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Syria Post-Assad: Scenarios and Regional Dynamics

Workshop Report



Middle East Council on Global Affairs
Politics and Society Institute

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Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
Key Takeaways.....	1
Abstract	2
Capacity, Governance, and Security	3
The Kurdish Question, Challenges for Damascus	4
Economic Recovery: Challenges and Needs	5
Syria and the Region	6
Syria and Geopolitics: Russia and the United States	7
Conclusion	8

Introduction

The “Syria Post-Assad: Scenarios and Regional Dynamics” two-day workshop brought together a diverse group of experts, academics, and policymakers from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, the United States, Europe, and Russia. The Middle East Council on Global Affairs, in partnership with Politics and Society Institute, convened these experts alongside a cohort of Syrian analysts, members of civil society, and policymakers to discuss the events that led to the fall of the Assad regime on December 8, 2024. The participants discussed a wide array of topics, with a focus on Syria’s trajectory and its effects on wider regional geopolitics. This moderator’s report provides a summary of the issues and recommendations discussed.

Key Takeaways

- The need for full and unconditional sanctions relief is urgent and mandatory—both by law and for the restoration of the Syrian state. Syria should not be made to continue paying the price for the war crimes of Bashar al-Assad’s regime against the Syrian people.
- With a lack of urgency from the international community on Syria’s economic recovery, the new leadership in Syria should convene a two-day economic conference to support international aid and investment as well as sanctions relief.
- Syrians are euphoric at the fall of Assad, but the burden of the war and the decades-long regime rule have left the nation exhausted, physically divided, and in need of a genuine opportunity to heal.
- Under the framework of the relevant elements of UN Resolution 2254, international mechanisms supported by fresh leadership for the UN mission in Syria are required to support the country with technical assistance. These mechanisms include the Independent Institution on Missing Persons in the Syrian Arab Republic (IIMP) and the International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism (IIIM).
- Iran continues to watch closely, assessing what kind of engagement it seeks, acknowledging the costly burden Assad placed on the Islamic Republic. Meanwhile, Russia seeks a negotiated settlement that would allow it to keep some military presence, namely at the Khmeimim military base.
- Türkiye is not expected to seek any direct or formal military incursion into Syria to secure its borders. However, Ankara requires various security guarantees and assurances from negotiations with Kurdish factions on a workable arrangement.
- The role of Saudi Arabia in supporting Damascus will be a crucial factor in the emerging geopolitical apportioning of power across the region, particularly between the region’s non-Arab powers: Türkiye, Israel, and Iran.

Abstract

As a seismic, generational moment in Arab and Middle Eastern politics and for the Syrian people, the fall of the regime of Syria's former President Bashar al-Assad has fundamentally changed the region. Weeks after the fall, the lingering euphoria has begun to subside as returning Syrians—those who had fled the regime and are visiting their homeland—as well as Syrians who had remained, begin to absorb the multitude of challenges facing the country. After years of divisive conflict, the Syrian people must now confront the full scope of the hardships affecting all of their country.

Under transitional president Ahmed al-Sharaa, the political situation—domestic and foreign—is progressing at a great pace. There are concerns regarding a lack of political action on the ground and an overreliance on civil society to fill the vacuum. International and regional actors remain uncertain on how to approach al-Sharaa, while civil society seems cautiously optimistic in the evolving dialogue with him. Meanwhile, as president, al-Sharaa is skillfully navigating the various interests vested in the country, the transition, and his leadership, ensuring that everyone “hears what they want to hear.”

Sanctions remain the most pressing and urgent matter. Sanctions relief is essential for the positive transformation of Syria. Yet, the U.S. and Europe have been slow to act and are likely to ignore the calls from all parts of the Syrian political elite for full and unconditional sanctions relief. Without such action, Syria is unlikely to emerge from the burden of the economic challenges it faces—both immediate (humanitarian) and structural.

The region's geopolitics have shifted significantly with the fall of the Assad regime. Will the Iranian regime remain steadfast without a major ally in Damascus? Some think that Tehran's stability is being underestimated. Russia, on the other hand, remains hopeful for a negotiated solution to its military presence that can satisfy its own vested interests. Gulf states, seeking to correct the mistakes of the Iraq war, have expectations of their own. And, while Türkiye may be the “regional victor” from the fall of Assad, Damascus does not view the power as being in the driver's seat.



Vendors and pedestrians navigate a bustling square with the war-torn remains of the Grand Mosque in the background in Aleppo, Syria, on January 21, 2025. (Photo by Bilal Alhamoud / Middle East Images / Middle East Images via AFP)

Capacity, Governance, and Security

“I thought I would die before I would ever return to Syria.” This is an expression regularly heard amongst the millions of Syrians now seeking to return to visit their country, after over a decade—or longer—of exile imposed by the regime. The euphoria of this moment is felt deeply by the Syrian population and those who have long supported their struggle across the region and beyond. Nevertheless, the challenges the country now faces are alarming, acute, and urgent.

Not least among these challenges is the economic and infrastructural damage the country has suffered. The Assad regime never rebuilt areas damaged by the war, leaving them desolate and unoccupied across large swathes of the country. People now returning to their homes in areas such as the Damascus countryside, Western Aleppo, Homs, and Daraa, are all finding significant damage, if not outright destruction. While energy, food, and currency are the immediate needs, longer-term crises of housing, land and property, reconstruction, demographic shifts, and social cohesion are going to persist as challenges during this transition.

Socially, the agenda of bringing accountability to address the plight of missing and detained persons in Syria is gathering momentum as people seek to demand concrete responses from the new leadership in Damascus. There is, however, a lack of progress on the justice agenda and major trust deficits between the new administration and civil society. These pertain to questions of judicial reform and the wider lack of legitimacy concerning, specifically, the minister of justice. Furthermore, efforts to enact revenge and vengeance and attempts to create sectarian tensions are driving misinformation online, resulting in violence and unsafe security conditions in parts of the country, such as in Homs and Latakia. The al-Sharaa government lacks the capacity to control the security apparatus of the entire country and is struggling to bring all armed groups under the umbrella of the newly reformed defense ministry.

There is also general apprehension about al-Sharaa as an individual. As recently as early 2024, protests broke out in Idlib province in northwestern Syria, against repression and poor governance under al-Sharaa and his group, Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), who were governing the area. There remains a lack of transparency in decision-making and a lack of capacity in government administration, which is in part due to the wider, ongoing de-Baathification process. Even so, some experts familiar with how HTS administered Idlib note that most of what the group achieved in Idlib cannot be replicated in Damascus or across the country. However, it was noted that HTS—and al-Sharaa—are responsive to criticism and the needs of the country, demonstrating a significant level of pragmatism. Nevertheless, some experts warn that that Idlib’s governing ideology was a hybrid of autocratic, technocratic, and theocratic doctrines, and that a similar approach may emerge under al-Sharaa. The Syrian revolution may be used to carve out national goals, but this may be mixed with elements of Sunni sectarianism, Salafism, and possibly jihadism, resulting in the continuation of a hybrid ideology.

The Kurdish Question, Challenges for Damascus

Despite the attempted push for an “Erbil-style” autonomy agreement for the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and Damascus, the Kurdish divisions of power in Syria are vastly different from those that exist in Iraq. Active PKK influence in Syria is unacceptable to regional neighbors like Türkiye and the international community, which designate the PKK as a terrorist entity.

Even so, there is wide agreement that neither side—including among the Kurdish actors—seeks war or confrontation. Al-Sharaa has regularly referred to himself as president of a unified Syria, seeking to move past these divides. The Kurds, however, do seek to explore possible forms of decentralization across the country’s northeast, including in Afrin. Al-Sharaa must therefore balance the interests of the local actors, as well as Saudi Arabia and Türkiye.

The SDF—as “winners of the Kurdish question”—have sought to impose several conditions on their absorption into the wider state-building project proposed by al-Sharaa. They say this is modeled on previous arrangements reached between SDF and HTS during the war, despite significant ideological differences between them. The SDF, therefore, wants to impose its role in a new military apparatus as part of a national project, with a locality governed solely by the SDF. One expert in attendance noted that there are longstanding social tensions around this issue of security, especially from an Arab majority that is present, with a need for greater reconciliation efforts on the social level to prevent repercussions.



Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan (R) and Syria’s interim president Ahmed al-Sharaa hold a joint press conference following their meeting at the Presidential Palace in Ankara, on February 4, 2025. (Photo by OZAN KOSE / AFP)

Economic Recovery: Challenges and Needs

The economic recovery of the country will determine its political and social transition and healing from the years of trauma under the Assad regime. One expert noted that there is a long history of an entrepreneurial mindset in Syria and a distinct “can-do” attitude that comes from the country’s industrial history. Whilst there is a vast diaspora that can offer support in the meantime, with remittances and other forms of cash injection, there is a need to develop significant amounts of capital for reinvestment. Community-based philanthropy has not only survived the war, but it has kept many parts of the country functioning economically despite the desolation caused by years of fighting.

Sanctions continue to have a “chilling effect” on the country, including the resulting over-compliance in recent years that has exacerbated their effect. All participants emphatically noted the need for full sanctions removal as a matter of priority. However, it was noted that this is unlikely to take place under this Trump administration. Many participants echoed the sentiment that it is unfair to continue to enforce the same sanctions that were imposed against Assad for specific crimes on al-Sharaa’s government.

The experts also noted the long-term impacts of sanctions. For instance, as Tehran’s experience with the JCPOA demonstrated, investor confidence takes a significant amount of time to rebuild after sanction are lifted, and that suspension delays infrastructural and banking investments as these sectors remain risk averse.

Beyond the sanctions, however, there remains a “backlog of serious problems,” noted a development expert with a long history in Syria and the region. He went on to describe these problems: “food security and the collapse of the Syrian agricultural sector, which has been left to decay and needs state framework; water security challenges that have been accelerated in the last decade; property rights – now exacerbated since the 2011 revolution, with new forms of appropriation; energy depletion and resources, including the main oil refinery and its distribution/delivery across the country; a disappearing state capacity on all levels with decay now amplified through reduced fiscal capacity.” The expert emphatically closed with a warning that “the state has no policy making infrastructure with the disappearance of institutional memory in recent years.”

Other economic challenges center around cash flow, hard currency, key commodities, and goods, including the question of taxation (implemented in Idlib, but impractical for the entire country at this time). There is also a need for a specific humanitarian relief plan, as well as a focus on restarting the oil sector, which will require the lifting of sanctions (beyond a waiver) and likely foreign investment to upgrade the oil and gas sector by reviving and restarting the oil pipeline. This—alongside a broader national reconstruction plan—would create jobs as the energy sector is rebuilt, but participants noted that this will require a new legal and security framework under new leadership.

Finally, a cautionary perspective was presented from the Libyan experience of the past 14 years, urging Syrians not to ignore the economy while focusing on recovery. Each institution understands this concept differently and the country must conduct a comprehensive needs assessment. This can be done through a two-day economic conference hosted by the new leadership in Damascus to attract and secure interest and support for Syria’s transition and its economic needs.

Syria and the Region

Since 2011, the political and security dynamics in Syria have had implications for a significant amount of conventional policy approaches in the region. These included the enlargement and expansion of the “Axis of Resistance” concurrent to counter-revolutionary policies from some regional states, part of a broad anti-Islamist agenda, whilst competing with a growing role for non-Arab countries in the neighborhood. The fall of the Assad regime rapidly altered this dynamic; what had been a stronghold for Iran until December 8 has now become a key ally for Arab states of the Gulf and a partner for Türkiye.

For Ankara, Syria is pivotal for its ties to the Arab states in the region. However, the significant presence and strong role of Kurdish forces in northeastern Syria have created tensions between Türkiye and the U.S., Russia, and Iran at various points over the last decade. For Türkiye, the Kurdish issue is both a security concern and a domestic political question, making it an existential issue for Ankara.

Despite the significant focus on Türkiye’s role, its influence over the Syrian National Army (SNA), and the relationship between Türkiye and al-Sharaa, participants viewed the Gulf states’ roles—particularly that of Saudi Arabia and Qatar—as the most important. The shifts in Syria also have profound implications for the neighboring states of Iraq, Jordan, and Lebanon, as well as for the geopolitical projection of power. A regional policymaker present noted that, “What shape Syria takes under this transition will affect the entire region in a similar and inverse way to how Assad shaped the neighborhood.”

The discussion then turned to Jordan, emphasizing how it swiftly rushed to host the “Aqaba meeting” only days after Assad’s fall. The meeting hosted key regional stakeholders in order to coordinate their responsibilities, assess the upcoming challenges for Syria, and generate consensus regarding “joint strategic paths” for the benefit and stability of Syria and the region at large.

For the Gulf states, particularly Saudi Arabia, there is a desire to correct the course of policy in the region that started after the 2003 invasion of Iraq. For this reason, the region is choosing to embrace al-Sharaa and seeking means by which to work with him in a confident and productive manner. Support from neighboring Jordan and Lebanon, a country which is coping with its own serious issues, for the fledgling leadership of Syria will also aid this effort.

For Iraq, however, addressing the new reality in Syria requires a more delicate balancing act. Despite its dual position within the “Axis of Resistance,” Iraq has its own legacy and history with the Baath Party, including direct ties with the Assad regime. For current Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed Shia al-Sudani, the priority is to “protect Iraq’s national agenda, exercising a collaborative approach to relations with Syria, noting that Islamic State resurgence is the primary security threat along [Iraq’s] borders.”

In the meantime, Iran remains cautious, watching closely as the new situation unfolds. Iran experts present acknowledged a “strategic setback in Syria” with the fall of Assad, despite the fact that there was little public support left for Iran’s backing of the regime in Damascus. The prevalent sentiment in Tehran seems to be: “We have gotten rid of a terrible burden, which—especially since 2017—had become a significant expenditure with little to no return.”

While Assad’s fall has undoubtedly weakened Iran’s regional influence, Hezbollah’s military setbacks in Lebanon appear to pose a greater challenge for Tehran. Two competing interests remain for Iran: rebuilding the axis and focusing on a more diplomatic deterrence strategy through an alliance with the Arab states. Despite all this, a majority of experts at the dialogue noted that the bigger threat for Syria and the region remains Israel and its current military campaign.

Syria and Geopolitics: Russia and the United States

Global powers with interests in Syria, such as the U.S. and Russia, are also undergoing significant shifts, but with little understanding of how to engage with the new Syrian leadership.

An expert on U.S. policy towards Syria stated that, while the fall of Assad presents a strategic opportunity for the U.S., the Trump administration is unlikely to engage further with this current leadership. The U.S. government continues to designate HTS as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO), and, in this participant's assessment, that is unlikely to change under this administration. Furthermore, it was suggested that now is the time to "move past the question of U.S. troops in the northeast," without being drawn definitively into a discussion on whether there would be an upcoming withdrawal of U.S. troops. Moreover, acknowledging the increased tension from the recent Israeli incursions into Syrian territory beyond the occupied Golan Heights, it was noted that it would likely fall to the regional Abraham Accord signatories, namely the UAE, to "temper regional fears and settle [Israel] down."

Turning to Russia, the discussion emphasized that the fall of Assad is a significant setback. The "credibility of Moscow as a security provider in the region can now be challenged," one participant argued. Russia is focusing on limiting the damage by reaching out to al-Sharaa, seeking transactional arrangements to protect and secure its military infrastructure and to sustain the ongoing Russia-Syria economic pact. Negotiations on Russia's presence in Syria may hinge upon Moscow offering to continue the crucial wheat supply to support Syria's food security needs, in exchange for keeping Khmeimim military air base over Tartus naval base if forced to scale back its presence. The air base is particularly important for Russia as it offers a strategic hub for Russia's military activities in the Sahel and Sub-Saharan Africa. The goal for Russia would be to "construct a similar arrangement as that reached with the Taliban in Afghanistan."

Conclusion

Although powerful actors in the region, such as Iran, Türkiye, and Israel, offer various visions for the region, some participants lamented that Arab countries do not have their own. “Syria is the opportunity for Arabs to articulate a vision,” it was suggested.

However, it is difficult to separate Syria from the complexities of regional geopolitics and great power competition. The question of Iran’s declining regional influence, the increasing role of Saudi Arabia, Türkiye’s emboldened approach, and destabilization by Israel are all factors that will affect the trajectory of Syria’s transition.

First and foremost, any opportunity for Syria to progress towards a more tangible transition to democracy—or, at least, peace—requires the U.S. and Europe to engage more fervently and urgently. The lifting of sanctions is a precursor to the success of the transition, and, if not granted, it is likely to lead to failure or worse. Regarding a long-term agenda, the lack of political engagement and a clear roadmap raises major concerns, while the economic challenges of recovery and structural reform present a mammoth task for the new leadership in Damascus.

Political and social reconciliation will require close attention to the agenda of implementing justice and accountability systems. For now, the sentiment is that the pragmatism exercised by al-Sharaa and his closest aides will provide this new leadership in Syria with time to attempt rebuilding the country. However, Syria’s security remains precarious, as the government’s human resources remain limited and tensions persist with armed factions, such as the SNA, SDF, and other movements in the south. As such, the situation demands careful attention, reconciliation efforts, and regional collaboration to ensure that armed groups integrate into a national army that is inclusive and representative.

For Syrians, the honeymoon is not yet over, and it may not be for some time. However, this new beginning has brought forth an enormous number of challenges, existential questions, and genuine fears for the future. The coming six months will chart the course of the transition period, in which significant political and security questions must be addressed. The willingness of regional and global actors to invest in a post-Assad future remains clear, although not fully articulated at this stage. For Syrians, the challenges are numerous and the questions abundant, but the desire to return and work to rebuild their country is undeniable.



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