



Delhi Policy Group

Advancing India's Rise as a Leading Power



WEST ASIA REVIEW DECEMBER 2024

Author

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Cover Image:

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan attended a meeting in Aqaba, Jordan on the situation in Syria on December 14, 2024. Source: [Official X Handle/Secretary Antony Blinken](#)

Syria's transitional government leader Ahmed al-Sharaa spoke with Al Arabiya News on elections and the country's constitution on December 29, 2024. Source: [Al Arabiya News](#)

Syrian people hoist the flag of revolution at the Umayyad main square in Damascus after the collapse of Bashar al-Assad's regime, December 21, 2024. Source: [Official X Handle/Syrian Arab News Agency \(SANA\)](#)

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West Asia Review

by

Amb. Gaddam Dharmendra

Developments in Syria

President Bashar al Assad fled Damascus on the night of December 7-8, 2024 ending the five-decade old rule of the Assad family over Syria. Assad, who has been granted asylum in Russia, leaves behind a fractured country. Abu Muhammad al-Jolani, leader of the Turkish backed Islamist group, the Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), now leads the interim government in Damascus. The HTS was formerly known as the al-Nusra Front, and before that as the Syrian branch of al-Qaeda. Assad's departure was met with jubilation by Syrians across the country, who celebrated the end of a brutal and much reviled regime.

The sudden and abrupt fall of Assad has taken observers by surprise and continues to reverberate across the region. Major regional actors are scrambling to understand developments and shape their future position. The most immediate impact is being felt by Russia and Iran, both of who were firm backers of Assad, especially since the eruption of the pro-democracy movement in Syria in 2011.

In recent years, Russia was increasingly distracted by its war with Ukraine, and Iran was facing a series of setbacks following the decimation by Israel of the main components of its "Axis of Resistance", especially the Hezbollah. The battering of Lebanon's Hezbollah was a vital blow to both Assad and Iran as they had been critical to holding up the Assad regime. Both Russia and Iran are left assessing their diminishing options in West Asia and the Levant. Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian is due to visit Moscow on January 17, 2025.

Overall, the situation in Syria remains complex and fluid especially with regards to the possible outbreak of sectarian violence, given Syria's religious diversity and the Islamist leanings of the HTS.

HTS leader Abu Mohammad al-Jolani has since reverted to his given name of Ahmad al-Sharaa and is showing himself to be firmly in control. He has appointed trusted aides to senior positions, including Assad Hassan Al-Shaibani as Foreign Minister, Murhaf Abu Qasra as Defense Minister and Annas Khattab as Intelligence Chief.

Sharaa is also making every effort to remake his past image as an Islamist and portray himself to the world as a unifier capable of holding together and healing a diverse country. Over Christmas and New Year, he met leaders of the country's Christian community, in a show of his secular credentials and as an assurance to Syria's Christians. There are, however, concerns over the HTS radical ideology and the presence of foreign Islamist fighters in the ranks of the HTS, some of who have apparently been granted Syrian citizenship and even appointed to senior military posts.

Overall, Syria remains fractured and one of Sharaa's challenges would be to reunite a country which has for well over a decade been de facto split into various spheres of influence divided among opposing factions. The pro-Turkish HTS together with the Syrian National Army (SNA) controls the major towns in Central and Northwest Syria, including Damascus, Homs, Hama, Aleppo and Idlib.

The Northeast of Syria is held by US forces and the US backed Syrian Defence Forces (SDF), consisting mainly of pro-independence Kurdish PKK/YPG cadres. Significantly, all of Syria's main oil fields are located in this region. The US-SDF joint mandate is to keep in check ISIS/Daesh Islamists and prevent their resurgence. French Minister of Armed Forces, Sébastien Lecornu, announced on December 31, 2024 that the French Air Force had carried out airstrikes on December 26 against ISIS Targets in Syria, in support of "Operation Inherent Resolve". There have also been reports of skirmishes between the HTS/SNA and SDF around the northern town of Manbij.

Syria's South and Southeast have been under the control of assorted local leaders, including Druze Christians. This region was vital for Iran's land-corridor supporting both Assad as well as the Hezbollah in Lebanon.

Taken together, above divisions attest to the highly fluid situation in Syria.

Sharaa has also been receiving officials from important neighbours such as Türkiye and Iraq, as also from Qatar and Ukraine. Qatar and Türkiye have publicly emerged as important backers of Sharaa and the HTS. Within days of Assad's fleeing the country, the Turkish and Qatari intelligence chiefs, Ibrahim Kalin and Khalfan Al-Kaabi respectively, visited Damascus on December 14. Since then, there has been a steady stream of visitors to Damascus to meet Sharaa, ranging from a senior Bahraini delegation (as current Chair of the Arab Summit) to the US, the UK and the EU. All have evinced keen interest in understanding Sharaa's future

course of action and, more importantly, to prevent the emergence of a vacuum which can be exploited by radical Islamist elements.

For now, the priority of most Arab countries as also Turkey appears to be to prevent Syria from once again coming under Iranian influence.

Sharaa has started pro-actively shaping the narrative, offering conciliatory gestures to other Syrian factions and making a series of carefully curated public appearances and giving interviews to select media outlets. In a highly detailed and lengthy interview to Saudi Arabia's "Al-Arabiya" TV channel on December 29, Sharaa came across as articulate and well prepared, making it clear that he is in this for the long term.

In the interview, Sharaa said that Syria has been liberated for the "next 50 years" and that a transition process is now underway. According to him, the writing of a new constitution can take up to three years and that thereafter elections will be held which can take up to four years since a "comprehensive national census" has to be taken before holding any election. He gave assurances that he would soon convene a National Dialogue Conference, and that the HTS would be dissolved.

On Syria's external relations, Sharaa hoped that the incoming Trump Administration will lift sanctions, reiterated that Syria has strategic interests with Russia, and affirmed the need to maintain good relations with Saudi Arabia, which he said has a significant role to play in Syria's reconstruction.

As regards Russia, Sharaa said that there are "deep strategic interests" between Syria and Russia. Citing Russian weapons systems and power plants, he said that "we do not want Russia to leave Syria in a way that some might desire".

Significantly, Sharaa made no mention of either Egypt, Iran or China. Iran is widely considered to have lost significant strategic space, especially its much coveted land route supplying the Hezbollah in Lebanon. For China, the principal cause of concern would be the presence of Uighurs in the HTS, professing their membership in the East Turkestan Independence (or Islamic) Movement (ETIM). This has since been publicly acknowledged by the interim Syrian government with the appointment of some Uighurs to senior positions in the Syrian military together with Jordanians, Tajiks, Egyptians and Albanians.

Regional response

In the wake of the historic changes emanating from Syria and reverberating across the region, the state of play in West Asia and the Levant is outlined below.

Türkiye: Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan became the first foreign minister to visit Damascus and meet Ahmed Al-Sharaa (December 22). During their joint press conference, Foreign Minister Fidan said that Syria's territorial integrity is "non-negotiable" and that the Kurdish PKK-YPG "must dissolve itself immediately." The Syrian regime has also apparently requested Türkiye to print new identity cards, including passports, driving licenses, and IDs.

Within days of Fidan's visit, reports emerged that Türkiye has begun deploying military equipment, including M60 main battle tanks, to its borders with Syria. The military build-up is taking place towards the town of Idlib, under control of the HTS.

Going forward, Türkiye's two main priorities will be to ensure the return of the over 2 million Syrian refugees and prevent the resurgence of a Kurdish independence movement.

Qatar: Qatar is widely seen as one of the main backers of Sharaa and the HTS. Within days of Assad's downfall, Qatar's intelligence chief Khalfan Al-Kaabi was in Damascus (on a joint visit with his Turkish counterpart). This was soon followed up by the visit of Qatar's Minister of State Mohammad Al-Khulaifi who met Sharaa (December 23).

In an interview to a TV channel "Mobasher", Sharaa declared that "Qatar has a special priority in Syria, due to its honourable stance towards the Syrian people" and that Qatar "participated in all stages of the revolution and remained steadfast in their position until the very end...in that respect we have discussed all challenges in the current and future phases, including political dimension but more specifically (economic) development...The Qatari embassy has reopened after a long absence in Syria and through this we hope for strategic wide cooperation. We have also extended an invitation to Emir Tamim to visit Syria, hopefully the relationship will be restored to a thousand times better than the past." Sharaa said that Qatar is prepared to invest in Syria, including in its energy sector.

Saudi Arabia: The new Syrian Foreign Minister Hassan al-Shaibani posted on X (December 30) that he will be visiting Saudi Arabia at the invitation of Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan bin Abdullah. This will be his first overseas visit since assuming office. On December 29 Syria's leader, Sharaa, gave wholesome praise for Saudi Arabia's support to Syria. In his interview to Saudi Arabia's Al-Arabiya channel, Sharaa fondly recalled that he was born in Saudi Arabia and had lived there till he was seven years old. He said "I am proud of everything that Saudi Arabia has done for Syria, and it has a major role in the country's future".

Together with the **UAE**, the Saudi response has so far been cautiously positive, while keeping a close watch on developments in Syria. The invitation to Foreign Minister Shaibani to visit Riyadh as his first overseas tour is a reflection of this policy. The Saudis and Emiratis are wary of a resurgence of Iranian influence, the so-called Shiite "Arc of influence", as also the revival in Syria of radical Islam under the aegis of the Muslim Brotherhood. More importantly, they will be vital to Syria's reconstruction following the devastation wrought by the decades long civil war. The foreign ministers of the GCC countries met in Kuwait (December 26) to review developments in Syria.

Libya: A delegation from the Libyan Government of national Unity, led by Libya's Minister of State for Communication and Political Affairs, Walid Ellafi, was in Damascus. The Libyan Government of national Unity is the UN-recognised government, and was received by the interim leader Ahmed al-Sharaa (December 28). Reports indicate that the discussions pertained to diplomatic relations, energy and migration. After the meeting, Walid Ellafi was quoted as saying "We expressed our full support for the Syrian authorities in the success of the important transitional phase" and "We emphasised the importance of coordination and cooperation...particularly on security and military issues", cooperation "related to energy and trade" and "illegal immigration".

The visit of the Libyan delegation so soon after Assad's fall is indicative of yet another competitive front opening up between Russia and Türkiye. The latter supports the Libyan Govt of National Unity while the former backs the Government of National Stability and its leader Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar. Reports are that Russia may relocate some of its military assets from Syria to Benghazi in Libya. Also, Libya has been a major route of migration for Syrian refugees to Europe.

Russia: Widely considered as one of the losers of Assad's fall, Russia seems to have been taken by surprise at the speed of the collapse of the Assad regime. Kremlin's spokesman Dmitry Peskov said that "Apparently events in Syria have surprised the entire world...We are not an exception."

Russia had firmly backed Assad during the pro-democracy uprising, often with its brutal airstrikes. In fact the HTS-led assault on the Assad regime took place while Assad was attending his son's graduation in Moscow. Assad has since been granted asylum in Russia.

However, the interim head in Syria, Ahmed Al Sharaa, has clarified that Russia will remain an important player in Syria. In his interview to al-Arabiya, Sharaa made this clear saying "we do not want Russia to leave Syria in a way that some might desire". The reasons for Sharaa publicly supporting Russia are pragmatic. The Syrian army is largely made up of Russian equipment, and bases much of its military doctrine on Russian principles. Russia has been a major supplier of energy and other infrastructure.

As such, Sharaa's responses reflect a mature pragmatism, one of remaining engaged with Russia and preventing it from aligning its responses with Iran, while simultaneously keeping future options open. Meanwhile, Russia continues to occupy the Mediterranean naval port of Tartus and the airbase in Latakia but appears to be either withdrawing its assets or moving to downsize its presence. As noted above, Russia may be relocating its military assets from Syria to Benghazi in Libya.

US: Within days of the collapse of the Syrian regime, US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken toured the region, beginning with Jordan. In a statement released on December 10, Blinken laid out in considerable detail the US position: "The United States reaffirms its full support for a Syrian-led and Syrian-owned political transition. This transition process should lead to credible, inclusive, and non-sectarian governance that meets international standards of transparency and accountability, consistent with the principles of United Nations Security Council Resolution 2254. The transition process and new government must also uphold clear commitments to fully respect the rights of minorities, facilitate the flow of humanitarian assistance to all in need, prevent Syria from being used as a base for terrorism or posing a threat to its neighbours, and ensure that any chemical or biological weapons stockpiles are secured and safely destroyed. The Syrian people

will decide the future of Syria” and that the United States “will recognise and fully support a future Syria government that results from this process”.

Subsequently, Secretary of Defence Lloyd Austin posted on X (December 25) that he had spoken with Turkish Minister of National Defense, Yaşar Güler, “to discuss Syria and our mutual security concerns. We agreed to remain in close communication and affirmed that coordination presents the best opportunity to promote stability in the region. Our countries will continue to work together to defeat terrorism and support a more secure and stable Syria.”

It is clear that the US is assessing how Al Sharaa will shape Syria’s future transition, while retaining leverage to nudge him in the right direction. US sanctions remain in place, especially the 2019 “Caesar Act”, which specifically sanction Syria as a means to punish the Assad regime. These sanctions target Syria’s petroleum and banking sectors. Syria’s interim chief, Sharaa, has called for the lifting of these US sanctions. For the time being, however, the US has not given any indication as to when and whether it will ease the sanctions or lift its ban on the HTS. Notably, it has suspended a US\$10 million bounty on Sharaa.

Much will also depend on how the administration of incoming President Donald Trump will shape its policies in West Asia and the Levant. Israel’s interests will likely be central to future US decisions. Nevertheless, Trump remains keen to withdraw US forces from Syria. The incoming US NSA, Mike Waltz, posted on X (December 23) that “President Trump is absolutely right. His mandate overwhelmingly was not to drag us into Middle Eastern wars. We do not need American boots running around Syria in any way shape or form. But we’re keeping an eye on those things. ISIS, Israel’s border and kind of the broader dynamic with our Gulf allies.”

Israel: Israel has for long been concerned over the smuggling of weapons by Iran to Lebanon’s Hezbollah from across the Syria-Lebanon border. Within days of Assad’s fall, Israel conducted several hundred air raids, decapitating Syria’s air defences and heavy military equipment. In parallel, Israeli ground forces entered parts of southern Syria without resistance and occupied the strategic locations abutting the Golan Heights, including the high-value strategic Mount Hermon, which is the highest mountain in Syria (2814 metres). Its capture will give Israel strategic oversight as well as extensive control over much of Lebanese and Syrian airspace.

Separately, the Israeli Defense Minister Israel Katz declared (December 11) that Israel intended to establish a demilitarised zone in southern Syria. According to a media report, Katz was speaking at a navy base in Haifa where he declared that the Israeli army will create a “defense zone free of weapons and terrorist threats in southern Syria, without a permanent Israeli presence, in order to prevent terrorism in Syria from taking root.” He is reported to have given few details on what that entailed, but apparently warned that “whoever follows Assad's path will end up like Assad. We will not allow an extremist Islamic terrorist entity to act against Israel.”¹

Overall, Israel has for the time being successfully mitigated yet another source of significant threat to its national security by degrading remnants of Hezbollah. In doing so it has dealt another blow to Iran exposing it to direct future airstrikes. However, there are also concerns within Syria of the seizure of Syrian territory by Israel, an act which can agitate pro-Palestinian and anti-Israeli elements within Syria.

Iran: The fall of Assad regime brings to an end Iran’s decades long investment in Syria, the only state in its “Axis of Resistance”. In fact, Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi undertook back-to-back visits to Damascus and Ankara to help prop up Assad on December 2-3. Araghchi later posted on X: “Important talks with President Assad and straightforward constructive discussion with FM Fidan. My trip from Damascus to Ankara was among rare direct flights. All agreed: NO ONE benefits from another war in Syria. Conflict carries 100%-guaranteed spillover of terrorism to the whole neighbourhood. As always, Iran stands with Syrian people, Government and Army in their fight against terrorism - and ready to assist and support regional de-escalation through dialogue and diplomacy.”

Araghchi’s visit, however, was for a losing cause. The simultaneous visit and subsequent assessment of IRGC General Javad Ghaffari (December 3) was more realistic. Ghaffari concluded that there was a total failure of Assad’s army and a clear lack of their desire to put up a fight against the assault by HTS forces.

With Assad’s fall, the adversarial relationship between the new interim regime in Syria and the Islamic Republic has quickly come to the fore, alongside the nascent but long existing tensions between Iran and Türkiye. Within days of Assad’s fall,

¹ “Israeli Jets Hit Syria as Troops Reportedly Move Deeper Into Country.” *Nikkei Asia*, December 11, 2024. <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/Middle-East-crisis/Israeli-jets-hit-Syria-as-troops-reportedly-move-deeper-into-country>.

reports were that the Iranian Embassy in Damascus was ransacked. Subsequently, some 4000 Iranians were evacuated.

Iran has, however, adopted a defiant tone. Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei has posted several times on X on the situation in Syria. In one post (December 22), he called on Syria's youth to "stand with firm determination against those who have orchestrated (and) had brought about this insecurity and God willing, they will prevail over them". This brought an immediate rebuttal from Syria's Foreign Minister Asaad al-Shaibani, who too took to X to firmly warn that "Iran must respect the will of the Syrian people, the sovereignty of the nation and its territorial integrity. We caution them against spreading chaos in Syria and hold them accountable for their recent remarks."

Earlier, Khamenei had taken to X to level an indirect accusation that Turkey was behind the latest developments. Without directly naming Turkey, Khamenei stated that "A government in a neighbouring country of Syria has played and is still playing a clear role in what's happening. However, the primary conspirators and control room are in the United States and the Zionist regime. We have evidence of this that leaves no room for doubt for anyone" (December 11).

Subsequently, both Iran and Syria exchanged claims and counter claims for moneys owed to each other. Some Iranian lawmakers said that the interim Syrian government should inherit Syria's debt to Iran. The sums mentioned were around US\$ 30-50 billion. However, Iran's Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Esmail Baghaei sought to down play the issue. On the one hand, he clarified that these numbers are "truly very exaggerated", but on the other he said that Syria's new state will inherit all financial obligations to Iran under the principle of state succession. Baghaei did not mention any specific amount.

Clearly, the rapid developments in Syria have dealt a devastating blow to Iran's regional ambitions and expansionism. Iran has lost a vital link in its "forward defense" strategy and suffered possibly an irreversible setback to its regional ambitions. However, despite its aggressive rhetoric and characteristic bluster, Iran is reassessing its choices and quietly taking steps to reverse and cool down developments, especially in its self-inflicted conflict with Israel.

Towards this end, Iran has turned to Turkey to send indirect messages to Israel, seeking a cessation of their long running mutual hostility. In a highly significant interview by Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan with the French TV channel "France24" (December 23), he explicitly stated that "Iran has informed Turkey that

it absolutely wants to avoid any war and confrontation with Israel over Palestine or any other issue.” Fidan said that he is “very much” concerned about a war between Iran and Israel, but that the “Iranians don’t want such a war (and) they’d like to avoid any major confrontation. This is direct information that I’ve had from our Iranian friends as a result of my meetings with them”.

However, going by Israeli Defense Minister Israel Katz’s comments at Haifa, Israel is clearly in no mood to reciprocate and knows well that it now has the upper hand vis-à-vis Iran. This is especially so after its October strikes deep inside Iranian territory crippling and degrading vast swathes of Iran’s air defence systems and missile and nuclear facilities, including a nuclear weapon research facility.

China: China has adopted a wait and watch approach on the recent developments in West Asia and the Levant. The presence of Uighurs and ETIM cadres in Syria’s HTS should be a cause for concern, but one which it is clearly downplaying. In Beijing, Foreign Minister Wang Yi met diplomatic envoys of Arab countries based in China (December 19), during which he said that China-Arab relations have “entered the best period in history under the guidance of the leaders of China and Arab countries”. He reiterated China’s call for a “comprehensive ceasefire and permanent withdrawal of troops in Gaza as soon as possible”. Wang said that China will “continue to support Arab countries in strengthening their strategic independence and achieving unity and self-reliance, and make efforts for peace and stability in the Middle East”².

Ukraine: President Zelensky of Ukraine announced his intention to build closer relations with the new dispensation in Syria. He said that Ukraine would be dispatching of 500 tons of wheat to Syria, and followed this up by sending Foreign Minister Andrii Sybiha to Damascus (December 30). Sybiha met both Sharaa and Syrian Foreign Minister Hassan al-Shibani.

² “Top Chinese Diplomat Meets Arab Diplomatic Envoys.” Ministry of Foreign Affairs – People’s Republic of China, December 20, 2024.
https://english.www.gov.cn/news/202412/20/content_WS6764f329c6d0868f4e8ee26b.html.



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