

# POLICY BRIEF NO: 8

## Syrian Transition at Year One – A New Struggle for Syria

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## Abstract

*December 8, 2024 marks the beginning of a “new struggle for Syria”. Among others, three challenges stand out in the transition period: legitimacy, regime consolidation, and reconstruction. While the new regime in Damascus under al-Shaara performed well in gaining international legitimacy, turning this into legitimacy back home has so far proved difficult. The question regarding the state system – whether Syria will be a central, unitary state or a decentralized, federative state – is a major point of controversy. In this paper, I look at the competition between different domestic and international actors and their struggle for the future of Syria.*

## Introduction

“The Struggle for Syria” is a commonly used title to describe Syrian politics. Seale (1965), in his seminal book, put Syria at the center of regional and international rivalries and explained how external powers have an eye on the country for influence and how its leaders are in constant search for outside allies to survive the political turmoil beset by coups. When Hafez Asad came to power in 1970, the struggle for Syria seemed to be over, only to come back with full force after four decades when the country entered a bitter civil war under the rule of his son, Bashar.



Syria’s multi-layered, multi-actor civil war started a “new struggle for Syria” as regional and global actors became parties to the war, making the country a battleground for regional and global rivalries. From 2017 onwards, as the Syrian civil war reached an impasse, the contours of the conflict were also defined: Asad would stay in power with the help of his allies Russia, Iran and Hizballah; the Kurdish groups would control the Northeast, mostly supported by the U.S.; Türkiye would continue to have a hold on the north in a quest to repel any threat – mainly from the Democratic Union Party (*Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat* - PYD) and its armed branches People’s Defence Units (YPG) and Women’s Protection Units (YPJ); while the opposition would continue to be confined mostly to Idlib, ruled by the *Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham* (HTS). When the Arab League welcomed Asad warmly back in May 2023, after 12 years of civil war, the debate on the struggle for Syria seemed to be over, with Asad remaining in power and the existing divisions managed, rather than ruled.

Yet, the road to a renewed struggle for Syria began with the developments in Gaza as Israel's attacks on Iran and Hizballah severely weakened Syria's allies and created a vacuum in Damascus. The opposition, led by the HTS, then marched to Damascus, and as Asad left for Russia, the regime collapsed within a short period of time. The swift pace of events led to questions regarding the future of the country, and once again brought back the debate of a "New Struggle for Syria".

Since December 8, 2024, there has indeed been a struggle for Syria, domestically, regionally, and somehow internationally. Since the HTS-led groups captured Damascus, established a transition government, and declared Ahmed al-Shaara as President, three significant challenges stand out: legitimacy, regime consolidation, and reconstruction.

At the core of all these challenges lies the question regarding the state system - what kind of a state will be built in Syria - a centralized, unitary state or a decentralized, federative state. The new struggle for Syria centers on this question. The President of the transitional government, al-Shaara, has underlined that Damascus is pushing for a unitary, central government. Domestically, the Sunni groups; regionally most states, mainly Türkiye, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and the Gulf states; and internationally the US are with al-Shaara, pushing for a central Syria. Those opposing centralization and calling for a decentralized state include domestically, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), the majority of the Druze, and the Alawites; and regionally, Israel. This competition,

especially between Türkiye and Israel, risks bringing further escalation into Syria.

## Garnering International Legitimacy

Many regional countries that supported the opposition during the civil war hailed the fall of the Asad regime and the new rulers of Damascus. Türkiye was quick to express support, and close cooperation began in rebuilding Syria. Being the first country al-Shaara visited, Saudi Arabia, like the other Gulf countries, also supported the transition, particularly in terms of providing financial support. Considering the dire need of the new regime to reconstruct the war-torn country, attracting Gulf money is a priority in the regional relations. The support of especially Türkiye and Saudi Arabia has been critical in bringing the new Syrian leadership in a series of contacts with the US administration that, among others, led to the lifting of sanctions on Syria, and a warm welcome in the White House last month, making Al-Shaara the first Syrian president to have visited the White House. The international legitimacy that the visits to the UN and the Western capitals have given to the new regime has been immense.

The US administration thinks that the new regime in Syria could help put the Middle East in order. As the US President Trump told al-Shaara in Riyadh in May, he had a "tremendous opportunity to do something historic in his country," (Reals and Walsh, 2025) and asked al-Shaara to address these

issues: joining the Abraham Accords; expelling foreign and Palestinian fighters; helping the US prevent an Islamic State (IS) resurgence; and assuming responsibility for the detention facilities holding IS members in the northeast.

In case he could deliver on these points, Trump said, the way for full restoration of US diplomatic relations, deeper economic ties, and the cancellation of longstanding congressional sanctions could follow. Damascus has been doing better in some of these terms than in others. Important figures in the Palestinian resistance were expelled, and recently, Syria announced joining the anti-IS coalition, which was a big step. This could weaken the significance of the SDF as an ally for the US in the fight against IS.

The new regime's relations with Russia, in the meantime, have been complicated. As Russia has supported the Asad regime during the civil war and Asad is currently sheltered in Russia, the extent of Russia's relations with the new regime is a big question. Although the Russian military presence has declined, it is still keeping strategic locations such as the Hmeimim airbase, the Tartous port, and the Qamishli Airport. The recent exchange of visits proves that Damascus is in a quest to develop further ties with Moscow. Although another important step in gaining international legitimacy, considering the ongoing war in Ukraine, and the tense Russian-Western relations, more Russian involvement could sharpen the struggle in Syria, where many actors are already in a bitter competition.

## Challenges - Domestic Consolidation and Regional Competition

Despite the successful foreign visits that legitimized and increased the popularity of the new Syrian regime, this has not so far guaranteed a central, legitimate government in Damascus. Growing intercommunal violence regarding the Druze and the Alawites has been fueling the push for decentralization/federalism. The SDF has already been supporting this idea, despite the March 10 agreement with Damascus to integrate into the new Syrian state.

Over the past year, the country witnessed a series of rounds of revenge killings against the Alawites, to which the Asad family belonged. In March, more than 1700 were killed in Latakia, and in the last weeks of November, another round of killings occurred in Homs. The Alawite community held large demonstrations demanding the following: right to self-determination; the release of members of the community detained since Asad's fall; and an end to all acts of violence against members of their sect.

The Druze community also repeatedly called for the right to self-determination over the past year. The events of July in Suwayda ended with over 800 Druze dead and 900 wounded. The Druze leadership, three sheikhs divided along family lines, reacted differently. While Sheikhs

Hinnawi and Jerboa engaged with Damascus and were interested in a centralized, unified state, Sheikh Hijri has been calling for external help, mainly from Israel, against the al-Shaara government. Calling the government illegitimate (Al-Arabiya, 2025) he has been leading the call for a decentralized Syria.

Since Asad's fall, the SDF has also been vocal in demanding a decentralized, federal Syria. Although an agreement signed on March 10 by the SDF leader Mazlum Abdi and al-Shaara called to integrate all civil and military institutions in northeast Syria under the administration of the Syrian state, including border crossings, the [Qamishli International] Airport, and oil and gas fields (Sarkar, 2025), the question of how this integration, especially into the army, will take place kept the process at an impasse. The SDF wants to join the Syrian army as a single bloc, while Damascus wants it to dissolve and its members to join the army as individuals, a position also backed by Türkiye. SDF leader Abdi, during his talk at The Middle East Peace and Security Forum at the American University of Duhok last month, once again called for a decentralized Syria. He said, "After a 15-year-long war, there must be a decentralized Syria, and the peoples of this region should rule themselves". (Hawar News, 2025)

Israel has been the main supporter of the idea of a decentralized Syria. As the HTS marched to Damascus and captured the state, Israel has been concerned about the new rulers of Syria and has carried out a series of bombings targeting the military centers and the air force, trying to avoid any attack on itself. The HTS leadership,

before 8 December, had declared support for the 7 October Hamas attacks, mourned the assassinations of Hamas leaders Haniyeh and Sinwar, and pursued an anti-Israeli stance.

Netanyahu has previously referred to the new Damascus government as an "extremist Islamic regime and a threat to the state of Israel" (Salem, Tawfeeq and Humayun, 2025). The Israeli government unilaterally declared a demilitarization zone in southern Syria, extended its occupation in the Golan, and repeatedly launched air strikes on the country. It is interesting to see that while the US has been trying to push Syria to join the Abraham Accords with Israel, Israel has been attacking Syrian territory to keep the regime weak, extending occupation beyond the Golan, and pushing for enhanced cooperation with the SDF and the Druze. As Damascus called for restraint and the possibility of a peace agreement seems low at this stage, it is mainly Türkiye that sees Israel's Syria policy as a threat. Türkiye has been extremely critical of Israel's regional policy, and Israel has been concerned about the growing role of Türkiye in Syria, making Syria a theater where Turkish-Israeli regional rivalry is played out.

## Conclusion

Looking back at one year of transition, the new Syrian government has performed well in one major area: gathering international legitimacy. In terms of consolidation and reconstruction, there are important limitations. The need for reconstruction is not only about finances, but also about rebuilding effective state institutions. Many observers warn

against the renewal of the nepotistic networks close to Bashar Asad's corrupt regime in the new leadership. A comprehensive and inclusive constitution will be the key to building the state institutions and creating a new Syria. Yet, as the debate on the state system continues, there are more challenges ahead.

Many observers note that the role of the US is declining in shaping Middle East politics. Observations on the conference held in Duhok, mentioned above, underscore this point – that it lacked any reference to the role of the U.S. in the future of Syria and the region's security architecture, while emphasizing an enhanced role for regional powers. Although the role of regional actors has indeed increased, I argue against a decline in the U.S. role.

On the anniversary of the change in Syria, the contours of the Middle East regional order are being drawn by the U.S., as it is brokering a peace deal in Gaza, albeit fragile, while also setting the agenda in Syria. I am not overlooking the agency of Syrian domestic actors or the regional actors and their active role in Syria. In what could be termed the “new struggle for Syria”, the role of regional actors and their competing visions for the country's future is crucial. Yet, this competition between the Israeli projection of a decentralized Syria or the Turkish/Saudi projection of a centralized unified Syria might be leading to further turmoil than calm. It seems that the future of the country depends more on which regional actor and its projection Washington will support.

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