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The New Syria: Halting a Dangerous Drift

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What's new? Syria's interim government faces a difficult transition, with the country wracked by repression, civil war and sanctions. It has launched a political process that purports to reflect the views of broad segments of the population as part of a dramatic rebuilding of the state.

Why does it matter? Syria is living on borrowed time. The interim government is running out of funds, security forces are overstretched, poverty is deepening and insurgency is brewing at the periphery. Outsiders are meddling. Western sanctions deprive leaders of what they need to rebuild, while preventing fragmentation or a return to civil war.

What should be done? The interim government should pursue security, economic and governance reforms simultaneously, recognising their interdependence. Security for vulnerable communities – especially Alawites, who formed the former regime's political base – is essential for stopping spiralling violence. Donors should ease sanctions and offer other support to give the transition a fighting chance.

I. Overview

Syria's new order is in a race against the clock. Rejoicing followed President Bashar al-Assad's ouster by the Sunni Islamist Hei'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and other rebel groups. Yet now the country is gripped by growing uncertainty over interim president Ahmed al-Sharaa's political outlook and his perceived drive to monopolise power. He has sought to soothe nerves by trying to establish security and launching a transition ostensibly meant to produce a more inclusive government. Yet he faces mammoth challenges: wartime destruction, an acute cash shortage to pay state salaries, enervated ministries, disunited security institutions, simmering sectarian divisions, grievances built up over years of civil war, Western sanctions that forestall significant foreign assistance and damaging Israeli intervention. With Syria drifting dangerously, outside actors should give the new leadership the support it needs to begin rebuilding the country. The alternative could be state collapse, which would come at enormous cost to Syrians and to regional stability.

By overthrowing a hated regime, and shedding little blood during their final offensive, Syria's new leaders earned enormous gratitude among many Syrians and in many foreign capitals – and with it both the benefit of the doubt and valuable time to set

the country on a new path. Even if many Syrians view them with suspicion, given their jihadist origins and unknown ambitions, most have been encouraged by al-Sharaa's public utterances, which are a marked departure from Assad's mix of menace and stale sloganeering – hallmarks of his bloody, repressive reign. Syrians were heartened by the lack of widespread violence for some time after Assad fell. But, in early March, bloody clashes in Latakia, Tartous and Hama – accompanied in some places by massacres of civilians – showed they have ample reason to fear its renewal, which could take on a distinct sectarian dimension, generating chaos, new waves of displacement and even the division of Syria into cantons under the influence of foreign powers.

For his part, al-Sharaa must walk a tightrope strung between Islamist ideologues, some of whom look askance at his pragmatic discourse and forays into diplomacy, and the wider world. For reconstruction, Syria must acquire cash that donors may deny or condition on good governance and a degree of pluralistic political participation. In the meantime, al-Sharaa must strike a balance between acting swiftly to meet the population's urgent needs – food, electricity and other necessities – and moving at a more deliberate pace to develop a political process with the broadest possible buy-in. He must also maintain security while ensuring accountability for those who attack civilians, whether the assailants are insurgents or aligned with the state. The danger that militias operating under the banner of state security forces will commit atrocities while fighting ex-regime elements was illustrated all too vividly in early March. Al-Sharaa must also cope with foreign actors' meddling, particularly the Israeli's army's move into southern Syria.

Stumbling on any of these fronts could lead the new leadership into a vicious cycle of fighting off fresh insurgencies in response to insecurity, gaps in basic services, political exclusion and escalating abuse of civilians, followed by withdrawal of any prospect for significant outside support for rebuilding the country. Further impoverishment of the population might then give rise to new grievances as drivers of rebellion, which could in turn create openings for external players to pursue their own interests at the interim government's expense. In that scenario, it would be difficult to envision a stable, or any, Syrian state still standing. The result could instead be long-term fragmentation and a return to civil war.

Damascus is hoping to get sanctions relief from Western capitals, as well as fiscal support from both them and Gulf Arab states; these represent the key sources of immediate assistance and the most potent source of future investment. Yet Western governments sceptical of HTS may attach strings to the easing of sanctions that are unrelated to their original purpose. If donors impose conditions that the new leaders cannot meet, they could consign Syria to even deeper economic misery rather than ameliorating it.

The way forward will surely be bumpy, but it will surely go better if the country's leaders are as transparent as possible in their governance and admit room for improvement in everything from fostering broader participation to keeping a leash on disorderly elements among the new security forces. Beyond meetings already conducted with key donors, they should do everything in their power to give governments in the West and the Gulf reason to back them, lest they fail precipitously for lack of resources. Donors should make clear the conditions required for their support, which should include reconstruction of essential infrastructure, as well as for

further sanctions waivers if not outright relief. Donors should also use diplomatic channels to discourage outside actors from exploiting Syria's frailty for their own purposes. If donors decline to extend aid, or delay it unduly, this rare but promising project of state rebuilding in the turbulent Middle East could descend into yet another fiasco, with huge costs for human and regional security.

II. A Brief Honeymoon

Syrians and outsiders seem to agree that the country's new leaders, particularly al-Sharaa (previously known by the *nom de guerre* Abu Mohammed al-Jolani), were encouragingly non-ideological in their initial pronouncements about the country's future and the steps they took to realise it. Even many chary of HTS's jihadist past were favourably impressed.¹ Most importantly, HTS overthrew the Assad regime with minimal bloodshed and, at least at first, little violent retribution.

HTS moved quickly to establish security in the main population centres and mostly prevented, or punished the perpetrators of, reprisals against members of the previous order. It formed a caretaker cabinet drawing members from the Salvation Government that had assisted it in ruling Idlib, the north-western province where it exercised *de facto* autonomy for years before launching its final offensive. Al-Sharaa and his foreign minister, Asaad al-Shaibani, set off on a diplomatic blitz to convince potential allies in the Middle East, Europe and the U.S. that jihadists were not taking over Syria, that the country would be open for business and that its devastated economy urgently needed support.² This approach, which an interim government official called a combination of "firefighting and ice-breaking", served to ward off chaos while keeping the lights on.³ The appearance of Syria's new leaders at Davos – site of the elite World Economic Forum's annual gathering – and their interviews in prominent Western media outlets were striking signals of the interim government's priorities.⁴

In subsequent weeks, the new leaders took the first steps toward a political process designed to produce an elected constitutional government. On 29 January, armed factions led by HTS convened a Conference for Declaring the Victory of the Syrian Revolution, named al-Sharaa the country's interim president, decreed the formation of an interim legislative body, suspended the old regime's 2012 constitution and dissolved parliament, all security agencies and the Baath party, along with themselves.⁵

¹ Crisis Group interviews, Damascus, Cairo, Jerusalem and Brussels, January-February 2025.

² On al-Sharaa's background, see Raya Jalabi, "The secret history of Syria's new leader, Ahmed al-Sharaa", *Financial Times*, 6 March 2025; Laila Alrefaai and Ahmad Abazeid, "The multiple identities of Syria's new leader", *New Lines Magazine*, 28 February 2025; Jerome Drevon, *From Jihad to Politics: How Syrian Jihadis Embraced Politics* (Oxford, 2024); and "The Jihadist Factor in Syria's Idlib: A Conversation with Abu Muhammad al-Jolani", Crisis Group Commentary, 20 February 2020.

³ Crisis Group interview, Damascus, 24 February 2025.

⁴ Well before it took control of the country, HTS understood the value of external outreach, having worked to convince outside actors of its movement away from jihadism during the period when it controlled Idlib. See, eg, "The Jihadist Factor in Syria's Idlib: A Conversation with Abu Muhammad al-Jolani", *op. cit.*

⁵ "Conference to declare the victory of the Syrian revolution: Timing and effects", *Jusour*, 30 January 2025 [Arabic].

They also announced plans to stage a national dialogue conference in February aimed at broadening input into the country's direction and building support for a transition roadmap, to be followed by a transitional "constitutional declaration" and establishment of a new interim government in March.⁶

Many initial signs in the post-Assad transition seemed hopeful. Within a week of the regime's fall in early December 2024, schools reopened. Though there were reports of looting, abductions and violence, particularly in Alawite areas – motivated by revenge against former regime elements, other civil war grievances or criminality – there was no sustained unrest. Outside Damascus, travelling after dark remained unsafe, including between the main cities. But in the capital, and in daylight in many other places, HTS imposed a degree of control. It did so, remarkably, without a major show of force; at the end of February, for example, the vital road to Damascus from the Lebanese border had a single checkpoint at the city's entrance. A lone officer waved cars through.⁷ By this time, a sense of security was emerging, encouraging over 850,000 displaced Syrians to go back to their areas of origin and an estimated 270,000 refugees to return from abroad.⁸

Other indicators for the transition have also been positive. Fuel (though of low quality) has been available in apparent abundance, despite the halt in Iranian imports following Tehran's hasty withdrawal with the Assad regime's demise; urban traffic is as heavy as ever.⁹ In mid-March, Qatar announced it had started supplying natural gas via Jordan for Syrian power plants, relying on a U.S. waiver.¹⁰ Government ministries are operating, though at reduced capacity, and public-sector employees are reportedly receiving their salaries, if sometimes a bit late.¹¹ Yet these things are only part of the picture.

III. Daunting Challenges from Within

There is also a grimmer side of the ledger, with a worrying tally of impediments to progress. First is the physical toll of the civil war. Entire neighbourhoods of Damascus and other cities lie in ruins. While many schools have reopened, 30-50 per cent of the buildings remain unusable, having been damaged, destroyed or repurposed during the war.¹² An estimated 40-50 per cent of pupils aged 6 to 15 remain out of

⁶ On 13 February, al-Sharaa presented the Preparatory Committee for the conference, comprising five men and two women affiliated with HTS, groups under the Syrian National Army umbrella and civil society organisations. "Syria forms committee to draft transitional constitutional charter", France 24, 2 March 2025.

⁷ Crisis Group observations, 23 February 2025.

⁸ "Syria: Thousands of displaced head home, but many refugees remain weary", UN News, 13 February 2025. Many returnees from Lebanon, in particular, can be expected to keep travelling back and forth as long as the situation in Syria remains uncertain.

⁹ Crisis Group observations, 23-28 February 2025.

¹⁰ "Qatar begins supplying natural gas to Syria through Jordan", Al Jazeera, 13 March 2025.

¹¹ The public sector (not including the army and security agencies) reportedly employs 1.2 to 1.3 million people. Crisis Group interview, foreign ministry official, Damascus, 24 February 2025. A UN official estimated the funds needed to keep it running at around \$300 million per month. Crisis Group interview, Damascus, 24 February 2025.

¹² Crisis Group interview, education ministry official, Damascus, 25 February 2025.

school.¹³ The UN Development Programme estimates the total cost of repairing war-related destruction in Syria at \$200 billion.¹⁴ “We inherited a skeleton of a country”, an interim government official noted.¹⁵

Second is the country’s economic straits. The government has little in its coffers – and no immediate prospect of filling them. It has no foreign exchange earnings, and it will have difficulty getting foreign aid due to sanctions imposed by the UN Security Council and Western states, not just on the former regime and state institutions but also on HTS as a designated terrorist organisation. The most consequential measures are those put in place by the U.S., which amount to a nearly full embargo on Syria’s economy, although a U.S. general licence (discussed below) creates openings for certain transactions with governing institutions or relating to the energy sector or remittances.

As is often the case, governments and in particular private companies are holding off on helping Syria for fear of running afoul of U.S. law.¹⁶ Qatar, for example, has indicated it will not transfer funds to pay Syrian government salaries unless and until it receives assurances from Washington that doing so would not violate U.S. sanctions.¹⁷ The Trump administration has been silent on this question thus far.¹⁸ The sobering reality is that Syria is rapidly running out of money – not just for reconstruction but also for the state payroll and subsidies on staple goods.

Of the many challenges the Syrian economy faces, the liquidity crisis is particularly acute, with the Central Bank setting a very low ceiling for withdrawals of Syrian pounds (at an amount equivalent to \$20-30 per day for most people). Entrepreneurs report being unable to pay wages and operating expenses because the banks have their money locked up.¹⁹ After the interim government lifted most tariffs, cheap Turkish goods flooded markets, threatening small businesses.²⁰ In these circumstances, Syrians may look to the state for relief it cannot provide. A recruitment drive for the new army and police forces, which is getting a strong response, will likely increase the pressure on the authorities to make funds available for salaries.²¹ The arrival of hundreds of thousands of returnees brings resettlement and employment costs that the interim government, for now, is also unable to pay.

A third problem is the interim government’s lack of capacity, which it has exacerbated with its own actions. To date, decision-making within the government occurs

¹³ “The Impact of the Conflict in Syria”, UNDP, February 2025, p. 35.

¹⁴ Crisis Group interview, UN official, Damascus, 26 February 2025. The war’s total cost is much higher if one includes the loss in GDP during this period.

¹⁵ Crisis Group interview, Damascus, 24 February 2025.

¹⁶ Syria is particularly badly affected, as U.S. secondary sanctions penalise foreign businesses and individuals who do business in Syria. “Syria’s economy, still strangled by sanctions, is on its knees”, *The Economist*, 6 March 2025.

¹⁷ “Exclusive: U.S. sanctions hold up Qatari support for Syria, sources say”, Reuters, 27 February 2025.

¹⁸ A U.S. official suggested that Qatar did not need U.S. approval and that its reluctance to transfer the funds was a case of not wanting to pour money into a bottomless pit. Crisis Group interview, Washington, 14 March 2025.

¹⁹ Crisis Group interview, industrialist, Damascus, 22 February 2025.

²⁰ Crisis Group interviews, Syrian business owners, Damascus, February 2025. See also “Turkish goods undermine local products in Syria”, *Enab Baladi*, 28 February 2025.

²¹ The Assad regime’s security forces may have numbered half a million. The new authorities reportedly laid off all of them. New recruits could replenish the ranks – and raise the associated costs.

in a very small group around al-Sharaa, with little participation thus far from the larger circle of Syrian elites. Distrust of employees in ministries and other institutions led the new leaders to send home many civil servants, sometimes replacing them with people from the Salvation Government in Idlib, who lack the expertise to run the central state's far more complex machinery. Early on, the authorities appointed conservative Islamists (including one, later demoted, who advocated restricting the role of women) to important positions, for example as judges, and even a justice minister who had overseen the execution of two women in Idlib on charges of "prostitution".²² The interim government sought to correct such mistakes but nevertheless defended choosing individuals from the Salvation Government by stating that naming officials who were familiar with one another would allow for more effective governance at a critical time.²³

The interim government thus has difficulty carrying out much beyond the most basic and urgent tasks. So far, the education system – that is, the parts of it that are open – is functioning moderately well, alongside essential health and some judicial services. But other sectors are in trouble. One reason is that the government has been dismissing people who are needed to run things, citing overstaffing; even marital ties to security officers of the ousted regime have been grounds for dismissal, with no evidence of wrongdoing.²⁴ At state-run power plants, the authorities laid off many technical experts, while a shortage of medical staff has hampered efforts to scale up health care services in some areas.²⁵ Perhaps most critically, discharging local police has gravely undermined law enforcement.

The fourth group of challenges relates to security. The interim authorities took steps to restore calm in many areas, including along the coast, where most of Syria's Alawites reside.²⁶ Yet killings and kidnappings for ransom or revenge are still occurring in some parts of the country, especially Homs, a governorate in the centre. Things could get much worse if the government cannot either impose consistent order or continue to pay public-sector salaries.²⁷ In this eventuality, and since the private sector is likewise hobbled, mass impoverishment and, in some rural areas, near-starvation could cause bread riots and other protests, which the undertrained security forces might try to suppress, possibly initiating cycles of violence.²⁸

²² "New Syrian justice minister 'oversaw execution of women for prostitution' in 2015", *The New Arab*, 5 January 2025.

²³ See "Promoting a Stable, Peaceful Transition in Syria", Crisis Group Commentary, 30 January 2025; and Dareen Khalifa and Noah Bonsey, "Key Decisions Loom as Syria Enters a New Era", Crisis Group Commentary, 14 January 2025.

²⁴ Crisis Group interviews, opposition member and civil society activist, Damascus, 25 February 2025. Interim government officials say the Assad regime created thousands of jobs and provided state housing for the spouses of fighters and loyalists as compensation for their losses in the civil war. They argue that it would be unjust to keep the results of this policy in place. Crisis Group interviews, Damascus, January 2025.

²⁵ Crisis Group interview, Salamiya Hospital employee, Masyaf, 12 February 2025.

²⁶ The interim defence minister, Murhaf Abu Qasra, said he spent ten days in Latakia to help prevent violence. Crisis Group interview, Damascus, 9 February 2025.

²⁷ As an international official put it, abductions may not reflect state policy, but the public could perceive failure to stop them as a state policy. Crisis Group interview, Damascus, 26 February 2025.

²⁸ Crisis Group interviews, Damascus, February-March 2025.

The danger of spiralling violence is especially great in predominantly Alawite areas along the coast and adjacent mountains, which are disproportionately affected by the wholesale dismissal of the former regime's security forces. Would-be insurgents could take advantage of the lack of communication channels between the new leadership and minority communities to engage in disinformation campaigns and fearmongering, including via social media. They could inject communal grievances into social protests, whipping up a perfect storm.

The first days of March brought signs of an emerging insurgency rooted in the Alawite community. On 6 March, paramilitaries loyal to the deposed regime staged coordinated attacks on the newly established security forces in Jableh and Baniyas, towns on the Mediterranean coast. The assault prompted a swift, chaotic counter-offensive by the security forces and other armed factions backing the government.²⁹ Damascus sent crack troops to the region, but in their wake followed groups only haphazardly organised under the new structure, including foreign elements and factions implicated in sectarian violence during the civil war. In the fierce fighting that ensued, many security personnel were killed, along with many of the original attackers, including through summary executions. Reports suggest that hundreds of civilians also died, including women and children, massacred in their homes and villages by armed groups on the side of the government but not fully under its control.³⁰ Further such incidents could strain Syria's stability past the breaking point, fuelling further insurrection and renewed communal strife.

The north east presents another particularly thorny problem, albeit one that saw encouraging developments in February and March. A conflict between the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (SNA) – a gamut of armed groups – and the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) has been escalating since Assad fell, with hundreds of deaths. It revolves around both the future of the Kurdish-led SDF and Autonomous Administration in the new Syria and Türkiye's four-decade effort to suppress the Kurdistan Workers Party, or PKK, which Ankara, the U.S. and the European Union label a terrorist organisation and of which the SDF is the Syrian spinoff.

Recent events may contribute to a resolution. In late February, the PKK's leader, Abdullah Öcalan, called on the group to disband, a development that could help defuse Ankara's threat perceptions with respect to the SDF, reducing the likelihood of a new armed confrontation between the two.³¹ Two days later, the PKK leadership headquartered in northern Iraq's Qandil mountains responded by declaring a unilateral ceasefire in the group's struggle with Ankara, which has killed tens of thousands since

²⁹ They included members of the former army's 25th division, considered the elite unit in the Assad regime's military. See "Finding a Path through a Perilous Moment for Post-Assad Syria", Crisis Group Statement, 10 March 2025.

³⁰ Ibid. Armed groups, including those part of the Turkish-backed SNA, are integrating into the defence ministry after being dissolved. This process will take months, however, and they remain largely beyond the government's full control for the time being.

³¹ "A Promising Route to Peace in Türkiye's PKK Conflict", Crisis Group Commentary, 11 March 2025; and "Kurdish leader Öcalan issues message from prison, urging PKK to disarm to make peace with Turkey", AP, 27 February 2025. SDF leader Mazloum Abdi denied that Öcalan's call would be applicable to his group in Syria. "SDF chief says Öcalan's disarmament call is for PKK and 'not related to us in Syria'", Al Arabiya, 27 February 2025.

1984. Then, on 10 March, the interim government and SDF signed a deal by which the latter agreed to merge into the new state's institutions by the end of 2025.³²

Still, the situation remains fraught. While talks are under way with the SDF, Damascus appears either unable or unwilling to order the SNA to stop attacks. Part of the challenge is that resolving the problem in the north east is somewhat a function of Türkiye's PKK conflict and thus not solely in the hands of Damascus and the SDF. It is too early to be optimistic about serious progress on this front.

Another consideration is that Damascus and SDF see each other as weak.³³ Each, believing that time is on its side, may hold out in an effort to maximise the other's concessions, leaving a matter so critical to the future of the Syrian state to fester. Moreover, other issues are competing for the government's attention. A government official suggested that the north east is a lesser priority at the moment than security in Homs and other sensitive areas.³⁴ But placing it too far down the list could have grave consequences: failure to come to a workable compromise concerning the degree to which power might be decentralised could lead to continued fighting in the north east, at best, and strain the state's cohesion, at worst.

There are other lurking possibilities that would add a new layer of insecurity. In particular, if there were a precipitous U.S. troop withdrawal from the north east, and a failure of Ankara-PKK peace efforts, there could well be a subsequent Turkish incursion to crush the SDF.³⁵ The U.S. maintains some 2,000 troops in Syria as part of its continuing counter-ISIS mission, with Washington deploying U.S. airpower against ISIS targets.³⁶ During his first term, President Donald Trump sought to withdraw U.S. forces from Syria, but those hasty efforts were halted amid significant pushback from the Pentagon and other quarters. U.S. officials now indicate that they expect U.S. troops to depart from Syria within the year, and Pentagon officials are developing options for a withdrawal.³⁷

IV. External Actors: Help or Harm?

The Assad regime's removal was a major setback for Iran and Russia. Iran withdrew its personnel and allied Iraqi, Lebanese and Afghan militias on the day the regime fell. Russian forces stayed, but in smaller numbers, and redeployed to their naval base at Tartous and airfield at Hmeimim.³⁸ While their future in Syria is uncertain, the interim government has allowed the Russian troops to remain for the time being. Their continued presence provides an advantage in that Syria's remaining arsenal is stocked with Soviet-era weapons and the Syrian pound is printed in Russia.³⁹ Antag-

³² "Syria's interim president signs a deal with Kurdish-led SDF to merge forces", Reuters, 11 March 2025.

³³ Crisis Group interview, Damascus, 27 February 2025.

³⁴ Crisis Group interview, Damascus, 24 February 2025.

³⁵ Robert S. Ford, "America Can Best Help Syria by Getting Out", *Foreign Affairs*, 5 March 2025.

³⁶ "DOD Announces 2,000 Troops in Syria, Department Prepared for Government Shutdown", U.S. Department of Defense, 19 December 2024.

³⁷ Crisis Group interviews, Washington, mid-March 2025.

³⁸ "Russia gambles to keep military bases in post-Assad Syria", Reuters, 2 March 2025.

³⁹ Russia, which had printed currency for the ousted regime, held up deliveries for a time after it fell, resuming them in February. "Syria receives local currency printed in Russia before Assad's fall",

onising Russia could be costly, as Moscow also retains leverage through its UN Security Council veto (relevant for sanctions relief), proxy networks and disinformation capabilities.

As Iran and Russia have lost influence, Türkiye's has grown. Ankara has had a measure of leverage with HTS for years. HTS had its quasi-autonomous enclave in Idlib, a province that Turkish forces had entered in 2017, and Ankara kept a cordon along the southern boundary, shielding the area from serious Russian-regime attack.⁴⁰ When HTS took over the country, Ankara was quick to parley with the new authorities, sending its foreign minister and head of intelligence to Syria in an effort to secure Turkish interests.⁴¹ Türkiye was also able to put new pressure on the SDF in the north east, backing military advances by its true partner, the SNA, in Manbij. Squeezed on the battlefield by SNA rebels and pressed politically by the interim government in Damascus, the SDF remains vulnerable, though as noted above recent developments suggest one way this flashpoint could be defused.

Israeli operations in post-Assad Syria complicate dynamics even further. In the immediate aftermath of the regime's ouster, Israeli forces pushed beyond the 1974 disengagement line separating the Israeli-occupied Syrian Golan Heights from the rest of Syria, occupying additional terrain that it turned into a buffer zone.⁴² Meanwhile, Israeli warplanes carried out strikes that demolished Syria's air force and navy, as well as weapons caches in southern Syria. In late February, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu warned the interim government not to deploy its forces or HTS fighters south of the capital, professedly to protect Syria's Druze population, and threatened to attack anyone harming the Druze.⁴³ Israel has also demanded the "complete demilitarisation" of areas south of Damascus.⁴⁴ In word and deed, Israel has appeared to signal that it seeks a weak, decentralised Syria, one in which Turkish influence is limited; it has faced no pushback from Washington.⁴⁵

How far Israel will push into Syrian territory is not clear. Though their messages are not always fully consistent, Syrian Druze leaders have indicated they do not want

Reuters, 14 February 2025. A second batch was reportedly delivered in early March. "Syria received new delivery of currency from Russia, says govt official", Al Arabiya, 6 March 2025.

⁴⁰ Crisis Group Middle East Report N°213, *Silencing the Guns in Syria's Idlib*, 14 May 2020.

⁴¹ "Syria's new leader says all weapons to come under 'state control' in meeting with Turkish FM", *Arab News*, 23 December 2024. In mid-March, Turkish troops were in the process of withdrawing from Idlib, but not yet from other parts of northern Syria.

⁴² "We want our deployment in the area to be significant and strong. We are not limiting ourselves in time. It is performance-based, not time-based". Crisis Group interview, Israeli defence official, Tel Aviv, 28 February 2025. See also "Netanyahu says Israel will occupy Syria buffer zone for foreseeable future", *The Guardian*, 18 December 2024; and "Satellite imagery reveals Israeli military construction in buffer zone with Syria", BBC, 23 January 2025.

⁴³ Israel issued a statement: "We will not allow the terrorist regime of radical Islam in Syria to harm the Druze. If the regime harms the Druze, it will be harmed by us". Quoted in "Netanyahu says Israel won't allow Syrian forces 'south of Damascus'", AP, 24 February 2025. See also "Israel's military is told to prepare to defend a Druze community outside Syria's capital", AP, 1 March 2025.

⁴⁴ An Israeli defence official said, "The goal is to create a buffer zone that is clean of any army presence or forces that we are not familiar with or cannot trust. This includes regime forces". Crisis Group interview, Tel Aviv, 28 February 2025. See also "Netanyahu says Israel demands 'complete demilitarization' of southern Syria", *Washington Post*, 23 February 2025.

⁴⁵ See Dareen Khalifa and Mairav Zonszein, "How Israel's Overreach in Syria May Backfire", Crisis Group Commentary, 17 March 2025.

Israeli protection, much less a country carved up into cantons. They have declared themselves committed to a unitary, secular Syrian state based on the rule of law and a constitutional order that shuns the sort of ethno-sectarian logic underpinning power sharing in Lebanon and Iraq. “We don’t care about the religion of the president; we care about the nature of the state”, Sheikh Hikmat al-Hejri, one of the foremost Druze spiritual leaders said. When HTS toppled the regime, he added, “it was the regime that fell, not the country, and we are part of the country”.⁴⁶ In early March, clashes broke out between the interim government’s forces and Druze militias in the capital’s Jaramana neighbourhood, provoking further Israeli threats, but the interim government soon calmed the situation in talks with Druze community leaders.⁴⁷

The U.S. looms large over Syria’s future. In his Senate confirmation hearing, Secretary of State Marco Rubio described Syria as “an opportunity” that is “worth exploring”, but the Trump administration has offered sparse engagement on Syria and few clues as to what Rubio’s words might mean in practice.⁴⁸ Instead, it appears to be in a holding pattern, seemingly distracted by other priorities and waiting to see what Syria’s interim government will do. As of mid-March, the transition in Washington was still under way, with important portfolios at the National Security Council and Department of State still unfilled.

In the meantime, U.S. inaction may undermine the embattled transition in Syria. U.S. sanctions continue to have an inordinate impact, bringing a growing part of the population to the edge of starvation.⁴⁹ Yet the prospect that the Trump administration will suspend or lift U.S. sanctions is at best up in the air. The administration is leery of the new leadership in Damascus because of worries about its jihadist roots. State Department officials listed five areas in which the U.S. expects the interim government to make tangible progress in exchange for movement on sanctions relief: support for U.S. efforts to find and retrieve missing U.S. citizens in Syria (or their remains); initiatives to counter Iran in Syria; work toward a transparent and inclusive government; help in combating ISIS; and dismantlement of the former regime’s chemical weapons program. They indicated that Damascus has proven cooperative on all five fronts, but that it needs to follow its words about transparent, inclusive government with actions.⁵⁰

The U.S. has yet to display a broader concern about Syria’s well-being, and it may prefer to outsource its Syria policy to its ally Israel. On that score, some Israeli officials have reportedly been lobbying the administration not to lift sanctions.⁵¹ An Israeli official softened that call, saying there is room for nuance: “Israel’s interest is in

⁴⁶ Crisis Group interview, Suweida, 27 February 2025. A Hejri aide said Syrian Druze have strong bonds with Druze communities in Israel. “We call them Palestinian Druze”. But he categorically rejected the idea of Israeli protection.

⁴⁷ “Syrian forces deployed in Jaramana to end unrest”, Al Jazeera, 3 March 2025.

⁴⁸ “Highlights from Marco Rubio’s confirmation hearing”, *The New York Times*, 15 January 2025.

⁴⁹ The World Food Programme reported in December 2024 that “3 million people [were] severely food insecure before 27 November, while an additional 12.4 million are food insecure (10 million) or at risk of falling into food insecurity”. “WFP Syria Emergency Response: External Situation Report #1 – 15 December 2024”, Relief Web, 15 December 2024.

⁵⁰ Crisis Group interviews, Washington, 14 March 2025. Officials expressed horror at the violence along the coast in early March but said they were encouraged by the deal between Damascus and the SDF – suggesting that both events would play heavily in considerations about sanctions relief.

⁵¹ Crisis Group interview, U.S. official, Washington, 24 February 2025.

the *pace* of sanctions relief. It has to be dependent on actions. Make it about actions, not trust”.⁵² Another Israeli official clarified that Israel wants conditions attached to any lifting of sanctions or terrorist designations. “There can be no free lunch” for the new order in Damascus, he said.⁵³ In this respect, Israel may well be pushing at an open door with Washington.

European countries, from their side, may prove more flexible in their relations with the new leadership in Damascus. The EU has already suspended sectoral sanctions on energy, transportation and banking, removed various banks from the black-list, issued exemptions to the prohibition of banking relations between Syrian and European banks and permanently extended a humanitarian exemption.⁵⁴ Following an EU Foreign Affairs Council meeting on 17 March, which came on the heels of violence on the Alawite coast, High Representative Kaja Kallas suggested that sanctions relief could reinforce stability: “If we want to prevent further violence, we need to give the people hope in Syria”.⁵⁵ The UK has taken similar, if smaller steps.⁵⁶ Yet these actions to shore up the new order will be inconsequential compared to what the U.S. could do to blunt the impact of various crippling U.S. measures such as the State Sponsor of Terrorism and Foreign Terrorist Organisation designations.

V. Many Risks, Little Time

All these factors suggest that the new government is facing major risks and has little time to get them under control. The signs are not promising. The new authorities appear to be “controlling, not governing”, in the view of an international observer.⁵⁷ In dismissing public-sector employees, they have used criteria that are murky to the public and often appear to be ad hoc.⁵⁸ In the security sector, the interim government sent all members of the ousted regime’s forces home, pursuant to the “victory declaration” that dissolved them.

The much-heralded national dialogue conference in late February that was to decide the nature of the transition turned into a rushed meeting that issued a mix of ringing but apparently pre-cooked declarations affirming freedom, citizenship,

⁵² Crisis Group telephone interview, 5 March 2025.

⁵³ Crisis Group telephone interview, 6 March 2025.

⁵⁴ “Syria: EU suspends restrictive measures on key economic measures”, Council of the EU, 24 February 2025.

⁵⁵ She added, “And giving the people hope is also access to the banking services. That means that salaries can be paid, so that means that the companies can invest in and develop all this life in Syria further. And that is why right now we are going with our plan to relieve the sanctions”. “Foreign Affairs Council: Press remarks by High Representative Kaja Kallas after the meeting”, European External Action Service, 17 February 2025.

⁵⁶ The UK lifted a freeze on assets of two dozen Syrian entities, including the Central Bank of Syria, in early March. “UK unfreezes Syrian central bank assets”, Central Banking, 7 March 2025.

⁵⁷ Crisis Group interview, Damascus, 4 March 2025.

⁵⁸ Reportedly, the interim government dismissed a number of people, mostly women, from public-sector jobs – teaching, in particular, in which Alawites were overrepresented – because they are married to security personnel. Crisis Group interviews, opposition politician and civil society activist, Damascus, 25-26 February 2025.

participation and coexistence.⁵⁹ It endorsed decisions taken beforehand, such as establishing a committee tasked with drawing up a “constitutional declaration”, as well as forming – not electing – an interim legislative chamber and drafting a new constitution.⁶⁰ More than one friendly critic in Damascus labelled it a mere “box-ticking exercise”.⁶¹ While some observers gave the leadership credit for supporting debate over even very sensitive issues, like transitional justice, what seemed like a hurried process landed poorly among most.⁶² A civil society activist called it “a charade”.⁶³

Many Syrians have expressed fears that the constitutional declaration, which al-Sharaa signed on 13 March, will prove not temporary as promised, in force merely during the interim five-year phase, but permanent, whether by default or design.⁶⁴ The document bestows sweeping executive powers upon al-Sharaa, who can appoint the next interim government, one third of the interim parliament’s members and a “high committee” that in turn will name the other two thirds.⁶⁵ With so much authority concentrated in the president’s hands, some Syrians believe that the new order may be veering toward authoritarianism.⁶⁶

The new leadership has yet to persuade the public of its good-faith intentions on these critical matters governing the transition. Meanwhile, the government has made moves that worry civil society. Activists fear that it does not intend to make space for them in the country’s new political order, unless they have a pedigree of which the leadership approves. It suspended the licences of all civil society organisations registered in areas previously controlled by the Assad regime with an order to re-register according to the regulations applicable in Idlib before 8 December 2024. Organi-

⁵⁹ “Syrians back freedoms, constitutional process at landmark dialogue”, Reuters, 25 February 2025.

⁶⁰ For the text of the recommendations, see “Eighteen outcomes issued... The Syrian national dialogue conference concludes its work in Damascus”, *al-Arabi*, 25 February 2025 [Arabic].

⁶¹ Crisis Group interviews, Damascus, 23-27 February 2025. In a telling manifestation, some would-be participants living abroad received their conference invitations only the day before, making it physically impossible for them to reach Damascus in time. Whether the delay was by design or due to the organisers’ ineptness is hard to say. Crisis Group interviews, opposition politicians and civil society activists, Damascus and Suweida, 25-27 February 2025. There are few flights into Damascus at present and travelling overland through neighbouring countries adds at least one day, so even people who would have dropped everything the moment they received an invitation could not have expected to reach Damascus in time.

⁶² Several conference participants gave the authorities credit in this regard. Crisis Group telephone interviews, February 2025.

⁶³ The activist said “people were hopeful” when al-Sharaa announced plans for the national dialogue. “But then it got delayed. Then there was the ‘victory conference’ that gathered all the armed factions. He killed the idea of a national conference with this move”. Crisis Group interview, Damascus, 24 February 2025.

⁶⁴ Crisis Group interviews, Damascus, 24 and 26 February 2025.

⁶⁵ “Syria has a new temporary constitution. Here are the highlights”, *The New York Times*, 14 March 2025; and “Text of the Constitutional Declaration of Syria 2025”, Al Jazeera, 14 March 2025 [Arabic].

⁶⁶ “The Syrian constitutional declaration: Presidential authority, autocratic rule and the requirements of the current stage”, *al-Arabi*, 15 March 2025 [Arabic]; “Syria’s constitutional declaration: Widespread controversy and fears of exclusion”, Sky News Arabia, 14 March 2025 [Arabic]; and “Syria’s New Constitution: A Shift Toward Unchecked Presidential Powers”, Foundation for the Defense of Democracies, 19 March 2025.

sations registered in Idlib and/or based across the Turkish border in Gaziantep, by contrast, are now free to operate in all parts of Syria.⁶⁷

Significant risk also inheres in the security challenges that the new government faces. Non-HTS armed factions operating independently or without specific state authorisation are alienating minorities in central and western Syria, where the interim government's forces (former HTS fighters now reorganised as General Security) remain stretched. Unless the new authorities manage to make vulnerable populations feel safer, citizens may start taking matters into their own hands, especially considering the tens of thousands of former regime personnel present in some areas, who are now unemployed. Rebuilding the army while excluding many dismissed soldiers and security officers could create a large group of disenfranchised, disaffected men with easy access to (abundant) weapons as well as military experience. These men could too easily become the core of an insurgency motivated equally by sectarian threat perception and material hardship.⁶⁸

Moreover, ISIS may be down in Syria, but by most accounts it is far from out, lurking in the remote desert reaches east of Damascus (the Badia), as well as around Deir al-Zor.⁶⁹ It is reportedly taking advantage of the partial power vacuum outside the capital to organise itself, and it has attempted at least one attack in Damascus, namely on the (Shiite) Sayyida Zainab shrine on 11 January.⁷⁰ Insecurity also raises the risk of ISIS elements moving into towns in force.⁷¹ Looking at the horizon, the group could exploit lasting disorder in the country to expand, much as it waxed amid the civil war's violence over a decade ago, and thus further sap the interim government's ability to impose control.

Additionally, al-Sharaa may face a challenge from foreign fighters who were allied with HTS in the past, some of whom are diehard ideologues with jihadist leanings; while they might not pose a direct danger to him or his government, they could undermine him by engaging in violence against minority groups.⁷² While ruling Idlib during its years of insurgency, HTS battled al-Qaeda and ISIS, and evicted or shunt-

⁶⁷ Decree issued by the Ministry for Social Affairs and Labour available from Humanitarian Action Coordination on X, @HU_AC_CO, 4:10pm, 29 December 2024, and from the ministry itself in Arabic on Facebook, 30 December 2025. A civil society activist said to achieve compliance with the Idlib regulations, most organisations would have to change their bylaws, requiring processes (such as general assemblies) that are likely to be time-consuming and difficult under current circumstances. In the meantime, these organisations are unable to initiate or continue projects, receive funds or even pay their employees. Crisis Group interviews, civil society activist and UN official, Damascus, 25-26 February 2025.

⁶⁸ More than one interviewee mentioned that hundreds of (mostly Alawite) Syrian officers are living in Russia, Libya, Iraq and Iran, either because they were there for training when the regime fell or fled there afterward. Crisis Group interviews, Damascus, 25 February 2025; and by telephone, 27 February 2025.

⁶⁹ Further, SDF-held prison camps, such as al-Hol in Hassakeh governorate, hold thousands of families of ISIS fighters. The UN Security Council lists five groups of foreign fighters present in Syria, in addition to those operating under the HTS aegis. They include groups mostly made up of Chechens, Moroccans and Uzbeks.

⁷⁰ "Syria intelligence says thwarted ISIS attempt to bomb Shia shrine", Al Arabiya, 11 January 2025.

⁷¹ Lack of coordination with former regime security officials means the new government has no knowledge of who escaped from regime prisons, including high-level ISIS commanders. Crisis Group interview, foreign security official, Damascus, February 2025.

⁷² Crisis Group interview, international observer, Damascus, 23 February 2025.

ed aside some of its own hardliners, seeing them as a threat. In the process, it burnished its credibility as a non-jihadist, Syrian nationalist actor. But obdurate figures remain in the fold. Some who hold military ranks have been integrated into the new army. Any of them could become frustrated with al-Sharaa's attempt to woo the West at the cost of ideological purity.⁷³

The interim authorities can reduce the danger of armed opposition to their rule by addressing the population's needs, especially regarding food and security, and thus eliminating a source of grievance. It will be difficult to do so without significant external help, however, and such assistance will not be forthcoming unless Western sanctions are lifted or at least suspended. While emergency aid and help for early recovery may continue, as during the Assad days, the prospects look dire without an immediate injection of cash to pay public-sector salaries and electricity support, let alone long-term investment in reconstruction.⁷⁴ A possible scenario is that growing unemployment will drive increasing numbers of Syrians into the grey economy, whose networks continue to operate, even if no longer led by the Assad clan and its cronies. The old regime derived major revenues from producing and smuggling Captagon, an illegal drug derived from amphetamine, and this trade has not halted with its demise. It is reportedly proceeding at a much-reduced level but could revive as state coffers run dry.⁷⁵

Those who do not seek their living in illicit trade could sink deeper into poverty, a situation that would intensify an already dire humanitarian crisis. Others could join an armed opposition for lack of better options.

VI. The Way Out of a Catch-22

Syria's interim leadership is in a Catch-22. It must stabilise the country and show good faith in broadening political participation and representation in governing institutions, but if Western countries view its actions as falling short, they will refuse to provide the sanctions relief the government needs to restart the economy and lend succour to the weary population. While the leadership sounded a constructive note during the transition's early weeks, indicating that it intends to rebuild the country's institutions through a process representative of Syria's pluralistic makeup, it has made missteps as well, such as the truncated national dialogue conference whose invitation list was too short, the concentration of power in the hands of the interim president and the haphazard, brutal response to insurgent violence on the Alawite coast that failed to prevent massacres committed by forces aligned with the government.

⁷³ Crisis Group interview, international observer, Damascus, 23 February 2025. That said, disgruntled HTS members are unlikely to defect to ISIS, as some outside observers suspect they might, because of bad blood between the two groups.

⁷⁴ The UN has defined "early recovery" as focusing on four priority areas: health and nutrition; education; water, sanitation and hygiene services; and livelihoods, "with access to electricity being a key enabler". "The United Nations Resident Coordinator and Humanitarian Coordinator (RC/HC) for Syria, Adam Abdelmoula, launches the Early Recovery Strategy (2024-2028)", UN OCHA, 24 November 2024. Even emergency and early recovery assistance will be compromised under current conditions, namely by sanctions-related challenges such as difficulties in making money transfers, obtaining permissions for equipment and high operating costs.

⁷⁵ Crisis Group telephone interview, European diplomat based in Jordan, 20 February 2025.

But the new government in Damascus can still find its footing by helping the country cohere and getting on the track to recovery. Doing so will be no small feat. It requires Damascus to restart the economy, launch reconstruction, bring the array of former rebel militias firmly under state control, demonstrate a commitment to pluralistic governance during the political transition and make clear that there is no room for lawlessness in the new order by holding accountable those responsible for summary executions and violence against civilians in Alawite areas in early March. Damascus will also need to do all it can to build on the preliminary deal with the SDF to reintegrate the latter and the Autonomous Administration into state institutions in a manner that preserves stability in the north east.

These priorities are interlinked, and none can be delayed while progress is made on the others. Without security, there cannot be a functioning economy or reconstruction; and without a recovering economy, including many more jobs, it will be difficult to prevent Syrians from joining either the informal economy or an armed opposition. To overcome its lack of capacity, the government will have to broaden participation in state institutions. It can do so only by bringing back many of those it fired, but rehiring will require a transparent vetting process, as well as funds to pay salaries. Obtaining the latter means finding a way out of the sanctions trap that is strangling the economy, which in turn means accommodating Western countries' demand for transparent, inclusive politics and governance during the transitional period. Failure to restore security, stabilise the economy and hold undisciplined armed actors nominally under state control to account will feed insurgency and demands for autonomy, which will weaken central governance in an increasingly vicious cycle.

The country's new leaders will thus have to keep acting on all these fronts simultaneously, showing progress on each one to maintain the legitimacy they received from ousting the Assad regime and the Syrian people's patience with any hitches in the transition. Still, firmly establishing public order must be the top priority, along with ensuring the reliable delivery of basic services. Regarding security, the government should take immediate steps to manage the risk of further unrest, particularly among Alawites. It should do so, first, by thoroughly investigating the role of state-sponsored armed groups on the coast and in the mountains in early March, bringing to justice those found guilty of crimes against civilians. Punishing the perpetrators will help reassure the public that the authorities are serious about building a state based on the rule of law.

As Crisis Group has separately noted, the question of justice for atrocities during the war is a more complicated one, particularly given the strong demand among Syrians for accountability. The lack of action on this front so far has likely contributed to vigilantism, which then stokes fear among the communities affected by it. On the other hand, hints that Damascus intends to pursue former regime officials may well stoke insurgency. In principle, contentious questions of transitional justice should be left for a national dialogue and a more inclusive government to determine. In the meantime, if the government does arrest former regime officers it should do so transparently, specifying who is being arrested and on what grounds, as well as affording due process to everyone it takes into custody.⁷⁶

⁷⁶ "Finding a Path through a Perilous Moment for Post-Assad Syria", op. cit.

Other measures will also help. The government should vet and reinstate dismissed police officers, as this force was largely uninvolved in the former regime's atrocities. Recruiting Alawites into the local police, alongside HTS-affiliated forces, could help address staff shortages and foster a sense of inclusion, while also improving public safety. The new leaders should also set up a vetting mechanism that allows spouses of the former regime's security personnel to return to their public-sector jobs. Additionally, the interim government should work with community representatives to set up security mechanisms in their localities – focusing on places where trust in central authorities is low – as a way of encouraging local ownership of security responsibilities and, again, reassuring citizens of the government's good-faith intent to protect everyone equally.

In addition to swift steps on the security and economic fronts, the interim government should not just announce but demonstrate through concrete measures that it will foster meaningful participation, and that the current concentration of power is a temporary state of affairs mandated by the urgent need to stabilise the country. It should publicly welcome and encourage broad participation in transitional politics, institution rebuilding and preparations for drafting a permanent constitution.⁷⁷ While the national dialogue conference fell short in this regard, it is still a useful foundation for bringing into the transition individuals and groups who adequately represent the country's diversity, be it in ethnic, confessional, ideological, geographic or gender terms.

Doing all it can to settle the conflict in the north east, meanwhile, could help Damascus tame centrifugal forces throughout the country. The initial agreement between the interim government and the SDF provides an important building block for more detailed negotiations on how to peacefully integrate a region and leadership that have enjoyed autonomy from central government since 2012 into state institutions. Additionally, finding a compromise with the SDF could help the government boost energy supplies, potentially relieving the population of significant expenses (for power generators and gasoline smuggled at a high markup) and earning state revenue.⁷⁸

These various tasks need not be insurmountable, even if the odds seem daunting. But the leadership will not be able to accomplish them on their own. Help from external actors with an interest in seeing a stable Syria emerge will be essential. Countries that are sanctioning Syria can take steps short of full sanctions relief if they are not ready for it. The Europeans have shown the way by suspending the most important sectoral sanctions. The U.S. should follow suit, expanding the Syria General License 24 (GL 24), issued on 6 January, which authorises transactions with governing institutions in Syria and "certain transactions related to energy and personal remittances", to include commercial activity, and extending it indefinitely.⁷⁹ For its part, the EU

⁷⁷ Al-Sharaa set a five-year transition to draft a permanent constitution and hold elections. For comparison with an accelerated process in Iraq that led to civil strife, see Crisis Group Middle East Report N°42, *Iraq: Don't Rush the Constitution*, 8 June 2005; and Crisis Group Middle East Report N°19, *Iraq's Constitutional Challenge*, 13 November 2003.

⁷⁸ Oil wealth allows the Autonomous Administration in north-eastern Syria to keep more than 100,000 people on the payroll, at salaries much higher than those in the rest of the country.

⁷⁹ The State Department sparked hope of the possibility of sanctions relief when it announced on 22 March that the U.S. might soon institute further exemptions, including for those affecting financial transfers. "U.S. rethinks sanctions on Syria", *Enab Baladi*, 22 March 2025.

should offer companies incentives and assurances regarding sanctions compliance if they contribute to reconstruction of major and essential infrastructure as part of “early recovery”.

The UN Security Council could also expand existing humanitarian carveouts to cover commercial activities, reconstruction and rebuilding. To the extent that sanctioning countries, as well as the UN Security Council, condition further sanctions relief on the interim government’s or HTS’s actions, they should set clear, realistic benchmarks that the Syrian authorities can meet in exchange.⁸⁰

If adopted systematically, a mix of the above measures could channel significant amounts of money into the economy and bolster consumption, including by supporting the payment of state salaries – and potentially allowing the state to increase them where necessary (eg, in the security sector). Whatever the approach, donors should aspire to reach consensus on their minimum expectations of Syria’s interim government, particularly where these relate to sanctions relief. As Crisis Group has suggested elsewhere, they might make the easing of terrorism sanctions contingent on counter-terrorism cooperation and measures relating to the presence of foreign fighters who remain in Syria. But donors should resist the impulse to condition lifting sanctions on progress in areas unrelated to the reasons for levying them in the first place – for example, governance reform.⁸¹

Other countries should chip in. In the Gulf, countries like Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates can help the new authorities in Damascus a great deal, including through direct financial support. They and other international actors invested in Syria’s stability should also encourage Damascus to take constructive steps in protecting the country’s pluralism and fundamental rights, in particular by bringing Alawites into the new political order.

Finally, countries with ties to Israel should encourage Israeli leaders to alter their aggressive approach in Syria, which may end up driving the interim government toward embracing Türkiye more fully, an outcome that would not be in Israel’s interests. If Israel does not change course, it may help enable the kind of chaos on its north-eastern border that would pose a bigger threat than a more predictable state actor – as the Assad regime was, even as an enemy – would.⁸²

⁸⁰ See Dareen Khalifa and Noah Bonsey, “In Syria’s Idlib, Washington’s Chance to Reimagine Counter-terrorism”, Crisis Group Commentary, 3 February 2021; Khalifa and Bonsey, “Key Decisions Loom as Syria Enters a New Era”, op. cit.; “Promoting a Stable, Peaceful Transition in Syria”, op. cit.; and “Rethinking UN Sanctions on Syria’s Interim Leaders”, Crisis Group Commentary, 28 February 2025.

⁸¹ “Rethinking UN Sanctions on Syria’s Interim Leaders”, op. cit.

⁸² Striking a far more assertive tone than the interim government’s previous muted protests, in early March Syria’s mission to the UN sent a letter to the UN Secretary-General and the president of the Security Council, stating, “The Syrian Arab Republic rejects in its entirety and condemns in the strongest terms the statements made by the Israeli occupation entity prime minister on 23 February 2025, when he called for the Syrian state to demilitarise the southern Syrian governorates of Qunaytirah, Dar’a and Suwayda’, and said he would not allow any Syrian army presence south of Damascus. ... These statements constitute blatant interference in the internal affairs of Syria in violation of international law and the Charter of the United Nations”. “Identical letters dated 3 March 2025 from the Permanent Representative of the Syrian Arab Republic to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General and the President of the Security Council”, UN Digital Library, 3 March 2025.

VII. Conclusion

Syria is caught in a delicate entr'acte. A sense of unease prevails as the new leadership tries to chart its course. Three months after HTS defeated the Assad regime, the burst of violence in the predominantly Alawite coastal areas and mountains in early March was a reminder that failure to provide security and basic services to the population, especially those sidelined without hope for the future, and establish a political transition that is truly inclusive of the country's varied communities could spell disaster for the interim authorities. "Time is not to our advantage", a government official said.⁸³

For now, al-Sharaa and his colleagues can keep trading on the credit that overthrowing the regime earned them. But that credit may soon run out, including in the literal sense of money that they desperately need to pay public-sector salaries, rebuild the security forces, restart the economy and receive returnees eager to come home. Outside actors who want post-Assad Syria to succeed, despite the misgivings they may have about its new leaders' past, therefore need to act fast. If they do not, their dallying could help bring about a state collapse that would immiserate Syrians and might destabilise countries around them, with a new wave of chaos once again sending refugees into neighbouring countries and, before long, Europe as well. They have the tools to prevent such a scenario. Now is the time to use them.

Damascus/Brussels, 28 March 2025

⁸³ Crisis Group interview, Damascus, 24 February 2025.

Appendix A: About the International Crisis Group

The International Crisis Group (Crisis Group) is an independent, non-profit, non-governmental organisation, with some 120 staff members on five continents, working through field-based analysis and high-level advocacy to prevent and resolve deadly conflict.

Crisis Group's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries or regions at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, it produces analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international, regional and national decision-takers. Crisis Group also publishes *CrisisWatch*, a monthly early-warning bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in up to 80 situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

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Comfort Ero was appointed Crisis Group's President & CEO in December 2021. She first joined Crisis Group as West Africa Project Director in 2001 and later rose to become Africa Program Director in 2011 and then Interim Vice President. In between her two tenures at Crisis Group, she worked for the International Centre for Transitional Justice and the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General in Liberia.

Crisis Group's international headquarters is in Brussels, and the organisation has offices in seven other locations: Bogotá, Dakar, Istanbul, Nairobi, London, New York, and Washington, DC. It has presences in the following locations: Abuja, Addis Ababa, Bahrain, Baku, Bangkok, Beirut, Caracas, Gaza City, Guatemala City, Jerusalem, Johannesburg, Juba, Kabul, Kyiv, Manila, Mexico City, Moscow, Seoul, Tbilisi, Toronto, Tripoli, Tunis, and Yangon.

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