

SYRIA AFTER BASHAR AL-ASSAD'S FALL - CHANGES AND CHALLENGES

Abstract

The Syrian conflict, which began in 2011, has evolved into one of the longest and most devastating wars in the modern history of the Middle East. The situation has been characterized by political complexities, ethno-sectarian confrontations, large-scale forced migration, and the involvement of external powers, resulting in a transformative crisis for the country. By the end of 2024, the overthrow of Bashar al-Assad's regime and the subsequent transfer of power to Ahmad al-Sharaa (also known as Abu Muhammad al-Julani) and the transitional government marked a new chapter not only in Syria's domestic affairs but also within the regional international system. This article examines the key directions that shape the country's political reality in the post-Assad era.

The formation of the new government and sources of legitimacy present two main tasks for Al Sharaa's administration during the power transition: first, to consolidate legitimate authority among various social groups; and second, to restore state institutions and ensure their effective functioning.

The new leader, previously linked to Islamist military-political structures, endeavored to shift the focus from armed resistance to political governance. His primary sources of legitimacy stemmed from two factors: external support, evidenced by the recognition of the transitional government by Western nations; and internal agreements, notably the historic deal reached with Kurdish factions. Nevertheless, Syria's political agenda continues to highlight the challenges of state consolidation.

Keywords: *Post-Revolutionary Syria, Regional actors, Alawites, Bedouin, Druze*

The Syrian conflict, which began in 2011, has become one of the longest and most devastating wars in the modern Middle East. Political complexities, ethno-sectarian confrontations, large-scale forced migration, and the involvement of external powers turned the country into a transformative crisis. By the end of 2024, the overthrow of Bashar al-Assad's regime and the transfer of power to Ahmad al-Sharaa (Abu Muhammad al-Julani) and the transitional government marked a new stage not only for Syria's domestic development but also for the regional international system. The article reviews the main directions that define the country's political reality in the post-Assad era.

Formation of the new government and sources of legitimacy

Al-Sharaa's government was confronted with two primary tasks during the power transfer process: first, to consolidate its legitimacy among diverse social groups; and second, to restore and ensure the functioning of state institutions.

The new leader, previously affiliated with Islamist military-political structures, endeavored to shift the focus from armed resistance to political governance. His main sources of legitimacy stemmed from two key factors: external support—specifically, the recognition of the transitional government by Western nations; and internal agreements—the historic deal reached with Kurdish formations. However, Syria's political landscape remains complicated by challenges surrounding state consolidation.

Dynamics of Foreign Relations

Western Engagement: The United States and the European Union

Al-Sharaa's administration swiftly sought to establish diplomatic ties with Western nations. The United States and the European Union recognized the transitional authority as a legitimate partner, launching initiatives aimed at supporting Syria's economic recovery and facilitating the repatriation of refugees. This Western support is motivated by both humanitarian concerns and geopolitical interests, as integrating Syria into the Western sphere of influence may be viewed as a strategic effort to mitigate Iranian and Russian influence in the region.

Regional Powers: Turkey and the Gulf States

In recent years, Turkey has actively engaged in northern Syria, continuing to assert its influence in the region. Ankara aims to safeguard its security interests, particularly in containing Kurdish formations, while also seeking to enhance its economic position.

Equally noteworthy is the increasing involvement of the Gulf Arab states. Both Saudi Arabia and Qatar view the new government as a chance to mitigate Iran's regional influence and to expand opportunities for economic cooperation.

Russia

For many years, Syria represented a strategic partner for Russia, providing access to military bases in the Mediterranean region. The new government has adopted a more cautious stance on this matter: Moscow remains intent on preserving its military infrastructure. This signals the emergence of a new balance of power, in which Syria seeks to assume a more flexible position.

Iran

The most sensitive and contentious dimension concerns Iran. During Assad's rule, Tehran exercised substantial influence over Syria's domestic and foreign policy through both military and financial means. The advent of the new government has considerably weakened this influence. Iran is attempting to retain its position by relying on Shiite militias and struggling for relevance in post-Assad Syria. However, Syria and Iran now face a serious crisis in their bilateral relations.

Israel

For Israel, Syria's transitional period carries dual significance. Israel is deeply invested in the reduction of Iranian influence; it continues to conduct regular military operations on Syrian territory, particularly against Iran-backed formations. The new government thus confronts a complex dilemma: the necessity of defending national sovereignty while simultaneously

avoiding the outbreak of a large-scale war.

Domestic Political Challenges

Agreement with the Kurds

The agreement reached with Kurdish formations may be regarded as a significant political breakthrough. For years, one of the central axes of the conflict had been the question of Kurdish status.

Alawites, Bedouin, and Druze

The Alawite community, which under Assad's rule constituted a central political pillar, has found itself in a vulnerable position within the new reality. For them, the new government is associated with the loss of power and the risk of political marginalization. A similar situation exists within the Bedouin and the Druze communities, which continue to represent one of the most sensitive factors in maintaining internal stability.

Economic and Humanitarian Realities

Return of Refugees

As a result of the war, millions of refugees were compelled to leave Syria. The new government has set as a priority the gradual return of these refugees. Yet the implementation of this policy is closely tied to large-scale social and economic challenges: the destruction of housing infrastructure, shortages of employment opportunities, and persistent security concerns.

Reconstruction of Infrastructure and Investment

Economic rehabilitation is inconceivable without large-scale investment. Beyond Western assistance, the country is actively seeking to attract investors from within the region as well. The reconstruction of infrastructure—roads, energy facilities, and water resource management—constitutes a necessary precondition for the stabilization of Syria's economy.

Syria as a Regional Hub

Post-Assad Syria has emerged as a regional arena in which the interests of various external powers intersect: the United States and the European Union seek to expand their influence; Russia strives to maintain its military presence; Turkey is focused on security and economic interests; Iran struggles to restore its lost positions; and Israel prioritizes the containment of Iranian formations. Consequently, Syria has been transformed into a kind of geopolitical hub, where the rivalries of regional powers will determine not only the country's future but also the stability of the broader Middle East.

Conclusion

The reality of post-Assad Syria is multifaceted and complex. The new government simultaneously faces both internal and external challenges. The preservation of national unity and the consolidation of state institutions depend only in part on internal agreements; they are also shaped by the balance of interests among external actors.

Ultimately, Syria stands at a crossroads between two alternative paths: The construction of an institutionalized state, grounded in broad domestic consensus and multipolar foreign relations, or dependence on external powers, which would once again render the country a space of conflict and tension.

The outlook remains uncertain, yet it is evident that Syria's future will play a decisive role in shaping the architecture of regional security and the balance of international power.