
THE NEAR EAST DIMENSION

AL-ASSAD'S FALL AND THE SYRIAN PROSPECTS: REGIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL DIMENSIONS

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The article examines how the overthrow of Al-Assad's regime affected political dynamics in Syria and international politics in the Middle East. The author analyzes influential factors that created favorable environment for the military opposition's offensive. The article studies the main stages of the military uprising against Al-Assad in terms of the key actors' battle activities. The author examines the specifics of the transitional state system and the interim government's measures aimed to resolve political and economic problems in Syria. Main attention is paid to security problems, constitutional and state developments, social and economic reconstruction, regarding new administration policies aimed at securing its power and safeguarding Syrian sovereignty and territorial integrity. The key regional and world players' policies in Syria and their relations with the new administration are presented. The author concludes that the fall of Al-Assad marked a new phase in the Syrian conflict and affected critical factors in determining future regional developments by increasing the possibility of new international conflicts and territorial splits in the Middle East.

Keywords: Syria, Al-Assad, uprising, opposition, Middle East.

Introduction

At the turn of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the Middle East passed through a number of significant political transformations. The end of the Cold War and the collapse of the bipolar world system marked a new stage in international relations in the region. The former political system of the 1970s that engaged the Middle East in world politics followed the Cold War era has been gradually changing. The world powers strived for global dominance, and the Middle East witnessed a struggle for influence between major regional and international actors. Their political perceptions included the use of military force to shape the regional power balance in their own favor.

The involvement of Middle Eastern states in globalization processes has caused critical changes to state's systems. Most Mideast countries were on the verge of transferring power from one ruler to another, from an old order to new opportunities. The military has been deeply involved in politics. The armed forces have become the most

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important political instrument in the hands of Arab rulers. A distinctive feature of recent decades has been the noticeable strengthening of the Islamist factor in Middle Eastern politics.

The lack of democratic institutions in the Middle East determines the weakness of Arab states in comparison with such social institutions as religion, community, and family. In contrast to the proclaimed secular nature of the state, religious fundamentalism remains deeply rooted in Arab-Muslim societies. Muslim clerics actively influence the identity, power balance and legislative practice of the state.

The politicization of Islam has caused sectarian destruction, which has brought the Arab religious sphere into a permanent state of crisis. The radicalization of Islamic movements has advanced their leaders' desire for power in the Middle Eastern states. The specifics of regional political processes have affected the sphere of spiritual life and marked a significant shift in people's behavioral patterns. On the eve of the Arab Spring, most Middle Eastern states were politically fragmented. There was a clear demand in society for a strong and responsible state that could effectively control over the process of reforms and democratization.

However, on the eve of the Arab Spring, most Middle Eastern countries passed through a transitional development phase. They experienced political fragmentation and the concentration of state power in the hands of certain family clans and ruling elites. Many Arab states witnessed growing grievances between civil society and old authoritarian systems. The ability of Middle Eastern leaders to resist domestic and international challenges was limited. The crisis of Arab regimes and the ideology of Arabism, along with the growing sectarian extremism, facilitated Israel's, Turkey's, and Iran's advancement of their interests in the Middle East (Grinin and Korotayev 2022: 595–624).

The Arab Spring radically changed the political environment and destabilized the security balance in the region. Over the past decades, the Middle East has been one of the most turbulent and conflict-ridden regions in the world. The level of confrontation has had a pronounced upward trend. The emergence of new regional conflicts with a long-standing political background has led to the destruction of local political systems and state institutions.

The Syrian crisis has shaped a new phase in political and military struggle for the Middle East. The Syrian crisis has lasted for more than 14 years and has become an exceptional case in contemporary Middle East politics. The civil war in Syria has exacerbated the conflict in the region and caused critical changes in regional security. The key international players have viewed the Syrian crisis as a new opportunity to strengthen their positions in the process of reshaping the Middle East.

Despite the successes achieved by Bashar al-Assad with the help of Russia, Syria remained politically divided into regional and international influence zones. The ability of the ruling regime to maintain territorial integrity and al-Assad's prospects for long-term political survival were under question. A sharp economic crisis could result in the political defeat of the ruling regime at any moment. The war in Gaza in 2023, combined with the consequences of the Syrian crisis, formed a group of factors in late 2024 that provided favorable conditions for an armed opposition offensive and led to the collapse of al-Assad's regime.

The Determinants of al-Assad's Fall

The deformation of the state power structure and state institutions based on family ties and sectarian balances caused an acute crisis among Syrian elites, weakening the regime and reducing its legitimacy both in Syria and abroad. The civil war annihilated main state institutions and negatively affected the state's abilities to govern. The crisis caused the decentralization of power, promoting conspiratorial political approaches and power struggles within the ruling elite (see Akhmedov 2022). Bashar Al-Assad sought to reshape the state mode, using the support of external forces. The process of reform within the local elites led to the emergence of new power groups rooted in public and private economic enterprises and military organizations. Warlords, political intermediaries and drug smugglers who made their capital from Syrian civil war filled the void left by the elite. This situation negatively influenced economic sectors due to the technological backwardness of the new civilian elites and their dependence on security services, whose officer corps experienced a systemic crisis (see Akhmedov 2023).

The crisis seriously affected the national army and security apparatus. The Syrian army suffered a significant reduction in personnel and military equipment, and serious changes occurred in its organizational structures. Before the crisis, the Syrian Army had lost 50 % of its 220,000 soldiers and officers. As a result, fewer than 20,000–25,000 men remained under the full control of the Syrian military command. Besides, 150,000–200,000 fighters served in militia units. During the first years of the crisis, the ruling elite sought for support from different foreign militias loyal to the regime. These measures raised factionalism within the officer corps and weakened the authority of the central military command. According to sectarian parameters, most of the regular army personnel were represented by Sunni. However, the real leadership in the armed forces was in hands of Alawites (van Dusen 1972: 123–136).

One of the most powerful combat units like the Republican Guard Division (DRG) and the 4th Special Division, as well as new militia units, such as 25th Assault Brigade (Tiger Forces), are entirely staffed by Alawites. Military Intelligence and other special services closely monitored the Sunni officers. Sunni commanders preferred not to show any initiative and followed orders blindly. Since the first years of the crisis, 20 combat divisions of the SAA used no more than a third of its personnel and combat forces to fight rebels. Many Sunni militaries were suspected of lacking loyalty to the regime, and their secret aspirations for the opposition. Defection of more than 3,000 officers (Sunni) depleted the officer corps and caused changes in sectarian balance within the army leadership. The Alawites occupied almost all command positions in the army (Ziadeh 2013). The regime relied only on Alawite officers, local militias, and irregular forces like 'Shabiha'.¹ Assad's reliance on confessional militias to fight armed opposition raised serious skepticism about his strategic and military capabilities (Akhmedov 2018: 62–65).

The national armed forces and security agencies were a weak point in the ruling regime. By the end of 2024, the Syrian army began to form on a conscription basis and effectively turned into volunteer units. Many fighters from the 5th Corps, created by the Russian military, did not have special military training and were older than the conscripts (Akhmedov 2023). On the other hand, the number of irregular army units formed with Iran's support amounted to 150–200 thousand people whose true interests were far

from the real needs of the Syrian state. The role of central command significantly reduced, and many security forces went out of the regime's control and struggled not for Syrian interests, but for their own. Destructions caused by the army and their lack of combat abilities, combined with a weak combat spirit and an ideological orientation, caused changes in the behavioral patterns of military personnel and decreased their ability and motivation to defend the regime.

By the end of 2021, total economic losses exceeded \$650 billion. The consumer prices increased by 670 % in 2021. The reduction of oil production led to an acute fuel crisis in Syria. In January 2023, Iran resumed supplies of oil to Syria, interrupted at the end of 2022. However, Iranian aid could not fully meet the needs of the Syrian economy. To stop the economic decline, the Syrian economy needed 200 million barrels per day. Negative developments in the public sector were accompanied by corruption that increased and amounted to 20–25 % of the GNP by 2022. The economic crisis could result in the collapse of regime at any time.

The Syrian social structure dramatically changed due to the civil war. By the spring of 2017, between 7 and 9 million Syrians had left the country. The Syrian population had decreased to 16 million from 22–24 million before the crisis. At the end of 2017, about 80 % of the Syrian territory was under the control of Al-Assad's forces, where about 75 % of the total Syrian population lived. Sunni Arabs made up 42 % of the population, compared to 87 % in areas controlled by armed opposition group. Significant casualties among civilian population, millions of refugees, and huge destructions changed the behavioral patterns of the Syrian population. The unresolved problem of Syrian refugees and al-Assad's refusal to form a coalition government in accordance with UN Security Council Resolution No 2254 torpedoed the process of national reconciliation and political settlement (Akhmedov 2022).

Sectarian strife has noticeably increased amid the deteriorating economic situation. A trend towards national separatism has clearly emerged in Syria. HTS militants found refuge in the Idlib province. Together with other jihadist forces, the HTS controlled about half of Idlib with suburbs, as well as parts of the neighboring provinces of Aleppo, Latakia, and Hama, where about 5 million Syrians lived (Stepanova 2012: 7–25). The process of normalization between Syria and Turkey was hampered by Al-Assad and hindered the final defeat of terrorist cells and the withdrawal of foreign troops from Syria. In September-October 2024, the HTS resumed its attacks on government forces, unleashing an armed conflict in the region.

The war in Gaza turned Syria into an area of Israeli-Iranian armed confrontation. Because of Iran-backed Shiite militias, Damascus found itself involved in a war with Israel, which thwarted plans for ending the military phase of the conflict. Iran's forceful participation in the Syrian conflict went along with confessional expansion. The spread of Shi'a faith and the alienation of significant part of public and private real estate properties in favor of Shiite fighters and their families caused growing protests among different strata of the Syrian population, including the officer corps. The change in power balance in Syria and increased international rivalry strengthened expansionist sentiments among regime opponents, while reducing the level of support from its Russia and Iran allies (see Akhmedov 2024). The weakening of the regime created favorable conditions for the opposition's offensive.

The Collapse of the Regime

The fall of the regime occurred because of coordinated and planned actions by Islamist opposition led by HTS (Issaev and Korotayev 2021). On November 27, 2024, HTS² launched a military operation in Idlib, which coincided with al-Assad's visit to Moscow. Within 24 hours, the opposition seized most of the Idlib province and gained control over western Aleppo. HTS blocked the Damascus-Aleppo international highway (Al-Badrawi 2024). The leader of the organization called on local residents in Dara'a (southern Syria) to join the fight against pro-Iran forces. By November 30, HTS was within a few kilometers from the center of Aleppo, held by Shiite and IRGC troops (Al-Quds 2024). In a phone call with Iraqi Prime Minister M. al-Sudani, al-Assad asked to send pro-Iran Popular Mobilization Forces from Iraq to Syria. Arab media reported that Tehran was ready to deliver about 20,000 fighters from Iraqi militia and IRGC forces to Syria (Qasemi 2024).

Iran was counting on air support from the Russian Aerospace Forces to protect logistical routes for sending militias and weapons to Syria from Iraq from Israeli and US air strikes. The US launched a series of air strikes on Shia militias on the Syrian-Iraqi border. Ankara declared its readiness to use force if Iran and Russia continued their armed support for al-Assad. Under these circumstances, many Shia militias in Iraq were skeptical about Tehran's ability to ensure their safe passage to Aleppo, and they refrained from participating in military operations against the Syrian opposition. The command of Iraq's Shiite militias, together with their IRGC handlers, concluded that sending fighters would pose a threat to the Axis of Resistance (Al-Saray 2024). On December 2, 2024, al-Assad met with Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi in Damascus. By that time, the rebels had already taken control of Aleppo and were rapidly advancing towards Hama. Iranian officials were forced to admit that Al-Assad's army was too weak to resist the rebel offensive (Rihan 2024). By early December, 2024, opposition had completely captured Aleppo, Idlib, and Hama and forwarded to Homs.

At the same time, the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) advanced towards the Golan Heights, violating the demarcation line (1974). The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) strengthened their positions at a checkpoint (Al-Bukamal) in the northeastern regions. In southern Syria, the Druze movement intensified. On the night of December 6–7, 2024, the opposition forces captured Homs, and on the evening of December 7, rebel units from southern Syria under command of al-Odeh entered the southern suburbs of Damascus. The SAR Ministry of Defense ordered the Syrian Military Counterintelligence Directorate troops to cease resistance. The Syrian military withdrew from the southern regions of Syria. On December 7, foreign ministers of Russia, Turkey, and Iran met in Doha (Qatar). The summit developed a common position on the situation in Syria. Al-Assad was offered to abdicate power in exchange for political asylum (Raid 2024).

The large number of opposition units accelerated the fall of the regime. The government forces were unable to immediately repel the opposition and were able to regroup only after several days. The SAA could not fight effectively without Russian air support and ground operations by the IRGC and Hezbollah. Because of the Gaza war and confrontation with Israel, Iran suffered heavy losses and was unable to ensure the safe delivery of weapons and fighters from Iraq and Lebanon to Syria. After the opposition advanced in Aleppo, Russian Intelligence received information that if the opposition took Hama and Homs, it would gain 80 % of the Syrian population's support.

To avoid excessive bloodshed, the Russian Air Forces ignored Iran's request to cover Iran-backed militias march from Iraq to fight the opposition in Aleppo. Moscow indicated that they were not much interested in al-Assad's persistence. The cost of defending the regime financially and militarily was no longer feasible for Russia and Iran. Turkey acted as a mediator in the dialogue between Tehran and HTS. Al-Sharaa guaranteed the safety of Alawites and Shiites, their holy places in Syria. By agreement with HTS, the IRGC's troops left several areas in Aleppo. The Hezbollah command ordered to evacuate the organization's troops from Syria. Since mid-December 2024, about 100,000 Hezbollah fighters and allied Syrian officers with their families moved to Lebanon (Mansour 2025). After HTS units backed by Turkey stormed Damascus in the night of December 7–8, al-Assad hastily left the Syrian capital and flew to Moscow from the Russian Air Force base in Hmeimim.

The First Steps in Power

The HTS played a decisive role in the collapse of al-Assad. However, it would have hardly been able to achieve such quick success without the participation of units from the Syrian National Army (SNA – former Free Syrian Army – FSA), Kurdish armed formations of the SDF and popular volunteer units from southern Syria (Mustafa 2024). The success of the armed opposition was also due to new tactics employed by HTS, which combined active combat operations with intensive psychological influence on the local population and the regime's forces. The opposition issued temporary certificates for surrendered soldiers and officers that ensured their immunity until a new order was established.

The success of the Military Command in overthrowing al-Assad depended on other objective factors that were no less significant than the military preparation and training. During the period of 2017–2024, the Salvation Government in Idlib demonstrated an ability to provide services and achieved some form of social justice in the areas under its control with a competitive advantage. However, it would be difficult to replicate this relative success in the rest of Syria without considering several fundamental factors. The previous Salvation Government gained de-facto legitimacy to govern the Interim Government under revolutionary legitimacy. This allowed it to lead the transitional phase under the banner of maintaining stability. However, to achieve legitimacy derived from the coherence of the governance system, the Military Command had to start with a constitution, followed by legislation, and community involvement. In the few weeks since al-Assad's fall, the new administration of Syria made clear its priorities for the transitional phase, largely relating to stability, administration, legitimacy, and sovereignty.

Almost immediately after the fall of al-Assad's regime, the new authorities announced that the political transition in Syria would result from the General National Congress, with the participation of all political forces. A Constitutional Assembly supposed to draft a new constitution and adopt laws on parties and elections. On December 10, 2024, Mohammed al-Bashir was appointed as the head of a 12-member cabinet. Later, six more ministers were added to the cabinet (Raid 2024). However, real power was in the hands of the Military Operations Directorate headed by al-Shara'a. The new administration sought to ensure security in order to start political transition and create a

stable environment that would encourage the return of refugees and inflow of investment.

The Military Command dissolved the security services of the fallen regime and targeted their command staff both in Syria and in neighboring Lebanon and Iraq. To establish security, the new rulers relied entirely on the military form of the Salvation Government dominated by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, which controlled Damascus. At the same time, the Military Command refused to recruit former Syrian military defectors from the SNA. Anyone who wanted to return to the army first had to get recommendations from HTS (Hiba 2024). However, in order to impose stability across Syria, the new security apparatus needed massive expansion. Any delay in this process could leave space for unrest and organized crime that the remnants of the former regime could exploit.

In less than a week after the fall of al-Assad, the Free Officers' Organization (Dubbat al-Ahrar) addressed the Military Command. In the appeal signed by retired corps general A. al-Wawi, the officers insisted on their participation in the construction of a new professional Syrian army based on secular and patriotic principles. They emphasized that the military should be under civilian control and should not fight against their own people. Dubbat al-Ahrar included former SAA officers who had defected during the crisis. They were mainly Sunnis from Homs. The organization counted 1,200 members. Firas Tlas, son of the former Syrian Defense Minister, headed the political bureau of 'Dubbat'. His elder son, General Manaf Tlas, took military leadership. Manaf was one of the associates close to Bashar and his late brother Basel al-Assad. Rumors of General Manaf's imminent return to Syria and a possible military coup speared through Damascus's markets (Sha'ar 2025).

In fact, the new government lacked legitimacy both within the country and abroad. Ahmad al-Shara'a paid most attention to foreign relations and creating an attractive image abroad, trying to enlist the support of influential international players, primarily the United States, Western Europe, the Persian Gulf monarchies, and Russia. Al-Shara'a sought international recognition in every possible way and wanted to remove the HTS from the list of terrorist organizations in order to ease sanctions against Damascus. Despite Washington's cancellation of the \$10 million reward for the capture of A. Sahara, the exclusion of the HTS from the US State Department and the Treasury's terrorist lists and the lifting of sanctions could hardly have occurred automatically, given the deployment of 2,000 American troops in Syria, the Trump administration's negative approach towards Islamists, and Washington's allied relations with the SDF. The US Air Force raids over Idlib in mid-January 2025 proved the US attitude towards the new Syrian authorities. The US airstrikes occurred a few days after the HTS reported disruption of an ISIS* operation targeting a Shiite shrine in Sayda al-Zeinab, while the new Syrian Interior Minister M. A. Rahman announced that his ministry would ensure the security of holy sites in contact with local residents (Nehme 2025).

The fall of al-Assad's regime challenged the regional states and their relations with Syria. Syria's regional neighbors feared the spread of revolutionary and Islamist ideas in their countries. Two largest countries in Arab world, Egypt and Algeria, were in no hurry to cooperate with the new authorities in Damascus. During the HTS offensive, Jordan supported al-Assad, and Iraq provided shelter for high-ranking al-Assad's security officers and al-Fatemiyoun (Afghanistan) and al-Zainabiyoun (Pakistan) brigades (Al-Arab 2024a). Given these concerns, Damascus avoided to associate the victory of HTS with

the 2011 revolution and its eventual spread to neighboring countries. The power change in Syria, along with the weakening of Iranian influence, opened up new opportunities for Gulf countries to strengthen their positions in the Middle East. The head of Qatar was the first among Arab leaders who visited Damascus after the HTS came to power, and promised to increase investment in the Syrian economy. Arab states competed with Turkey in Syria, which intensified cooperation with Damascus through special services in order to reshuffle political agenda in Syria in its favor. The head of Turkish intelligence (MIT) visited Damascus on December 13, 2024, and celebrated the victory of the HTS together with the new authorities at the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus.

Qatar and Turkey worked to rehabilitate Syria's international airports. Ankara also started a project to renovate the electricity network, first in Aleppo then across the country. Doha and Ankara sent a floating power station to supply the Syrian coast with electricity, while Jordan began repairing electricity mains supplying the country's south. On the other hand, Gulf States faced the threat of Israeli influence spreading and Iran's attempts to restore its positions in Levant in the near future. After December 8, 2024, Israeli aircraft conducted more than 400 air strikes on targets in Syria. Israel completely occupied the Golan Heights and the strategic high ground of Harmon Mounts. Iran evacuated its forces from Syria after the fall of the regime, but it still had a large number of supporters in Syria whom it intended to use to re-establish its position. Despite the fact that al-Shara'a declared Syrian territory cleared of pro-Iranian formations, 890,000 Shiites from Iran and Iraq, 783,000 from Lebanon, 360,000 Turkish Alawites, and 210,000 Shiite from the Persian Gulf countries lived in Damascus and its suburbs (Al-Shekh 2024). While the Military Command has already begun to tackle the country's priorities, it challenged several restrictions in the face of mounting demands. Al-Shara'a said on December 4, 2024 that his administration was only prepared to lead a transitional phase in Aleppo. This was largely due to the disorder and confusion reigning within the country, as well as the lack of a clear plan of action following al-Assad's fall. Many people in Syria and abroad were skeptical about the Military Command's ability to provide political development and constitutional reform, given the spread of rebellion and revolutionary sentiments throughout the country and foreign interference, primarily from Israel and Turkey. The emphasis on foreign relations distracted the new authorities from solving acute socio-economic problems and security issues. As a result, by the end of January 2025, the situation in Syria came to an impasse.

The Decisive Actions

In late January 2025, the new administration took decisive measures to restore order in the country by holding the so-called 'Congress of Victors' in Damascus. Commanders of all opposition combat units, as well as high-ranking civilian officials, attended this forum. The Congress abolished Syria's 2012 constitution and suspended all exceptional laws. The meeting dissolved the ruling Baath Party, the member parties of National Progressive Front bloc and their affiliated organizations, the People's Assembly and its committees, the former regime's army and security agencies with their various branches and names, along with all the militias it had established. The Congress dissolved all military, political and civil revolutionary units, including HTS, with their subsequent incorporation into new state institutions.

The cessation of HTS activities served as one of the compelling reasons for convening the Congress. Almost simultaneously with HTS, another terrorist cell of Al-Qaeda* in Syria, Hurras al-Din,³ announced its self-dissolution. This organization emerged as an alternative to HTS after the latter began to withdraw from fighting the regime's troops in Latakia and Homs, and started to cooperate with Turkey. This was seen by Al-Qaeda leaders as a departure from the common cause. After the change of power, most members of Hurras joined HTS (Al-Kinda 2025). The self-dissolution of these two terrorist organizations had a positive effect on the new administration's image and helped to ease international pressure.

The Congress became the first step towards the creation of new state institutions that supposed to maintain order throughout the country and establish a new state on legal basis in cooperation with allies of the new administration. Al-Shara'a's appointment as Syria's interim president empowered him to act as the leader of the Syrian Arab Republic and authorized to form a temporary legislative council for the transitional phase. The new administration moved from holding meetings and exchanging messages to more effective activity at the domestic and international levels. Al-Shara'a outlined priorities for the transitional period. New administration had to fill power vacuum, maintain civil peace, prevent Assad's remnants return to power, reform state institutions, reconstruct economy, industry, agriculture and the service sector, and restore Syria's traditional role in Levant through developing foreign relations.

To provide mechanisms for building legitimacy, new authorities had to address fundamental issues in line with structural challenges that Syria would face in the coming phase. The new regime urgently needed legislative and executive authority that would stem from a firm constitutional and legal foundation. Establishing constitutional legitimacy and national dialogue supposed participatory and inclusive framework. All such decisions had to be made through General National Congress. The new administration faced difficulty holding this forum, as each component would struggle to form a comprehensive national delegation to represent it. There had been no agreement with the Kurdish-dominated Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria. If the government opposed national quotas and federalism, Alawites and Druzes supported the principle of federalism, while Kurds and Christians advocated for expanded autonomy and creation of their own territorial enclaves, respectively. Organizing representative elections in a country where about 13 million Syrians live abroad or have been displaced was almost impossible task. The safe return of refugees depended on creating necessary social infrastructure and an economic environment.

On February 12, 2025, the Committee for National Dialogue began its work. In early March 2025, Ahmad al-Shara'a ordered to form an expert committee to draft a constitution. This committee included seven experts, one of whom, A. al-Korabi, made it clear that the Committee had to develop a legislative framework for the transitional period. Like the Committee for National Dialogue, the Constitutional committee was largely formed behind closed doors. This caused discontent among the Kurds, who insisted on developing a national partnership and changing the article on the religion of the head of state in the constitution (Shakay 2025). Given the lack of progress in negotiations with the Kurdish units in northeastern Syria, it was unclear whether the Kurds would participate in these committees and public forums on national dialogue and constitutional drafting. As a result, the new authorities had to declare that it would take

three to five years to prepare a new constitution and hold elections. Extended deadlines for the formation of legislative bodies could negatively affect prospects for economic development and cause discontent among the population with the socio-economic policies of the authorities. The political vacuum caused by the abolition of the former party system could lead to the creation of opposition political groups.

Economic reconstruction, effective administration and building relationships with the national bourgeoisie were other urgent tasks for the new government. Al-Shara'a announced a three-stage strategic plan for economic reconstruction. However, the inflation control tools used by the Salvation Government in Idlib were not effective in managing the recovery of the diverse and complex Syrian economy. The crisis Syrian economy was highly contracted, and investments in reconstruction could increase the risks of growth at the expense of vulnerable population groups. Once reconstruction began, it would cause rapid cash flow to markets and induce significant inflation. Approximately 60 % of the population may face the risk of food insecurity in the short term. To prevent public dissatisfaction with the current government, it had to establish a rapid safety net. Furthermore, competent individuals within these structures require indirect monitoring mechanisms, which cannot be provided by direct oversight methods that Salvation Government traditionally relied on to combat corruption. The Syrian administrative structure required approximately 2,000 senior-level national managers and around 10,000 middle-level managers.

The central authority, represented by the Interim Government, cannot monitor them directly. The new government faces significant challenges in selecting, training, monitoring, and holding personnel accountable through intermediary oversight mechanisms. The former oversight systems, such as the Central Commission for Control and Inspection and the Central Financial Control Authority have become core pillars of corruption and during crisis and lack effectiveness. Meanwhile, the government prepared to privatize 107 public sector enterprises and close unprofitable ones. According to the government's perception, the public sector needs no more than 600,000 people, which is 50 % of its total labor force. The dismissal of hundreds of thousands of civilians and military professionals could negatively affect domestic political stability, causing an increase in the number of unemployed people. The new authorities need about US\$10 billion annually to restore and maintain social infrastructure at the proper level.

Damascus placed a high priority on providing public services, as doing so would indicate that the new authorities had actually begun to rebuild the state and its institutions, which were essential for achieving domestic legitimacy. Providing a basic level of services would also help to establish security and encourage Syrian refugees to return in harmony with regional and international efforts to stabilize the region. The new administration promised significant improvements in the provision of services, especially electricity, water, sanitation, and housing. However, these improvements would require significant resources, and would take time to feel, meaning that external support would be crucial. The new administration faced huge challenges in providing these services, most notably the decrepit and war-torn infrastructure inherited from the previous regime, the bloated public sector, international sanctions, and a general lack of resources. Lifting sanctions and providing external support could help the new administration make progress in this area (Al-Mughril 2025).

Because the direct material losses from the crisis in the Syrian economy amount to US\$125–150 billion, in addition to indirect losses of US\$200–300 billion as a result of the shutdown of production cycles in a number of economic sectors. The GDP estimates dropped from \$58 billion in 2011 to approximately \$20–22 billion in 2024. To recover the lost GDP, Syria needs an annual growth rate of approximately 6–7 %. Consequently, restoring the lost GDP is unlikely to be achievable before 2040, even with open investment markets (Omran Strategic Studies, 2025). In general, reconstruction requires resources that are currently unavailable, particularly in light of ongoing sanctions. Donor aid in such amounts is unlikely to arrive, and one-time investments from Qatar and Turkey will not produce the desired effect. After the US lifted a number of restrictions on Damascus, national business moved to Syria. Mohammad Hamsho, R. Kutali, and H. Kadru, who served the business interests of Maher al-Assad, have expressed their willingness to return hundreds of millions of US dollars to the Syrian treasury, so that they can conduct their business in the country. Samer Foz, the owner of the Four Seasons hotel chain, known as Bashar al-Assad's unofficial residences, has partially resumed investments in Syria. The head of al-Qatarji trade and industrial company, Muhammad Baraa Qaterji, has invested in a number of oil production and processing industries. The largest sugar monopolist, Tarif al-Akhras, the uncle of B. al-Assad's wife allegedly sent a personal message to al-Shara'a and voluntarily transferred all his enterprises to the service of the HTS (Al-Akhbar 2025b). As the Syrian planning system is not equipped to quickly address the above mentioned challenges, establishing proper relations with business and civil society organizations is considered as an essential part of creating a positive environment for the return of investment in Syria and should not be limited to charitable activities alone.

The new administration worked to establish professional armed force whose structure and combat doctrine differed from that of the previous regime. The Ministry of Defense has begun to integrate armed factions from the Military Command to be followed by the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army. Eventually, it planned to integrate all remaining armed groups in Syria. To reconstruct the Syrian military and monopolize arms in the state's hands, the new administration relied on domestic dialogue and the support of regional and international allies. Meanwhile, the transition from mosaic armed factions to a new professional army required careful planning and stability among various parties to achieve a unified effort in support of a single national project.

The Military Operations Directorate formed a new intelligence service, headed by Anas Khattab, whose task was to ensure internal security and combat espionage. However, the new authorities left the organizational structure of the Interior Ministry unchanged. The security personnel from the HTS Salvation Government performed the duties of the dismissed former command staff. A. al-Shara'a promoted the Minister of Defense and the Chief of General Staff to the rank of Brigadier General. Other commanders from HTS and allied forces served in positions as Major General and colonel. The new appointments were supposed to facilitate the subsequent disbandment of the formations and their incorporation into the army (Al-Jazeera Net 2025). The creation of a new army faced great difficulties. Kurdish armed units refused to disband and negotiated conditions for their incorporation in the new army. By the beginning of March 2025, only 18 divisions and 50 combat units had expressed their readiness to join the new national army. Many people in Syria believed that the surrender of weapons would

occur only after the establishment of a legitimate authority, and criticized the interim government's actions.

Meanwhile, a delay in the creation of a new security structure has been critical for Syrian stability and its territorial integrity. ISIS⁴ units have become more active in the Syrian Desert (Shero 2025). There are about 4,000 members of ISIS in SDF prisons. More than 12,000 ISIS fighters from Arab and Western countries, mostly Syrians and Iraqis, are jailed in 26 prisons in northeastern Syria. The SDF has conditioned their extradition on guarantees for its own security. The clashes erupted in February-March 2025 in the suburbs of Damascus (Jarmana) between internal security forces and the local armed opposition demonstrated the inability of the new authorities to take full control of this area, adjacent to the Suwayda province, where the Druze opposition has strong influence. The Israel-affiliated Syrian Brigade party issued a statement in support of the federal structure of the state and called on Damascus authorities to negotiate a peace treaty with Israel. The Hikmat al-Hijri sect, supported by Druze sheikhs, and the Suwayda Military Council announced the creation of their own army (Al-Akhbar 2025a). Al-Assad's remnants and military personnel found refuge in the mountainous regions of the Mediterranean coast and neighboring Lebanon under the protection of Hezbollah. They planned a terrorist attack on the new regime in order to destabilize the situation and disrupt economic development plans.

The Mutiny on the Coast

On March 6, 2025, loyalists of al-Assad launched a series of coordinated attacks in cities and villages along the country's coastline in the first operation of its kind since the regime's collapse on December 8. The attacks began with several ambushes along the Latakia-Jableh-Banias highway which cut the road. Former regime forces attacked and seized control of key sites, including a naval command center and a college near Jableh, as well as Criminal Security agency facilities in Latakia and Jableh, the Regional Command HQ in Qardaha and the National Hospital in Jableh. The rebels also cut roads to the military airport at Satamo, the Hmeimim base bridge, and the Tartus port checkpoints. The initial attack killed 16 members of the General Security, while 47 others were kidnapped and arrested after being surrounded.

According to the Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR), the mutiny on the coast was provoked by al-Assad's remnants and supported by the IRGC and Hezbollah. The attack coincided with the announcement of the formation of the military council signed by Brigadier General Ghiath Dala, a high-ranking officer in the former Fourth Division and a confidant of al-Assad's brother Maher. Dala issued a statement that urged citizens to take up arms against the new rulers of Syria. General Dala received financial aid from Hezbollah and Iraqi militias, as well as logistical support from the SDF. Dala established ties with General M. Jaber, the former commander of the SAA Special Forces unit 'Desert Falcons,' as well as with Y. al-Hajalam, who led the operational headquarters of the 25th division under the command of S. al-Hassan. The whole operation was allegedly led by M. al-Assad. On March 5, he left Iraq for Moscow to meet with Bashar al-Assad. The former head of Syrian Air Force Counterintelligence, I. al-Khoweiji allegedly led the attack on the criminal police department in Latakia. The attack came a day after the IRGC announced the formation of a group called the Islamic Resistance in Syria, as well as the '313th Force for Jihad in Syria'. The attack of Al-Assad's loyalists coincided with unrest in the southwestern province of Suwayda and in

Jarmana, as well as with the deployment of SDF reinforcements around the Tishreen Dam and Maskana fronts. The recently-formed Supreme Council of Alawite Sheikhs supported the loyalist attacks in response to security forces' harassment of coastal Alawites and appealed for help from Russia in supporting Syria's Alawite enclave (Al-Jazeera Net 2025).

In response to developments on the coast, the new Ministry of Interior called for a general mobilization, and the Ministry of Defense, in coordination with military divisions deployed in Syria's south, center and north, sent large reinforcements towards the coast where they launched a major counter-attack against al-Assad loyalists. This pushed General Dala to issue a statement calling for negotiations and calm. The government security and military force quickly halted the assault by al-Assad's loyalists, seizing security headquarters and major checkpoints in cities along the Syrian coast within 12 hours. Then, the authorities conducted a widespread search operation in mountains along the coast to find and eliminate loyalist forces, taking advantage of the general alert and arrival of about 15,000 fighters to the region. According to SNHR, local and foreign units formally assigned to the Ministry of Defense were responsible for reprisals against civilians during the cleanup operation. The Syrian Organization for Human Rights (SOHR) estimated the total number of victims as 1,383 people by March 10, 2024, most of whom were Alawites. SOHR estimates that 800 Alawites were killed during the cleansing operation. Al-Assad's loyalists killed more than 300 military and civilian leaders of the new regime (Al-Quds 2025a). The government's rapid response and the insurgents' failure to take control of Tartus, Jableh, and Latakia thwarted their plans, helped by Syrian public hostility towards al-Assad's loyalists and the chaos they wanted to create.

The events on the coast revealed a group of hidden threats that the new administration faced in governing the country. The armed uprising of al-Assad's loyalists on March 6–9, 2025, on the Mediterranean coast, which claimed the lives of hundreds of military and civilians from the law enforcement agencies and civil administration, was not the first clash between opposing sides since the HTS came to power, but it was the largest, bloodiest and potentially most dangerous clash. Since December 2024, the Syrian coast has witnessed clashes between supporters and opponents of the new regime, supported by Israel, Turkey, and Iran in the context of their regional rivalry and struggles over Syria. Moreover, Tel Aviv, Ankara, and Tehran have used sectarian factors and played on the feelings of national minorities and their apocalyptic moods: the Alawites on the coast, the Druze in the south, and the Kurds in northeastern Syria.

Apart from previous clashes, the recent insurgence suggested that it was a carefully planned operation backed by external actors. These simultaneous coordinated moves and pre-emptive announcements of the formation of new armed groups aimed to ignite a rebellion on the Syrian coast and allow al-Assad's loyalists to regain control. Iran supported the attack and sought to change the power balance in Syria in order to use its militias in forthcoming negotiations with the US, similar to Tehran's efforts in the 2015 nuclear deal to save al-Assad and Hezbollah. The statement of Alawite sheikhs made it clear that al-Assad loyalists were considered occupying the coastal cities, and then claimed on Russian forces at the nearby Hmeimim and Tartus bases to protect them. This plan also sought to take advantage of Israel's hostility towards the new Syrian authorities and their support for separatists in northeastern Syria and Suwayda, where sen-

ior al-Assad loyalists strived to exploit tensions to gain joint moves towards Syria's partition.

Preliminary results of these events showed that the military balance was in favor of the new government, which, despite certain losses, managed to suppress the attempted rebellion. The rebels failed to expand the geography of protests, draw government forces into a war of attrition, and enlist the support of external forces. Most Arab states expressed support for A. al-Shara'a's actions to suppress the rebellion. At the same time, one could not ignore the fact that many supporters of the new government expressed their sympathies at street demonstrations and in social networks precisely on religious grounds, using religious symbols and slogans, which in some cases led to the persecution of Alawites during the cleansing operations. Thus, they indirectly contributed to the rebels, who tried to frame their actions in the context of religious hostility between Alawites and Sunnis, in order to undermine the authority of the new government, which had repeatedly declared its protection for minorities and dialogue with them. The new regime's opponents continue their attempts to undermine the legitimacy of interim government by giving its policies a religious coloring that does not reflect the will of the entire Syrian population (Hiba 2025).

Despite A. al-Shara'a's public condemnation of illegal actions by law enforcement officers against civilians in rebel areas, the danger of similar events in other Syrian provinces remains due to the insufficient work of the new Syrian security agencies with the local population. The ineffective methods of law enforcement officers in disarming the civilian population and suppressing the activities of warlords increased the risk of militarization in Syrian society based on religious marginalization. The attack also demonstrated the failure of the new government to integrate or settle the status of former regime officers. Despite the government's control over all state's institutions, the coastal attack underlined that many weapons remain in private hands in various areas of the country and their owners remain at large, especially in Damascus and its suburbs, Hama, and Aleppo. These events took place against the backdrop of a sharp deterioration in the material situation of the Alawites on the coast, as a result of measures to restructure public sector enterprises and government institutions, as well as in the absence of significant results in normalizing relations between the interim government and the Druze community, and a deadlock in security and local governance in Kurdish autonomous regions. The actual lack of action by the new administration to establish local self-government has strengthened ideas of national separatism among confessional enclaves in Syria.

The Syrian International Prospects

The Assad's loyalist assault increased doubts among members of the international community about the ability and willingness of the new government to fulfill its obligations. Regional and international powers established contacts with the new administration immediately after it took power in Damascus. The interim government initiated communication channels with various governments in order to redraw Syria's international relations. The new administration strived to ensure good relations in order to lift sanctions and end Syria's political isolation. Foreign support could also help accelerate the reconstruction process. The new administration hoped that international support for regional stability would include support for Syria's stability, contributing to partnerships

in fighting terrorism and supporting a transition that can foster development and prosperity.

On February 13, 2025, Paris hosted an international conference on Syria attended by Arab and European countries. Previously, similar conferences were held in Aqaba (Jordan) on December 14, 2024 and in Riyadh (KSA) on January 12, 2025. The distinctive feature of the Paris meeting was the recognition of Syria's transitional government. On March 17, 2025, the 9th donor conferences in Brussels invited for the first time the Syrian government, represented by its Foreign Minister Asaad Hassan Shaibani. The co-chairs of the conference condemned the attacks on Syrian coast by al-Assad's remnants. The European Union voiced its support for the steps taken by the Syrian government and described them as very encouraging, citing the signing of the Constitutional Declaration and an agreement with the Syrian Democratic Forces. Shortly after the Brussels summit on March 20, Germany reopened its embassy in Damascus (Jusoor for Studies 2025).

The US limited presence at the Paris summit caused many questions because of the uncertainty of American policy in Syria. After the crisis broke out, the importance of Syria for the US was determined by the terrorist threat, further escalation in the region, involving Iran and Israel, and Russia's strategic victory return in the Middle East, which challenged US positions in the region. After the fall of al-Assad's regime, these threats were partially or completely removed. And Syria has lost its former importance to the US. Of course, Washington strived to marginalize Iran's position in the region and prevent the creation of new logistical routes to support the Islamic Resistance (IR)* forces in Syria, Lebanon, and Palestine. Conversely, Iran would never accept the loss of Damascus, which was an important link in Iran's strategic project – the Axis of Islamic Resistance (Al-Arab 2024b). The IRGC has already planned to allocate a significant portion of its oil revenues to Hezbollah, financing arms supplies to Lebanon. Given the changing regional power balance, Iran did not exclude cooperation with the United States and Israel on Syria, using common interests with Tel Aviv and Washington on the Kurdish issue, against the backdrop of Turkey's strengthening positions in Syria. Tehran believed that against the backdrop of uncertain situation with the withdrawal of US troops from Syria, Turkey and Iraq were interested in maintaining security balance in the Syrian northeast in their favor.

Because of al-Assad's fall, Iraq became the center of Middle East politics, where competing interests of local and international players intersect. In May 2025, Iraq supposed to host the Baghdad Dialogue summit, which is expected to be attended by the Syrian President A. al-Shara'a. Baghdad considered a dialogue with the new Syrian authorities. At the same time, they were not in a hurry to fully restore relations with Damascus, since the new Syrian leadership's policies were not yet completely clear. Ahmed al-Shara'a strived to build strategic partnership relations with Ankara. After the HTS's victory, Turkey got an opportunity to more effectively control Kurdish separatists. On the other hand, Ankara's military operations in the Syrian northwest and northeast were opposed by Israel and Iran. Turkey was considering expanding its zone of influence in northern Syria based on the Adana Agreements of 1989, but faced opposition from the Kurds, who received Western support as a result of their successive battles against ISIS* in 2014–2019. Jordan was concerned about the growing Islamic activity on its borders. In the fall of 2024, the Islamic Action Front won a significant number of seats in parliament in the Kingdom's legislative elections. The fall of the al-Assad

regime creates new challenges for Israel's regional policy. The weakening of Iran, Hezbollah, Hamas and the Syrian army provided strategic advantages for Israel.

At the same time, the collapse of al-Assad's regime created a security vacuum along Syria-Israel borders, which could be filled by previously unknown militant groups. Israel's eagerness to control a number of Syrian territories along with plans to deliver a decisive blow to Islamic Resistant forces in Iraq presented potential risks for relations with regional powers and the United States, complicating relations with Turkey and Saudi Arabia (Al-Akhbar 2025c).

The Prospects for Syrian Security and International Stability in the Middle East

The long-standing timeframes for the formation of legislative bodies could have caused public discontent with the new government's policies in view of the growing uncertainty regarding the formation of new political parties and the political procedures for creating a new government. On the eve of al-Shara'a's visit to New York in October 2025, where he was scheduled to address the UN General Assembly, Syria held its first parliamentary elections. These elections were not held in Hasakah, Raqaa, and al-Suwayda because of the complicated situation in these three provinces and clear opposition from the Kurdish and Druze armed groups. Any political party could participate in these elections that were indirect in nature. A total of 1,578 candidates participated in the elections. They represented 50 electoral districts. The candidates chosen by authorized regional organizations ran on a separate list. The President, al-Shara'a personally appointed 30% of the candidates. The candidates competed for 140 out of 210 seats in parliament. Women accounted for 14% of the candidates. Syrian women constituted 3% of the 119 elected members who entered the new Syrian parliament. In fact, these elections raised many questions. Since transitional president al-Shara'a exercised all executive, legislative, and judicial powers, he could naturally appoint not only one-third of the parliament members, but form authorized commissions that selected two-thirds of the remaining candidates. However, al-Shara'a had the power to practically appoint not only the prime minister, but also the rest of the cabinet, according to his own political and ideological preferences. Unofficial exit polls in Damascus showed that nearly 70% of Syrians expected more democratic procedures for parliamentary elections. The lack of democratic procedures negatively impacted the progress in national reconciliation process and impacted securing political and social ethnical stability in the country.

Political security remains a pressing issue in the country. In the summer of 2025, number of Syrian districts witnessed clashes between government forces and armed Kurdish and Druze separatist groups. Most intense military confrontations with government forces took place in eastern Aleppo and along Euphrates's maritime borders, resulting in the death of hundred high-ranking Syrian military personnel. The SDF conduct active intelligence operations in Damascus and send its preachers and agents there. At the same time, the SDF isolated regime-loyal civilians and military personnel in Hasakah, Raqqa, and Deir al-Zor. In July 2025, in southern Syria's Swayda, supporters of the Military Council and the National Guard, affiliated with the Druze sect Hikmet al-Hijri, raided government forces and kidnapped several tribal leaders. These clashes involved several hundred fighters from both sides and heavy weapons after tribal groups captured central Swayda districts. Druze rebels were forced to withdraw from the old city's neighborhoods. Government forces' attempts to stabilize the situation in rebellious districts were met with fierce resistance. The Israeli Air Force supported the Druze and

bombed government forces and military facilities in Damascus. In total, over 800 civilians and soldiers were killed and 900 were wounded during the clashes.

In late September 2025, Syrian and Turkish forces conducted a joint counter-terrorism operation against ISIS's * drone stations. They eliminated several leaders of the Iranian branch of ISIS in Syria. In response, ISIS fighters carried out a series of armed attacks on targets in Aleppo. ISIS changed its previous tactics and emerged from the desert. The ISIS militants have moved to cities and are now active in Damascus and along the Mediterranean coast. IS enjoys the support of its sponsors in Africa and Asia. The organization has substantial financial income from abroad and profits from weapons and drug smuggling. It also has many followers in the Syrian army. At the same time, the organization does not have a territorial enclave in either Iraq or Syria. Therefore, ISIS fighters deliberately avoid direct combat with Syrian troops. The Syrian military fears that the West could exploit ISIS. During his election campaign, Donald Trump promised to withdraw American troops from Syria. But now, the Pentagon wants to clear Syrian territory of ISIS in order to ensure the complete absence of its militants in the country (Sulta 2025). The creation of a new Syrian army has faced significant difficulties. Against this background, Russia's call for using former Syrian military personnel seems quite justified. Moreover, this procedure was clearly outlined in the provisions of the UN Security Council Resolution № 2254 of 2015. The Russian initiative also included civilian officials who had nothing to do with crimes against their people. Moscow believed that the inclusion of former al-Assad's regime officials in the new state institutions would reduce Syrian minorities' concerns about the violation of their legitimate civil rights. The new developments on the Syrian coast and in Sweida show that the Russian proposal is just in time (Jusoor for Studies 2025b).

As for the **Russian Syrian relations**, Ahmed al-Shara'a has repeatedly made it clear that he does not want Russia to leave Syria, emphasizing the strategic partnership relations between Moscow and Damascus. At the same time, al-Shara'a and his security advisors were under strong pressure from Western European countries (Germany, France, and Great Britain). He also had to take into account the feelings of the Syrian population regarding the issue of maintaining Russian military bases in the Mediterranean. Commenting on the Russian Air Forces' attacks on opposition forces during the Syrian crisis, the Syrian Defense Minister Murhaf Abu Kasra said that there are no permanent friends and enemies in politics. He emphasized that Damascus is ready to leave the Russian bases if it meets the interests of the Syrian people (Al-Araby Al-Djadeed 2025). The visit of the Russian high-level delegation to Damascus on January 29, 2025, marked an important turn in Russia's policy in Syria. Moscow demonstrated that, despite the change of regime, it remained interested in relations with the new Syrian authorities. The telephone conversation with the Syrian leader on February 12, 2025, initiated by Russian President Vladimir Putin, opened a new page in bilateral relations and removed a number of pressing issues (the extradition of al-Assad) that were holding back their development.

Vladimir Putin expressed support for unity of Syrian territory. Moscow wanted to maintain its presence in the Mediterranean, and Damascus needed Russian support to realize Syrian reconstruction. The new Syrian administration is interested in maintaining relations with Russia that could help to strengthen al-Shara'a's position in the country, especially against the backdrop of Moscow's desire to facilitate the lifting of sanctions. Moreover, Syria's national debt to Russia exceeded \$15 billion (Shihan 2025).

The mutiny on Syria coast caused the Russian concerns for peace and security for all political, ethnic, and religious groups in Syria. During his meeting with the Syrian foreign minister in Turkey on February 23 and 24, the Russian foreign minister Sergey Lavrov stressed Russian support for national reconciliation, warning about the rise of jihadists in Syria. During the UN Security Council Session on March 10, 2025, senior Russian officials criticized the new Syrian authorities and expressed their hope for maintaining national unity in the country. Russia exerted pressure to obtain concessions from the Syrian side regarding Russian bases, discouraging continued demands for the extradition of al-Assad and compensation for damage caused by Russia's military involvement in 2015. Despite the apparent Russian-American rapprochement, the session failed to secure the United Nations Security Council's condemnation of the Syrian government and holding it responsible for the events. Conversely to the time of al-Assad's rule, European positions forwarded by France and Britain showed reluctance to condemn the new regime. These positive signals from Europe warned Russia, given European persistent calls for the closure of Russian military bases. Notably, on March 20th, the Russian president sent, message to Ahmed al-Shara'a, which was the second direct communication between the two presidents since Al-Shara'a came to power. Vladimir Putin expressed his support for efforts to stabilize the country as quickly as possible in order to ensure its sovereignty, independence, unity, and territorial integrity. He also affirmed the Kremlin's continued willingness to cooperate practically with the Syrian authorities across the full spectrum of bilateral relations in order to strengthen the traditionally friendly relations between Russia and Syria. In view that Syria remains a key arena for Russian-European rivalry, which becomes stronger once Russia resolves its Ukraine dilemma, Moscow should avoid conflicted messages focusing on joint international position backing new Syrian government.

On October 15, 2025, Syrian President Ahmed al-Shara'a arrived in Moscow with an official visit and heading a representative delegation. The talks between Vladimir Putin and al-Shara'a in Moscow culminated a series of previous Russian-Syrian contacts and shaped the details of previously discussed issues of bilateral cooperation. On the eve of the meeting, Russia supported Syria at the UN. Moscow condemned Israeli bombing of Syrian territory and expressed solidarity with the Syrian position that Israel should withdraw from occupied Syrian territories to the 1974 demarcation line effective December 8, 2024. Russia expressed support for the integrity of the Syrian state, with the center playing a decisive role (Jusoor for Studies 2025c). During the talks, the Syrian leader addressed issues related to the presence of high-ranking Syrian military and intelligence officials on Russian soil, whom the Syrian authorities had accused of serious crimes against Syrian citizens. Russia demonstrated its understanding of the Syrian leadership's concerns about ensuring social justice during the transitional period. Both sides discussed the possibility of establishing a legal mechanism for cooperation in the search for and extradition of individuals suspected of involvement in serious crimes against civilians. At the same time, Russia expressed hope that the Syrian leadership would comply with legal norms and the rule of law, particularly in matters of human rights, given the expected participation of the Syrian Arab Republic in relevant UN committees and international organizations. According to some Arab observers, Russia may consider possible extradition of low-ranking Syrian security officials after conducting its own investigation into their involvement in charges (Al-Qouds 2025a).

According to some Arabic-language online sources, Moscow and Damascus agreed to develop mutual platform for bilateral relations under new conditions based on the principles of respect and mutually beneficial cooperation. Negotiations on military-technical cooperation between Russia and Syria as well as the supply of equipment and food were conducted taking into account the positions of both countries' militaries in the interests of strengthening the territorial integrity of the Syrian Arab Republic and its defence capability, and ensuring Syrian sovereignty. Following the lifting of relevant UN sanctions, Moscow was prepared to fully resume supplies of spare parts and equipment to the Syrian armed forces. Moscow maintains a military presence at its bases in Tartus and Khmeimim, as well as at Qamishli Airport, using them primarily for logistical and intelligence operations. Undoubtedly, after al-Shara'a's visit to New York, the Syrian side's negotiating position has strengthened somewhat. However, given the complex domestic political situation in Syria and the growing international tensions surrounding Damascus, the new Syrian authorities see Moscow as a reliable economic partner and a potential guarantor of their security and regional stability. Damascus counted on Russia to help resolve its relations with Israel. Israel occupied a significant portion of southern Syria, playing the Druze card and supporting Kurdish rebels from the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) (Jusoor for Studies 2025c). Damascus was interested in Russia's efforts to mediate Syrian-Israeli reconciliation, especially if the United States suddenly decided to shift its focus to pursuing peace elsewhere. At the request of the Syrian side, Russia expressed its willingness to consider the possibility of ensuring the security of Syrian territory and deploying its police units as peacekeeping forces along the 1974 demarcation line. Damascus strives to return to Moscow's previous peace initiatives. Syria wants to permanently maintain Russian fortified areas, while revising the previously concluded agreement with al-Assad in a favorable direction, by writing off a significant portion of Syrian debt, and unfreezing some Syrian assets in Russian banks.

Iran highlights the new Syrian leadership concerns by reporting US plans to establish a new military base near Palmyra. Recently, unusual activity has been observed in Palmyra and its suburbs, with the arrival of US transport aircraft in the area, as well as military equipment at the al-Tanf base on the borders with Jordan and Iraq. Al-Shara'a and his security officials estimate that the Iranian-Israeli war could resume, leaving Syria once again caught between two fires. Iran may adopt the political strategy employed after the American occupation in 2003. The intensified protests among Alawites on the Mediterranean coast, persistent separatist trends in the Druze regions and secessionist aspirations of the Kurdish population in northeastern regions provide favorable conditions for Iranian actions. Tehran can use Assad loyalist officers who have found refuge in Iraq, northern Lebanon, and the Syrian coast; fighters from pro-Iranian militias settled in Syria, and ISIS*, HTS*, and Hurras al-Din* militants dissatisfied with al-Shara'a's policies.

A group of factors, both internal and external, may influence Iran's political perceptions in the Middle East. The historical legacy of Arab-Iranian relations in a predominantly Sunni region has heightened a sense of vulnerability and threat, which has conceptually institutionalized interventionist sentiments in politics. The weakening Iran's position and combat power of its militias are forcing Iran to reconsider its previous strategy in the face of international pressure and partial loss of its image in the region.

On the one hand, Iran's tactical response lies not only in maintaining Iran's military might, but also in searching for other foreign policy tools. Most Middle Eastern countries are tired of endless armed confrontation and are looking for new options in economic cooperation and technological integration. Iran's onside reliance on military force is viewed by regional powers as a dangerous and risky factor. Tehran could provoke the formation of new alliances with its potential competitors. At the same time, along with the expansion of its Shiite militia network, Iran has formed several alliances with regional and global powers, primarily with Russia, China, and Venezuela. Iran has signed long-term cooperation agreements with China and Venezuela, as well as economic partnership agreement with the Eurasian Economic Union and joined the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, and BRICS. Over the past ten years, trade balance between Russia and Iran doubled to \$5 billion. Tehran intensified its cooperation with Russia in the region to offset its losses in Syria through mutually beneficial economic and military contracts (Abdulla 2025).

On the other hand, how long can Tehran maintain a balance between its political and ideological ambitions and domestic political challenges? Growing economic problems, consistent protest movements, and mystical expectations of a 'Day after Khomeini' could sooner or later trigger a political crisis in the country. Compared to the revolutionaries of 1979, the new generation of Iranians are no longer as committed to previous ideological dogmas. Today, many Iranian citizens express disillusionment with Tehran's foreign policy, which they believe is negatively impacting their social well-being. Despite the ongoing tensions in Iranian-Arab relations, Tehran has some chance of remaining an active participant in Arab politics and a potential counterweight to key regional players. The nature of Iran's relations with Arab countries is largely determined by the dynamics of inter-Arab relations aimed at maintaining regional stability. If Iran succeeds in strengthening its relations with the Gulf countries and finally emerges from international isolation, it could play a more significant role in the region.

However, if the military conflict continues, Iran could become so weakened that it will remain irrelevant to Arab and regional politics. On the other hand, much depends on events in Syria and its relations with its regional neighbours. Ongoing clashes in various parts of Syria and continuous Israeli and Turkish offensives in various parts of the country threaten Iran's security and push Tehran to maintain and expand its positions in Syria and Iraq. At the same time, Iran would prefer not to exacerbate relations with Russia and the United States, Turkey, and Israel in the region, which could significantly limit its activity in the Middle East.

Regardless of how difficult the process of building new Iranian-Syrian relations may be, Iran's prospects in Syria largely depend on Tehran's success in reaching an international agreement on the nuclear issue, which, after the 12-day war with Israel, has become not only a matter of political prestige but, above all, a prerequisite for the survival of Iranian statehood. Without a nuclear dialogue, resuming international contacts on security issues with Tehran could de-escalate the confrontation in the Middle East and alleviate the Syrian regime's concerns. In this situation, the best option for Iran is to return to the nuclear deal, both to compensate for losses in Syria and to demonstrate its strength. However, much in this matter depends on more than just Tehran's will. Russia understands this well, as the Middle East is a matter not only of foreign policy interest but also a factor in ensuring national security for Russia due to its geopolitical proximity.

Over the past 15 years, the situation in the world and the Middle East has changed significantly. True, it has not become better or safer. However, Russia has become much stronger and more confident. After its Syrian companies and successes on the Ukrainian front, Russia's influence in the world and especially in the Middle East has increased exponentially. Moscow has established its leading position in multilateral international organizations and alliances such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, BRICS, the League of Arab States, and the Organization of Islamic Conferences (OIC). Moscow maintains friendly, partnership, and constructive relations with China, India, Israel, Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the UAE.

Damascus seeks to use its ties with Moscow to balance its relations with the West. Russia competes with Israel and Turkey for influence in Syria. Israel's concerns about Turkey's strengthening in Syria are helping Moscow strengthen its position. Israel expects Russia to ensure the security of the lines of contact on the Syrian-Israeli border. Israel is Ankara's main rival in the struggle for Syria. Israel's invasion of Syria has led to deterioration in Turkish-Israeli relations. The ongoing Israeli occupation of southern Syria, and Israeli air strikes on Ankara-established military bases in central Syria could ultimately push Turkey towards rapprochement with Iraq and Iran, in opposition to Israel's plans in Syria.

Under these circumstances, Russia's Middle East policy is taking on new forms and dimensions. In this regard, it is worth considering the creation of a new international security mechanism under Russian auspices in the Middle East, including Syria. It is necessary to adopt proven practices from Astana, Sochi, and other international platforms, involving Israel, Egypt, Algeria, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, China, and India, as well as a number of Latin American countries interested in stability in the Middle East.

Conclusion

While the traditional system of international relations and the previous world order and the global system are rapidly disappearing before our eyes, various global centers of power and influential groups of interests are emerging. Their unification and behavior patterns are based on new principles of polycentricism that determine the potential influence of each center on global politics and the nature of their interactions with each other. Despite the aforementioned rise of regionalism in Middle Eastern politics, the Middle East remains one of the most challenging issues for these centers today.

The power change in Syria marked a crucial turning point in the Syrian conflict and affected the parameters of the Middle East's future development. The rapid collapse of the al-Assad's regime and the replacement of the ruling Syrian elite by a government of a different nature and origin marked new trends in the development of the Middle East region in the near future. The historical legacy of Hayat al-Sham's has left an indelible mark on the organization's political profile, largely predetermining its policies in the Syrian Arab Republic and the Middle East more broadly. This very fact exacerbates the already high level of tension in the region, creating new challenges and threats to international security in the Middle East.

Because of the collapse of the al-Assad regime, Syria stands at critical crossroads that presents both opportunities for reform and risks of further fragmentation. Previously, the central government applied diverse formulas to manage the territory, focusing on building loyalty to the Baath regime rather than the efficiency of administration for

serving local communities. During the crisis, many areas that were outside the control of the central regime adopted their own territorial orders. The civil war further fragmented Syria's territorial governance, giving rise to distinct models of local governance under various de facto authorities. Each governance model tried to adapt to unique political, social, and regional circumstances, resulting in diverse approaches to administration, resource allocation, and public services.

Despite the fall of al-Assad, the legacy of fragmented spatial geometries has highlighted the urgency of reuniting the territory and establishing a viable and cohesive governance model. These designs must prioritize inclusivity, equitable service delivery, and meaningful local autonomy in order to foster stability, cohesion, and sustainable development. The traditional structure of local administration in Syria needs to be comprehensively reassessed with regard to its levels, sizes, and administrative divisions. In Idlib, the Salvation Government has abolished the governorate level of administration, opting instead to manage major municipalities. This approach cannot be replicated in other governorates. The central government can hardly exert centralized control, given the divisions left by years of strife between local communities. Syrian communities cannot be governed solely on the basis of overt religious and ethnic affiliations, as each group has its own contradictory social levers and customs representing competing interests and clashing local leadership and patronage networks. At the same time, the country cannot be managed in an asymmetrical manner.

Thinking in terms of ethno-sectarian groups will put the new government into unfamiliar dilemmas, unlike those faced in Idlib, where religious and cultural groups were relatively limited in geographic and spatial terms. Balancing societal interests will pose a significant challenge in areas where cultural and ethical values do not align with the government's moral foundations. Agreements with some community leaders will not guarantee satisfaction for other leaders. The success of territorial governance in Syria will depend on the government's ability to adapt to changing socio-political realities, while finding common grounds in various territorial models to promote a more equitable distribution of power and resources. This approach would be essential for reorganizing the country's territorial hierarchies, administrative borders, and political economy in order to support sustainable reconstruction and fair representation for Syria's diverse communities.

In the near future, new Syrian rulers will have to prove that the rise of Islamists to power was not an irony of fate that made Bashar al-Assad provide them with organizational niche in Idlib, but was the result of the Syrian people's choice. The task is extremely difficult, given the complex sectarian map of Syria and the failure of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, where more than 90 % of the population is represented by a single ethnicity and religion. The future will tell. Under these circumstances, the policies of the new Syrian authorities shape a new political reality in the region. Their ability to quickly restructure their foreign policy based on national security priorities determines the Syrian and Middle Eastern perspectives. Depending on the success of the new authorities, Syria may either remain within its current territorial boundaries, or it may be fragmented into a number of territorial enclaves under the patronage of external forces.

NOTES

* This organization is recognized as terrorist and banned in the Russian Federation.

¹ 'Shabiha' in Arabic means 'the ghost'. Irregular paramilitary gangs formed by Alawite warlords in the Latakia district. They began to form in the early 1980s as a force shield for the Alawite community after the Muslim Brothers' revolt. Although Hafez Assad banned them and forced 40 initiators including his wife's relatives, to leave Syria for Paris, they continued their activities illegally. Before the crisis, they were famous for smuggling weapons and drugs through Hezbollah facilities in Latin America. They practiced kidnapping, killing rival businesspeople (mainly Sunnis). They turned a large part of Latakia into their inclusive zone, terrorizing and robbing local people. In 1999, they attracted international attention by forcefully preventing Rifaat Assad's (Hafez Assad's elder brother) attempt to launch a military assault on the Syrian coast to seize power in Latakia. When the revolution erupted, they sided with Bashar Assad, who gave them the green light to carry out their inhumane actions against the Sunni population in Syria. Today, the regime forces have gotten rid of them, as they have compromised and refused to obey the Damascus authorities.

² Heiat Tahrir Al-Sham (HTS) – terrorist organization forbidden in Russia.

³ Hurras Al-Din-Hurras, Al-Qaeda – terrorist organizations forbidden in Russia.

⁴ Islamic State in Iraq and Syria – ISIS-terrorist organization forbidden in Russia.

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