



After Assad: Who Shapes Syria Now?

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Summary

On 26 March 2025, the Swedish Institute of International Affairs (UI) held a closed workshop titled “Syria After Assad: Competing Powers and the Struggle for Stability”. The event brought together researchers and experts specializing in Syrian and regional affairs to discuss potential scenarios for Syria’s future following the fall of Bashar al-Assad’s regime. The discussions were structured around three sessions, one covering internal dynamics and two parts focusing on regional dimensions.

The workshop aimed to shed light on the key challenges Syria faces in the post-Assad phase, analyse the roles of domestic and regional actors, and explore critical issues such as: political legitimacy, the role of civil society, press freedom, and paths toward transitional justice and reconstruction.

Since the workshop, several important developments have occurred in Syria and the broader region, including changes in U.S. and EU sanctions policies and recent announcements regarding the PKK’s organizational status. These and other events are not covered in the report and may influence future assessments of the issues discussed. The views and conclusions presented reflect the perspectives shared by individual participants at the time of the meeting. They do not necessarily represent a consensus or the position of all attendees.

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Internal dynamics

The first session of the workshop examined the political, economic, and social transformations that have taken place in Syria following the collapse of the previous regime and the emergence of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) as the de facto authority in northwestern Syria since late 2024, under the leadership of Ahmad al-Shara (formerly known as Abu Mohammad al-Julani). This transition marked a critical turning point, raising serious questions about the future of governance in Syria, the nature of political alternatives, and the prospects for a democratic, pluralistic order.

While the fall of the regime brought initial relief to some sectors of Syrian society, the rise of HTS an actor with a jihadist background triggered concern both domestically and internationally, particularly due to the absence of guarantees for basic freedoms and widespread scepticism about the group's intentions to reform. Some international actors initially expressed a limited willingness to engage with the new authority, in what was perceived as an opportunity to give HTS a chance to prove itself. However, this openness gradually faded as it became clear that the new leadership was more focused on consolidating power and seeking external legitimacy than on addressing the urgent needs of the population or initiating meaningful political reform.

The session then focused on the institutional and economic challenges faced by Syria in this context, as well as the deeper dilemmas related to the legitimacy of emerging actors, the fractured social fabric, and persistent

sectarian and regional divisions in the absence of a unifying social contract or coherent political project. Some key internal challenges discussed included:

- **Resurfacing of social divisions:** Long suppressed under Assad's security apparatus, social divisions are now resurfacing.
- **Political legitimacy:** There is an ongoing absence of elections or genuine representative mechanisms.
- **Internal fragmentation:** The ruling authority remains fragmented, undermining its coherence and stability.
- **Sharaa's leadership:** Ahmad al-Shara is a man skilled at reinventing himself. His authoritarianism will remain subdued to avoid alienating the conservative backers essential for securing investments in the country. This political pragmatism reflects the delicate balance he must maintain to navigate Syria's fractured political landscape.
- **Long-standing divisions:** Fragmentation within Syrian society—between rural and urban populations, and between the rich and the poor—has resurfaced. These divisions were built up over more than 50 years under the Assad regime.
- **Ongoing Israeli military operations:** Contributing to Syria's continued instability, Israeli actions have



targeted HTS and other areas. While HTS has no direct reason to engage in conflict with Israel, the pro-Palestinian stance of its support base compels it to act cautiously. Recent Israeli attacks on HTS have shown that the attempt to maintain a 'cold peace' has not succeeded. Israel has declared certain areas of Syria off-limits to HTS and has carried out widespread bombings across the country to assert its dominance over the military landscape. While Israel appears to favor a fragmented Syria, neighboring countries such as Jordan prefer a stable and unified Syria to prevent a potential domino effect across the region.

- **Devastated economy:** The cost of rebuilding Syria is estimated to be between 250 and 400 billion USD. However, the situation has worsened due to the removal of subsidies on essential items like bread and gas. For example, bread for family use used to cost 400 Syrian pounds, but now it has risen to 4,000 Syrian pounds. This increase has placed significant pressure on families, especially those relying on government assistance. Additionally, the removal of subsidies on gas is also affecting daily life, further burdening households in these difficult economic times.

HTS and SDF: Contradictions in International Discourse

The session addressed the contradiction in how international powers engage with local actors. While Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS)—despite its authoritarian tendencies and jihadist roots—has been given an indirect diplomatic opening, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) have faced continuous delegitimization, particularly by Turkey, which considers them an extension of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). However, the SDF has made efforts toward implementing transitional justice, whereas HTS is likely to pursue an authoritarian path. Notably, SDF, despite criticisms regarding militarized governance or limited inclusivity, has maintained a model of local self-administration involving Arab, Kurdish, Assyrian, and other communities. Yet this model has not received the same level of international flexibility afforded to HTS. This disparity highlights a fundamental problem in counterterrorism policy, prompting questions about the criteria used to define a "terrorist" actor and whether those criteria align with humanitarian and human rights principles.

The Kurdish Question and Internal Dialogue

The discussion also touched on the intra-Kurdish dialogue currently taking place in northeastern Syria, aiming to reach a unified vision regarding Kurdish political representation within Syria. Despite political divisions among Kurdish parties, efforts are underway to identify common priorities, including:



- Recognition of Kurdish national identity;
- Establishment of a decentralized democratic framework; and,
- Agreement on a collective position regarding Syria's future state structure,

Nonetheless, doubts remain about the ability of Kurdish factions to reach consensus, and about the willingness of the new authorities or international stakeholders to recognize these demands. Moreover, Turkey's persistent criminalization of Kurdish aspirations was seen as a destabilizing factor that threatens the broader stability of the north.

Economy and Sanctions: Survival Before Justice

While there has been some temporary easing of sanctions, the practical benefits of this move remain minimal due to bureaucratic obstacles and weak implementation capacity. The idea of delisting HTS as a terrorist entity to facilitate international funding was also discussed, though participants warned that such a move would carry serious risks, particularly given HTS's increasingly authoritarian conduct and lack of transparency.

Accordingly, some speakers emphasized that any sanctions relief must be conditional upon real and verifiable reforms, and that legitimizing an undemocratic authority through aid mechanisms would be counterproductive. There were also calls for greater political honesty from international actors, urging them to stop pretending that a

democratic transition is underway when evidence suggests otherwise.

Toward Genuine Stability: Justice, Pluralism, and Environment

In conclusion, the discussion underlined that no real stability can be achieved in Syria without:

- A bottom-up democratic process, not only externally imposed top-down solutions;
- Meaningful inclusion of all ethnic, religious, and gender groups in the political process;
- Active involvement of local civil society and the Syrian diaspora in shaping future governance;
- A serious transitional justice framework, starting with an independent judiciary and financial transparency;
- Reconsideration of the state-centric model in favour of alternative governance structures; and,
- Ensuring food security through environmentally sustainable and long-term development policies.

These internal dynamics are further complicated by the regional power contestation, as explored in the following session.



Regional Interference I: Governments

Following the fall of the Assad regime, regional powers re-emerged with divergent agendas, some seeking to stabilize Syria, others contributing to its fragmentation. The evolving situation presented opportunities for actors like **Turkey** to reassert their influence under the banner of stability. Turkey dominates the economy, which does not automatically allow for the opening of Syrian domestic production. However, Turkey's motives extended beyond reconstruction, aiming instead to fulfill long-term strategic objectives, including eliminating any form of autonomous Kurdish governance and safeguarding economic interests critical to sustaining the current administration in Ankara.

Turkey's current strategy resembles its approach during 2015–2016, when it selectively engaged Kurdish factions based on national security priorities. With a new de facto authority rising in northern Syria whose rapid consolidation of power took Ankara by surprise, Turkey has seized the moment to foster a long-term alliance with a compliant local partner, one that reinforces its border policy and curbs Kurdish self-rule ambitions. Turkish actions suggest Kurds need to be “defanged,” meaning no more cross-border intra-Kurdish coordination and cooperation. Meanwhile, **the Gulf** states have shown readiness to engage with the new Syrian authorities and may be among the few actors with both the financial capacity and political leverage to negotiate sanctions relief with the **United States**. However, Washington's current position appears unfocused and

lacking in sustained engagement with the Syria file.

The European Union, too, has expressed an interest in a stable Syria, largely to facilitate the return of Syrian refugees. Nevertheless, its role has been marked by delay, limited involvement, and a lack of urgency in pushing for sanctions relief an element closely tied to broader development goals. This hesitation has weakened the EU's potential to influence Syria's reconstruction trajectory.

On the other hand, **Israel** has been one of the first regional actors to escalate efforts aimed at destabilizing and fragmenting Syria following the regime's fall. This has included intensified airstrikes and expanded operations in the occupied Golan Heights, forming part of a strategy to prevent the emergence of a unified and capable Syrian state along its borders.

Iran, by contrast, has entered a phase of strategic uncertainty following the collapse of its allied regime. Syria had long served as a key node in Iran's regional influence architecture, largely due to its geographic connection to Iraq and Hezbollah in Lebanon. It also played a vital role in facilitating the China's BRI “Belt and Road Initiative” through control of major border crossings. Tehran's concerns escalated significantly after the targeting of Alawite communities, fueling fears about the resurgence of Sunni radicalism and the potential spillover into Iraq, which has now become the primary focus of Iranian geopolitical attention. Conversely, its attempts at expanding influence have most likely failed. Turkey has now taken over control, and the Kurds may shift their focus to Iran encouraged by both



Ankara and Tel Aviv. Iran must still absorb the lessons and costs of losing Assad.

In parallel, there is growing unease in Tehran over Israel's efforts to reconstruct areas in Syria and to form new local alliances—moves perceived as direct threats to Iran's strategic position. Despite Syria's strategic importance to Iran, Tehran has yet to articulate a clear or effective policy, making it, by default, one of the main contributors to ongoing regional instability.

As for the lifting of sanctions, the United States will most likely require a complete severance of ties with both Iranian and Palestinian radical groups before initiating any sanctions relief or eventual suspension. The Gulf states remain the only actors with both the capacity and the willingness to invest, but they will require the agreement of the Trump administration in the US. At the same time, Israel is actively lobbying against the lifting of sanctions.

Ultimately, the workshop discussion underscored that regional powers tend to interpret the Syrian crisis through the lens of their own strategic interests. Rather than supporting a stable political transition, these actors frequently engage in fragmented interventions. The path toward building a new Syria, however, must be anchored in the agency of the Syrian people themselves—not shaped solely by regional influence or transient alliances.

Regional Interference II: Governance, Media, and Diaspora

The third and final session of the workshop focused on the regional implications of Syria's current transitional phase. Participants explored how military fragmentation, shifting donor policies, international sanctions, and geopolitical competition have collectively shaped the post-Assad environment. The session also addressed the evolving landscape of press freedom and the role of the Syrian diaspora.

Fragmentation of Armed Groups and the Limits of Control

Despite attempts by the new governing authority to convey an image of centralized rule and forces, this is more a narrative than an operational reality as the country and groups remains fragmented. HTS is among the most organized groups, yet it functions through a loose coalition of affiliated factions. The Syrian National Army (SNA) has maintained connections with both Turkey and HTS. In southern Syria, factions previously aligned with the Assad regime and Russian forces fractured further following the political shift. Meanwhile, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and its partners continue to operate independently from HTS-controlled zones.

This structural disunity presents a major barrier to stability. HTS lacks the financial and institutional capacity to unify or support a coherent armed force. Many factions operate on separate payrolls, often funded by Turkey or other regional backers, reinforcing external leverage and limiting efforts toward unified governance.



International Aid Gaps and the Impact of USAID's Withdrawal

A major point of discussion was the departure of USAID from Syria. This shift has significantly impacted local administrative capacity, as the withdrawal represents a 40% decrease in aid to Syria. Although the European Union has attempted to fill the vacuum, its contribution remains modest. The group noted that while some sanctions have been eased, the relief has been limited and too slow to produce meaningful effects. Bureaucratic obstacles and weak institutional frameworks continue to hinder the flow and effectiveness of international assistance. The foreign direct investment that is urgently needed the only measure capable of mitigating the immediate catastrophic situation—is unlikely to materialize through a one-year suspension of sanctions.

Debates Around Delisting HTS and Risks of Premature Legitimacy

One controversial issue discussed was the potential removal of HTS from international terrorism lists to unlock funding and institutional support. However, concerns remain about the absence of accountability mechanisms and the authoritarian tendencies of HTS leadership. The proposal was considered risky in the absence of genuine reform.

European Union Policy and the Politics of Refugee Return

The European Union's Syria policy was scrutinized, particularly in relation to refugee return. Syria is increasingly viewed as a

possible destination for returnees, but current conditions—marked by poor service provision, ongoing security threats, and lack of legal protections—do not support voluntary and safe return. Another problem of returnees is that children who have been mostly raised abroad see no future in Syria but their parents have unrealistic ideas of a return. The discussion noted limited strategic coherence in EU engagement and minimal influence over destabilizing actors, including Israeli operations within Syria.

Press Freedom and the Role of the Diaspora

There is now more press freedom than under Assad, but limits still exist, and it remains unclear how stable or clear these limits will be. The diaspora has played a key role in advancing this debate and fostering interaction, but it is not free from sectarian influences. Despite some openings in the media space, press freedom remains constrained. Investigative journalism is largely absent, and state censorship has re-emerged. While the constitution formally protects freedom of expression, these protections are undermined by vague national security clauses. Social media platforms have become critical for public dialogue, but they also contribute to political polarization.

The Syrian diaspora and independent journalists were acknowledged for their expanded roles in advocacy and transitional justice. Their efforts, especially online, continue to serve as a space for documenting abuses, proposing reforms, and engaging in dialogue on Syria's future. Despite operating in difficult conditions, these actors help



sustain a measure of openness absent under the former regime.

Key Observations

The session concluded with an overview of the intersecting challenges that must be addressed in any future stabilization strategy:

- Continued fragmentation of the security environment;
- Sharaa is a man for all seasons, skilled at reinventing himself. His authoritarianism will remain subdued to avoid alienating the conservative backers essential for securing investments in the country;
- Gaps in development and humanitarian aid;
- Restricted media and civil society space; and
- Inadequate conditions for refugee return.

Taken together, these dynamics highlight the complexity of Syria's recovery and the need for more coordinated and principled international engagement.

Conclusions

Across the three sessions, the workshop offered a comprehensive examination of Syria's evolving landscape in the wake of regime collapse. From the domestic complexities of political legitimacy and economic collapse to the influence of competing regional and international agendas, a picture emerged of a country facing a multifaceted transition fraught with both risk and possibility.

Internally, Syria remains entangled in structural fragmentation, lacking an inclusive political framework or functioning institutions capable of addressing the urgent needs of its population. The emergence of new power centers has not resolved old grievances; rather, it has introduced new forms of exclusion and control, often at the expense of democratic potential.

Regionally, external actors continue to approach Syria through the prism of their own strategic calculations. While some seek stabilization, others pursue influence through fragmentation and alignment with local proxies. This has reinforced the crisis rather than helped resolve it.

Key cross-cutting concerns included the sustainability of international aid in the absence of political reform, the implications of designating or delisting non-state actors, the viability of refugee return under current conditions, and the urgent need for transitional justice and media freedom as pillars of any reconstruction process.

The path forward, while uncertain, will depend on international actors moving beyond short-term interests and aligning their engagement with the priorities and rights of Syrians themselves. Only through a principled, inclusive, and transparent approach can a sustainable future for Syria begin to take shape.



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