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Assad is gone, but Syria's problems live on

As the West announces sanctions relief, Syria risks disintegration behind a veil of reform

The collapse of the Assad regime opened a rare window of opportunity for Syria: the chance to reconstruct a nation not only with bricks and mortar, but through the introduction of legitimacy, trust and the rule of law. Yet, in the months since, it has become clear that Interim President Ahmed al-Sharaa and his HTS-affiliated circle are not providing the kind of national leadership to effect any such transition. Instead, strongman rule has taken root, justified by promises of economic recovery and stability.

While this model may hold for a while, strongman rule built atop the unresolved traumas and continuing violence of a brutal civil war is not only ethically troubling, but also strategically brittle. The implications extend beyond Syria's borders, particularly with regard to European interests: from regional stability and curbing irregular migration to reducing Syria's long-term dependence on aid. If Syria's transition is to be salvaged, it will require external support grounded in sober political risk assessment — not wishful thinking.

The mirage of renewal

From the outset, the interim authorities have sought to project an image of moderation and renewal. Foreign Minister Asaad al-Shaibani's first speech to the UN Security Council on 25 April 2025 declared that Syria was 'breathing freedom' after decades of repression. Beneath such declarations, however, lie troubling realities: monopolisation of power leading to bureaucratic inertia; perceived exclusion of critical constituencies; and the continued instrumentalisation of security structures to achieve political ends. While a handful of individuals from diverse backgrounds have been appointed to less influential ministries to signal inclusion, governance is effectively in the hands of fewer than a dozen HTS loyalists.

Crucially, transitional justice, which is essential to rebuilding social trust, is being mishandled. There is no transparent or consistent approach to addressing perpetrators from all sides. The interim government's current posture wavers between vague gestures of reconciliation, quiet alliances and selective arrests — all without clarity or public accountability. In practice, it lacks the legitimacy, territorial control and functional judiciary needed to credibly administer justice.

The establishment of a transitional justice commission on 17 May could represent a step in the right direction. However, its creation by presidential decree points to a top-down approach focused on positive public messaging. If the investigation into the coastal massacres of early March, in which Alawite civilians and security personnel were among the primary victims, is any indication, the signs are troubling. Despite public promises and the establishment of a dedicated commission, the process has thus far been opaque and politically managed. To this day, neither Sharaa nor Shaibani has visited the affected communities.

Recognition without reform

The interim government's pursuit of international recognition reveals a deeper insecurity: its awareness that it lacks genuine national legitimacy. Acknowledging this, its leadership has rightly identified external recognition – particularly the formation of an unassailable consensus around Sharaa – as the key to consolidating power. The pattern of appeasing abroad while suppressing at home is nothing new. In March, Shaibani threatened to boycott the Brussels aid conference because of the inclusion of Syrian civil society organisations. It was only the EU organisers' firm stance that ensured civil society participation. It bears repeating: it is Syria's civil society, not HTS or other armed actors, that has preserved the country's moral core throughout 14 years of war.

Meanwhile, hopes for national healing are collapsing under the weight of sectarian violence. Recent unrest in Druze majority areas of Jaramana, Ashrafiat Sahnaya and Suwayda has been met with silence from Sharaa. Since January, human rights groups have documented a surge in abductions and forced evictions, primarily targeting Alawite communities, including in the capital, and Kurdish civilians in Afrin. These acts of retribution have gone largely unpunished, deepening existing rifts in Syria's society and raising fears of new migration flows.

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Negotiations with the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) further illustrate the shortcomings. Sharaa and his associates remain fundamentally unwilling to share power.

difficult process.

Decentralisation is treated not as an opportunity to start piecing the country back together but as a threat to the monopoly on control. But no number of committee meetings or constitutional (re)drafting can substitute for the hard political compromises necessary to re-unify Syria.

Economically, the optimistic rhetoric of renewal and headline promises of financial support from Saudi Arabia, Qatar or the World Bank mask a more sobering reality. The interim authorities' governance remains too narrow and exclusionary to attract sustainable investment beyond elitist networks sustained by patronage. Saudi Arabia and Turkey have successfully lobbied the Trump administration to ease sanctions. The European Union has followed suit, announcing a full lifting of economic sanctions on 20 May. While sanctions relief is welcome given their humanitarian consequences, and Syrians embrace support that helps restore basic services, the broader picture is more complex. Gulf-backed investment, combined with insufficiently conditional Western development assistance, risks entrenching authoritarian structures under the guise of reconstruction.

Moreover, dismantling the complex web of sanctions may turn out to be a drawn-out and difficult process. The full scope of conditions tied to Washington's move remains unclear — as does the question of whether Russia and China will agree to lift the UN terrorist designations of Sharaa and his interior minister, Anas Khattab, or what concessions they may demand in return.

The Israel factor

One of Washington's key expectations until at least 14 May was that Syria signs a peace agreement with Israel. This posed a profound challenge. The status of the occupied Golan Heights is not a peripheral issue for Syrians, but a central matter of national sovereignty. For Sharaa, agreeing to normalise relations without addressing the Golan would further erode his already fragile domestic legitimacy. On the Israeli side, while a deal that guarantees the exclusion of Iranian forces from Syria might be attractive in principle, the current political reality in Tel Aviv makes any agreement that could legitimise or bolster Sharaa's rule unlikely. This is especially true given that HTS publicly praised Hamas' October 7 attacks on Israel. Although Trump now appears to have dropped the demand for a peace agreement, the broader question remains unresolved: how can a unified and functioning Syrian state under Sharaa's leadership be aligned with Israeli strategic interests?

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Israel's frequent strikes on Damascus, Daraa and Hama, framed by Prime Minister Netanyahu as acts of protection for the Druze minority, are calculated steps to humiliate Sharaa and advance Israel's stated goal of partitioning Syria. Sharaa has adhered to an old formula: endure Israeli strikes to stay in power. According to sources close to the interim president, Sharaa privately told visiting US congressmen in mid-April that he was ready to enter normalisation talks with Israel, even offering the occupying state special privileges in the Golan. His HTS-linked regime, too extremist to rally behind and too weak to deter aggression, gives Israel the perfect 'partner'. With the centre hollowed out, the country edges closer to fragmentation: Kurds in the northeast, Alawites on the coast and Druze in the south all drifting beyond the reach of a government that neither defends nor unites.

Syria's internal challenges are compounded by the meddling of foreign governments intent on carving out influence in the nascent state, treating Syria, still, as an open buffet. Given the absence of a coherent regional and international strategy, Sharaa finds himself in a marathon of bilateral deal-making, navigating the often-conflicting interests of external actors whose support he needs. This is reinforcing the rise of a new political order built on authoritarian control mechanisms masked by international diplomacy. In Western policy circles, this trajectory is often enabled by a mix of euphoria and wilful denial — by those unwilling to acknowledge the reality on the ground, or who have resigned themselves to the idea that strongman rule is a tolerable cost for what they perceive as stability and geopolitically expedient.

Salvaging Syria's transition

To salvage Syria's transition, urgent measures are needed to ensure citizen safety, calm political discourse and establish state neutrality. Such steps were envisioned in UNSCR 2254, the blueprint for a peaceful transition endorsed by the Security Council in 2015. But just as Assad rejected it, Sharaa has swiftly overridden it. More regime change, however, is not in Syria's interest at this fragile juncture. What the country needs is a credible mechanism, supported by regional and international diplomacy, through which the various components of a de facto divided Syria can find common ground on the nation's immediate and longer-term future,

free from the constant threat of violence being used as a negotiating tool.

Assad is gone, but Syria's problems live on. Given the scale of European investment over the past decade, it would be short-sighted to drop the EU's doctrine of principled engagement now — only to see Syria drift toward yet another authoritarian model. With the recent lifting of economic sanctions, the EU has forfeited one of its most powerful tools of leverage. Going forward, its primary influence must come from tying development assistance and political recognition to clear, enforceable benchmarks in terms of progress in intra-Syrian negotiations and meaningful adherence to human rights by the interim government. This may temper the current hype, but it remains the only realistic path toward resolving a conflict that may be temporarily contained, yet is all but certain to reignite if left politically unaddressed.



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