will be the least likely to trust a Turkish-backed effort.

Regarding the rights of minorities, one must investigate the nominations in the transitional government. On December 20th, Syria's transitional government (Political Affairs Department of the Syrian Salvation Government (SSG)), announced a series of governmental appointments. One of the appointments was Aisha Al-Debs as head of the Office for Women's Affairs, which oversees judicial, social, cultural, and political affairs affecting the women of Syria. Her appointment appears to be an attempt to allay the concerns of HTS opponents regarding the status of women under the new regime. However, her views on women's status and role in society pose a challenge regarding inclusive frameworks. Al-Debs, born in Damascus, wears a hijab and comes from a religious family. Furthermore, she has expressed extremist views, praised terrorism, and criticized the United States and the moderate Arab regimes. She has voiced support for Hamas and its military wing, mourned the death of its leaders, and praised the October 7th Hamas-led attack and atrocities in southern Israel, calling the attack "the king of Arab Spring revolts."¹⁵

Challenges and Opportunities for Israel

In the short term, Israel has gained from these rapid changes, as the new Sunni-Turkish-led camp has made it a priority to push the Iranian Shi'a axis out of Syria. The power vacuum left by the expulsion of the Shi'a axis, however, might now be filled by Turkey and Qatar, and made up of a Muslim

Brotherhood alliance, whose affiliates also won 22% of the votes in the Jordanian elections last September. The Jihadi past and Islamist affiliations of Mr. al-Sharaa and some of his appointed figures, such as Anas Khattab, who also appears on the American Terror list due to his links with ISIS under Abu Musab al Zarqawi do not ease Israeli concerns. This uncertainty and unease is reflected in the IDF's activities in the buffer zone (UNDOF AOS) situated in Syria's Golan Heights plateau it controls.¹⁶

PM Netanyahu declared that "we have no intention of interfering in Syria's internal affairs, but we intend to do what is necessary to ensure our security," and added that he authorized the Air Force to "bomb strategic military capabilities left behind by the Syrian army so that they would not fall into the hands of the jihadist."¹⁷

While the IDF continues to bomb Syria even a month after al-Sharaa took over most of Syria, this should indeed be seen as a temporary move. The IDF's activities in Syria do not address the pivotal policy questions Israel must consider when it comes to Syria. While the use of military force might resolve immediate security concerns, long-term prospects for relations require consideration of other policy options.¹⁸ The current Israeli presence in Syria, already viewed as an "occupation," triggered demonstrations against Israel. The death of unarmed Syrian civilians as a result of Israeli strikes has caused many to further challenge Israel's response in Syria.¹⁹ At the start of HTS's offensive in Syria, Israel was far from the focus of the new Syrian dynamic. However, continued Israeli activity in the Golan Heights might have the opposite effect, and instead galvanize Syrian frustration and anger against Israel.

Other vectors will likely be influencing Israel's policy moves in Syria: US policy under incoming president Trump in Syria and the region, the strength of the ceasefire with Hezbollah in Lebanon, and the impact, if at all, the Syrian developments will have on the domestic arenas of Lebanon and Jordan.

Still, Israel has a good reason to support the vision of the New Syrian National Project and give its neighbor a chance. A Syria that respects the rights of its minorities is likely to respect the rights of

its neighbors, which presents an opportunity to create a new trajectory of relations between the two countries. A Syria that will be embraced by moderate partners in the region and that is keen to stay away from Iran is certainly one that Israel should support.

Israel has already demonstrated that it can offer a different model of engagement. Between 2013 and 2018, Israel successfully led humanitarian operations, establishing 15 clinics and two hospitals on the Syrian side of the border, which served over 1.5 million Syrians. It is not out of the question that Israel could reopen its borders as a gesture of goodwill, in a coordinated effort that could pave the way for a more positive future.

In the same vein, Israel should prepare for the possibility that the Syrian National Project may fail, leading to Syria becoming effectively divided once again. Israel should remain engaged with the

communities in southern Syria, which may become increasingly significant if Damascus loses control over the border area again. While Israel needs to be cautious about taking sides in the internal Syrian conflict, it should continue to extend its hand to the Syrian factions that believe this is a pivotal moment to reshape both countries' relations and establish a framework for cooperation.

Syria, once a cornerstone of the Middle East, has been left in turmoil since the outbreak of civil war in 2012. The nation is now fragmented, with large parts lying in ruins and its economy in shambles. Regional players, including Israel, should shift their focus from the Syria that once was to the New Syrian Project that is hopefully beginning to emerge. It may be time for Israel to change its narrative and support the rise of a new Syrian nation, not as a platform for targets, but as a beacon of potential and possibilities.

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