

Syria's Transition at the Crossroads: Will the New Syria become a Pillar of Stability or a Source of Turmoil for the Region?

Like the sudden melting of a “frozen revolution”, the 14-year-old resistance against the Baathist dictatorship of Bashar al-Assad celebrated a belated success. In December last year hope returned to Syrians for a life free of fear and oppression despite the fact that the agents of change were not the ones many had wished for. Although the honeymoon with the new Islamist rulers is over, Syria is not anymore a doomed country where time seemed to stand still. It has become dynamic. Overnight, Syria was turned into a key component of the transforming architecture of the Middle East that started on 7 October 2023 with Hamas’ attack on Israelis and Israel’s military backlash against Hamas and Hezbollah. The new macro-picture of the region is now void of the Iranian dominated Shia Crescent once reaching from Teheran to Beirut and displays instead a Sunni axis from Turkey in the north to Syria in the south, affecting domestic arrangements in Lebanon, Iraq and even the Palestinian territories. In the centre of events, the new rulers in Damascus are faced with a plethora of challenges against New Syria’s unity, stability and territorial integrity.

Brief Points:

- In December, Syria was suddenly turned into a key component of the transforming architecture of the Middle East that started on 7 October 2023 with Hamas’ attack on Israelis and Israel’s military backlash against Hamas and Hezbollah.
- Syria’s new rulers are facing a plethora of challenges in an effort that can be viewed in three phases of transition: stabilization, pluralization and democratization. Each phase has its own imperatives and dangers.
- The Islamist-dominated government is well aware of bad examples that they do not intend to repeat: Afghanistan, Egypt, Libya, Tunisia.
- By trying to avoid a downward spiral, the new rulers are facing the tightrope balance between stability and legitimacy. The entire region would profit from a success of this rare experiment.

What the International Crisis Group has called “a race against the clock”¹, where multiple tasks ideally need to be accomplished in parallel, can also be analysed as an unfolding of transitional phases, while each one of them has its own imperatives. The first one after a shock event is the phase of prioritized *stabilization* in which the monopoly of power has to be restored internally, and resilience against external spoilers needs to grow. Naturally, the circle of trust is small, governing structures are still largely informal and imperfect, mistrust and insecurity reign high. Since Damascus was taken by a heterogeneous alliance of groups with different agendas and loyalties, the balancing act to satisfy both radical Islamists and more secular actors plus the international community is a tightrope walk for Interim President Ahmed Al-Sharaa and his entourage.

The second stage may be seen as a phase of *pluralization* during which the new rulers base their power on a broader basis. Without a certain amount of stability, pluralization appears a risk as seen from the window of the Presidential Palace. But by failing to pluralize at the right moment, inflexible rulers may contribute to erode stability as dissatisfaction, mistrust and criticism grow within segments of the population that feel left out and demand more inclusion.

The third stage – if everything goes well – would be the phase of *democratization*, since political change and popular power were at the core of Syrian revolution’s demands and will be the yardstick for many Syrians inside and outside the country to measure the new rulers. Here, however, we lack a good example from the Middle East where a Salafist jihadi force turned into a moderate, technocratic, economy-oriented power that would even allow to put their own performance to a popular test. Also, incentives are diminishing over time, particularly when democracies are facing unprecedented challenges in Syria’s neighbourhood like in Turkey and Israel. Still, Syrian civil society’s voices are loud in this regard and indications even from the rulers exist to possibly embark on such an experiment, *if* the next steps follow the roadmap laid out by Al-Sharaa himself.

At this juncture, the transition process in Syria can be located at the interface of phase one and two with a temporary Constitutional Declaration and new, more inclusive and technocratic cabinet in place. Still, big question marks exist with regard to stability and monopoly of state power after the massacres against Alawite civilians in March by radical jihadi groups

under loose or no command from Damascus, and an ongoing counter-insurgency by Iranian-backed pockets of the old Assad regime. Equally, the nascent phase two has been criticized as not pluralistic and inclusive enough. Power is still predominantly in the hands of the President and his circle of trust. Despite a breakthrough pre-agreement between the Centre and the Kurdish-dominated Autonomous Administration in the North-East and close consultations with the historically obstinate Druze community, risks of centrifugal dynamics persist, especially with Israel’s interest in establishing minority proxies and a weak and decentralized Syrian neighbour. In this regard, the current state of Syria’s transition can be regarded as a balancing act between the imperatives of stabilization and pluralization or between stability and legitimacy.

Phase three would consist of free and fair elections after the drafting of a new permanent constitution within a period of five years, as Al-Sharaa has announced. Again, a tightrope walk in a polarized environment: He has mostly avoided the term democracy until now but spoke of elections. The period of five years looks reasonable given the immense challenges in a highly destroyed country where half of the population is displaced, cadastres are destroyed and the economy is in shatters. It also makes sense with regard to mistakes made elsewhere like in Iraq after 2003, where the US had insisted on early elections no matter what just to tick the box of “democracy”. On the other hand, in five years a lot can happen that lowers the incentives of the rulers giving up power to a transparent and accountable system of governance.

It is now up to the multitude of Syrians, Syrian NGOs, nascent political parties in Syria and the diaspora to keep up their loud demands and nudge the rulers towards this goal in each further step, while international donors dispose of remnant sanctions and granting aid as a leverage. At the same time, holding back support and insisting on too many conditions too early would endanger Syria’s urgently needed economic recovery and thus endanger stability and increase the risk of a full-fledged civil war, which would make any aspirations for good governance, inclusivity, women’s rights etc. obsolete. Therefore, the European willingness to lift further sanctions and especially the announcement of US-President Donald Trump in Riyadh on 13 May to lift all US sanctions to give Syrians a new chance, are encouraging steps but also a downpayment by the international community with high expectations on Damascus.

The transitional government will only be able to implement its ambitious political agenda under a reasonably stable economic and social framework. Syria's economy shrank by twelve percent annually between 2011 and 2018 and is now at just one-third of its pre-war level of 2010. Compared to normal conditions during the same period, Syria's economy has lost approximately USD 300 billion due to destruction and lost production, according to the World Bank.² Reconstruction alone is estimated to cost USD 250 billion. The new government in Damascus has estimated the country's debt at USD 20 to 23 billion, despite a gross domestic product of just USD 17.5 billion.³ According to the UN, around 90 percent of Syrians live in poverty, and 70 percent are dependent on humanitarian aid.⁴ Given the potential return of hundreds of thousands of refugees from neighbouring countries (Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey), the situation could become even more critical. At the same time, losers of an unsuccessful transition may cause new refugee flows to the Eastern Mediterranean as thousands of new Alawite refugees have already been reported trickling into Lebanon. Christians and other minorities may follow in a bad-case-scenario, since they are also traditionally better connected abroad.

In fact, the Islamist-dominated transitional government is well aware of bad examples that they do not intend to repeat. One of them is Afghanistan. Despite its Salafist orientation, Afghanistan cannot serve as a model for the new rulers in Syria. While the situation in HTS-administered Idlib could be considered socially very conservative, it was and is in no way comparable to the repressive Taliban regime. International political and economic isolation also runs counter to the new rulers' interest in an economic upturn in Damascus. Not only western countries would shy away from any interaction with Damascus, also Arab countries, who oppose radical Salafi ideology from Egypt to the Emirates, even today's Saudi Arabia, would start working to undermine the new project.

Secondly, in Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood had the chance to democratically assume government responsibility after the Arab Spring in mid-2012 to mid-2013. However, they squandered this opportunity due to their one-sided Islamist policies and poor governance. As a result, they quickly lost support among the population, including large sections of the religious Sunni community. The military's overthrow of President Mohammad Morsi therefore enjoyed broad

support. Similar tendencies can be observed in Syria with Islamist fighters intimidating Christian women asking them to wear the hijab, threatening "infidels" or even massacring Alawites and some Christians in a frenzy of collective revenge. Indeed, Al-Sharaa is receiving increased headwind from radicals within his own movement, from inside HTS especially in Idlib, some of whom consider him a traitor succumbing to Western demands.

Thirdly, Libya has been in a civil war since the overthrow of long-time ruler Muammar Gaddafi in 2011, which led to a de facto east-west division of the country. This scenario could also occur in Syria if the various militias, including the Kurdish dominated forces in the North-East, fail to buy into the national agenda despite the commitment from March this year. Preventing the Libyan scenario – or Iraq's situation after 2003 – also provided the reason for Al-Sharaa to keep Syria's institutions mostly intact (and with them many personnel from the Assad regime, although, over time, an increasing number of civil servants have reportedly been sent home).

Fourthly, Al-Sharaa himself referred to developments in Tunisia. He expressed concern that, after an initially successful transition with a new constitution and substantial steps toward democracy, a dictatorship could be re-established as a result of democratic elections. In Tunisia, the incumbent president, Kais Saied, has gradually built an autocratic regime after his election in 2019. In an anti-Islamist and authoritarian backlash, Al-Sharaa and many others would end up in torture chambers again like under the Baathists.

By trying to avoid these deterring examples, the new rulers are facing the tightrope balance between stability (in their own hands) and legitimacy. Al-Sharaa has embraced a vision of a pragmatic, market-based order. The economic successes achieved in Idlib under HTS rule, including the digitization of services, serve as a guide. As HTS has demonstrated in Idlib, the government is willing to make concessions in the implementation of strict Salafist rules, especially when faced with resistance from the population or international pressure. Their interest is staying in power, avoiding a hunger revolt or mass vendettas and, in the best case, obtaining a popular mandate through elections later on, or in a worse scenario, hold on to power by sacrificing legitimacy and fight off internal enemies with the acquired apparatus.

The success or failure of this process will have large repercussions for the entire region. Another flux of Syrian refugees would be only one aspect of it. Another aspect would be proxy wars between agents of Iranian influence and agents of the new Sunni axis. Syria would be sending again shockwaves into the region, re-activating and attracting more foreign fighters, weapons, liberating thousands of IS prisoners from detentions camps in the North-East and potentially galvanizing IS sleeper cells and other radical frustrated elements for whom the rulers in Damascus have become too liberal.

The losers of the process would obviously like to see the transition fail. Above all, this is Iran and certain strata of Syrian society – not only Alawites and some Christians but also Assad-loyal Sunnis, however clearly a minority – that receive backing in a hybrid warfare, also in social media. Iran is also supporting the new “Islamic Resistance Front” that has vowed to liberate the Golan and further occupied areas from Israel. Coupled with a continuation of Israel’s aggressive military and hybrid engagement in a weakened Syria, this may distort the domestic discourse and create a nationalist tone quite similar from Baathist times where the attention is diverted from real problems of governance and economic performance and replaced by ideological frenzy. The other loser, Russia, has played it with caution, conscious of its leverage. It has maintained its military bases in Hmeimim and Tartous, has declared readiness to reconstruct what its bombers put to debris for years, and to continue to print the Syrian Lira in Russia.

Turkey, on the other hand, has moved from a potential spoiler to an actor pursuing Syria’s unity and stability. But everything hinges on a successful domestic reconciliation process that needs to be sustained with the PKK and thus between Damascus and the Kurds in Qamishli. In alliance with Qatar, Turkey forms one camp of foreign influence, while the UAE, Saudi Arabia and Jordan sympathize with more secular groups in the south. It would be disastrous for Syria if not only Israel continues to drive wedges into Syrian society but if also the different camps of Arab supporters pulled into different directions, a déjà vu of times of the failed revolution.

For western policy makers, the view on Syria’s transition in terms of phases means that they should carefully calibrate their carrot-and-sticks policy in line with a realistic roadmap. After having failed to support the moderate opposition in 2011/12, they should give a benefit of the doubt for the fact that Syrians have finally taken their fate into their own hands. At the same time, Europeans should strongly continue their support of Syrian civil society in their own countries and in Syria itself. Many have been exposed to democracy and rule of law for years now and therefore have been the most critical voices on certain behaviours of the new rulers. Their determination needs support, so that freedom in this window of opportunity will not be strangled by new rulers with old methods in different clothing. The entire region would profit from a success of this rare experiment, including with a faint chance of a peace architecture that would one day include Syria, other Arab countries and Israel.

Endnotes

¹ <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/east-mediterranean-mena/syria/b95-new-syria-halting-dangerous-drift>

² <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/424551565105634645/pdf/Growth-after-War-in-Syria.pdf>

³ <https://www.piie.com/blogs/realtime-economics/2025/syria-needs-debt-restructuring-will-be-difficult>

⁴ <https://news.un.org/en/story/2025/02/1160346>

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THE PROJECT

Re-Imagining the Eastern Mediterranean

This project aims to explore the Eastern Mediterranean as a distinct geopolitical space in the context of global and regional transitions. It conceptualizes the Eastern Mediterranean's new geopolitical identity both historically and theoretically and looks at its security and politico-economic prospects. At the same time, it tracks the main challenges that regional states face, and attempts to re-imagine the patterns of conflict and cooperation by examining the potential of regionalism and inter-state cooperation in various sectors. Moreover, the project keeps monitoring conflict and peace-building dynamics (e.g. in Syria and Libya) as well as region-building/regionalism processes in the Eastern Mediterranean and the role of state and non-state actors.

PRIO

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