

Factors Mattering to Syria's Future

Key points

- Syria's new government has sent out a series of inclusive and constructive signals for restoring or reshaping Syria's relationship with a wide variety of partners.
- The fall of the Assad regime wouldn't likely cause a big impact on Russia's presence in Syria in the near future.
- The Syrian new government needs to work out a more creative approach to engage with Israel.
- The fall of the Assad regime might open new possibilities for Iran-Syria relations.
- The former Syrian President Assad may still have some influence over Syria, yet the path for getting him back to the centre stage will be very hard (if not completely closed).
- The Syrian interim government is determined to build a different Syria in the future. So, for the interests of the Syrian new authority, it will need to be carefully handling the disputes raised among different religious groups within the society in the years ahead.



Syrians celebrate at the first Friday prayers since Bashar Assad's ouster at the central square in Damascus, Syria, on 13 December 2024. (File Photo / Hussein Malla / AP).

The quick fall of the Syrian Bashar Assad regime in December 2024 without much struggle of the anti-Assad government forces had surprised many from various fields. After the Assad regime being toppled, numerous Syrian people gathered on the street to celebrate the end of the Assad ruling and the beginning of a new era, yet Syria's future will still be full of challenges and uncertainties.

The Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham (HTS), one of the few militant groups, had played a key role in leading to the fall of the Assad regime. Ahmad al-Sharaa, previously known as Abu Mohammad al-Jolani, the leader of the HTS, was appointed as head of state for a transitional period of the Syrian Arab Republic and “authorized to form a temporary legislative council for the transitional phase, which will carry out its duties until a permanent constitution is enacted and put into effect”, announced by Hassan Abdel Ghani, spokesman for the Syria Military Operations Command on 29 January 2025.



Ahmad al-Sharaa speaks at the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus on 8 December.
(Omar Albam / AP / CNN).

Syria has been facing a tough and complicated situation for years already, both internally and externally. The possible approach adopted by the Syrian new government in the years ahead in dealing with various internal and external issues will critically affect Syria's future domestic stability, the country's foreign relations with other key stakeholders, and the peace in the broad Middle East region.

This piece tends to explore and analyse some of the very important factors which would most likely cause a big impact on Syria's future.

The eruption of the Syrian civil war since 2011 has led to a great division of the Syrian society, a serious damage of the country's economy and people's well-being, and a deteriorating relationship between Syria and a number of countries. So, internally, the Syrian new government for a long time to come will focus on promoting domestic dialogue, understanding, and reconciliation among various groups, and striving to recover the country's economy; while externally, the new government will manage to restore or reshape the country's relationship with the important regional and international stakeholders in order to create a more friendly and enabling environment for helping Syria's recovery.

On the front of Syria's foreign relations, to fix the external challenges facing the country, it is still early to tell what approach and policies the Syrian new government might adopt and implement in the media- and long- term, and also whether or not the designed approach and relevant policies can be implemented.

Yet, for the time being, Syria's new leader al-sharaa on many diplomatic occasions has expressed the country's interest in constructively engaging with all relevant partners. The new government over the past few months has received foreign delegates from a number of countries including the United States, France, Germany, Russia, Turkey, and Syria's neighbours etc..

Syria's Diplomatic Engagements with Foreign Delegates from A Variety of Countries

During the Assad era, the diplomatic relationship between Syria and a number of countries had been stalled. Over the past years, Syria has been greatly suffering from the sanctions imposed by some Western countries. Following the fall of the Assad regime, some Western officials have expressed their interest in normalizing ties with Syria. Yet, in the meantime, they have also been very concerned about the future direction of Syria. In other words, the issue of whether or not the Syrian government would move toward a democratic governing system or abide by strict Islamic rules to govern the country would likely have an impact on how likely and when the sanctions imposed on Syria can be lifted, and how long it would possibly take for Western countries to normalize diplomatic relations with Syria.

Besides that, as for Syria's interactions with regional powers, since December, we have seen a sign that Syria would be willing to restore diplomatic ties and engage more closely with the country's neighbours in the Middle East region.

As led by the Syrian civil war, the relationship between Syria and some Middle East countries such as Qatar and Saudi Arabia etc. had undergone some changes. Obviously, the Syrian new government would be interested in making a new start for Syria's relations and cooperation with countries in the region.

Over the past few months, the Syrian government officials have met with the delegates from Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Lebanon, Sudan, Iraq, Morocco and so on. Meanwhile, the officials of the Syrian government have conducted a series of foreign visits including the Syrian new leader Ahmed al-Sharaa's visit to Saudi Arabia and Turkey in early February.

Generally, at the current stage, from Syria's perspective, constructively engaging with a variety of partners in the Middle East region and beyond would be conducive to the new government's effort in gathering more support and creating a more friendly environment for promoting the recovery of Syria.

Russia and Syria: A Possibility of Continuing the Longstanding Strategic Bilateral Ties

Specifically for Syria's foreign relations with Russia, during the Assad era, Russia had been a strong supporter to the Assad government in fighting against terrorism. Russia had played a key role in helping keep the survival of the Assad regime. Nevertheless, in response to the recent conflict from late November to early December 2024 between the Assad government forces and the anti-Assad regime forces, Russia had little involvement in it.

Some observers viewed that due to the ongoing Russia-Ukraine conflict, Russia had no extra hand to get involved in the Syrian issue.

It is assumed that the Russia-Ukraine conflict may have played a part in affecting Russia's decision of not getting involved in the recently occurred Syrian internal conflict. Besides that, even without being occupied by the Ukraine crisis, the Russian side might have realized that, given the evolving trend of Syria's domestic situation all over the past years, directly intervening in the fighting between the Assad regime and the anti-Assad militant groups could have further complicated the Syrian domestic situation, and that a possible scenario led by the growing complexity inside Syria would be counteractive to the interests of both Russia and Syria in the years ahead.

Even long before the fall of the Assad regime, the general picture of Syria's domestic situation had already shown that the Syrian broad public even including a large portion of Assad's supporters had been very tired of the long and lasting atrocities and devastation ruined by the war, as well as of the very serious corruption problem under the Assad regime.

Therefore, the fatigue demonstrated by the Syrian society and the Syrian military forces toward the war and other domestic problems under the Assad ruling could explain why within only twelve days, without great struggle taken place between the Assad government forces and the anti-Assad regime forces, the anti-government forces had quickly captured the Syrian capital.

By the time when the Assad regime was approaching to an end, to protect the Russian military bases, servicemen, and Russian citizens in Syria, the Russian side had already started to stay in contact with the anti-Assad militant groups.

After the fall of the Assad regime, in an annual event in December 2024, Russian President Vladimir Putin, when addressing a question related to Russia and Syria, said that “he would keep Russia’s presence there, only if Moscow’s interests coincided with those of the political forces that had taken control.”

The Syrian new government officials had also expressed an open attitude toward consulting with Russia on any possible arrangement. Syria’s new leader al-Sharaa, in an interview with Al Arabiya in late December, said that “Syria shares strategic interests with Russia”, and that “the new Syrian leadership does not wish for Russia’s presence in Syria to end ‘in a manner that is inconsistent’ with their longstanding bilateral relationship.”



Entrance of the Hmeimim Air Base outside Latakia, Syria, in late December 2024.
(Aaref Watad / Agence France-Presse / Getty Images / New York Times).

In the scholarly field, Nikolay Kozhanov, a consulting fellow with Chatham House viewed that “Syria’s opposition forces well understand that the country’s future is uncertain, they want Russia, if not as a friend, then a neutral party”; while “Moscow’s main goal will be to maintain at least a minimal level of influence through a military presence, for example, at its existing bases, or through contacts with other regional players, such as Turkey.”

Israel and Syria: The Syrian Government Needs to Work out A More Creative Approach to Manage the Country's Relations with Israel

For Syria's possible relations with Israel, apparently the Syrian new government will need to overcome some serious obstacles. Apart from the historical hostilities between the two countries, more recently, following the fall of the Assad regime, the Israel Defence Forces had immediately bombed hundreds of targets inside Syria and quickly occupied a certain part of the Syrian territory - the Mount Hermon summit. The Israeli side claimed that this is just a temporary occupation, with the purpose of preventing Israel from being attacked by another possible terrorist group or regime.

The Mount Hermon summit naturally sits at an important point for Israel and Syria; it is 2814 meters, the highest point inside Syria, and about 35 kilometers away from Syria's capital, Damascus. So, Israel's capture of this part of the Syrian territory has put Syria in a very vulnerable position from a strategic and geographic perspective.



Israeli soldiers stand on Mount Hermon, in Syria, after Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu ordered the military to retake a demilitarized zone. (CNN).

Most likely Syria alone through bilateral negotiations with Israel can not manage this issue. It will need the involvement and mediation of other important parties.

Syria and Iran: A New Window for Reshaping the Syria-Iran Bilateral Ties or the Beginning of A Worsening Relationship?

In relation to Syria's engagement with Iran, under the ruling of the Assad regime, Iran and Syria had kept a very close ties. The Syrian territory had occasionally been served as an important channel for Iran to deliver support to Iran's allies. So, as a result of the fall of the Assad regime, Iran appeared to have suffered a big loss.

Nevertheless, there is also a need to see that the fall of the Assad regime might have opened a new window for Iran and the Syrian new government to reshape the Syria-Iran relationship and jointly stabilize the situation in Syria and beyond.

The approach and actions possibly taken by Iran - whether Iran would choose to support any insurgent groups against the Syrian government or agree to jointly develop a constructive approach with Syria to manage the Syria-Iran bilateral ties - will be of very significance in affecting how the relationship between Iran and Syria will be like in the future.

In the Meantime, the possible approach adopted by the Syrian new government toward Iran will be of equally importance in affecting the direction of Syria's future relations with Iran and the possible security situation in Syria.

Syria's new leader al-Sharaa said that the Syrian transitional authority would aim to build an inclusive government. This means that the new government would accept and respect the reality of diversity among different groups and partners. In his meeting with a number of foreign delegates since December 2024, when addressing the issue related to religion and national conflict, al-Sharaa emphasised the significance of "reconciliation and co-existence", and viewed that "historical animosities shouldn't be taken as a factor in affecting today's relations" among various religions and nations.

Apparently, the Syrian new government had sent out a series of friendly and constructive signals, which would be conducive to the new government's effort in stabilizing the domestic situation as well as in rallying support from a variety of parties, internally and externally.

How Likely the Former Syrian President Assad Still Matters in Affecting Syria's Future?

Among various factors at the domestic level which might generate an impact on Syria, it is assumed that one of them could be related to the extended influence of the former Assad regime. The staunch supporters to the former Syrian leader may seek to regain certain influence. So, under that circumstance, Assad's departure would actually do no help for promoting reconciliation within the society.

By the time when the domestic situation was out of Assad's personal control, he had held

talks with the representatives of the anti-government forces, with whom, Assad agreed to peacefully transfer his power.

On 8 December, Russian Foreign Ministry stated that Assad had left Syria, and the decision of stepping down as president following his talks with opposition forces was Assad's own decision.

The Russian side also "reaffirmed its support for an 'inclusive political process' based on UN Security Council Resolution 2254, which calls for a peaceful resolution to the Syrian conflict through free elections and a new constitution."

Later on, the Russian government spokesperson Peskov confirmed that "the former Syrian leader had been granted asylum in Russia on humanitarian grounds and that the move was personally approved by Russian President Vladimir Putin."

Then, about a week following his arrival in Russia, Assad made his first public statement on Facebook that it wasn't in his plan to leave Syria. Amid Damascus being stormed by the opposition forces, he fled to the Russian military base in Latakia, where he planned to keep fighting with the insurgents. Nonetheless, after the Russian base was under drone attacks, Russian allies evacuated him to Russia.

Indeed, that situation was very critical and urgent for him.

It is assumed that, instead of leaving the country, another choice for Assad could be that, following his talks with opposition forces, he should have immediately, through the domestic and international media agencies, made a public announcement to the Syrian people and the world that he had reached a consensus with the opposition forces through negotiations, mainly indicating that he had agreed to give up his power, accommodate the needs of the Syrian domestic situation, and make a peaceful power transition.

Under that scenario, he would have been safe.

According to RT, for instance, after the opposition forces captured Damascus, then Prime Minister Mohammad al-Jalali had made a statement that he can be found at home in Damascus, and that he would cooperate with whoever chosen by the Syrian people.

Making a public announcement to call for an end to the fighting and atrocities by Assad following his negotiations with the anti-Assad militant groups would serve the interests of Assad himself and Syria. Then, in a long run, regarding whether or not Assad would be able to return to office, it will be decided by the Syrian people through holding free and transparent elections.

It is not certain whether Assad would still aim to run office or return to Syria. If so, he may be able to generate some influence over Syria, yet the path for getting him back to the centre stage will be very hard (if not completely closed).

By the way, according to the media report, in early March 2025, a series of clashes occurred between the security forces of the Syrian new government and a group of militants in the Alawite-populated areas in Latakia and Tartus (the Alawites is a Muslim minority group, to which, the former Syrian President Assad is connected) led to the death of at least 1300 people, including more than 800 civilians. In response, a number of countries including the U.S. and Russia condemned the violence against civilians; Syria's new leader Ahmed al-sharaa also "condemned the violence and promised to hold those harming civilians accountable".



A scene of spent cartridges littering a street in the city of Latakia, Syria on 10 March 2025.
(Moawia Atrash / Getty Images / dpa / RT).

Civilians shouldn't be targeted by any armed forces or groups. Targeting minority civilian population would undermine the new Syrian government's endeavour in promoting domestic dialogue, inclusiveness, and reconciliation. The Syrian interim authority is determined to build a different Syria in the future. The current stage is just the very beginning toward achieving that goal. For the interests of the Syrian new authority, it will need to be carefully handling the disputes raised among different religious groups within the society in the years ahead.

Generally, it is assumed that the management of the above series of matters by the Syrian transitional government including Syria's domestic situation and possible engagements with a variety of partners will greatly influence Syria's future. At the initial stage, the Syrian interim

authority had shown a friendly and constructive attitude toward working with all relevant partners for restoring order in Syria and then for promoting the recovery of the country. No doubt, there will be full of uncertainties and challenges. From a medium- and long-term perspective, the government will need to ensure the successful implementation of relevant policies and measures, in line with the good signals delivered at the initial stage, in order to finally accomplish the goal of rebuilding Syria.