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Syria's Transition: Domestic Challenges and Regional Implications

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The rapid shift in Syria's political landscape has triggered a fast-moving realignment of international and regional stakeholders. Following more than a decade of protracted conflict, Ahmad Sharaa, leader of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), a former splinter faction of al-Qaeda, has assumed the presidency. His transitional government, while facing internal instability, has received backing from Türkiye, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia, while maintaining cooperative relations with Russia.

Despite these shifts, Syria remains in a fragile state, facing an acute humanitarian crisis, extensive infrastructure devastation, and a massive displacement crisis with over 4.5 million registered refugees in neighboring countries and elsewhere, alongside over 7 million internally displaced population. While the handover of power has been set within a three-to-four-year transition period, key challenges remain in ensuring political stability, economic reconstruction, and social reintegration. Moreover, trust in the transitional government remains low among Western countries, including the European Union, which remains wary of legitimizing a government led by a former jihadist figure and has conditioned engagement on demonstrable commitments to governance reform and human rights protections.

The following sections examine Syria's emerging governance options; the direct impact in neighboring countries, particularly Jordan, Lebanon, and Iraq, where governments are adjusting their security policies, trade relations, and refugee strategies in response; and finally explore the European Union's position, as it faces critical policy decisions, balancing diplomatic engagement, humanitarian assistance, and reconstruction aid with the need for political conditionality and human rights safeguards.

I. Governance Models and Challenges in Post-Assad Syria

The ousting of Bashar al-Assad in December 2024 marked a turning point in Syria's protracted conflict, yet the country's political future remains uncertain. As of February 2025, the country's governance landscape is fractured with two models emerging: a centralized transitional rule with sectarian undertones under Ahmed al-Sharaa, and a decentralized option championed by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and Sheikh Al Hijri within the Druze community. This analysis delineates these governance frameworks, underscoring the fragility of Syria's transition.

1. Centralized Transitional Rule: Reality and Rhetoric

Ahmed al-Sharaa's formal appointment as Syria's transitional president on January 29, 2025, marked a symbolic shift from a *de facto* military dominance to constitutional legitimacy. Emerging from an alliance of anti-Assad coalitions, dominated by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), al-Sharaa has rapidly consolidated his power, integrating key armed factions into the state structure. The decrees on January 30, 2025, suspending the 2012 constitution, dissolving Baathist institutions, and pledging elections within four years, have signaled a break from the past. However, his governance model remains fraught with contradictions, as his government practices continue to undermine pledges of inclusivity.

The dissolution of Assad's security apparatus and integration of rebel factions aim to legitimize the new government's authority. However, this process has prioritized control over inclusivity. While al-Sharaa has promised a "genuine and inclusive" National Dialogue Conference¹, key decisions, such as delaying elections until a census is completed and forming a provisional legislative council handpicked by his office, concentrate power in the executive.

¹ Words used in his first presidential addressed of Jan 30, 2025.

Before al-Sharaa's renewed call for an inclusive national dialogue, his transitional government followed an imprint of sectarian marginalization. Purges of civil servants in the name of radical reforms for efficiency are reportedly affecting non-Sunni employees at a greater rate,² also confiscation of property among Christians, controversial possible changes to the education curriculum, along arbitrary detention practices, have the potential to deepen communal fractures. Meanwhile, the mostly male Sunni presence in proposed transitional bodies underscores the gap between rhetoric and reality.

2. Decentralization and Autonomy: The SDF and Druze Experiences

In contrast to Damascus's centralizing tendencies, northeastern and southern Syria have adopted localized governance models that emphasize autonomy and minority rights. However, these models do not necessarily follow an inclusive approach, as they also implement exclusionary practices.³

The SDF's Federalist Aspirations

The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) have governed northeastern Syria through the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES). However, their future remains uncertain due to internal Kurdish divisions, Damascus's opposition, and external pressures from Türkiye and the U.S.

In negotiations with Damascus, the SDF has demanded military integration as a unified bloc, administrative decentralization, and equitable resource distribution. While Military Integration as a Bloc has been rejected by Damascus the other two requests have received some consideration.

Meanwhile, internal Kurdish rivalries, particularly between the SDF-aligned Democratic Union Party (PYD) and the Kurdish National Council (KNC), hinder a unified Kurdish stance. Diplomatic efforts to bridge these gaps, including talks with Iraqi Kurdish leader Massoud Barzani, have yet to yield concrete results.

Externally, the SDF faces Turkish military threats and uncertainty over U.S. support under the Trump administration. Without internal cohesion and reliable international backing, the SDF's governance model remains fragile, leaving its future in Syria's post-Assad landscape uncertain.

The Druze Community

Sheikh Hikmat Al Hijri, a prominent religious figure in the Druze community, has rejected subordination to Damascus until a new constitution is in place. In Suwayda, local councils and militias led by Al Hijri have prioritized their military self-management over military control from Damascus. However, deep divisions persist within the Druze community, while some factions advocate for full autonomy, others align with Damascus, and others seem to have explored potential support from Israel. Druze resistance to Damascus is shaped by their wartime experience fighting against al-Nusra, as well as his political aspirations.

3. Syria's Uncertain Inclusive Future

Syria's governance remains fractured, with competing groups vying for representation and influence, shaping an uncertain political future. Challenges to Damascus's centralization efforts differ in approach: the SDF seeks formal federal recognition, while the Druze prioritize autonomy. Both, however, face shared vulnerabilities. The SDF's reliance on Western support leaves it at risk of abandonment, while the Druze,

² Prior to December 8, public service positions were predominantly filled by Alawi Syrians. Under the transitional government's push for administrative efficiency, there are reports that in areas like Tartus, this initiative is being used to reshape the sectarian composition of the public sector. Reports indicate that non-Sunni employees are being systematically placed on forced leave, signaling a potential sectarian shift in the balance of state institutions under the new leadership.

³ While most arbitrary detentions have been attributed to the authorities of the transitional government, 59 arrests and enforced disappearances among civilians were attributed to the SDF with the pretext of being ISIS affiliates (Syrian Network of Human Rights, 2025)

lacking foreign patrons, are exposed to economic and military pressure from Damascus. Without strong external backing, both models remain vulnerable to coercion, and the persistence of competing governance frameworks risks deepening Syria's de facto partition.

Meanwhile, al-Sharaa's government embodies a paradox. It seeks legitimacy through mention of inclusivity while consolidating power through exclusionary practices. This contradiction reflects Syria's broader post-revolutionary dilemma: centralized authority cannot stabilize a fractured society without addressing regional grievances and sectarian divisions. Unless the transitional government commits to genuine inclusion, integrating diverse communities into governance and fostering meaningful power-sharing, his government will remain vulnerable to both internal dissent and external interference.

II. Syria's Transition and Neighboring Countries

Jordan's Strategic Economic Positioning Amid Syria's Transition

In the aftermath of Syria's political transition, Jordan is actively positioning itself as a regional economic stabilizer and a key trade facilitator. By emphasizing the resumption of trade relations and the revitalization of free trade zones, Jordan seeks to reinforce its role as a commercial gateway.

Diplomatic and Economic Pragmatism

Jordan's engagement with Syria is a pragmatic diplomatic move, prioritizing economic recovery over political entanglements. By reactivating trade and reducing logistical barriers, Jordan presents itself as a neutral economic actor willing to cooperate with Damascus regardless of the shifting political landscape. This stance allows Jordan to maintain regional stability while ensuring its economic interests are safeguarded in a rapidly changing environment.

The resumption of trade, the government's push to reduce trade barriers, improve transportation networks, and the reactivation of free trade zones reflect an active economic policy rather than a reactive approach to shifts in Syria. By promoting cross-border trade efficiency, Jordan positions itself as an economic partner in Syria's transition, reinforcing its image as a forward-looking and investment-friendly nation.

Political Challenges and Considerations

While Jordan's economic initiatives are promising, the political landscape presents significant challenges. The ascent of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) in Syria raises concerns about the potential empowerment of Islamist factions within Jordan. Analysts note that HTS's victory may embolden local Islamist groups, potentially destabilizing Jordan's internal political balance (Khurma, 2025).

Furthermore, while the return of refugees could alleviate some of the domestic pressures related to resource allocation and public services, it also presents challenges in terms of its international standing, such as ensuring that returns are voluntary and conducted in safety and dignity. Moreover, a premature or uncoordinated return could lead to further instability if the conditions in Syria are not conducive to sustainable resettlement.

The extent to which Jordan can sustain this economic role will depend on Syria's internal stability, the response of international actors, and Jordan's ability to balance regional pressures. In positioning itself as a leading economic gateway, Jordan not only potentially strengthens its economic resilience domestically but also reasserts Jordan's geopolitical significance at regional and international levels.

Lebanon's Recalibration towards Syria

While Lebanon's immediate focus remains on stabilizing its internal political structure, including the implementation of the November 27, 2024, ceasefire with Israel, and the leadership transition under President Joseph Aoun, the changes unfolding in Syria are expected to have long-term and structural implications for Lebanon's domestic politics, economy, and regional alliances.

Regional Power Shift and Hezbollah

The loss of Al Assad as a strategic ally has disrupted Hezbollah's weapons supply chain, forcing the party to recalculate its operational strategy via Syria. Hezbollah Secretary-General Naim Qassem has acknowledged the need to find alternative military and logistical solutions. Furthermore, the rise of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) in Syria presents an additional challenge. While HTS has consolidated power in certain areas near the Lebanese border, its ideological opposition to Hezbollah could lead to future clashes or diplomatic tensions between the two entities.

Bilateral Relations: A Forced Reset

The collapse of Assad's regime necessitates a recalibration of Lebanon-Syria relations, particularly concerning bilateral institutions established under the former regime, including the fate of the Syrian-Lebanese Higher Council established in 1991 (Macaron, 2025), with some Lebanese calling for its prompt dissolution.

Lebanese and Syrian military officials have begun to redefine security coordination, particularly concerning border control. A recent meeting between Syria's new army chief of staff and Lebanon's army coordination officer highlights a mutual interest in stabilizing border regions and curbing illicit activities such as smuggling and militant infiltration.

Syrian Refugees and their Return

Lebanon currently hosts over 1.9 million Syrian refugees, making it one of the largest per capita refugee hosts in the world. While refugees are returning to Syria at a low pace steadily since September 2024,⁴ Lebanon has also witnessed new waves of asylum seekers, primarily individuals fleeing the emerging power structure in Damascus.

The repatriation of Syrian refugees remains a highly contested issue in Lebanon, with some pushing for accelerated returns to alleviate economic strain. In his inaugural address to parliament, President Aoun emphasized the urgency of developing a clear and actionable policy framework in coordination with the Syrian government, underscoring the need to prioritize repatriation under dignified and sustainable conditions (Matar, 2025).

While Lebanon aims to ease the economic pressure caused by Syrian refugees, however, these refugees have for a long time contributed to the Lebanese economy, and Lebanon will likely need Syrian labor moving forward for the agriculture sector and reconstruction efforts following the recent conflict between Israel and Hezbollah (Macaron, 2025).

Potential Economic Relations

Like Jordan, Lebanon is likely to benefit from a stable trade relationship with Syria. According to a recent study by ESCWA, the reopening of borders and the establishment of transportation corridors could have immediate positive implications for trade and GDP. Models by ESCWA looking into exports to Syria, show a

⁴ According to the latest UNHCR report, around 207,311 individuals have returned to Syria since December 8, 2024. It is estimated that 195,000 individuals have returned from Jordan and Syria.

potential positive trade balance for Lebanon, with the combined GDP of Jordan and Lebanon is expected to increase by a total of \$0.6 billion in 2025 and \$1.8 billion in 2026 as a result of gains obtained from trade in this scenario (ESCWA, Jan 26, 2025).

Iraq: Safeguarding Security and Sovereignty

The collapse of Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria has prompted Iraq to reassess its foreign policy, balancing immediate security concerns with long-term economic and political interests. Initially, Iraq's leadership expressed alarm, fearing that the ascendancy of hardline Islamist factions within the Syrian opposition could destabilize the region and embolden extremist groups reminiscent of ISIS (Salih, 2025). Prime Minister Mohammed Shia al-Sudani underscored the intertwined security interests of Iraq and Syria, pledging support against "terrorism," a term often used to describe anti-Assad elements. National Security Advisor Qasim al-Araji added a sectarian dimension by referencing historical Shia figures, signaling a commitment to protect Shia holy sites in Damascus (Salih, 2025).

As almost all relevant governments in the region seem to be looking past the new Syrian leadership's terrorist affiliations and are opening lines of communication with them, Iraq has adopted a more pragmatic approach, engaging with Syria's transitional government to safeguard its national interests. To this end, Mohammed Shia 'Al-Sudani dispatched the National Intelligence Director to meet with Syria's new government in December 2024, and the Minister of Foreign Affairs to represent Iraq in the January 12 meetings with Saudi Arabia, underscoring Iraq's commitment to regional stability (Khadim, 2025).

This shift underscores Iraq's need to carefully navigate and balance regional dynamics, managing internal sectarian divides while mitigating external pressures from influential neighbors like Iran. The political transition in Syria has the potential to reshape regional influence of Türkiye against Iran. In response, Iraq's leadership faces mounting pressure from Tehran, which is seeking to compensate for its loss of influence in Syria by strengthening its political, economic, and security position in Iraq (Khadim, 2025). Simultaneously, Iraq will be under growing pressure to reassess its bilateral relations with the United States. The evolving situation in Syria is likely to force both Baghdad and Washington to revisit their agreement on U.S. troop withdrawal, currently set for completion by the end of 2026. Meanwhile, Iran's continued support for armed groups within Iraq, including Kataib Hezbollah and Harakat al-Nujaba, complicates Baghdad's efforts to assert sovereignty and maintain stability. These militias, aligned with Tehran, have historically pushed the Iraqi government to adopt policies favoring Iran's strategic objectives (Al Shamary, 2024).

III. European Policy Response

The European Union (EU) is actively engaging with Syria's political transition. This engagement is characterized by a cautious strategic approach aimed at supporting Syria's stabilization and reconstruction while promoting inclusive governance and human rights.

Sanctions Policy and Economic Support

Initially EU governments displayed differing attitudes toward engagement with Syria's new leadership, reflecting broader divisions within the bloc. While some states remained cautious about legitimizing Ahmed al-Sharaa's government too quickly, others advocated for a pragmatic diplomatic approach to stabilize the region. Despite these differences, on January 27 2025, EU foreign ministers agreed on a roadmap to ease certain sanctions imposed on Syria since 2011. The plan includes a gradual suspension of restrictions in key sectors such as energy and transport, with the intent to bolster Syria's economic recovery and facilitate the return of refugees. The EU favors a mechanism that allows for the reimposition of sanctions if the situation deteriorates. Some sanctions, particularly those related to arms embargoes and measures against individuals from the former Assad regime, will remain in place to maintain leverage over Syria's new leadership.

Challenges and Considerations

The EU remains cautious in its engagement with Syria's transition, balancing the need to support stabilization and reconstruction with concerns over legitimizing groups previously designated as terrorist organizations. This reflects the EU's broader strategy of conditional engagement, where any support is tied to demonstrable commitments to democratic reforms and human rights protections. By maintaining targeted sanctions relief, diplomatic outreach, and advocacy for minority rights, the EU seeks to influence Syria's governance trajectory while avoiding premature normalization. As Syria's new leadership consolidates power, the EU's role will be pivotal in ensuring that reconstruction and political developments align with principles of inclusivity, accountability, and long-term stability.

Syria's transition presents both risks and opportunities for the EU. While the power shift offers a potential path toward stability, it also raises concerns about governance, human rights, and long-term peace. The EU must act strategically, ensuring that its engagement supports inclusive governance, reconstruction, and protection of civil rights without reinforcing authoritarian tendencies. A fragmented approach could weaken Europe's leverage and allow regional and global competitors to shape Syria's future.

IV. EU Engagement for Long-term Stability

As the EU navigates its engagement with Syria's political transition, from a rights-based and civil society view, UNSCR 2254 provides a crucial legal and political framework for shaping its response. Its core principles, political inclusivity, human rights, and governance reforms, should remain the foundation of EU engagement. Rather than a strictly UN-led process, a regionally mediated transition that reflects the role of national and regional actors could shape the EU's strategy, ensuring that governance reforms align with both international commitments and political dynamics.

1. Establish Clear and Transparent Conditionality for Engagement

The EU's conditional engagement strategy is vital, but it must be transparent, measurable, and enforceable. To this end, it could ensure:

- A structured framework for conditionality, ensuring that any sanctions relief, trade agreements, or reconstruction support is linked to concrete governance improvements in Syria
- Clear human rights benchmarks, requiring protections for minorities, civil liberties, and women's participation in governance before further EU recognition or funding.
- A robust monitoring mechanism, where independent civil society organizations and international watchdogs track Syria's compliance with democratic reforms, minority rights, and the rule of law.

2. Prioritize Accountability and Justice Mechanisms

Given concerns over past human rights violations and ongoing repression, the EU must not sideline justice in favor of short-term stabilization, rather:

- Support documentation efforts of crimes committed by all actors, including those now in power, through funding and legal assistance for Syrian civil society organizations documenting abuses.
- Encourage an independent oversight body to review the human rights situation, particularly regarding arbitrary detentions, minority protections, and press freedom.

3. Address the Syrian Refugee Crisis with a Rights-Based Approach

This can be done through:

- Safe, voluntary, and dignified returns: urging the EU to reject coerced repatriation policies that force Syrians back into unsafe conditions.
- Protections for Syrians seeking asylum in Europe, countering narratives that frame Syrian refugees as a security threat rather than victims of war.

4. Prevent Economic Normalization Without Political Reforms

While economic re-engagement with Syria is inevitable, it must not become a tool for legitimizing authoritarianism. The EU should:

- Ensure that aid and reconstruction efforts benefit Syrian civilians, not war profiteers, by demanding strict financial oversight on where EU funds are allocated
- Support local economies and civil society along with public institutions, ensuring that small businesses, independent media, and grassroots organizations receive direct support
- Prevent the lifting of financial restrictions without governance guarantees, ensuring that funds do not strengthen military factions or repression apparatuses.

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