

## WHO WANTS WHAT IN POST-ASSAD SYRIA? Implications for a New Middle East Order

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*Within a Middle East (geo)political order already destabilized by the repercussions of the war in Gaza, the collapse of Bashar al-Assad's regime on December 8, 2024, sent shockwaves that keep echoing far beyond Syria's borders. On the one hand, the Syrian rebels' offensive put an end to a long-lasting dictatorship and over a decade of civil war. On the other hand, it had not only opened questions about the country's sociopolitical future but also reshuffled the cards of the competition between regional and international powers.*

**A**mong all the actors involved in the Syrian conundrum, Turkey was initially deemed the real “winner”. This is mostly related to the two main groups behind Assad's fall enjoying close ties with Ankara. While Turkey's direct support to the Syrian National Army (SNA) has been evident since 2016, its relations with Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) are much more blurred. Nonetheless, as soon as the latter emerged as the group leading the caretaker administration tasked with charting Syria's future, Ankara engaged in intense diplomatic maneuvers to seize its long-awaited strategic objectives: extending its influence over a friendly government in Syria, curbing Iranian leverage in the region, and preventing the formation of a Kurdish autonomous zone along its borders. Nonetheless, claiming a “spot under the sun” comes with risks. First, economic constraints hinder Ankara's ability to lead Syria's reconstruction. Second, while it enjoys leverage over HTS, the group's Islamist background makes it a controversial partner that could hamper its relations with other regional and international actors.

Most importantly, the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)'s refusal to integrate into the emerging Syrian national army has exacerbated tensions in the northeast, where Kurdish groups and militias like the People Protection Units (YPG) remain caught between pressures from Turkey –where the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK)'s leader Abdullah Öcalan has called for reconciliation– and doubts about the continuation of the U.S. support to fight against a potential resurgence of the Islamic State (IS). Therefore, such uncertainties and competing interests risk trapping the country in yet another cycle of instability maneuvered by external powers. Indeed, as evidenced by the uncertain outcome of the National Conference called by Syrian ad-interim President Ahmad al-Shara in late February, the new government's legitimacy stays contested, and internal divisions persist. Minority communities –including the Druze, Alawites, and Kurds–

remain uncertain about their place in the emerging order. The economic instability and reconstruction efforts loom as well. Although Gulf states may provide more substantial financial support, their involvement remains contingent on the political trajectory of the new administration. Seemingly, the European Union has eased some **sanctions**, but skepticism lingers over whether HTS can deliver genuine inclusive reforms.

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This explains the **cautious approach** undertaken by the Gulf states, particularly Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. While they share with Turkey the objective to undermine Iranian influence, they are traditionally more careful about granting overt support to Islamist groups like HTS that could complicate their international standing and inspire similar currents within their borders. Their diplomatic engagement has increased, but extensive financial commitments remain pendant over more precise guarantees about the new government's political direction. One partial exception is Qatar, which, due to its previous financial support to Syrian opposition factions and partnership with Turkey, could take a more sided stance. Still, the calculations of all the Gulf monarchies depend on **Trump's next moves** to a great extent.

While Washington remains a resolute backer of Israel, its approach to Syria is far less predictable. The UAE and Saudi Arabia do not see with good eyes a Turkish-dominated, Islamist-leaning Syria and fear Tehran could exploit tensions in the country's northeast between the Kurds and Turkey. Second, the October 2023 Gaza war put an abrupt halt to the normalization process between Israel and several Arab states. However, should the ceasefire hold, the second Trump administration could reignite the 2020 **Abraham Accords under new vests**, resorting to a "maximum pressure" strategy vis-à-vis Iran that would be warmly welcomed in the Gulf.

In this regard, **Israel** represents another actor that not only shares the goal of weakening Iranian regional influence but has already demonstrated the capability to operate in that direction. Seizing the **opportunity** presented by Assad's downfall, Israel swiftly expanded beyond the occupied Golan Heights, entrenching itself in Syria's southern provinces with an improvised military outpost. Besides being a defensive measure against Iranian-backed militias, this move also serves to counterbalance Turkey's growing influence. Especially considering Ankara's harsh anti-Israeli rhetoric and support for Hamas in Gaza, Tel Aviv has also raised the possibility of maintaining its ties with Kurdish-led groups. However, Israel's support to minorities such as Kurds and Druze risks exacerbating the tensions also with Syria's transitional government, which used the latest National Conference in Damascus to reiterate its **opposition to Israel's presence**.

While almost all actors are balancing between opportunities and risks, Iran certainly represents one of the “big losers” in these shifting regional power dynamics. As its “**Axis of Resistance**” was already weakened by Israel’s actions against Hamas in Gaza, the fall of Assad has further accelerated this regression. Losing Syria meant losing a crucial land corridor to Hezbollah, whose supply lines have been repeatedly targeted by Israeli airstrikes. Moreover, from a political viewpoint, the new government in Damascus has shown intention to backslide Assad’s close alliance with Tehran, with **reports** already indicating the interception of Iranian weapons bound for Hezbollah. Similarly, as Turkey’s expanding influence in Syria limits Iran’s regional strategic depth, the new unfriendly government in Lebanon further restricts Teheran’s diplomatic margin of maneuver. Against this backdrop, Iran could **back those Kurdish groups** who oppose the PKK leader’s call for disarmament and seek to hinder the dialogue between Damascus and the SDF.

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Likewise, Assad’s fall has significantly curtailed **Russia’s** historical influence over Syria. Moscow’s military intervention in 2015 was instrumental in keeping Assad in power and granting the Kremlin leverage on any diplomatic or military development. However, the shift of focus and resources towards Ukraine limited Russia’s power to shape the rapid unfolding of events in December. As for now, Russia’s immediate priority is securing its strategic military assets, particularly the Tartus naval base and Khmeimim airfield. Despite attempts to secure a new diplomatic dialogue with the Syrian transition government, the transfer of significant military equipment to Libya has already shown that it is improbable for Russia to alter the current negative prospects.

All in all, if one looks back at Syria before December 8, 2024, one sees a situation that seemed locked in place: Assad was being reintegrated into the Arab fold, Turkey was cautiously moving toward regional normalization, and Russia and Iran maintained their influence through the Astana format. Yet, to the surprise of many, the collapse of Assad’s regime provoked a shifting regional order in which every actor now wants to “get their piece of the cake”. As these players preach stability and dialogue while pursuing divergent strategies and competing objectives, this might exacerbate power struggles and prolong instability. Although positive developments depend, to some extent, on whether Syria’s new leadership can deliver on its promise of inclusivity, much will also lie on whether foreign actors continue prioritizing influence over stability. In such a situation, Syria risks remaining a battleground for regional competition. Instead, a sustainable future demands more than strategic maneuvering and requires a political settlement that addresses Syria’s internal fractures rather than simply exploiting or containing them.