



Middle East Dialogue

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Syria

The fall of Bashar al-Assad regime in Syria in December 2024 has brought about a significant reorientation in the Middle East, including changes to the regional landscape and wider alliances. It also fundamentally changes the prospects for Syria as a country. Even so, after 14 years of a brutal civil and regional war, the country has enormous challenges. As per one Syrian expert who recently returned to Damascus: “we are sitting on huge levels of [physical] destruction. Fifty percent of Syrians are not at home and cannot go home. Ninety percent of Syrians are below the poverty line. Education levels are low. The health sector has collapsed.” In addition, the expert noted that there are social questions that need to be responded to under the new leadership of interim President Ahmed Al Sharaa: “[secular] versus Islamist is another big question or challenge. Will they have a new social contract with Islamic values but not an Islamist political agenda? The Arab versus Kurd [fault line] is not just [about] the Kurds and Damascus but also involves Turkey. The outcome needs to satisfy different sides in order to last.”

One Syrian UN official echoed the challenges, emphasizing the economic challenges including the burden of daily struggles and lack of access to public services, while noting positive trends since Assad’s fall, notably the recapture of public space and the level of freedom of expression, both long denied to generations of Syrians.

Meanwhile, a Turkish policy expert noted that “transitional justice must be done with international support...100,000 people disappeared...Reconciliation efforts must be done in Syrian civil society. Everyone wants to have a say in the future of Syria, rightfully. What can be the way that they will feel included but not lead to a messy form of transition where no decision can be made, or lead to different countries to destabilize Syria? This can turn into a geopolitical vortex and generate a new set of conflicts in the region.”

There was broad consensus that economic challenges need to be alleviated quickly—both in forms of immediate recovery and aid coupled with investment to support restructuring. This must come in the form of long-term sanctions waivers from the United States alongside the lifting of sanctions from European countries.

Despite the apprehension towards interim Syrian President Al Sharaa among regional countries, there was consensus among the dialogue participants that he has significant legitimacy and popularity with the Syrian people at this time. There was also acknowledgement that the Syrian public has little desire or energy to demand more political engagement through this turbulent transition or even a military response to Israel. Although, one Lebanese policy expert highlighted the dangers of continued Israeli aggression as a watershed moment, which was echoed by Iranian and Turkish experts.

The Gulf states are concerned about counterterrorism, foreign fighters, and the perceived risk of an ISIS resurgence. One Emirati policy expert noted the need for Al Sharaa to deliver on power-sharing arrangements within Syria to placate concerns about his Jihadi past and his relationship with his former armed group, Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham (HTS). As one Turkish expert noted: "Everyone is trying to create their own Atlantis in Syria. Countries without power sharing are asking it for power sharing. They [Syrians] should not be the victim of rising expectations." Despite public perception, the expert was cautious about Turkey's role, "Turkey has limited support in Idlib [HTS]. I've never seen Ankara this cautious." Further risks of Turkey's expanded involvement were targeted at the level of the HTS and SDF (Syrian Democratic Forces) negotiation in the northeast, while the risk from Israel is seen by Ankara as an overt conflict driver that they would not ignore.

From across the region, there is hesitancy regarding the new authority in Damascus and how it shapes the region and geopolitical alliances. For Iraq, there are various challenges and concerns, notably security, the established ethnic power balance between the Kurds and Arabs, counterterrorism, and threats from Israel. There is also the complicated historical legacy of the Ba'ath regime and Iraq's relations with Syria. For Iran, it was noted that there is a significant difference between the fall of Assad and the weakening of Hezbollah, with the latter treated as a much bigger strategic defeat. Assad, conversely, became a burden on the state and cost the regime significant political capital, according to one Iranian expert. Iranian participants noted that now the major concerns for the Islamic Republic center on Israel and its wider territorial aggression.

One Syrian participant posed something of a reality check during the discussion, lamenting that "there is an expectation for Syria to be the poster child. The wish list is huge and unrealistic and is coming from many who don't even practice half of what they are asking Syria to become. There is a lot of goodwill in advising Al Sharaa and Syria, and if Syria manages to implement half of which we are managing, then it will be a good path."

Recommendations

Sanctions

- Need for goodwill and pathway from Washington to waive sanctions and from the EU to lift sanctions
- Offer sanctions relief as an incentive towards an inclusive political process and transitional justice roadmap

Stabilization

- Regional diplomatic efforts are needed to prevent Syria from once again becoming a regional battleground

Regional Security

- Rebuild an inclusive national military, including the disarmament of armed factions
- Regional and international training of the newly formed Syrian military can serve as an important incentive and support mechanism

Economic Recovery

- Prioritize support to the public sector, with a focus on education, health, and energy (both financial support and technical expertise)
- Encourage private sector engagement through the lifting and waiving of sanctions, which will provide confidence to the banking system to enable investment into Syria

Reconstruction

- Should be part of a regional/Levant “Marshall Plan” (including Syria, Lebanon, and Gaza)

Moderator's note

A group of dialogue participants met virtually on March 15, 2025, to discuss the implications of the insurgency led by remnants of the former Assad regime that took place on March 8, 2025, and the sectarian violence that followed it.

A Syrian expert noted these recent developments showed that the post-Assad era is still bloody, with communal divisions running deep—notably the longstanding Alawite/Sunni division. For some segments of Syrian society, the insurgency revealed the fragility and insecurity of the interim authorities in Damascus. For the Alawite community, their worst fears came true along with the realization that fellow Syrians will support their killing.

The agreement signed by interim Syrian President Al Sharaa and SDF leader Mazloum Abdi was surprising to Syrians. Both parties needed this agreement: Al Sharaa to regain some of his legitimacy domestically and internationally and Abdi to secure a ceasefire. US pressure on an upcoming withdrawal was key to bringing Abdi to the table. However, the agreement is more of a goodwill move, as it does not address most of the differences that divide Arabs and Kurds. The same has been said of the agreement reached with the Druze in Suwayda within the same time frame. The Syrian expert noted that “the national dialogue conference provided a space for a one-day honest discussion among Syrians. The issues that were raised during the discussions were not reflected in the final statement. The constitutional declaration provides a roadmap that gives Al Sharaa the powers he is seeking without solving any of the issues Syrians are focused on.”

Following the sectarian violence in Syria, pro-Iran groups started pressuring the Iraqi government to take a more hardline stance against the Syrian government. There are ongoing attempts by these groups to frame the violence targeting the Alawites as part of an overall narrative of Shia targeting and grievances, with the objective of mobilizing Iraqi Shia against the interim authorities in Syria. Given that this is an election year in Iraq, Iraqi officials are attuned to this heightening in the public narrative that is increasingly antagonistic toward the Syrian leadership.

An Iranian academic argued that while Iran still has capabilities to engage in internal Syrian matters, most Iranian officials do not intend to do so unless new regional dynamics require it (i.e., a joint US-Israeli attack against Iran). This will change both Tehran's cost-benefit calculus of action in Syria and its strategy of engaging against the US and Israel on Syrian territory. Part of that strategy is to maximize the conflict parameters in the region by linking its security to regional insecurity.