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Syria in transition

Mapping the local and transnational actors shaping politics in Syria

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SYRIA IN TRANSITION

Mapping the local and transnational actors shaping politics in Syria

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ABSTRACT

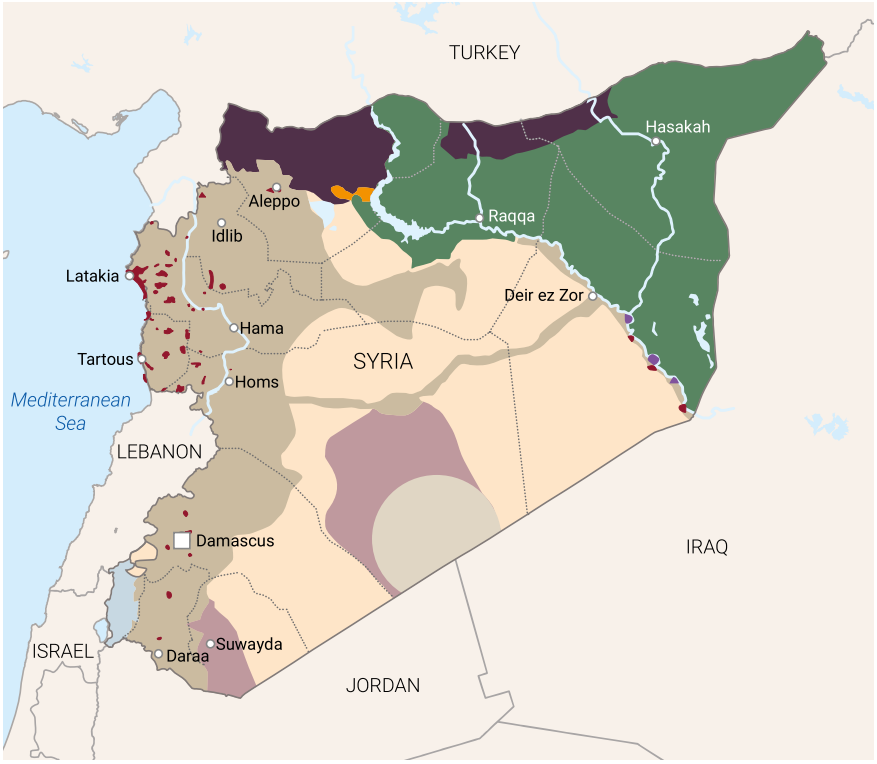
This report offers a field guide to the political and military actors shaping Syria's transition. It examines how rival powers govern with competing political visions, from centralised control in Damascus to self-rule in the northeast and independent local orders in the south. Despite tensions, emerging signs of compromise point to a fragile shift from confrontation to conditional dialogue. Findings include that while violence persists, the contours of Syria's future are increasingly shaped by formal negotiations and local governance arrangements. This suggests a shift from military stalemate towards political contestation. External powers are recalibrating strategies, recognising that influence now relies more on political engagement than military outcomes. Rather than offering policy prescriptions, the study identifies patterns of governance, negotiation, and contestation to support further analysis. This document is intended as a primer for laypeople, analysts and policy-makers seeking to understand Syria's trajectory. All data is current as of 26 June 2025.

ABBREVIATIONS

AQ	Al-Qaida
FSA	Free Syrian Army
HTS	Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (Organization for the Liberation of the Levant)
OIR	Operation Inherent Resolve
IRGC	Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps
ISI	Islamic State in Iraq
ISIS	Islamic State in Iraq and as-Sham
JaN	Jabhat al-Nusra (Support Front for the People of the Levant)
NF	Nusra Front (Jabhat al-Nusra)
PJAK	Partiya Jiyana Azad a Kurdistanê (Kurdistan Free Life Part)
PKK	Partîya Karkerên Kurdistanê (Kurdistan Workers' Party)
SAA	Syrian Arab Army
SAS	Saraya Ansar al-Sunna
SDF	Syrian Democratic Forces
SNA	Syrian National Army
SOR	Southern Operations Room
SSG	Syrian Salvation Government
STG	Syrian Transitional Government
YPG	Yêkîneyên Parastina Gel (Peoples' Defense Units)

MAP OF SYRIA

Map 1. Assessed control of terrrain in Syria, as of 27 May 2025



Source: 2025 Institute for the Study of War and AEI's Critical Threats Project.

INTRODUCTION

When Bashar al-Assad boarded a Russian military aircraft on 8 December 2024, it marked more than the end of his presidency. His quiet exit from a Russian airbase in western Syria was the final act of a five-decades-old family regime long sustained by external support and eroded from within. The Sovietera Ilyushin Il-76 transport plane took a zigzagged route through contested airspace before vanishing from flight trackers without fanfare.[1]

In the immediate aftermath, long-standing stalemates around key cities, already beginning to thaw in the days preceding Assad's exit, collapsed entirely. Rebel factions made rapid advances into former regime strongholds, meeting limited resistance. Regional governments, previously resigned to Assad's persistence, rushed to adjust their strategies. In Damascus, the security apparatus that had once kept the capital tightly under control appeared paralysed, left without clear orders or direction.

The collapse of the regime was the culmination of a long decline. Since 2015, Russian and Iranian military support had shielded Assad from battlefield defeat. But with Moscow and Tehran increasingly preoccupied with crises closer to home, the Syrian administration found itself exposed, grappling with a war-strained economy and fighting on multiple fronts.

The Syrian conflict has defied easy categorisation. It has been described as a revolution,[2] a civil war,[3] a proxy war[4] and a theatre for regional power competition.[5] Each label captures an aspect of the war, but none fully accounts for its shifting and multifaceted character.[6] What began in 2011 as an uprising against authoritarian rule soon fractured into overlapping struggles for power, territory and influence.

For the Assad regime, the war was framed as a defence of state sovereignty and territorial integrity. Central to its discourse was the claim that all opposition forces were foreign-backed terrorists, presenting the conflict as a foreign conspiracy aimed at destabilising Syria from the outside. For opposition groups, it began as a call for political reform and revolution and evolved into a fragmented fight for survival. Kurdish actors pursued greater autonomy; jihadist groups introduced their own violent agendas; and foreign powers intervened to contain threats or extend their influence.

With the regime dismantled, two key questions now dominate: who holds power in Syria, and what shape the future state will take. Ranging from centralist, federalist, Islamist, secular, sectarian, and transactional, competing visions are driving both the tangible conflict on the ground and the struggle of ideas over how to conceptualise Syria as a state.

Mapping this landscape is, in many ways, like aiming at a moving target: patterns emerge, but they shift quickly.

Understanding the constellation of armed actors and their external patrons is essential to making sense of what lies ahead. The next phase of the conflict will be defined less by military strength and more by the political projects that succeed in consolidating authority and legitimacy.

Lastly, any analysis of Syria's political trajectory must account for the provisional nature of power and the difficulty of drawing firm conclusions amid ongoing change. Mapping this landscape is, in many ways, like aiming at a moving target: patterns emerge, but they shift quickly. This report offers a structured and informed overview of current dynamics, but it should be read as a snapshot: analytically valuable, yet necessarily incomplete.

AIM AND CONCEPTS

Syria's conflict does not stop at its borders. Domestic power brokers depend on outside support to survive and compete. Foreign states, in turn, use these ties to extend their influence. These alliances shape who holds ground, who claims to speak for local communities, who governs which territory and who can claim higher legitimacy.

This report takes the view that such transnational alignments are central to understanding the distribution of power in Syria. These are not static or one-directional relationships. They shift in response to changing interests and conditions, and often involve local actors exercising considerable agency vis-à-vis external actors. By tracing these interactions, the report aims to clarify how external involvement intersects with local struggles, and how this shapes Syria's uncertain political future.

This perspective is grounded in the premise that competition between states plays a formative role in shaping the course and character of local conflict dynamics.[7] The internationalisation of the Syrian conflict and its cross-border linkages present prisms through which to understand how domestic groups adapt over time by shaping their tactics, objectives and capacity to mobilise resources. Ignoring these transnational dimensions risks overlooking critical drivers of political stability and instability alike.

While this report examines the internationalisation of the Syrian conflict and the strategic interests of external actors, it rests on a central premise: the future of the Syrian state will ultimately be shaped by Syrian political actors. Foreign influence may enable, constrain or distort domestic developments, but it cannot substitute for the political choices, power struggles and institutional trajectories emerging from within Syria itself. Accordingly, the analysis foregrounds the agency of Syrian actors, even when viewed through the lens of regional and international dynamics.

Portrayed in this report are the following political actors:

Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) as the frontrunner for the transitional government led by Ahmed al-Sharaa. It represents the most coherent, organised political authority in Syria and is seen by international players as Syria's legitimate government.

The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), a minority-based political project and fighting force with enduring presence and organisational continuity in the Syrian conflict, operating under the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) in Northeast Syria.

Political communities in Suwayda and sourrunding areas, Druze and Sunni groups in southern Syria are pushing for greater cultural and political autonomy, though their demands remain mostly local in scope.

Syrian National Army, a Turkish-backed coalition of Syrian opposition factions marked by limited cohesion, strong ties to Ankara and a controversial track record functioning as both a proxy force and a fragmented military actor in the evolving post-Assad order.

Assad-loyalist groups, a loose constellation of ex-Baathists, ex-security personnel from the former regime and patronage networks that clash with Syria's incumbents to undermine the transitional government.

Hezbollah, formerly central to propping up the Assad regime through combat and logistics, now retains a limited footprint in Syria, serving Iran's strategic interests and monitoring the transition.

The Islamic State continues to operate in border areas. It retains the capacity and intent to disrupt the political positioning of the transitional government.

Saraya Ansar al-Sunna, a salafi-jihadist splinter group comprising of former members of both Hayat Tahrir al-Sham and former al-Qaeda affiliate group Hurras al-Din.

Syria hosts a wide array of political parties and movements, some of which have been excluded from this mapping. This report limits its scope to actors with identifiable leadership structures, operational coherence and demonstrable influence over national-level developments. The exclusion of smaller or less transparent groups reflects a methodological emphasis on those currently shaping the post-conflict political trajectory in an empirically verifiable manner, traceable through public records, media reporting or institutional outputs.

METHODS AND AUDIENCE

Who is this mapping relevant for? This is a field guide to the shifting landscape of contentious politics in Syria. It is for anyone tracking the moving parts of the conflict, whether diplomats, analysts, humanitarian actors or observers seeking clarity on the balance of power. It maps how domestic and external actors assert control and attempt to impose their own versions of stability. For those needing a refresher on who's who in the Syrian arena and what they want, consider this a primer.

The report maps Syria's political and militant actors through a qualitative, multi-source methodology aimed at capturing the fluid and fragmented nature of the conflict. It draws on a broad range of open-source materials, including official policy documents from Syrian state authorities as well as materials produced by external state actors and multilateral institutions. These include analyses of bilateral and regional relations, strategic assessments and policy statements outlining the respective positions and priorities of international actors vis-à-vis the Syrian conflict and the Syrian state as represented by its incumbent government. These sources are supplemented by coverage from international news outlets, reports from humanitarian organisations and local media. The integration of these materials facilitates cross-referencing and contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of political developments.

The data presented across these diverse sources, ranging from state documents and international policy papers to conflict event databases and academic analyses, vary significantly in form, scope and reliability. These discrepancies make it neither possible nor desirable to compare Syria's political and militant actors in a strictly commensurable fashion. The sources differ in what they measure, how they define actors and the political vantage points they reflect. There is no single analytical baseline or shared standard against which all groups can be evaluated. Rather than aiming for neat comparisons or typologies, this mapping focuses on how these actors, each embedded in its own web of local dynamics and transnational ties, may shape the political trajectory of a future Syrian transition. Rather than to standardise assessment of these groups, the goal is to clarify the diverse capacities, agendas and transnational alignments that are likely to influence the terms and outcomes of any negotiated settlement in the new Syrian polity.[8]

Reliable data on some of the actors included in this mapping is limited, particularly in the case of pro-Assad militias operating in the coastal region around Jableh, Hezbollah-aligned networks and Syrian National Army groups. These groups do not offer organisational transparency and rarely communicate beyond their immediate patronage networks. They lack formal public-facing structures, and their activities are not designed to be visible or legible to outside observers. As a result, verifiable information about their operations, leadership and territorial presence remains scarce. This report has therefore relied primarily on news reports, scholarly work and think tank reports to approximate their role and influence.

Given the volatility of the conflict and the rapid pace of developments, this report recognises the inherent limitations of capturing a moving target. The analysis is based on data available as of 26 June 2025. Despite these constraints, it aims to provide a structured, policy-relevant overview to inform both academic debate and diplomatic engagement.

This mapping has undergone double-blind peer review by academic experts in the field and has been strengthened by the thoughtful feedback of two anonymous reviewers. Any remaining inaccuracies or shortcomings are the sole responsibility of the author.

WHO IS THIS MAPPING FOR?

This mapping is a field guide for those seeking to understand the evolving dynamics of power and contestation in Syria. It is intended for analysts, researchers, policy-makers and others engaged in tracking the conflict's developments. While it does not claim to be exhaustive, it offers a structured overview of key actors, both domestic and external, and the forms of authority they seek to establish. For those in need of a clear entry point into the current landscape, this report serves as a reference to help orient further inquiry.

Hama, Syria. 13th Dec, 2024. Photo by Sally Hayden/SOPA Images/Sipa USA / Alamy Live News.

SYRIA AFTER ASSAD: WHAT'S AT STAKE?

WHAT'S AT STAKE DOMESTICALLY?

The Syrian state has spent over a decade at war with its citizens. Syrian civilians, in turn, have been at war with each other. Years of violence, repression and fragmentation have eroded public trust and hollowed out institutions. The new Syrian leadership inherits a fragmented polity, characterised by both a broken system and a society divided and sceptical of central authority. Rebuilding legitimacy while delivering basic services and ensuring security will be among the government's most urgent and difficult tasks.

The central challenge of Syria's transition lies in determining what kind of governance will replace the highly centralised, authoritarian model that has defined the Assad era. After more than a decade of war, the Syrian state no longer exercises uncontested control over much of the country. Instead, a patchwork of political and military actors administer territory through a range of institutional arrangements. This fragmentation raises a fundamental question: should the future Syrian state attempt to reimpose centralised authority, or should it accommodate the realities of decentralised governance that have emerged during the conflict?

This question is administrative in part, but more fundamentally concerns how legitimacy, representation, and authority will be constituted in the post-conflict period. A return to governance structures pre-dating the start of the Syrian uprisings in 2011 may risk reinforcing the same exclusionary dynamics that contributed to the outbreak of conflict. Conversely, how does the state offer the possibility of integrating previously marginalised actors and regions into a new political compact? This includes Kurdish-led governance structures in the northeast, as well as Druze, Alawite, and other minority-led entities in the northwest and south.

A return to governance structures pre-dating the start of the Syrian uprisings in 2011 may risk reinforcing the same exclusionary dynamics that contributed to the outbreak of conflict.

The model of governance that ultimately takes hold in Syria will determine whether power is recentralised in Damascus, devolved to regional authorities like the Kurdish-led administration in the northeast, or fragmented among local actors and armed groups. This choice will shape how security forces are structured, how oil revenues and public services are distributed, and whether provinces have a say in legal and administrative decisions. It will also determine the extent to which armed actors can be integrated, demobilised or excluded from post-war political life.

Any sustainable model must account for the deeply fragmented political geography of Syria today, where competing authorities have exercised de facto sovereignty for years, developed their own bureaucracies and cultivated local loyalties.

Beyond issues of governance, the transition implicates a range of socio-political concerns. These include the fate of internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees, many of whom remain outside the country's borders or in areas not under direct government control. From neighbouring countries, nearly 400,000 Syrians have returned to Syria, and at least 1 million IDPs have returned to their areas of origin of the 13 million people displaced during the war.[9] Adding to this, authorities will grapple with the contentious question of the IDP camps hosting Islamic State fighters and their families. For both IDPs and refugees, return, reintegration and legal status remain unresolved, with implications for property rights, civil documentation and long-term demographic balances in contested minority-populated areas.[10]

In parallel, questions of transitional justice, accountability for war-time abuses and the release or continued detention of political prisoners continue to define the boundaries of who gets to be part of a new Syrian polity.[11] On May 16 2025, the Syrian government announced the formation of a Transitional Justice Commission tasked with investigating crimes committed under the former Assad regime. Critics argue that the commission lacks transparency and sidesteps more recent abuses, as its mandate excludes violations committed after Bashar al-Assad's removal from power.[12]

Reconstruction is another critical stake in the transition. Years of conflict, sanctions and institutional breakdown have devastated Syria's economy and infrastructure. By 2017, the conflict had damaged or destroyed about a third of the housing stock and about half of medical and education facilities.[13] The ability of any post-conflict political arrangement to attract reconstruction aid, reinvigorate public services and address deep socio-economic inequalities will be central to its long-term sustainability. In a Syria where nine out of ten people live below the poverty line, cash matters.[14] Yet, the prospects for liquidity in Syria's cash-strapped economy remain limited, and large-scale foreign investments remain contingent on political outcomes, particularly official recognition by international entities such as the World Bank as a legitimate partner in development and the lifting of sanctions by the U.S.

Lastly, a core challenge in Syria's transition may simply be a numbers game: whether the new government has enough capacity to impose basic order. As the governing authority in Damascus, Sharaa and his group face pressure to extend control beyond the capital. While they have consolidated central institutions, enforcement weakens sharply in peripheral areas. The March 2025 massacres of more than 1,300 minority

civilians in Latakia underscored this gap.[15] Without the ability to guarantee stability nationwide, the government risks relying on northern and southern power centres. This is an arrangement that could complicate efforts to centralise governance.

In sum, what is at stake in Syria's transition is more than the end of armed conflict. Rather, it is the terms on which a new political and social order will be established. For this grand task to succeed, a one-off National Dialogue Conference of merely six active meeting hours with a very limited guest list will not suffice.[16] The resolution or continued deferral of these domestic questions will determine the trajectory of the Syrian state and society for decades to come.

WHAT'S AT STAKE REGIONALLY?

The fall of the Assad regime has upended the regional order. States that once backed rival sides in Syria's war now face a rapidly changing political playing field. New calculations are required.

Turkey has emerged as the most consequential actor in this realignment. Ankara now finds itself in a position to shape Syria's post-conflict order. President Erdoğan was the second foreign leader to meet with the new Syrian president, and Turkey has swiftly moved to entrench its role in Syria's security architecture.[17] It is leveraging its existing economic and security footprint in the north, where it governs local institutions, the Turkish lira is valid currency and local schools fly the Turkish flag.[18] Even the official Turkish post office operates from five locations in northern Syria.[19] For Ankara, the partnership with Syria's transitional government is both a domestic priority and a lever for deeper influence in the region since its early days in Idlib province, where Turkish border trade kept the HTS's economy afloat. The Ankara administration aims to use its influence in Damascus to curtail Kurdish autonomy, repatriate Syrian refugees and solidify its role as a regional middle power.

Iran and Hezbollah have suffered a significant strategic setback. Syria had long served as a critical corridor in the Iranian-led Axis of Resistance,[20] enabling the transfer of weapons to Hezbollah and Hamas and anchoring Iran's ability to project power against Israel. That balance has now shifted. Two events were decisive: Hamas's October 7 attack, which prompted sustained Israeli military responses against Hamas, Hezbollah, and Iranian-linked assets including sites near Iran's nuclear infrastructure, and the collapse of the Assad regime, which stripped Iran and its allies of crucial operational depth in the Levant. Iranian militias have lost their

rear base priviliges, and Hezbollah's resupply routes have been disrupted. The loss of this logistics corridor traversing Syria's southern shrub desert, combined with setbacks suffered by Houthis in Yemen, Hamas in Gaza and Hezbollah in southern Lebanon, has sharply curtailed Tehran's regional reach.

Russia, another key backer of Assad, risks losing its long-standing foothold in Syria. Notably, the new authorities are the same rebel groups Russia spent nearly a decade targeting with airstrikes. As the country descended into civil war in 2011, Russia deepened its backing of Assad, offering diplomatic protection at the UN Security Council, blocking sanctions, and providing financial aid, military hardware, intelligence support, and air raids over rival groups. Russia's offer of refuge to Assad, after years of support, has come at a cost. It lost access to the Tartus port, crucial for its wider footprint in Africa, and raised doubts about its role as a reliable backer of allied regimes.[21] With diminished leverage and fewer assets, Moscow risks becoming a marginal player in a country it once helped dominate.

For Israel, Assad's downfall ends a decade-long uneasy equilibrium. Though there was no formal peace, Assad maintained a predictable hostility. The new order in Damascus led by a former jihadist group has prompted Israel to continue its long-standing policy of conducting airstrikes in Syria, a pattern that predates the fall of the Assad government. However, the current campaign has reached an intensity not seen in previous years. While Israeli jets targeted Iranian-linked sites and weapons transfers during Assad's rule, the pace and scope of strikes have sharply escalated since the new government took control in Damascus. This reflects both heightened Israeli concerns over the emerging order and a strategic effort to prevent the reconstruction of conventional Syrian military capabilities.

Turkey has emerged as the most consequential actor in this realignment.

The Gulf states have responded to the fall of the Assad regime with a mix of shared strategic interests and divergent political instincts. All agree on curbing Iran's influence, ending Syria's role as a drug transit hub[22] and preventing jihadist groups from operating freely. Yet their approaches differ. Qatar has moved the fastest, embracing the new government and co-ordinating closely with Turkey, its key regional partner. Saudi Arabia sees an opportunity to reassert its influence in the Levant and was the first foreign destination of President al-Sharaa. In contrast, the

UAE, caught off guard by Assad's collapse, has adopted a cautious posture relative to front runners Qatar and Saudi Arabia, as its rulers are wary of HTS's Islamist roots and the prospect of a renewed Muslim Brotherhood foothold in Syria. Though the Gulf Cooperation Council remains divided on Syria, major Gulf powers have shifted from isolating Damascus to actively engaging it as a strategic arena.

The international attention is not unsolicited. Damascus is pursuing it. The new Syrian government has launched an intense diplomatic offensive. In its first month, it conducted 102 bilateral meetings with states, 27 with international organisations and ten with Syrian diaspora groups. The second month saw a threefold surge: 306 state-level engagements, 103 with international organisations and 22 diaspora meetings. Some were multilateral, inflating totals, but the trend is unambiguous, Syria is actively courting recognition and reintegration.[23]

This activity is not just symbolic. For the transitional authorities, diplomatic outreach is essential to securing legitimacy, unlocking international aid, attracting reconstruction finance and navigating sanctions relief. Regional actors, in turn, are doing more than vying for influence in a fragmented state; they are seeking to shape the terms under which Syria will be reintegrated into the regional order. Their stakes go beyond who governs Damascus. They include who will shape Syria's future political economy, guide the recovery of infrastructure, and strengthen preferred local actors. All are opportunities for foreign capitals to embed political conditions and steer Syria's regional manoeuver room.

WHO GOVERNS? MAPPING THE POLITICAL ACTORS SHAPING SYRIA'S TRANSITION

This chapter provides a descriptive overview of the political actors currently involved in governing different parts of Syria following the fall of the Assad regime. The main questions are: who are they, and what do they want? It outlines who holds authority in specific territories, what institutional structures they have established and how they maintain control. The chapter will refrain from evaluating the legitimacy or effectiveness of these actors, and rather focus on documenting their presence, organisational forms and the extent of their administrative or military functions.

The report examines how armed and unarmed resistance works side by side.

It is important to highlight that the report examines how armed and unarmed resistance works side by side. While the shift to arms has fuelled territorial fragmentation and exacerbated an already dire humanitarian situation, it has not extinguished the nonviolent movement. A core of political actors in Syria and in the diaspora remain committed to the original aspirations of the uprising, centering on democratic representation and elimination of authoritarian political structures. Rather than displacing earlier forms of mobilisation, militarisation has broadened the opposition's landscape, bringing with it a proliferation of armed actors. Unlike the relatively unified but broad goals of the early civilian opposition, namely regime change and democratic transition, the armed groups exhibit a spectrum of conflicting ambitions.

Given the fluidity of the political and military situation on the ground, the distribution of authority described here may shift over time. The chapter should therefore be read as a snapshot rather than a definitive account. As noted, this mapping is based on data available as of June 26, 2025.

To ensure long-term relevance, the analysis sets aside day-to-day developments and instead focuses on the longer term political ambitions and structural capacities of each actor to shape the future configuration of the Syrian state.

Syrian President Ahmad al-Shara meets with dignitaries and notables from Quneitra and the Golan Heights. Damascus, Syria, on June 25,2025. Photo: Syrian Presidency apaimages Damascus Damascus Syrian Arab Republic / Alamy.com.

SYRIAN TRANSITIONAL GOVERNMENT

Source: Syrian Presidency.

HTS primary zone of territorial control. Source: Author's own illustration.

HAYAT TAHRIR AL-SHAM: SYRIA'S NEW POWERBROKERS

On the eve of 30 March 2025, Syria's new transitional government was announced. Several cabinet positions have been filled by familiar elite figures from the era of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham's (HTS) Syrian Salvation Government (SSG) in Idlib. The new cabinet also includes family members of the interim president at key positions, one woman, Kurds, Christians and even a handful of former Assad-era ministers. This

broad representation signals an effort to project inclusivity, but it does not yet offer a clear indication of how power is distributed within the administration. It remains too early to determine whether this diversity will translate into meaningful political influence.[24] To wit, Syria's new minister for social affairs and labour admitted to the New York Times in May 2025 that she did not yet know how many employees she had under her, nor the size of her budget.[25]

While the Syrian Transitional Government (STG) includes a broad range of actors, our focus will narrow to the president's own faction. Early reports suggest that the ostensible dissolution of HTS's armed wing into the Ministry of Defence is far from complete.[26] While the group has recalibrated its public posture, it remains unclear to what extent underlying networks and decision-making circuits have been meaningfully restructured so as to reduce the risk of parallel structures in the state's new military organization.

Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), although militarily disbanded on paper, exerts effective control over key state institutions in Damascus.[27] As the primus motor of the transitional administration, HTS-linked individuals direct the political centre of gravity through a tightly knit patronage network and a centralised leadership structure under President Ahmed al-Sharaa. While the leadership has initiated diplomatic engagements and a broad national dialogue, these efforts remain firmly managed from the top. In the transitional government established in March 2025, seven out of 23 ministers come from the HTS-dominated SSG group and another two key figures in the administration are siblings to the interim president.[28] It is for this reason that HTS is the focus of this section: as both the engine and constraint of the current transition.

From insurgents to incumbents

Over the past decade, HTS has emerged as a dominant military actor in north-west Syria and the primus motor of an evolving governance project. Since its consolidation of power in Idlib, home to up towards five million people,[29] HTS has converted itself from a fragmented jihadist faction into the central force behind a civilian administration marked by formal bureaucratic structures, and the privatization of public services delivery.[30]

HTS filled a governance gap by injecting itself into weak opposition co-ordination structures, using its military dominance to impose a unified administrative framework across Idlib since 2017. Prior to this, Idlib and its environs were controlled by a plethora of armed groups both revolutionary and jihadist backed by different

state actors such as the U.S., Gulf States and Turkey. By building alliances and establishing the Syrian Salvation Government, HTS has overseen the centralisation of local councils, establishment of security courts and rolling out of public services like telecommunications systems. With aid from Turkey, post offices, schools and other tangible services have been flagships for HTS's governance project. A key component has been SSG's delegation of key functions to technocratic workers unaffiliated with the group itself, as well as the strategic placement of HTS loyalists in leadership roles.

These dynamics position HTS as both a capable political actor and a case study in the adaptive politics of jihadi movements navigating post-conflict governance.

This approach has produced a paradoxical mode of governance: hegemonic yet delegated, coercive yet pragmatic. HTS maintains overarching control over Idlib's political and security environment, yet much of the day-to-day administration is handled by technocrats in the local bureaucracy. Authority is centralised, but its exercise is often outsourced to private companies in the orbit of the political leadership. Coercion remains the backbone of the system as rivals are suppressed and dissent is tightly managed. Yet governance is also marked by pragmatism, including a degree of accommodation with civil society actors, the local informal political actors such as influential families and clans, as wells as formalised international NGOs. This hybrid model allowed HTS and their SSG project in Idlib to project both order and adaptability to attract humanitarian actors. This has helped consolidate its dominance and mitigating the liabilities of direct rule.

HTS's long-term investment in institutional consolidation merits close attention. Rather than a radical emirate or a short-lived warlord project, HTS's political order in Idlib has increasingly resembled a proto state,[31] shaped by both internal constraints from coalition building with local groups and external pressures from states shaping its political environment like Turkey and Russia. The group has enforced security, regulated religious discourse and engaged in political manoeuvering that signals acute awareness of regional trends, particularly its deep dependence on Turkey and the constraints imposed by continued terrorist designations. These dynamics position HTS as both a capable political actor and a case study in the adaptive politics of jihadi movements navigating post-conflict governance.[32]

The group at a glance

HTS is estimated to have had between 5,000 and 20,000 fighters.[33] Estimating the number of HTS fighters is difficult due to inconsistent sources and limited access to reliable data. Figures range widely, with some estimates citing several thousand and others exceeding tens of thousands. These variations reflect differing definitions of affiliation, the inclusion or exclusion of auxiliary forces and HTS's own strategic opacity. The group does not publicly disclose its strength, and external actors often conflate HTS units with other armed factions operating in Idlib.[34] HTS has a clear incentive to keep its force size opaque, both to avoid external scrutiny and to manage internal dynamics. This ambiguity is further reinforced by the group's current process of merging its fighters into the newly announced Ministry of Defence, which may further blur the distinction between HTS's military wing and other affiliated forces.

Yet open-source material, including press imagery, confirms that HTS possesses a well-equipped force that includes armoured vehicles, drones and advanced weaponry, some acquired from Assad's forces. Over the past decade, the group has also invested in military innovation, establishing its own drone manufacturing workshops to enhance reconnaissance and strike capabilities.[35] The group has demonstrated a high level of operational professionalism across varying terrains in Syria. In urban centres, the group has shown effective command and control in close-quarter combat, employing infantry tactics and adaptive use of fortified positions. In more provincial settings marked by flat, open geography, HTS has adjusted its operations, using mobility, co-ordinated firepower and local intelligence and alliance-building to maintain tactical advantage. This adaptability across distinct operational environments reflects a degree of military sophistication. The rapid fall of Damascus can be attributed both to the weakness of the Assad regime and to HTS's ability to capitalise on political and military vacuums.[36]

Financially, HTS has long relied on a combination of taxation, smuggling, monopolization of the oil sector, tight control of financial services, as well as private donations from locals keen to curry favour with its leadership. It has also likely received remittances from wealthy Syrians abroad who opposed the Assad's regime.[37] HTS has risen to financial prominence in large part by controlling and taxing cross-border trade between Syria and Turkey. This is achieved by levying customs duties on commercial goods passing through key crossings, most notably the Bab al-Hawa crossing. HTS has allowed economic entrepreneurs and non-HTS constituencies to participate in civilian administration under the SSG, suggesting

that its financial model relies on a mixture of taxation, coercive extraction and partnerships with urban elites, business actors and tribal groups for long-term institutional stability.[38]

The SSG also leveraged their partnership with Ankara in strengthening their grip on monetary policy. In June 2020, the Syrian Salvation Government declared it would adopt the Turkish lira to counter market instability caused by the sharp decline of the Syrian pound. Shortly after, significant amounts of Turkish currency began flowing into the region, primarily via the Turkish Post and Telegraph Organization branch in Afrin. The SSG began issuing salaries and setting prices in lira. An undetermined portion of this currency later surfaced in the Sham Bank, operated by HTS in Idlib City.[39]

In Idlib, HTS adopted a centralised economic governance over local markets, blending religious taxation with modern state-like control over strategic sectors. Through its Syrian Salvation Government (SSG), the group's Zakat Department imposed a compulsory tithe on olive farmers, requiring them to contribute 10% of either their olive harvest or the oil they produce, effectively institutionalising a religious levy as a form of agricultural taxation. In parallel, HTS has sought to dominate the telecommunications sector by laying fiber-optic cables and erecting communications towers across Idlib and western Aleppo. It has also enforced monopolistic control through SYR Connect, a company tied to HTS affiliates, by prohibiting internet service providers from operating without a license. This market consolidation was codified through the Telecommunications Law, issued by the SSG's Telecommunications Regulatory Department, establishing formal legal oversight of the sector and underscoring HTS's broader effort to regulate and capture key revenue-generating infrastructures under the guise of bureaucratic governance.[40]

Examining the measures HTS implemented in Idlib reveals how the group actively structured market governance and asserted fiscal authority through regulation, monopolisation and selective taxation. This record offers an instructive basis for anticipating the economic policies of the transitional government in Damascus, where similar instruments of control are likely to be deployed at a broader scale.[41]

Evolution of HTS

The organisational trajectory of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham is key to understanding the centralised and tightly managed nature of Syria's transitional government today.[42]

HTS's origins lie in the establishment of Jabhat al-Nusra (JaN) in 2012, founded by Abu Mohammad al-Julani as the Syrian branch of al-Qaida in Iraq (AQI). Initially operating under the leadership of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, JaN quickly established itself as a potent insurgent force in the Syrian theatre, drawing upon AQI's networks to secure funding, arms and manpower.

The relationship between JaN and its parent organisations began to deteriorate in 2013, when Baghdadi unilaterally announced the formation of the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), claiming authority over JaN. Julani resisted the merger, pledged allegiance to Ayman al-Zawahiri and rejected Baghdadi's claim. This rupture led to open hostilities between JaN and ISIS, consolidating JaN's status as Syria's official al-Qaida affiliate. Between 2013 and 2016, JaN consolidated territorial control in parts of Aleppo and Idlib yet remained embroiled in internal debates over its ideological alignment and long-term strategic direction.

By mid-2016, under mounting international pressure and internal strategic debate, Jabhat al-Nusra rebranded as Jabhat Fatah al-Sham (JFS), announcing a break from al-Qaida. Though widely interpreted as a tactical move aimed at securing political legitimacy and avoiding Western airstrikes, the rebranding also reflected a deeper, longer-term shift happening in the years before. The group had been distancing itself from the global jihadist framework of both ISIS and al-Qaida well before 2016.[43] Unlike ISIS, whose leadership and ranks were dominated by foreign fighters, Jabhat al-Nusra had a markedly higher proportion of Syrians and a more pragmatic posture towards local actors. This 'Syrianisation' was visible in its recruitment patterns, governance structures in Idlib and early support from segments of the opposition. As early as 2012, Syrian National Coalition President Moaz al-Khatib publicly urged the international community to remove Jabhat al-Nusra from its terrorist list,[44] an appeal that cost him political capital abroad but reflected the ambivalence within Syrian opposition circles.

While Zawahiri rejected the rebranding and viewed any dilution of al-Qaida's chain of command as a threat, Julani's public and explicit disavowal of al-Qaida would only come in 2017, with the formation of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham. By then, the group had

consolidated control over much of northwest Syria and was presenting itself as the centre of a national Islamist project, distancing itself from the image of a global jihadist network.[45]

Later, HTS defined itself as a locally focussed Islamist authority with an emphasis on consolidating political and administrative control over a limited polity: Idlib. The establishment of the Syrian Salvation Government (SSG) in 2017 formalised this shift, providing HTS with a civilian administrative arm that could carry out governance functions such as taxation, regulatory oversight and internal security. The move went beyond symbolism, marking the institutionalisation of HTS's authority and its shift toward bureaucratic governance.[46]

The organisational rupture with al-Qaida was not without consequences. It triggered an internal ideological schism, prompting hardline elements within HTS to defect and form Hurras al-Din (HaD), which remained aligned with al-Qaida. The split was both theological and strategic: HaD rejected HTS's growing pragmatism and accommodation with regional actors, particularly Turkey.[47] In response, HTS launched a systematic campaign to dismantle HaD's operational capacity, detaining senior figures and marginalising dissenting clerics. By 2019, HTS had firmly consolidated its monopoly on power in Idlib, maintaining internal order through coercion, denunciation-enabled policing partly based on conservative religious doctrine, and the bureaucratic mechanisms of the SSG.[48]

Between 2019 and 2025, HTS continued to assert itself as a dominant political actor. It formalised its control over markets, regulated infrastructure and engaged in security co-ordination with external actors, especially Turkey. While still adhering rhetorically to Islamist principles, HTS shifted its operational focus towards institutional survival, regional engagement and internal stability. This recalibration allowed it to maintain de facto autonomy while avoiding direct confrontation with state actors.

HTS's organisational history is marked by centralisation, ideological control and institutional layering, providing a revealing framework for interpreting the structure and logic of Syria's current transitional government. Many of the same patterns that characterised HTS's rule in Idlib, strong executive authority, carefully curated pluralism and centralised administration, are now visible in Damascus. The transitional government's tight command structure, reliance on patronage, regulatory enforcement, and strategic ambiguity reflect a continuation of HTS's governing logic, now extended to the national level.

Transnational relations

Turkey

HTS's ability to consolidate financial and territorial control in Idlib was closely tied to Turkey's role in the Astana process[49] and its de facto mandate to manage the province's stability. The Astana framework, by formalising zones of control and reducing direct regime offensives in four parts of Syria, created the conditions for HTS to entrench its authority in Idlib. Turkey's presence, which is primarily focussed on containing Kurdish political actors and preventing refugee flows, was a primary driver for HTS's ascendance. Both are political priorities for Ankara and sources of legitimacy for Damascus.[50] This allowed HTS to operate with limited interference, while Ankara's control over border crossings facilitated the group's taxation of trade. In effect, Turkish priorities enabled HTS's rise as the dominant local authority.

Turkey maintains ties with other actors in Syria, most notably the Syrian National Army (SNA), an umbrella group of predominantly Arab and Islamist factions with varying ideological orientations and degrees of continuity with the original revolutionary movement.[51] Yet none are as savvy governors as the HTS. Ankara has cultivated ties with al-Sharaa's group by lobbying for them to serve as a conduit for UN-sanctioned humanitarian aid, effectively legitimising its role in administering assistance under the guise of a neutral mandate.[52] Turkey extended its energy grid into Syria, keeping Idlib up and running through power outages.[53] And Turkey had years of intelligence-sharing with HTS as confirmed by Turkey's Foreign Minister and ex-spy chief.[54] Ankara and HTS, despite divergent ideologies, share a deep wariness towards the Kurdish political project in northern Syria, viewing it as a threat to their respective territorial and ideological ambitions. This convergence has helped sustain a tacit understanding between the two, rooted less in shared values than in mutual strategic concerns.

HTS and Turkey have converging economic interests, too. Turkish private sector firms, particularly those specialising in construction and logistics, are positioned to capitalise on reconstruction opportunities in post-Assad Syria. Meanwhile, HTS is deeply reliant on Turkish investment and technical expertise to restore essential services, which is crucial for securing legitimacy among a population where approximately 90% live below the poverty line.

Syria's new leadership may seek to preserve strategic flexibility vis-à-vis Ankara by entertaining overtures from both Saudi Arabia and Russia. While Ankara remains its most influential partner, Damascus has reasons to diversify its external ties. Saudi Arabia offers financial capital and a path to broader Arab normalisation, while Russia retains influence in parts of Syria's military and bureaucracy. By balancing these relationships, Syria can reduce overreliance on Turkey, gain leverage in negotiations over reconstruction and governance, and position itself as a more autonomous actor in a shifting regional order.

Qatar

Qatar's engagement in post-Assad Syria has been characterised by early financial commitment, strategic infrastructure investment and a preference for working with regional partner Turkey and in co-ordination with Washington. Doha has positioned itself as the leading Gulf financier of Syria's reconstruction, clearing the country's US$15.5 million debt to the World Bank, alongside Saudi Arabia, and securing re-engagement by international financial institutions and the SWIFT payment system after more than a decade of sanctions.[55] It has also delivered direct economic relief, including an US$87 million grant to cover public sector salaries[56] and plans to supply natural gas via Jordan.[57] Additionally, in the energy sector, a Qatari firm is leading a US$7 billion project to build four gas plants and a solar farm in partnership with Turkish and American firms, a venture that is projected to cover more than half of Syria's electricity demand. This combination of humanitarian aid, state-level investment and co-ordination with Washington suggests a technocratic and institutional approach. Rather than dominating the political arena, Qatar is embedding itself in Syria's recovery infrastructure, aiming to shape long-term governance outcomes through economic influence and international legitimacy.

Saudi Arabia and UAE

President Ahmed al-Sharaa and his foreign minister selected Riyadh as the destination for their first official foreign visits, signalling Syria's intent to recalibrate its regional alignment. In May 2025, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman hosted high-level talks in Riyadh. During the meetings, U.S. President Donald Trump met President al-Sharaa for the first time and announced the lifting of U.S. sanctions.

Saudi Arabia and the UAE are actively forging new ties with Syria's HTS-led government to curb Iranian and Turkish influence and reshape the power balance in the Levant. They see the transition in Damascus as a critical opportunity to cut Tehran's routes through Iraq and Lebanon and block any return of Iranian proxies. Gulf leaders are applying hard-learned lessons from Iraq and Yemen, where delayed engagement allowed Iran to entrench itself and forced costly interventions. Now, with Israel expanding its reach and Iran weakened, Riyadh and Abu Dhabi are stepping in early to assert control. Their support for Syria's new rulers is part of a broader shift towards a more assertive foreign policy aimed at securing regional leverage, countering rivals like Iran and Turkey, and positioning themselves as key actors in shaping the Middle East's post-conflict order.

Two recent examples underscore the accelerating pace of engagement with this bloc: Syria's new leadership plans to print its redesigned currency in the UAE and Germany rather than Russia, signalling a pivot towards Gulf and Western partners as U.S. sanctions are eased. In a further sign of deepening ties, Damascus signed an US$800 million preliminary agreement with a UAE firm to develop the port of Tartus, representing the first major foreign investment deal since President Trump's lifting of sanctions.[58]

Russia

Russia retains strategic interest in its bases on Syria's western coast and keeps open dialogue with Damascus' new rulers. Among Western observers, the fall of Assad is widely seen as a strategic setback for Russia. It casts doubt on Moscow's capacity to project and sustain influence in the MENA region and the Sahel, raising questions about its power projection abilities and reliability as an ally in places such as Mali, CAR, Burkina Faso, Libya and Sudan. Central to Moscow's objectives were the retention of its military foothold, particularly the Hmeimim airbase and the Tartus naval facility. However, Syria's new government moved to end its lease in Tartus, Syria's second-largest port after Latakia, with an estimated annual capacity of four million tons and approximately 20,000 containers. Russia reached an agreement for a new base in Sudan on the Red Sea,[59] and was seen relocating military equipment from the port.[60]

In a notable move, Moscow provided an undisclosed amount of liquid assets, reportedly in banknotes,[61] to bolster Syria's cash-strapped central bank, signalling a commitment to economic stabilisation efforts. Furthermore, Russia is exploring investments in Syria's energy sector, including gas fields and infrastructure projects, aiming to solidify economic ties and gain leverage in the country's reconstruction.

Russia is on a charm offensive, having initiated high-level contacts with the new Syrian leadership. In February 2025, President Vladimir Putin spoke with President al-Sharaa, marking the first direct communication since Assad's departure. However, the relationship faces strains. The new Syrian administration has demanded reparations from Russia for its military involvement during the civil war and has sought the extradition of Assad, who was granted asylum in Moscow.[62] These contentious issues complicate negotiations and reflect Syria's efforts to assert its sovereignty and address past grievances. In recent developments, HTS interim defence minister said that Russia's attitude towards it had 'improved significantly' and Russia could retain their presence 'if we [Syrian Transitional Government] get benefits'.[63]

Relations between Moscow and Syria's new rulers will remain transactional. While Russia is institutionally embedded in Syria's security and diplomatic apparatus, Damascus is cautious about deepening ties, wary that overt alignment could compromise its domestic legitimacy after a decade of Russian support for Assad.

Iran

Tehran has moved quickly to recalibrate its position in post-Assad Syria. The Iranian foreign ministry signalled its intent to preserve bilateral ties, while its ambassador in Damascus notably refrained from labelling HTS a terrorist group, which is a marked departure from earlier rhetoric under Assad. The gesture reflects a pragmatic shift: Iran is seeking to secure a foothold in a Syria now governed by former adversaries. For its part, HTS leader Ahmed al-Sharaa acknowledged in December 2024 that relations with a 'regional power like Iran' were indispensable. Both sides appear to recognise the utility of a working relationship. It highlights the transactional imperative driving the current engagement. For the HTS government, this involves seeking legitimacy and resources, while for Iran, it's about salvaging influence and maintaining access in a drastically altered regional landscape.

Washington's posture towards al-Sharaa's government, tied to explicit commitments such as designation of the IRGC as a terrorist organisation, has significantly constrained Iran's ability to re-establish its once deep military-diplomatic foothold in Damascus. Iran has withdrawn its forces, and practical avenues for re-entry under the current dynamics remain narrow and uncertain.

Should Iran seek to expand its influence over the transitional government, it may do so by reinforcing substate transnational actors such as the SDF or Hezbollah. Such overtures enable Iran to act as a spoiler to Sharaa's minority mobilisation strategy, particularly efforts to integrate armed minority factions into the Ministry of Defence, and to broader power-sharing arrangements.

Jordan

Within a week of the regime's collapse, Amman hosted a meeting of the Arab Contact Group in Aqaba, signalling its intent to remain diplomatically central to the regional response. Jordan offered and saw accepted training assistance for Syria's reconstituted armed forces. The move reflected deep concerns over cross-border threats, particularly the flow of Captagon and weapons from southern Syria. In 2024 alone, Jordan seized over 27.5 million pills and engaged in multiple armed clashes along the border.[64] Economically, Amman is positioning itself as a logistical conduit for reconstruction and trade, approving the construction of a dry port in Mafraq and reopening discussions on water disputes. Syria's upstream dam construction continues to deprive Jordan of its agreed share from the Yarmouk River.[65]

China

China, too, is recalibrating its Syria policy in response to the new transitional government in Damascus. China has reiterated its support for UN Security Council Resolution 2254, which calls for a Syrian-led political transition.[66] Despite initial alarm over the presence of Uyghur fighters in the new security apparatus, including TIP commanders reportedly integrated into the Defence Ministry, Beijing has quickly resumed engagement. In early 2025, China held four diplomatic meetings, including talks between its ambassador and interim President Sharaa, and a separate session between China's trade delegation and Syria's minister of agriculture to explore infrastructure investment. These steps reflect Beijing's pragmatic strategy: contain security risks from Uyghur militants while positioning itself for long-term economic influence in a post-Assad Syria.[67]

Infrastructure reconstruction offers a politically neutral entry point, allowing China to compete quietly with Turkey, whose construction firms have long dominated northern Syria's rebuilding efforts. Sanctions relief is a boon for Beijing. As Damascus strengthens its position through local governance and service provision, Chinese investment may indirectly reinforce its hold unless Western actors re-engage. Any deal is likely to include Syrian assurances regarding the containment or relocation of Uyghur militants.

U.S.A.

In March 2025, U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary for the Levant Natasha Franceschi presented a memorandum to Syrian Foreign Minister Assad al-Shaibani outlining eight U.S. conditions for lifting sanctions. These included creating a unified, professional military free from foreign command, granting unrestricted access to all chemical weapons sites and forming a committee to investigate the fate of missing Americans, including journalist Austin Tice. The U.S. also demanded the repatriation of Islamic State family members held in al-Hol, sustained co-operation on counterterrorism and authorisation for U.S. operations on Syrian territory.

Additional requirements included a public ban on Palestinian militias and their deportationas well as a formal designation of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) as a terrorist organisation. Syria complied selectively. Damascus expelled members of Palestinian Islamic Jihad,[68] collaborated with the OPCW[69] and facilitated the repatriation of several Americans. However, foreign fighters and U.S.-designated terrorists still occupy senior positions in the Syrian military.

Despite the partial implementation of its demands, Washington dropped its policy of conditional sanctions relief. In May 2025, during the Riyadh summit, President Trump announced the full lifting of sanctions following his meeting and much-reported handshake with President al-Sharaa. Over the course of two decades, Ahmed al-Sharaa moved from being a detainee at Camp Bucca in 2005 to shaking hands with the U.S. president in 2025. This is a remarkable trajectory by any measure.

While sanctions related to trade and humanitarian assistance are lifted through executive action directly by President Trump and enacted by the U.S. Treasury, those tied to Syria's state sponsor of terrorism designation remain in place pending congressional approval. Although parts of the Syrian economy stand to benefit quickly, full normalisation depends on legislative outcomes.[70]

Several unresolved issues continue to shape the bilateral relationship. Damascus has proposed integrating selected HTS fighters into a formal military structure, which raises long-term security concerns for Washington. The question of incorporating the SDF into Syria's defence architecture and transferring control of detention centres also remains open. To be viable policy pathways, these decisions may need to address Kurdish demands for political and cultural recognition

while ensuring continuity in counterterrorism operations. The deportation of Palestinian militants presents further complications, as neither Israel nor the Palestinian Authority is prepared to accept returnees without legal guarantees.[71]

At the same time, the scramble for Syria's reconstruction is intensifying. China has taken the lead in infrastructure bidding, while the United States is expected to push for preferential access. Syria has already invited U.S. companies to invest in its oil and gas sector as part of its broader economic recovery strategy.

Iraq

Baghdad remains a critical actor in shaping post-Assad Syria's trajectory. Its role straddles both internal security concerns and broader geopolitical calculations, especially with regard to the threat from transnational militancy stemming from Islamic State group, the two countries' Kurdish questions; and looming Iranian influence in Baghdad and in networks operating in Syria's desert.

Baghdad views the emergence of a new Syrian political order with caution, particularly due to the potential constitutional recognition of minority identities. Reports from working groups drafting Syria's interim framework suggest that the constitution may explicitly acknowledge Kurdish and other ethnic identities, reversing decades of Arabisation. Such a move would represent a symbolic break from Baathist-era policies and could influence Kurdish claims within Iraq's federal structure.

Kurdish politicians in Iraq, especially in Erbil and Sulaymaniyah, are closely monitoring Syria's approach to decentralisation and power-sharing. Gains by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and potential integration into Syria's defence or political system may set precedents that bolster Kurdish demands in Iraq. Conversely, Baghdad fears that any formal recognition of autonomous Kurdish governance in Syria could intensify federalism debates at home and embolden demands for constitutional revisions.

On the security front, Iraq faces direct threats from the porous Syrian-Iraqi border. The Islamic State maintains small groups with operational capability across Anbar and Nineveh, with Syrian territory providing a fallback zone. Co-ordination between Damascus and Baghdad on border control and intelligence-sharing is expected to increase, particularly around Al-Bukamal and Al-Qaim. Iraqi security officials have

also voiced concern over the reintegration of former HTS or IS fighters into Syrian national structures and the potential spillover of conflict if such elements are not properly demobilised.

Baghdad may also emerge as a logistical conduit in Syria's reconstruction. Iraqi ports and overland trucking routes could serve as arteries for Gulf and Chinese goods entering Syria via Basra and the northern trade corridor. These dynamics position Iraq as both a stakeholder in Syria's stabilisation and a strategic rear base for competing regional supply lines.

Israel

Israel has adopted a security-driven approach to the new government in Syria led by Ahmed al-Sharaa, combining expansive military action with selective diplomacy. In the weeks following Assad's fall, Israeli forces annexed its way into the UN buffer zone along the Golan Heights and established forward positions as far as Mount Hermon 40 kms from Damascus. Simultaneously, the Israeli Air Force launched a series of strikes on Syrian airbases and weapons facilities with the apparent aim of denying conventional assets to actors operating near its northern border.

While Israel does not formally recognise or endorse any Syrian political body, it has in the wake of Assad's exit used diplomatic channels via the U.S. to express its preferences for Syria's future, including support for preserving Russian military basing rights as a counterweight to growing Turkish influence. In May 2025, reports emerged that Israel and Syria began unofficial direct contact, with senior security officials holding face-to-face meetings to agree on deconfliction procedures, and prevent escalation along the border.[72]

These moves reflect a broader Israeli strategy to prevent the re-emergence of Iranian or Hezbollah-linked networks and to shape the post-Assad security architecture in its favour. However, Israel's actions are also a response to Turkey's growing influence, and Ankara's long-standing relationship with Hayat Tahrir al-Sham and its efforts to anchor itself more deeply in Syria.

Israel's 3 April 2025 airstrikes on the Hama military airport and the T4 base near Homs illustrate its evolving strategy towards Turkey's role in Syria.[73] While Israel framed the strikes as part of its effort to prevent hostile forces from rearming in the post-Assad landscape, the timing and targets point to broader geopolitical aims.

Turkey had been negotiating a joint defence pact with Syria's interim president, Ahmed al-Sharaa, and was reportedly preparing to deploy aircraft and air defence systems to both sites. By hitting Hama hard and striking only the perimeter of T4, Israel appeared to send a calculated warning to Damascus and Ankara. These attacks coincided with sharp public statements from Israeli officials, who accused Turkey of playing a destabilising role in Syria. The strikes are part of a wider pattern: since December 2024, Israel has launched over 70 ground incursions and repeatedly targeted military infrastructure, aiming to shape its operational environment in the south of Syria. The aim is to eclipse any resurgence of logistical networks aiding Hezbollah, and contesting the Turkish military footprint.

Israel has also pursued limited engagement with Syrian leadership. It entered direct deconfliction talks with Syrian officials, led by Quneitra governor Ahmad al-Dalati on the Syrian side, to co-ordinate at a local level. Israel also engaged Washington with proposals to preserve a decentralised Syrian structure and retain Russian military basing rights.

Summary

Hayat Tahrir al-Sham now dominates Syria's transitional government, exercising centralised control through a disciplined leadership under Ahmed al-Sharaa. Originally an al-Qaida affiliate, HTS has undergone a gradual process of nationalisation, shifting from transnational jihadism to a Syrian-centred political-military actor focussed on institutional survival and state-building. This transformation has unfolded incrementally, shaped by its alliance-building with local socio-political informal actors and the available talent pool in its northern enclave. HTS has relied heavily on continued access to cross-border trade via Turkey, making the flow of goods from external markets a critical lifeline for its governance model. Its economic model blends taxation with monopolistic control over key sectors, offering a prototype for national replication. While Turkey remains its most influential partner, HTS is actively cultivating ties with Saudi Arabia, Russia, Iran, the U.S. and even China, thereby signalling a strategic bid to diversify alliances and secure access to reconstruction resources. HTS and the interim government face the persistent challenge of containing radical ideologues within their ranks and asserting control over loosely affiliated armed groups. The Latakia massacres underscored the limits of their command authority and internal discipline. This has become a critical test for HTS's ability to restore intercommunal legitimacy and present itself as a viable governing authority beyond its core constituency. Its rise presents a critical case for understanding how jihadist-rooted movements adapt to post-conflict governance and navigate the constraints of international legitimacy.

Kurdish YPG fighters. Photo: Kurdishstruggle / Flickr.com. https://www.flickr.com/photos/kurdishstruggle/28568562235 https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/deed.en

SYRIAN KURDISH POLITICS: LOCAL RULE, TRANSNATIONAL NETWORKS

The flag of Kurdistan as used by various groups in MENA region to denote lineage to Kurdish political thought.[74]

SDF's primary zone of territorial control Source: Author's own illustration.

Kurds constitute the largest ethnic m inority in Syria, estimated at between 10–15% of the pre-war population roughly around 3 million people.[75] They primarily inhabit the northeast of the country, particularly in the governorates of Hasakah, Raqqa and Aleppo, where Kurdish-majority towns form the cultural and demographic heartland of Kurdish life in Syria.

Ethnically distinct from the Arab majority, Syrian Kurds speak Kurdish (primarily the Kurmanjî dialect) and maintain a distinctive Kurdish national identity rooted in shared cultural, linguistic and historical experiences. Due to long-standing state policies, Syria's Kurds, like many other linguistic minorities in the country, have long spoken Arabic alongside their native tongue. The vast majority are Sunni Muslims, though the community also includes smaller numbers of Jews, Yazidis, Alevis and secular nationalists. How much this religious identity plays into their modes of governance varies across political groups.

In the wake of the Ottoman Empire's collapse, Kurdish leaders joined the chorus of nationalist movements appealing for statehood. At the 1919 Paris Peace Conference, Şerif Pasha, a notable Kurdish figure and former Ottoman ambassador to Stockholm, submitted a formal request for an independent Kurdistan, envisioning a state carved from eastern Anatolia and northern Mesopotamia.[76] The proposal aligned with broader post-war ambitions to redraw borders along ethno-national lines, as seen with Bulgarians, Armenians and Arabs.[77] The 1920 Treaty of Sèvres appeared to open the door, offering vague provisions for Kurdish autonomy pending a local referendum. But the treaty was never implemented. The rise of Turkish nationalist forces under Mustafa Kemal and the waning interest of Allied powers quickly rendered Kurdish aspirations diplomatically obsolete.[78] The 1923 Treaty of Lausanne omitted any mention of Kurds, dissolving earlier promises and enshrining Turkish territorial integrity. Fragmented leadership, rival tribal loyalties and a lack of international backing further undermined the Kurdish case. Partitioned across four new nation-states, Turkey, Iraq, Syria and Iran, Kurdish communities found themselves minorities subject to state assimilation policies.

As such, Kurds have faced systemic marginalisation since the Syrian state's inception.[79] Successive Syrian governments, beginning with the post-independence governments and solidifying under the Baathists from 1963 onward, adopted Arab nationalist policies that denied recognition of Kurdish identity. A particularly stark example of this was the stripping of more than 100,000 Kurds of their citizenship in 1962, a status that barred them and their descendants from owning property, accessing public services or travelling freely.[80]

The Syrian state's political and cultural repression of the Kurds included bans on Kurdish language education, publications and cultural celebrations. Kurdish political activism was met with surveillance, imprisonment and violent repression, contributing to a pervasive sense of exclusion and formal marginalisation from the national polity.

The emergence of de facto Kurdish self-rule in parts of northern Syria, later organised under the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES), has significantly altered the Kurds' political status and given Kurdish actors unprecedented bargaining power on the domestic scene. As of this writing, AANES is the diplomatic and administrative face of the Kurdish-led political experiment.

The emergence of de facto Kurdish self-rule in parts of northern Syria, has significantly altered the Kurds' political status and given Kurdish actors unprecedented bargaining power on the domestic scene.

In sum, the Kurdish governance project in Syria is shaped by historical grievances. Therefore, political inclusion emerges as a central theme in their approach to the current transition.

Introducing the actors

The Kurdish-controlled regions of northern Syria are home to a constellation of political and military forces with both the intent and capacity to shape the trajectory of the current transition.

This section will introduce the primary entities, starting with the driving force of Syrian Kurdish politics, the PYD, then exploring the SDF as its main platform for domestic influence and finally examining their main rival Kurdish party, the KNC.[81]

PYD: DEMOCRATIC UNION PARTY

Original name in Kurmanjî and source to its acronym:
Partîya Yekîtîya Demokratîk.[82]
Source: PYD Communication's Office via Telegram

The strongest actor in Syria's Kurdish politics is the Democratic Union Party (PYD) which holds substantial political authority and maintains extensive grassroots networks supported by capable administrative systems. It is the dominant driver of Syrian Kurdish politics and the architect of a governance model that blends ethno-political mobilisation with a pragmatism shaped by years of war-time governance. Developed during the early 2000s, these governance capabilities have enabled the

PYD to consolidate territorial and political influence in the Syrian borderlands with strongholds in Kurdish-majority urban centres. These centres include Al-Qamishli (Kurdish: Qamishlo), Ras al-Ayn (Kurdish: Serê Kanîyê), Al-Ḥasakah (Kurdish: Hesekeh), Ain al-Arab (Kurdish: Kobanê) and Afrin (Kurdish: Efrîn).[83]

In its early years, the PYD operated clandestinely under Syrian Baathist rule. The party remained relatively marginal until Syria's uprising in 2011, when it mobilised to fill the vacuum in Kurdish areas. By mid-2012, as Assad's forces redeployed to other areas of the country to confront increasing pressure from rebel groups, the PYD and its allies took charge of Kurdish-majority regions with tacit regime consent. This laid the groundwork for the autonomous administration.

The PYD advocates for constitutional recognition of Kurdish cultural and political rights within Syria. It has previously proposed a federal, decentralised framework that would grant minorities the right to self-rule under a new constitutional order. The model envisioned by the PYD's leadership is grounded in democratic decentralisation, secular governance, ethnic inclusivity and gender equality, according to their manifesto.

This vision was until recently closely tied to the framework developed by Kurdistan's Workers' Party known by its Kurdish abbreviation PKK[84] and its broader umbrella organisation, the Kurdistan Communities Union (KCK). The PYD, the PKK and other local groups are organised by KCK in their respective countries. Speaking to The Wall Street Journal, Kurdish fighter Zind Ruken discussed the dynamics between the PKK and the PYD's armed wing Yekîneyên Parastina Gel (YPG): 'Sometimes I'm a PKK, sometimes I'm a PJAK [the PKK-allied affiliate, active in Iran], sometimes I'm a YPG. It doesn't really matter. They are all members of the PKK'.[85]

The KCK structure can be analytically understood as the organisational spine of the broader Kurdish movement. It enables the cross-functioning of its regional operations, co-ordinating its political, social and military structures across multiple countries, including but not limited to PKK in Turkey and Iraq, PYD in Syria and PJAK in Iran.

This organisational design was born out of increased pressure on PKK's regional operations after the capture and subsequent imprisonment of its chief ideologue and founder Abdullah Öcalan in 1999. The introduction of KCK created a transnational matrix organisation, enabling it to shift the centre of its operations elsewhere to

evade direct confrontation. This involves funnelling fighters and resources across PKK's sphere of influence in parts of Syria, Turkey, Iraq and Iran. This infrastructure remains in place, though its scope and function continue to evolve.[86]

In the 90s, KCK made an ideological shift away from seeking national statehood towards what it called democratic autonomy, a model of decentralised grassroots governance inspired by the canton model of governance.[87] This ideological shift directly influenced the PYD's political programme in Syria, highlighting the transnational ties to what is often presented as a local governance model for Syrian Kurds.

Administratively, this is has translated into a web of local councils in Syria which aims at creating public legitimacy of its rule.

The local councils of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) serve as the primary interface between the region's political institutions and its population. Officially tasked with delivering municipal services, mediating local disputes and managing community-level governance, these councils occupy a critical yet ambivalent position within a broader political system dominated by the PYD. While formally presented as decentralised and participatory, in practice these councils operate within a highly centralised framework shaped by KCK party networks, security imperatives and territorial contestation.

Functionally, local councils fulfil many of the responsibilities conventionally associated with municipal governments. They oversee water and electricity distribution, sanitation, local health clinics and educational facilities, often in the absence or collapse of Syrian state infrastructure. They also co-ordinate with internal security actors, such as the Asayîsh,[88] and play a role in civil registration and justice provision through locally constituted reconciliation and peace committees. However, their operational capacity varies significantly across regions. In areas with strong PYD roots, primarily Kurdish-majority zones in Jazira (Cizîr) and Kobanê, local councils often build upon pre-existing organisational networks and experience a degree of continuity. By contrast, in Arab-majority territories such as Deir ez-Zor or Raqqa, where the AANES has extended its reach primarily through military conquest rather than political consensus, councils are often perceived as externally imposed and face limited legitimacy among local populations.

The institutional structure of these councils follows a nominally bottom-up model with neighbourhood-level communes constituting the foundational layer. These communes are, in theory, spaces of direct democracy where residents meet to handle marriage, divorce, birth and death registrations, and elect representatives to higher administrative levels, including town, district and ultimately cantonal assemblies. Each level of the administration has a parallel women's council that can veto decisions it considers discriminatory.[89] However, despite the formal decentralisation, decision-making authority remains highly centralised. Most councils are either staffed by PYD-affiliated individuals or operate under the influence of KCK-aligned trained cadres, creating a situation in which ostensibly autonomous local bodies function as extensions of a tightly controlled political apparatus. Moreover, councils lack fiscal autonomy and depend on higher-level institutions for budgetary allocations, logistical support and policy direction, further reinforcing their dependence on the core structures of the AANES.

Two examples illustrate this trend. A unified curriculum rooted in democratic confederalism is implemented across the region, with teacher training and monitoring managed by central education committees. Judicial bodies operate according to legal principles set by the AANES Justice Committee, with major legal cases and appeals typically handled in Qamishli or Hasakah. In some cases, decisions made by local councils are superseded by higher-level bodies within the administrative structure.[90]

PYD's military strength primarily derives from its armed wing, the People's Protection Units (YPG),[91] actively engaged in defensive and offensive operations. The YPG is a centralised military force with extensive combat experience, organisational discipline and territorial control capabilities derived from PKK's decades of experiences conducting guerrilla warfare and managing rebel rule in Turkey, Iraq, Iran and Syria. The YPG's military capabilities have contributed significantly to maintaining Kurdish autonomy, countering threats from Turkey and residual IS elements, and securing political leverage in broader Syrian political dialogues.

In 2013 the all-female Women's Protection Units (with the Kurdish acronym YPJ) was created as a parallel force, reflecting the Kurdish movement's commitment to women's empowerment and symbolising the ideological departure from traditional militias in the region. The YPG/YPJ are not exclusively Kurdish; over time they attracted Arab tribal fighters, Syriac-Assyrian Christians, Yazidis and even international volunteers, although Kurds remain the core.

The YPG's leadership is somewhat opaque, given its guerrilla origins and its communal ideology. It does not publicise a single commander-in-chief. Instead, it operates under a general command council. In practice, since 2015 the YPG and YPJ have been integrated under the Syrian Democratic Forces' (SDF) unified command. The YPJ is led by its own councils of female commanders who co-ordinate with the YPG leadership.

The YPG's military strength has translated into greater political leverage for the PYD within Syria's domestic landscape. It is therefore pertinent to examine how the YPG evolved into a more capable fighting force and how this, in turn, expanded the group's transnational influence. This evolution was sped up by the creation of Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and its political wing Syrian Democractic Council (SDC).

SDC: SYRIAN DEMOCRATIC COUNCIL AND THEIR ARMED WING SYRIAN DEMOCRATIC FORCES (SDF)

SDC original name in Kurmanj: MSD - Meclîsa Sûriya Demokratîk
Source:
SDC Communication's Office via Telegram

SDF original name in Kurmanj: HSD - Hêzên Sûriya Demokratîk.
Source:
SDF Communication's Office via Telegram

The Syrian Democratic Council (SDC) and its armed wing (SDF) emerged in 2015 as a pragmatic response to a strategic dilemma: the United States required a capable local partner to lead ground operations against the Islamic State, while the Kurdish-led YPG needed international legitimacy and material support. Established as a multi-ethnic coalition of Kurdish, Arabic and Christian fighters, the SDF allowed Washington to deepen its engagement without formally aligning with an actor Ankara regards as a proxy of the PKK. This tactical alignment, while diplomatically expedient, did not fundamentally alter the SDF's internal command structure, which remains tightly linked to the YPG and its military apparatus. Its leader, Syrian national Mazloum Abdi, is a former PKK cadre and co-founder of YPG.

As the campaign against the Islamic State intensified, the SDF emerged as Washington's and other Western capitals such as Copenhagen, Paris and Berlin's sole viable partner on the ground in Syria through the Operation Inherent Resolve (OIR) coalition.

Other factions within the coalition included the al-Sanadid Forces, representing the Arab Shammar tribe; Liwa Thuwar al-Raqqa, composed of Sunni fighters from the Raqqa region; Jaysh al-Thuwar, a multi-ethnic alliance from northern Syria; the Euphrates Volcano, a joint formation of non-YPG Kurds and former Free Syrian Army elements; and the Syriac Military Council, representing Assyrian and Syriac Christian communities. It is important to note that the SDF's main asset does not lie in sheer numbers. Its troop count remains deliberately opaque, shaped in part by ongoing negotiations over the potential integration into the Syrian Ministry of Defence. Rather, its advantage stems from more than a decade of close co-ordination with modern NATO militaries in the fight against the Islamic State. This partnership has resulted in measurable improvements in command structure, interoperability and battlefield effectiveness, factors that set the SDF apart from other armed groups in Syria.

Today, the SDF functions as both a security provider and the main platform through which the PYD engages in Syria's political arena.

Ankara views the partnership as a strategic affront, citing the YPG's organic ties to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which it classifies, and expects its allies to classify, as a terrorist organisation.[92] This has prompted Ankara to launch military incursions into SDF-held territory and expand its support for the jihadist groups under the banner Syrian National Army (SNA), aiming to contain the SDF's territorial reach and counterbalance its growing influence along the border.

Today, the SDF functions as both a security provider and the main platform through which the PYD engages in Syria's political arena. It plays a central role in maintaining territorial control, managing local governance structures and regulating cross-border trade and security arrangements in Northern Syria for its population, estimated at 4.6 million people.[93] As Assad exited Syria, the SDF was the most cohesive and substantially armed actor operating within Syrian territory, with approximately 1,500 U.S. troops embedded on its territory.[94] These forces operate separately from their own Forward Operating Bases, conduct patrols and intelligence-gathering of their own accord. This arrangement reflects a broader pattern of transactional military coordination, in which daily cooperation is driven by shared enemies rather than shared visions.

The SDF's main flashpoint with the current government is the integration into the STG's Ministry of Defence alongside other substate armed factions.[95] Under the deal, SDF-controlled military and civilian institutions in northern Syria will be integrated into the Syrian state. This potentially marks the formal end of the AANES, yet lack of transparency around the agreement has opened space for speculation and divergent analyses regarding its objectives and prospects for implementation.

From the government's perspective, the agreement represents an assertion of sovereignty, territorial reintegration and deflects international criticism after recent mass killings near Latakia.[96] For the SDF, it ceases the military attacks from Turkey and SNA. The establishment of an eight-member commission to manage the transition by year's end provides a framework for a structured process but also opens the door to disagreements and delays. The agreement's vague language and complex provisions suggest it lacks a solid foundation for implementation. Fundamental differences between the two parties on the future of Syria remain unresolved.

Framing also matters. STG distinguishes between the Kurds and the SDF to frame the dispute as one of governance rather than of democratic minority inclusivity. This hampers with the SDF's agenda to assert itself as a unified actor seeking to push for minority rights. Given the historical legacy of state Arabisation policies[97] towards the Kurdish population, this distinction has done little to reassure Kurdish political actors. This was evident in the STG's refusal to invite Kurdish political actors to the National Dialogue Conference held in Damascus as a means to foster empowerment across communities divided by more than a decade of conflict. The absence of Kurdish representatives drew criticism from several actors and was seen as a symptom of their limited role in broader political negotiations.

Another flashpoint is the SDF's control over detention camps holding former IS combatants and their families. This sets up a complex political dynamic with the STG, highlighting critical policy areas of both friction and co-operation between the two camps.[98] STG prioritises centralisation of territorial control but must manage risks associated with radicalisation and violence from these camps if re-arrangements are too hasty. STG has signalled that yielding territorial control to SDF would make it sensitive to perceptions of compromised autonomy.

In a fragmented political landscape, the SDF has become a key actor, militarily unavoidable, politically resilient, and assertive in shaping the post-conflict order. This simultaneously strengthens and complicates its strategic position vis-à-vis external actors.

Transnational relations

To illustrate the transnational nature of Syria's Kurdish question, it is worth pausing on the terminology used by locals to describe the region. Commonly referred to as 'Rojava', or Western Kurdistan, this designation reflects how the political struggle in Syria is part of a broader Kurdish narrative. It links the area to parallel grievances and aspirations in Iraq (Basûr, or Southern Kurdistan), Turkey (Bakûr, or Northern Kurdistan) and Iran (Rojhilat, or Eastern Kurdistan), underscoring the shared sense of identity and grievances that transcends national borders.

Regional powers continue to contest the parameters of the Kurdish question in Syria. Most substantially, many are focussed on the integration of SDF into Syria's new Ministry of Defence. To start, several transnational factors drove the SDF to engage with Damascus on an autonomy-reducing deal, chief among them the PKK peace initiative in Turkey and mounting pressure from Turkish-backed Islamist forces in North Syria.

As part of a broader recalibration in Turkish domestic politics, PKK co-founder Abdullah Öcalan issued a statement on 1 March 2025, urging disarmament and a departure from the ideological tenets underpinning the PKK political project in Turkey and regionally. Abdullah Öcalan's call for the PKK to disarm has placed Syria's Kurdish-led PYD under renewed pressure to distance itself from its ideological roots. The statement intensified demands from both Damascus and Ankara for the group to integrate into state structures and dissolve parallel institutions.

While the PYD cautiously welcomed the peace appeal, it stopped short of committing to disarmament. At the same time, renewed offensives by the Syrian National Army, a coalition of armed groups supported by Turkey, started cross-border attacks. This intensified the security dilemma for the Kurdish-led administration. In response, Kurdish leaders, notably SDF commander Mazloum Abdi, took the off-ramp offered by Öcalan's peace initiative and sought accommodation with the STG as a strategic hedge against Turkish-backed advances into Northern Syria.

This development has reinforced al-Sharaa's role as a central interlocutor on Kurdish security matters. This makes Kurdish actors dependent on Damascus for protection. By keeping Kurdish negotiations separate from dialogue with other Syrian minority factions, the STG reduces the likelihood of co-ordinated bargaining among opposition and minority factions.

Turkey's recent co-operation with Damascus further shapes this political dynamic, reinforcing the Syrian government's stance. Both governments share concerns regarding Kurdish military capabilities and the YPG's affiliation with the PKK. Consequently, Ankara and Damascus co-ordinate diplomatically to contain and manage Kurdish politics as a security rather than a political matter. This collaboration securitises and compartmentalises Syria's Kurdish question and in effect sidelines Kurdish efforts to bargain as a rights-seeking minority, thereby constraining broader Kurdish political ambitions. The SDF's exclusion from national dialogue conferences exemplifies its marginalisation in formal political processes.[99]

Washington played a central role in the SDF-Damascus deal and even facilitated an airlift for the SDF delegation to Damascus.[100] The pivot was quietly encouraged by Washington, which uses the autonomy-reducing deal as a way to maintain its footprint in northern Syria and as an alliance-management tool for its relations with Ankara. This optic was further reinforced with the formally unprecedented U.S.-mediated dialogue track between Ankara and SDF leadership starting officially as of May 2025.[101]

The Trump administration's erratic posture on the U.S. military presence in Syria, exemplified by the abrupt withdrawal announcement in December 2018 and its partial reversal under pressure from the Pentagon and U.S. Congress, prompted the U.S. Department of Defense to treat the SDF as a strategic asset requiring insulation.[102] This institutional buffering aimed to maintain continuity in counter-IS operations ended up bolstering the SDF's political standing. In response to shifting U.S. policy signals, the group expanded its engagements with other international actors, including Russia. This happened after the October 2019 Turkish incursion as U.S. forces redeployed, and Russian troops moved into vacated areas.[103] Recent developments echo earlier episodes of U.S. disengagement, raising concerns about recurring strategic gaps. In May 2025, the U.S. announced that it is yet again reducing its military presence in Syria from 2,000 to a reported 1,500 troops, with further cuts under consideration. This downsizing comes as the new Syrian government and local actors continue to struggle with fully containing Islamic State activity, particularly in areas like the Badia and detention facilities in the northeast.[104]

Russia's relations between Kurdish groups in Syria, particularly the PYD and its military wing, the YPG, have historically fluctuated based on geopolitical pragmatism rather than a steadfast ideological alignment. Given the renewed uncertainty surrounding U.S. security commitments, especially following the current U.S. administrations shifting policies,

Kurdish factions may increasingly turn towards Russia as a pragmatic alternative. Moscow has a long-standing strategy of leveraging the Kurdish issue to exert influence over Turkey and peel a partner from U.S. regional orbit.[105] This is best exemplified with PYD office openings in Moscow in 2016. Yet, Russia's leverage over Syria's political future has markedly declined. Lacking both dependable partners on the ground and the military reach to safeguard their interests, Moscow now finds itself increasingly sidelined in the post-conflict calculus, offering little incentive to work with Kurdish groups.

In Iraq, the federal government is observing the SDF–Damascus agreement with caution. One possible outcome is the inclusion of minority identities in a future Syrian constitution, a potential bargaining chip that could signal a shift away from decades of Arabisation policies targeting Kurds and other ethnic groups.[106] This prospect may raise the stakes in Baghdad, where Kurdish parties continue to push for greater political agency and cultural recognition within Iraq's federal framework.[107]

Regionally, transnational relations between Kurdish actors are entering a new phase of cautious coordination. Following years of fragmentation and, the Qamishlo Conference of April 2025 marked a significant breakthrough in intra-Kurdish politics. Bringing together ENKS, PYD, and other parties with over 400 delegates from the Kurdish regions of Turkey, Syria, Iraq and Iran, the conference produced a unified Joint Position Document that calls for the integration of Kurdish regions within a federal Syrian state. The agreement reflects a rare consensus on Kurdish national rights, cultural recognition and political participation, and signals a coordinated shift toward institutional engagement across previously divided Kurdish constituencies. However, the document's explicit call for federalism, a term firmly rejected by both Ankara and Damascus, highlights the political friction ahead. Time will tell how this emerging Kurdish platform will navigate the constraints and opportunities of regional power bargaining.[108]

KNC: KURDISH NATIONAL COUNCIL

Original name in Kurmanjî: ENKS - Encûmena Niştimanî ya Kurdî li Sûriyê
Source: KNC Communication's Office via Telegram.

In contrast to the PYD, the Kurdish National Council (KNC) represents a rival strand of Syrian Kurdish politics. Formed in 2011 under the patronage of Iraqi Kurdish leader Masoud Barzani, the KNC is a coalition of a dozen Syrian Kurdish parties historically aligned with Barzani's Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and opposed to the PKK/PYD bloc.

Although significantly weaker than the PYD in Syria and the diaspora, the KNC r etains relevance by positioning itself as the sole Kurdish actor outside the PYD's orbit. This distinction grants it a measure of legitimacy, particularly among external stakeholders, amid ongoing criticism of the PYD's centralised governance.

The KNC advocates for negotiated Kurdish autonomy within a unified Syrian state, emphasising national-level representation and rights. Its support base lies mainly in culturally conservative, tribal and religious Kurdish communities outside urban centres, including older political elites and diaspora Kurds wary of PKK-style revolutionary politics.

Headquartered in Erbil, the capital of Iraq's Kurdistan Region, the KNC reflects its exile status and close ties to the KDP. It also formed a militia, the Rojava Peshmerga, composed of Syrian Kurdish refugees and defectors trained by the KDP's Peshmerga. This force fought IS in Iraq with U.S. support but was barred from re-entering Syria by the PYD, which viewed it as a hostile entity.

Within Syria, the KNC's operational capacity is limited due to PYD suppression. Many of its leaders reside in Iraqi Kurdistan or Turkey. Nonetheless, it plays a symbolic and diplomatic role for external actors seeking alternatives to PYD dominance in Kurdish politics.

Transnational relations

The KNC is the Kurdish body recognised by the Syrian Opposition Coalition, which Western and Arab states viewed as legitimate oppositional actors under Assad. As part of the opposition delegation, KNC representatives have joined Geneva talks and other negotiations, gaining a level of legitimacy denied to the PYD, whose participation was blocked by Turkey.

Ankara has strongly leaned into partnership with the KNC, since Turkey's government is a close ally of Masoud Barzani, the Iraqi Kurdish leader of KDP in Kurdistan Region, Iraq. Ankara has hosted talks and invited KNC into negotiations under its diaspora policy council Syrian National Council (SNC) and the Syrian Negotiation Commission. KNC has been a member since 2012 up until February 2025, when it withdrew, citing irreconcilable differences with the Sunni Arab bloc.[109]

In 2012, Barzani sought to mediate between rival Syrian Kurdish factions by engineering the Erbil Agreement, an attempt to balance the PYD's territorial ascendancy with a shared governance framework. Yet Barzani's initiative faltered as the Kurdish National Council (KNC) lacked the organisational depth, local roots and military infrastructure to assert itself on the ground. Unlike the PYD, which drew strength from its alignment with the PKK's transnational networks, the KNC struggled to build lasting cross-border alliances or project power beyond symbolic gestures. Barzani's intervention briefly papered over these asymmetries, but the PYD's cohesion and monopolism soon rendered the agreement irrelevant.

Summary

The Kurds of Syria are not one unitary political actor. Having established de facto governance structures in northeast Syria, the SDF is now undergoing a complex transition. It faces a hostile regional environment, with Turkey classifying it as a PKK proxy and a security threat, while the Syrian government, strengthened by Turkish support, has reiterated its intent to reassert control over all Syrian territory.

Major shifts may be imminent. The PKK's move to disarm reduces the ideological constraints previously shaping the SDF's position, forcing it to reconsider its strategic posture. With fewer barriers to engagement, the SDF may now find it easier to negotiate with both Damascus and Ankara.

In essence, the SDF is striving to transform its wartime gains into a lasting political status. In a future transition scenario, its key component, the PYD, is expected to demand political and civil rights for Kurds as part of any new Syrian constitutional order, leveraging its control of territory and its record of stable governance, and be willing to work with the KNC to ensure broader consensus-driven politics. How far it succeeds will depend on regional power dynamics, including Turkey's posture and the stance of other Syrian actors towards Kurdish political rights. Kurdish actors in Syria have not pursued statehood as a formal objective within their political programmes, making the oft-used 'separatist'[110] label an imprecise characterisation of their aims.

Members of the Druse community train with the Mountain Brigade in the southwestern province of Sweida, Syria, on Jan. 15, 2025. Photo: David Guttenfelder/New York Times/Ritzau Scanpix.

POLITICS OF THE PERIPHERY: SUWAYDA'S ROLE IN SYRIA'S TRANSITION

Southern communities primary zone of territorial control. Source: Author's own illustration.

The political culture of Suwayda has long been shaped by a preference for local autonomy and limited engagement with central authority, a pattern traceable to its semi-autonomous status under the Ottomans, when Druze communal leaders managed local affairs with minimal state interference.

While commonly seen as a Druze stronghold, Suwayda is home to a more diverse mix of communities than its image suggests. Alongside the Druze majority, the governorate includes Christian and Sunni Muslim minorities as well as smaller groups such as Circassians. These communities, though distinct in culture and religion, are closely integrated through local economic ties, shared institutions, language and long-standing patterns of cohabitation.

This arrangement was formalised under the French Mandate, which established the State of the Druze as part of a broader strategy of sectarian administration, reinforcing local governance structures and insulating the community from national political integration. Throughout the late 20th century, Suwayda remained politically peripheral, receiving limited state investment while maintaining internal cohesion through communal networks and informal governance. The logic being, that keeping the Druze separate but loyal prevented them from accumulating power within the security state while still tying their fate to the survival of the regime. During the civil war, this disposition translated into pragmatic neutrality; while nominally under regime control, Suwayda developed parallel local security arrangements that neither fully opposed nor supported Damascus, preserving relative stability while avoiding the fragmentation seen elsewhere.

To add nuance, this neutrality was not absolute. Some Druze leaders negotiated with the regime to shield the governorate from the destruction witnessed in places like Homs or the Damascus suburbs. Yet Su-wayda's survival cannot be reduced to elite dealmaking alone. The Druze population has played an active role in Syria's national uprising, particularly in the revolution's early days in neighbouring Dara'a, the site of the first protests of the 2011 uprising against Assad's government, and through recurring protests in Suwayda itself. These have reflected strands of political dissent that aligned with broader national protest movements rather than purely sectarian concerns.

DRUZE COMMUNITIES

One of many different versions of the Druze flag [111]
Source: Creative Commons Wikipedia via Verdy P (2005)

While Suwayda's political communities are often described in terms of cohesion and pluralism, their military capacity remains limited, exposing the region to a range of external pressures. Local militias and self-defence forces have maintained basic security within the governorate, but they lack the equipment, manpower and

co-ordination to project force or deter more powerful actors. This relative weakness has created space for smugglers, armed networks and opportunistic groups to exploit Suwayda's porous borders and under-governed terrain. Suwayda's location bordering Jordan and close to established trafficking routes has made it a node in broader transnational informal economies, including arms and drug smuggling.

Suwayda's challenge will be to maintain its model of pluralistic self-governance while addressing the security vacuum that increasingly defines its periphery.

Community leaders emphasise decentralisation as a stabilising force, but the gap between political autonomy and effective control leaves Suwayda vulnerable to actors with stronger logistical networks. The result is a fragile equilibrium: local authorities hold sway in urban centres and negotiate pragmatic arrangements with Damascus, but beyond this, influence is diluted by informal power brokers, smugglers and clans who operate with limited to no accountability. As the transitional government consolidates in Damascus, Suwayda's challenge will be to maintain its model of pluralistic self-governance while addressing the security vacuum that increasingly defines its periphery.

Even before the war, Suwayda maintained a delicate arrangement with the Assad regime, resisting conscription into national forces while avoiding outright rebellion. When protests erupted in 2011, the Druze organisations largely stayed out of the conflict, neither aligning with the opposition nor fully supporting the government. The emergence of Men of Dignity, a Druze militia formed in 2014, reflected this middle path: defensive in nature, wary of both regime and Islamist forces.

The Suwayda Military Council, a key Druze umbrella group, has publicly rejected the influence of external militias, including HTS, and has called for a decentralised Syrian state that recognises the specific needs of minority regions. Its leadership includes former Syrian Arab Army (SAA) officers, tribal leaders and commanders from pre-existing Druze militias, all of whom see the council as a mechanism for military co-ordination rather than a centralised army.[112]

This history of administrative insulation and institutional self-reliance now informs the Druze negotiating position. Community leaders are seeking an integration model that reflects existing governance practices and ensures continued local control in

exchange for symbolic integration into the national framework. Not unlike the arrangements under five decades of Assad's family regime. Yet various actors are attempting to steer the Druze narrative in conflicting directions.

In March 2025, only days after the SDF-deal, Druze factions formalised an agreement to integrate Suwayda into the national framework while granting it semi-autonomous status. This accord reflects mutual recognition: the Druze acknowledge the new political order, while the transitional government accepts the limits of its reach and the need for local buy-in from minority strongholds. The deal would grant Druze residents of Suweyda the right to serve in state civil institutions. In addition, Syria's security services will be permitted to operate in all areas of the region and take over police stations and other security centres. The spiritual leader of the Syrian Druze community, Hikmat al-Hijri, publicly rejected the agreement. This indicates internal divisions within the Druze community regarding the accord.

The timing of the agreement coming on the heels of the Latakia massacres and shortly after the equally opaque STG-SDF deal suggests it is less a definitive settlement than a symbolic gesture. Its vague language and lack of concrete provisions indicate it serves primarily as an opening move in what is likely to be a protracted negotiation process.

Transnational relations

The Druze community's leverage stems less from its demographic size within Syria and more from its strategic location near key transit routes to Jordan, as well as the broader regional significance of Druze populations. Maintaining control over Suwayda allows the Syrian government to signal stability and influence to external actors, including Druze communities in Israel and Lebanon. Suwayda borders Jordan and lies near Israel, placing the Druze at the nexus of regional security interests. Though the Druze have avoided direct alliances with either state, these external relationships combined with the community's coherent local governance have strengthened their negotiating position vis-à-vis Damascus. While Israel has publicly positioned itself as a protector of Syria's Druze minority, mirroring its domestic narrative about its own Druze citizens, such overtures are met with deep skepticism among Druze communities in Suwayda. Although one segment has shown openness to Israeli overtures, other segments reject external patronage. Israel's policy, often framed in humanitarian terms, should be read as part of a broader power-political strategy: to cultivate pliable enclaves along its border, and establish a buffer zone stretching from the Golan Heights through southern Syria and potentially into Kurdish-held areas.

Israel's immediate objective in southern Syria is to deny operational space to Hezbollah, Iran and other hostile non-state actors. Southern Syria, especially the area near the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights, is viewed by Israel as a critical buffer zone. Hezbollah and Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) have repeatedly sought to establish infrastructure in this area for intelligence gathering, weapons smuggling and future attacks. In April 2025, the Wall Street Journal documented Israel's infrastructure of out-posts and roadblocks aimed at solidifying its presence in the area.[113]

The Druze community's leverage stems less from its demographic size within Syria and more from its strategic location near key transit routes to Jordan, as well as the broader regional significance of Druze populations.

In the beginning of 2025, Israeli politicians intensified efforts to engage with Syria's Druze community. Defence Minister Israel Katz announced plans to permit Syrian Druze workers to enter the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights for employment, offering wages significantly higher than those in Syria. Additionally, Israel has facilitated religious pilgrimages for Syrian Druze clerics to visit sacred sites within Israel, marking the first such visits in decades. On top of this, Israel has sped up the provision of humanitarian aid to Druze communities. While publicly framed as humanitarian and cultural engagement, these policies serve dual objectives: stabilising Israel's northern border and establishing soft influence in a strategically sensitive area of Syria. Tel Aviv's calculus may be that cultivating relations with local minority communities could yield longer-term strategic dividends and limit the operational freedom of hostile actors.[114]

SOUTHERN OPERATIONS ROOM

Source: SOR Wikimedia Creative Commons

The Southern Operations Room (SOR) brought together a loose constellation of Arab and Druze armed factions whose co-operation was shaped less by ideological alignment than by shared geography and the fortunes of a collapsing central authority.[115]

In the days leading up to Assad's ouster, SOR coordinated the military push towards Damascus and spearheaded the Southern Syria offensive. The group was the first to enter Damascus, and took then-Prime Minister Mohammad Ghazi al-Jalali into custody for questioning. SOR ceded control of Damascus to HTS shortly after the take-over to avoid confrontations with HTS.

Among the most visible of these was the 8th Brigade, a formation based in Busra al-Sham and led by Ah-mad al-Awda, which had once operated under Russian auspices as part of the Syrian Army's 5th Corps. Although portrayed by some as a dominant southern force, its numbers were modest and its influence largely local, shaped by years of shifting alliances and transactional survival strategies.[116]

Its dissolution in June 2025, after weeks of tension and renewed government pressure, marked a symbolic moment in the transitional government's effort to reassert control, though the exact terms of its integration into the Ministry of Defence remain unclear.

Alongside it, groups like the Central Committee, an informal body of tribal figures and former commanders from Daraa and Quneitra, played a more political role, acting as interlocutors in negotiations despite internal mistrust stemming from their prior accommodation with the Assad regime. In Suwayda, Druze factions such as Harakat Rijal al-Karama, the Sheikh of Dignity Forces,[117] and Liwa al-Jabal followed their own trajectories, focussed primarily on local defence, autonomy and preserving communal influence rather than broader national transformation.[118] Their participation in SOR operations appears to have been driven by tactical necessity more than shared long-term goals, and their engagement with the transitional government has so far been limited and uneven.[119]

As of June 2025, no formal roadmap for the disbandment or reintegration of these groups has been made public. Their future role remains uncertain amid ongoing insecurity and the absence of a unified military or political framework in southern Syria.[120]

Transnational relations

The emergence of the Southern Operations Room drew significant regional attention, particularly during the initial collapse of regime control in the south. While that attention has since diminished, the episode illustrates a broader trend: in the absence of a stable central authority, local armed formations increasingly function as nodes

in fragmented security assemblages. These groups, whether former rebel factions, communal defence forces or local intermediaries, are more than residual, scattered groups from the war. They remain active players in Syria's evolving post-conflict landscape. Their presence has prompted bordering states to engage directly with local authorities to secure their interests.

Israel, concerned about the manoeuvrability of HTS-aligned factions within SOR, has reinforced its posture along the Golan Heights.

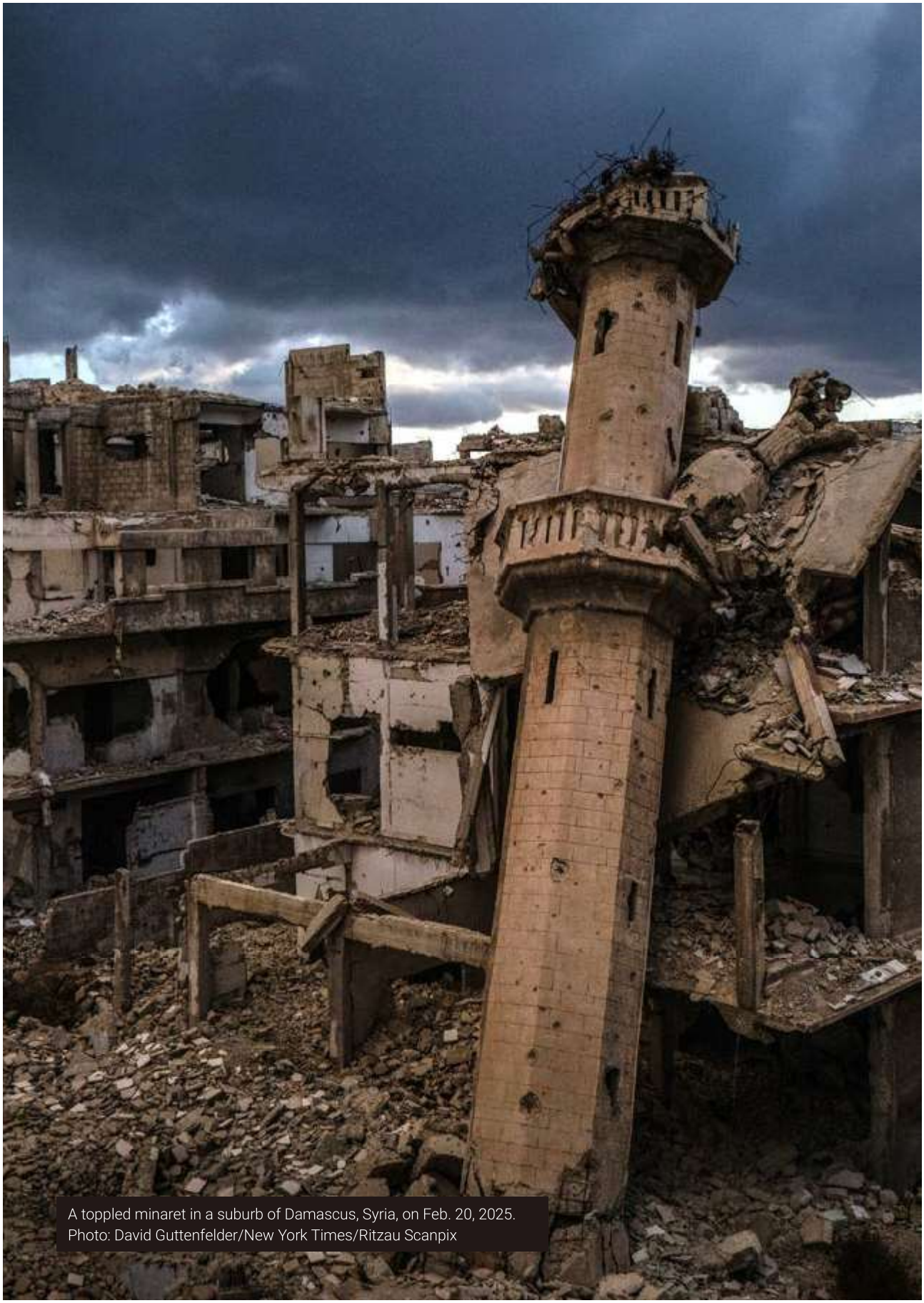
Jordan, wary of renewed cross-border smuggling and the erosion of previous Russian-mediated arrangements, has reactivated its local channels in Daraa.

The UAE, long opposed to Islamist movements, has also shown interest, particularly through its earlier connections with the 8th Brigade.

Together, these cases reflect a pattern in which neighbouring states pursue pragmatic, often informal arrangements with local actors when central authorities are unable to enforce or uphold security bargains in Syria's peripheries.

Summary

The Druze and southern factions have pursued a strategy of guarded engagement with Syria's new transitional authorities. Their ability to maintain relative order, avoid co-optation by radical actors and assert local control has enabled them to secure concessions from the state without sacrificing autonomy. The principal constraint on Druze power remains their limited capacity for external projection. Unlike Kurdish or Shiite militias, the Druze have not developed strong transnational networks or consequential militant proxies capable of influencing outcomes beyond their immediate locality. Their political weight is rooted in positional leverage rather than force projection. For now, their long-term role remain unclear. How Druze armed actors evolve into a professional security force by integrating into the national military structure will hinge not only on their positioning vis-à-vis Damascus and the Sunni majority, but also on the extent to which Israel continues to securitise parts of the Druze community as a strategic buffer or partner.



A toppled minaret in a suburb of Damascus, Syria, on Feb. 20, 2025.
Photo: David Guttenfelder/New York Times/Ritzau Scanpix

INTRODUCING THE DISRUPTORS

This chapter examines actors whose political projects focus on shaping Syria's fragmentation rather than seeking a future unified state. Despite possessing clear ideological aims with their political projects, their primary influence on the Syrian transition stems from their ability to obstruct the consolidation of any political order they cannot dominate. In the Syrian context, these actors function as counter-institutional forces, opposing formal authority structures irrespective of whether the political vision is one of centralisation or decentralisation.

While groups such as Hezbollah and the Islamic State possess coherent ideological agendas, their strength in the new Syria lies less in institution-building than in capitalising on the erosion of state authority. These groups exploit institutional vacuums and societal grievances to cast doubt on the credibility of emerging political frameworks. By actively eroding public confidence and amplifying perceptions of dysfunction, they contribute to a climate of political paralysis. In short, these groups are interested in fracturing the very idea of a shared future for Syria.

Against this backdrop, understanding these actors is less about mapping territory or tallying attacks, and more about tracing the political effects of disruption. The following sections unpack how each group leverages Syria's liminal space to assert influence and highlight their political relevance.

ISLAMIC STATE

Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jihadist_flag#/media/File:Islamic_State_flag.svg

Islamic State group, IS in short, is a Sunni jihadist organisation that once ruled a self-declared caliphate spanning large swathes of Iraq and Syria.[121]

History in brief

The Islamic State's origins can be traced to the insurgency that followed the 2003 U.S.-led invasion of Iraq. Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, a Jordanian militant, founded Jama'at al-Tawhid wal-Jihad, which later merged with al-Qaeda to become al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI). The group gained notoriety for its sectarian violence and uncompromising tactics, positioning itself as a dominant, albeit divisive, actor in the Iraqi insurgency. From early on, Syria served as a key logistical hub for AQI, providing a transit route, safe haven and recruitment ground for its operations across the border. This early use of Syrian territory as a rear base laid the groundwork for its future expansion.

Despite Zarqawi's death in 2006 and a subsequent decline under sustained pressure, the group endured by rebranding as the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI). The collapse of state authority in Syria in 2011, following the outbreak of protests and civil unrest, offered an opportunity for resurgence. ISI dispatched operatives to establish a Syrian affiliate, Jabhat al-Nusra, which quickly gained traction within the broader rebellion. By 2013, internal rifts surfaced. ISI reclaimed authority, rebranding as the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) and breaking from al-Qaeda. The following year, it declared a caliphate and seized territory across Syria and Iraq, establishing a cross-border statelet and redrawing the regional security landscape.

From 2014 to 2019, IS built a protostate with bureaucratic governance, extracting taxes, creating fiscal policies, controlling oil fields and enforcing an extreme interpretation of Islamic law. Its territorial defeat, however, did not mark its demise. Instead, the group has transitioned into a decentralised insurgency, leveraging the collapse of central authority in Syria to sustain a low-intensity campaign.

The Islamic State and HTS have crossed paths primarily as rivals, competing for territory, influence and ideological dominance in northwestern Syria. Their clashes have been frequent and often violent particularly in Idlib and western Aleppo where HTS has actively pursued, detained and executed IS operatives to assert its control.

While both groups share jihadist origins, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham and the Islamic State have diverged sharply in strategy, ambition and territorial logic. IS has consistently pursued a transnational caliphate through maximalist violence and rejection of state boundaries, whereas HTS has gradually reoriented itself around a Syria-specific, nationalist agenda. This inward turn, coupled with HTS's efforts to cultivate pragmatic relationships with local communities and selected external actors, places it in direct tension with IS's broader ideological field of play. In effect, HTS's localised state-building project challenges IS's claim to universal jihadist authority, making their rivalry a contest over both territory and the future of militant governance in Syria.[122]

Current activity

Though territorially defeated, the Islamic State remains a disruptive force in Syria's fragile transition. A car bomb attack on May 18 2025 in Mayadin, a government-held town in eastern Syria, killed five security personnel and marked the group's most significant operation in months. The timing was pointed: it came amid a U.S. military drawdown, a counterterror raid in Aleppo and a high-profile summit between the American and Syrian presidents. On June 23, 2025, a suicide bomber targeted the Greek Orthodox Church of the Prophet Elias in Damascus's Dweila neighborhood during a Sunday service, killing 25 people. According to the Syrian Interior Ministry, the attacker was affiliated with the Islamic State, though the group has not claimed responsibility.[123] While the group's operational pace is historically low, recent activity suggests it remains adaptive and opportunistic.[124]

Though territorially defeated, the Islamic State remains a disruptive force in Syria's fragile transition.

So far in 2025, the Islamic State has claimed 33 attacks. If that pace holds, it would be the lowest annual tally in over a decade. Yet by looking at the cadence of attacks since April, when U.S. forces began reducing their presence from 2,000 to around 700, the number of incidents has tripled. Until recently, at-tacks were confined to areas controlled by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which are in the midst of integrating with the new interim government. The Mayadin bombing, just outside the SDF zone, signals a strategic expansion and an attempt to exploit gaps in territorial control.

Authorities in Damascus continue to pursue IS remnants with a mix of intelligence-driven raids and targeted arrests. Notable operations in 2025 include the disruption of a plot to bomb the Sayyeda Zainab shrine in January, the arrest of a senior IS figure in February and multiple sting operations in southern and northern Syria. The SDF, for its part, has conducted around 30 arrest raids in the east. Though lower than in previous years, this level of activity points to a persistent insurgent presence.

Other factors are also compounding this resurgence. Turkish state and partner offensives against the SDF, the main U.S. partner in the fight against IS, have disrupted counterterrorism operations. As HTS and other groups were moving towards unseating Assad in Damascus in December 2024, Turkey-backed Syrian National Army (SNA) groups were moving east to target SDF near Manbij. In this context, IS has found space to regroup.

By creating moments of crisis that polarise communities, disrupt symbolic reconciliation and force transitional actors to choose between competing loyalties, IS can punch far above its weight.

In 2023, CENTCOM reported that IS in Syria had 'more than doubled' its claimed attacks compared to the previous year, with estimates reaching 700 operations.[125] There are differing reports as to whether the attacks demonstrate increased tactical sophistication, but judging by lethality and geographical spread, there is cause for concern.[126] At this point in time, the Islamic State does have the operational capacity to conduct attacks that destabilise the Syrian Transitional Government's efforts at ordermaking, yet it lacks the manoeuvre room due to increased cadence of coalitions bombardment.

One particularly potent tactic would be targeting symbolic sectarian sites such as Alawite or Shia shrines. An attack on a revered shrine or religious symbol, as evidenced by the attempted operation against the Sayyeda Zainab shrine, would place the incumbent government in an impossible position: respond forcefully, and risk accusations of sectarian bias; respond too weakly, and appear incapable of guaranteeing basic security or protecting minorities.

Such incidents would both deepen communal mistrust and could provoke retaliatory violence by pro-Assad militias or Iran-linked groups, risking any rekindling of sectarian mobilisation tactics. In this scenario, the Syrian Transitional Government would appear less as a neutral arbiter of transition and more as a weak or compromised actor, further undermining the political process.

More broadly, IS understands that the appearance of insecurity, rather than actual battlefield victories, is enough to derail state formation. By creating moments of crisis that polarise communities, disrupt symbolic reconciliation and force transitional actors to choose between competing loyalties, IS can punch far above its weight. It exploits perception as much as force.

Future of the IS detention camps

The U.S.-led containment of Islamic State in Syria has rested on a two-track system of external funding. Nearly 10,000 affiliated men and teenage boys are held in detention facilities, primarily secured through U.S. military allocations under a counterterrorism programme. Meanwhile, closed camps such as Al-Hol and Roj accommodate around 40,000, mainly women and children, have relied on operational funding from civilian sources, including USAID and the U.S. State Department. These funds have supported basic services and stabilisation initiatives, particularly in Al-Hol, long viewed as a crucible for ISs' ideological resurgence.[127]

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Now, the future of this funding looks increasingly precarious. In February 2025, the U.S. chargé d'affaires at the United Nations confirmed the policy shift, stating that the United States could no longer carry the financial burden alone.[128] The decision aligns with a broader retraction of foreign aid commitments under the current administration. The consequences are already evident: camp infrastructure is under strain, local authorities report growing insecurity, and the risk of ideological entrenchment remains high. The aid freeze leaves a gap in the international framework intended to mitigate the long-term threat posed by the Islamic State's networks.

Another looming challenge is the anticipated transfer of authority over the camps from the Syrian Democratic Forces to the central government. On 10 March 2025, Syrian Democratic Forces representatives signed a political accord with interim authorities that reportedly includes the eventual transfer of Al-Hol's administration to the central government in Damascus. While no formal handover has occurred, officials in the Syrian Ministry of Defence have begun preparing for phased integration, including security responsibilities and border management. SDF officials warn that handing over control of Al-Hol without clear safe-guards could undermine camp security and roll back counterterrorism progress. With past Islamic State prison breaks as precedent, as seen with their 2013 campaign in Iraq, a poorly managed transition risks creating openings for renewed instability.[129]

Transnational relations

Islamic State affiliaties have taken root across sub-Saharan Africa and Southeast Asia, where weak governance and local grievances offer fertile ground. In places like Nigeria and the Sahel, they fund themselves through illicit economies and localised violence, adapting IS's operational model to regional conditions.

Since the collapse of its territorial caliphate, the Islamic State has adopted a decentralised financial model rooted in extortion, kidnap-for-ransom and virtual asset donations.

Despite its geographic dispersion, Syria remains symbolically central to the Islamic State's narrative. The leadership maintains ties with affiliates and issues periodic communiqués to project cohesion across regions. This transnational posture has become essential to the group's survival strategy. Following the loss of its territorial caliphate, the organisation adopted a decentralised model, with regional franchises operating autonomously. However, networked structures still depend on central nodes to facilitate co-ordination, strategic oversight and financial transfers across theatres.

The killing of Abdullah Makki Muslih al-Rifa'i in March 2025,[130] reportedly responsible for global logistics and financing, illustrates the limitations of decentralisation. While regional affiliates may retain operational capacity, efforts to co-ordinate activity and funding across geographies become significantly more difficult in the absence of such connective figures. The loss of this node disrupts cross-border cohesion and high-lights the structural vulnerabilities inherent in IS's global model.

Since the collapse of its territorial caliphate, the Islamic State has adopted a decentralised financial model rooted in extortion, kidnap-for-ransom and virtual asset donations. U.S. Treasury estimates place its reserves at just under US$10 million, with another US$8 million raised in 2024 through criminal activity and donations. Cryptocurrency offers a discreet mechanism for moving funds across borders.[131]

Islamic State's local Syrian business model resembles that of other armed actors. Borderlands are preferred due to their governance gaps. In areas like Deir ez-Zor and Raqqa just outside of coalition control points, IS militants regularly extort money from civilians, truck drivers and business owners operating along key roads and in remote villages. Locals report being contacted via WhatsApp or through in-person intermediaries and told to pay monthly 'zakat' (Islamic tax) or face retaliation. For instance, a wheat trader moving goods between SDF- and regime-held areas might be told to pay a cut. Those who refuse may have their vehicles ambushed or burned, as has occurred on rural routes southeast of Deir ez-Zor.[132]

What unites these disparate theatres is a decentralised, low-visibility financial model that adapts faster than traditional counterterrorism tools can track. Funds move through informal channels such as hawala networks, bypassing formal banking systems and state surveillance. The result is a financing structure that is nimble, layered and increasingly immune to geographic containment. For a group that has lost its caliphate, its capacity to sustain violence across continents suggests that fiscal defeat remains a distant prospect.

Examples are plentiful. The Al-Rawi network, operating across Iraq, Turkey, Belgium, Kenya, Russia and China, has facilitated fund transfers through the use of proxies, cash smuggling and gold conversion. Funds were routinely laundered by converting large cash sums into gold, which was then sold to produce clean currency. Despite sanctions and arrests, parts of the network remain intact. In southern and eastern Africa, South Africa has served as a critical node, with facilitators using local banks to transfer funds to Islamic State affiliates in Mozambique and the Democratic Republic of Congo. These transfers often originated from Somalia and Nigeria. In parallel, Islamic State operatives have established front companies in Turkey and Sudan under false identities, enabling logistical support and financial flows. Together, these cases underscore the group's continued reliance on decentralised, opaque mechanisms to sustain its operations in the absence of territorial control.[134]

Syrian Baath Party
Source: Syrian Baath Party,
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Coastal Shield Forces
Source: Coastal Shield Forces,
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Syrian Islamic Resistance Front
Source: Uli al-Baas,
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ASSAD-LOYALIST GROUPS

The Assad loyalist forces operating in Syria's coastal region represent a fragmented constellation of ex-regime officials, ex-security personnel and localised militias, primarily drawn from the Alawite community and Baath Party. These actors lack a unified command structure and rely on insurgent tactics, ambushes, arson and retaliatory killings, which is indicative of a reactive, rather than strategic, mode of violence. Their mobilisation appears driven less by organised political objectives than by sectarian grievance, fear of marginalisation and resentment towards the new authorities. While certain operations such as co-ordinated attacks on checkpoints suggest limited tactical alignment, the broader loyalist posture remains disjointed and defensive.

It is important to distinguish these armed actors from the broader Alawite population. The Alawite community, while heavily concentrated in the coastal region, does not speak with a single voice. It is not a politically unified bloc, and its members hold diverse and often conflicting views about the future of Syria. Most Alawite civilians have not taken up arms and do not participate in these insurgent activities. Many seek stability and disengagement from renewed cycles of violence. The loyalist militias, while drawing recruits from Alawite areas, cannot be seen as representative of the community as a whole.

On 6 March 2025, insurgents ambushed security forces in the coastal town of Jableh, killing 30 personnel. The attack, which included burnings and shallow mass graves, triggered a violent response by the government and affiliated actors. Over the following days, a wave of reprisals claimed at least 779 lives, with both sides accused of targeting civilians. According to the Syrian Network for Human Rights, loyalist factions killed 172 soldiers and 211 civilians, while government-aligned forces and militias were responsible for 396 civilian deaths. Most of those killed were Alawites, though Sunnis and Christians were also among the dead.[135]

The loyalist insurgency consists of multiple factions. First off, the rise of the Iran-linked Syrian Islamic Resistance Front (Uli al-Baas) has been notable for its parallels to Hezbollah iconography and the strategies of Shia-based militias operating in Iraq under the auspices of the Popular Mobilization Units.[136] Another no-table group is the neo-Baathist Coastal Shield Forces led by Miqdad Fatiha, a former Syrian military officer.[137] The remainder of the notable groups are the National Defence Forces in Deir ez-Zor and a newly announced group under Iranian-linked and Assad family loyalist Brigadier General Ghaith Dala named Military Council for the Liberation of Syria.[138] Government officials say these groups carried out more than 40 attacks in recent months.

The government's response to the ambush has drawn scrutiny after units from the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army, along with foreign jihadist fighters and armed civilians, were seen participating in retaliatory operations. Human rights groups[139], the UN[140] and local monitors[141] have accused these actors of indiscriminate killings and abuse, particularly in rural Alawite-majority areas. While the transitional government's former main forces incl. Unit 400, the Othman Brigade, and the HTS' former primary law enforcement body General Security Service had a reputation for tighter discipline, some of these units were also implicated.[142]

Rising intercommunal violence underscores how the absence of credible justice mechanisms is driving cycles of revenge.

This highlights critical command and control failures among the involved fighting forces, which the STG had claimed were being demobilized into the newly formed Ministry of Defense. Although the Interior Ministry urged restraint, the violence had already escalated in the absence of oversight or coordination. This underscores the government's limited authority over allied factions and its belated attempts to impose accountability.

A Reuters report found that, for certain armed groups involved, the chain of command ultimately led to the STG's political offices in Damascus.[143] This deficit in command and control undermines the incumbents' credibility and ultimately risks fuelling broader sectarian mobilisation.

A 6 March investigative committee has been created to fact-find and assess what went wrong, as the pressure for accountability mounts.[144] Rising intercommunal violence underscores how the absence of credible justice mechanisms is driving cycles of revenge. Many Alawites feel vulnerable and stigmatised, while some groups rooted in Sunni constituencies grow impatient with the transitional government's pace of accountability, threatening the fragile social fabric.

The EU has imposed sanctions on Miqdad Fatiha, Ghaith Dala and three other Syrian individuals linked to the former Assad regime for their role in crimes against humanity, including chemical attacks and sectarian violence, under the Global Human Rights Sanctions Regime.[145]

Summary

The Assad loyalists do not function as a unified political force but rather as a fragmented insurgent threat operating outside formal structures of governance. Their influence stems less from broad-based domestic support or political representation, and more from their ability to undermine the transitional order through violence and disinformation. By refusing amnesty and reconstituting themselves into localised armed net-works, these actors have positioned themselves as spoilers of the transition rather than as participants in any negotiated future. Their actions are driven less by a coherent political platform than by a desire to preserve former privileges, resist accountability and reclaim power through coercion.

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Knowledge about these Assad-loyalist formations remains sparse. Most available information comes from news reports and a handful of independent monitoring organisations. There is no evidence of an institutionalised political body behind this mobilisation capable of engaging in formal negotiations. These dynamics merit closer journalistic and scholarly scrutiny to understand who these actors are, what drives them and how they are organised.[146]

SYRIAN NATIONAL ARMY

Source: SNA Communication's Office via Telegram

The Syrian National Army (SNA) operates as a network of armed factions. Some of these groups enjoy a close co-ordinating relationship with Turkey, who has historically supported the group as it morphed into being a cornerstone of Ankara's security assemblage on the Turkish-Syrian border.

The SNA is not to be mistaken with the Syrian Arab Armed Forces (SAA), which was the Assad regime's primary military force and is now disbanded. The SNA was formed in 2017 as an umbrella structure for opposition groups operating in Turkish-controlled northern Syria, the SNA now formally answers to the Syrian Transitional Government under President al-Sharaa. Its core structure consists of three legions encompassing dozens of militias, though the command system remains fractured and plagued by internal rivalries. Co-ordination varies sharply across factions, many of which act autonomously despite nominal affiliation.

The SNA's composition is heterogeneous. Some units, such as the Sultan Murad and Suleyman Shah Brigades, maintain close historical and ideological ties to Turkey, even drawing their names from Ottoman rulers. Other groups, like Jaysh al-Islam and Faylaq al-Rahman, integrated into the SNA following evacuation deals from eastern Ghouta.[147] Factions with origins in eastern Syria, such as Ahrar al-Sharqiya, have absorbed former jihadist fighters and are regularly accused of abuses, particularly against Kurdish civilians.[148] The group's operational behaviour varies widely, ranging from disciplined units to factions involved in looting, extortion and revenge killings. While the merger with the National Liberation Front in 2019 expanded the SNA's footprint, it did little to solve its structural incoherence. Many groups continue to shift allegiances, rebrand under new names and challenge central co-ordination.[149] This is due to their different local identities in the multiethnic, heterogenous demography of Northern Syria where clan structures and tribal policies still dictate local politics.[150]

Turkey's involvement is not peripheral. Turkish military bases, funding channels and command centres effectively manage some of the most notable SNA deployments.[151] The group has served Turkish strategic objectives both within and beyond Syria, participating in cross-border offensives against the YPG, garrisoning the Euphrates Shield and Afrin zones, and providing fighters for operations in Libya[152]

and Nagorno-Karabakh.[153] This has led some observers and Syrians alike to characterise the SNA as a subcontracted Turkish force, more aligned with Ankara's priorities than with the revolutionary ideals that once shaped the Syrian opposition. Turkey's interest in curbing Kurdish autonomy and creating buffer zones for refugee return has guided the SNA's operational agenda.[154]

Yet despite the appearance of cohesion, the SNA lacks unified command. Faction leaders wield significant autonomy, often resisting attempts to standardise discipline or accountability. Efforts by Turkey to centralise control have yielded only partial results, and the group's internal justice mechanisms remain weak.[155] While some figures argue that the SNA has detained and punished fighters involved in rights violations, evidence remains anecdotal, and abuses, especially in Afrin and Tel Rifaat, continue to draw international concern.[156]

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HTS and the SNA have at times co-operated during large offensives, such as the recent push towards Hama, but they also compete for local governance roles and influence over external backers. Tensions have sharpened over divergent approaches to Kurdish civilians: HTS has sought to project restraint and governance capacity, while SNA factions have been implicated in retaliatory violence and looting. Earlier arrests by HTS of SNA fighters accused of harming Kurdish communities reflect this tension.[157]

Summary

The SNA remains a murky actor. Much about its internal co-ordination, decision-making and long-term ambitions remains unclear. What is certain is that Turkey's backing has helped the SNA into a subcontractor role in Ankara's regional strategy as much as propped the network up as a Syrian political-military actor.[158] Whether this hybrid identity can evolve into a stable, accountable force in a post-conflict Syria, or whether it will continue to operate as a fragmented and contested security instrument, remains an open question.

HEZBOLLAH

Source: Hezbullah, Creative Commons License

Hezbollah emerged as a response to Israel's 1982 invasion of Lebanon and the perceived ineffectiveness of existing Shi'a political leadership, particularly Amal.[159] Inspired by Iran's Islamic Revolution and backed by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), Hezbollah formed as both a militant and ideological actor committed to resisting Israeli presence and exporting Iran's revolutionary model.[160] The group rooted itself in Lebanon's marginalised Shi'a communities, especially in the southern suburbs of Beirut and southern Lebanon, building a hybrid structure that fused militant operations with offerings of social, educational and health services. Over time, Hezbollah embedded itself in Lebanese society and politics, formalising its role through parliamentary participation while maintaining an autonomous military wing. Its success in driving out Israeli forces in 2000 and surviving the 2006 war against Israel elevated its status among supporters as both a national resistance force and a regional actor.[161]

Hezbollah's entry into the Syrian conflict in 2013[162] marked a decisive shift in its trajectory from a national resistance movement to a regional paramilitary organisation. Initially, Hezbollah framed its intervention as a defensive measure to protect Shi'a holy sites, particularly the Sayyida Zaynab shrine near Damascus, and to shield Lebanese Shi'a villages along the border from Sunni rebel groups. In reality, it quickly expanded its operations deep into Syrian territory, operating in Qalamoun, Homs, Aleppo and Daraa, often leading offensives alongside elite Syrian army units and IRGC personnel. This marked Hezbollah's transformation into a transnational actor capable of sustained expeditionary warfare.[163]

Combat in Syria significantly enhanced Hezbollah's military capabilities. The group gained battlefield experience in urban combat, siege warfare and drone deployment. It learned to co-ordinate with artillery and air assets, including Russian forces, and improved its command-and-control architecture. Fighting across a diverse and unfamiliar terrain, often against ideologically motivated Sunni groups like Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic State, hardened its rank-and-file. It also deepened Hezbollah's dependence on Iran, both for strategic guidance and logistical support. Syria evolved into both a theatre of operations and a strategic rear base facilitating weapons transfers from Iran to Lebanon, reinforcing Hezbollah's deterrent posture towards Israel.[164]

The events of October 7, 2023, and the war in Gaza that followed, forced Hezbollah into a new strategic calculus. After Hamas launched its unprecedented assault on Israel, Hezbollah opened a second front by targeting Israeli military positions in northern Israel, drawing heavy-handed Israeli retaliation.

Israel's intensified campaign against Hezbollah since October 7, 2024, further compounds the group's vulnerability. With supply lines from Iran under pressure, and Syria no longer a permissive operating environment, Hezbollah faces a strategic contraction. The new Syrian government has also moved against other Iranian-linked networks (e.g. Hashd al-Sha'abi operatives), demonstrating a broader commitment to dismantling Iranian influence.[165]

After Assad's exit, Syria's changing political trajectory poses a deeper long-term challenge. Hezbollah's logistical and strategic depth depends on access to Syrian territory, particularly overland weapons routes, training grounds and political cover. The new government in Damascus has inherited a long-standing hostility towards Hezbollah via its HTS core, dating back to the early conflict years as Hezbollah entered the foray. As such, the government is actively working to dismantle Hezbollah networks and disrupt their activities, particularly along the Lebanon-Syria border.

There are varying assessments on Hezbollah's ability to withstand sustained pressure. Some argue that Iran's proxy network can offset Hezbollah's reduced operational space in Syria. As has been noted elsewhere, a network of pro-Iranian militias exercises substantial influence over Iraq's border crossings, major highways and airports, effectively shaping the country's transit infrastructure. In Jordan, Iran cultivates sympathetic constituencies among Jordanian-Palestinian communities. In Syria, the post-Assad political order may struggle to counter entrenched Iranian smuggling networks, which are well-financed and often intersect with established narcotics trafficking routes.[166]

In the coming months, Hezbollah faces a complex and tightening strategic landscape. The Israeli military has moved in on its traditional supply routes, having demonstrated its tactical edge and a political willingness to escalate into annexed territory. There are reports of arms smuggling being intercepted as late as June 2025.[167] Meanwhile, Gulf states continue to sideline Iran diplomatically. This reinforces a regional setup that marginalises the Axis of Resistance. The United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia are expanding economic and diplomatic ties with Syria's transitional authorities, pulling Damascus away from the Tehran-Hezbollah orbit. Iran, while still a key backer, faces its own internal and external constraints, limiting its ability to project sustained power.

Summary

For Hezbollah, the strategic outlook is that of defensive recalibration. It will likely continue to posture against Israel, support its allies across the region and invest in asymmetric deterrence capabilities. However, its room to manoeuvre is shrinking. Its Lebanese support base remains strong but war-weary after Israel's fullscale operation in Lebanon with extensive airstrikes and ground incursions aimed at crippling Hezbollah's ability to threaten northern Israel. And the regional terrain is shifting. The next phase may test Hezbollah's firepower, but more critically it will test the group's logistical adaptability and ability to keep itself politically relevant to Iran's regional ambitions in an increasingly contested Levant.

SARAYA ANSAR AL-SUNNA

(English translation: Supporters of the Sunnah Companies)
Source: Saraya Ansar al-Sunna Wikimedia Creative Commons

Saraya Ansar al-Sunna (SAS) is a jihadist faction whose emergence is set to between late 2024 and February 1st 2025, following a defection from Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS). The group was reportedly formed by operatives from an HTS recruitment office tasked with regimetargeted operations, who split over disagreements regarding prisoner policy and what they viewed as HTS's abandonment of Sharia governance.[168]

Led by Abu Aisha al-Shami, the group comprises former HTS and Hurras al-Din members as well as unaffiliated fighters.

Saraya Ansar al-Sunna adopts a hardline Salafi-jihadist stance. It denounces HTS's civilian administration as apostate. Across different source material, the group is said to expresses open ideological sympathy for the Islamic State, though it currently operates independently.

In June 2025, the group claimed responsibility for the suicide bombing at the Mar Elias church in Damascus, killing 25. In their statement, the group said its attack was prompted by the Sharaa-government's move to prohibit unsanctioned religious preaching in the area.[169]

As the STG's governance project gains coherence and its roadmap becomes less opaque, a growing number of armed factions and personality cults around HTS and its former affiliate circles may maneuver to secure influence. This proliferation of actors, some opportunistic, others ideologically driven, is contributing to a more volatile landscape as they seek to renegotiate their place in the emerging order.

Reliable data on the group remains limited, as it only began conducting overt operations in February 2025. This scarcity of verifiable information complicates efforts to assess its internal structure, external ties, and long-term strategic trajectory.[170]

CONCLUSION

Syria today is characterised by fragmentation rather than unity. Multiple centres of power operate within its borders, often in parallel and at times in competition. The country's territory is governed by political authorities and armed actors, each advancing different institutional models and political agendas. From Damascus to Deraa, Raqqa to Qamishli, these configurations represent both different ideological aspirations and functioning systems of governance perceived as being incompatible by the different actors.

The Kurdish-led administration in the northeast has consolidated a secular self-administration model of governance. In southern Syria, local actors are developing new ways of engaging with what remains of the central state. Meanwhile, the Islamist-rooted leadership in Damascus is pursuing strongly centralised institutional reform and territorial control. The tension is tangible, but there are signs of political compromise across these zones of control, suggesting a shift, however frail, from outright confrontation to conditional dialogue.

The security landscape remains volatile. This was indicated by the instrumentalisation of sectarian framing surrounding the Latakia massacres and the central authorities' clashes with Druze actors in the south. Armed groups continue to wield significant influence, and political violence has not subsided. However, the struggle over Syria's future is increasingly shaped by formal and informal negotiation processes as well as by ceasefire arrangements and governance mechanisms at the local level. The emergence of such interactions indicates a gradual transformation from military stalemate to political contestation.

This report has shown that external actors continue to play a central role in shaping Syria's trajectory. Russia, Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Israel, the United States and others each support different entities within Syria. For the majority of the actors, their aim is to retain strategic leverage over the country's evolving political order. For some like Israel and Turkey, this entails pursuing territorial revisionism and annexation to shape outcomes in their favour. All of these states are engaging with substate authorities, facilitating service delivery, and in some cases, supporting political talks. Their involvement reflects a broader recognition that the consolidation of influence now depends less on battlefield outcomes and more on engagement with the diverse political orders emerging on the ground in Syria.

NOTES

1 Reuters, 2024.

2 (Munif, 2020) (Abboud, 2015)

3 (Balanche, 2018; Brittanica, 2025)

4 (Hinnebusch and Imady, 2018; Matar and Kadri, 2019)

5 (Phillips, 2016) all caps?

6 For a deeper dive into the multifaceted character of the war in Syria see (Abboud, 2015).

7 (Karlén et al., 2021)

8 For critical perspectives on standardised comparison and the classification of armed actors, see (Flyvbjerg and Sampson, 2011; Kalybas, 2006; Mampilly, 2011; Ragin, 2014).

9 (Schmitt et al., 2025; UNCHR, 2025)

10 (Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2025)

11 (Waters and Koontz, n.d.)

12 (AFP, 2025b; Human Rights Watch, 2025c; Waters, 2025b)

13 (World Bank, 2017)

14 (UNHCR, 2025)

15 In March 2025, militias linked to Syria's government carried out sectarian killings of more than 1,300 Alawite civilians in coastal cities, raising serious concerns of war crimes. (Kim, 2025).

16 (Goldbaum, 2025)

17 Erdoğan was preceded by Qatar's emir, Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani, the first foreign leader to meet with Syria's new president and a close regional partner of Ankara.

18 (Majalla, 2023)

19 (Ashawi, 2018)

20 The Axis of Resistance refers to a transnational network of state and non-state actors aligned with Iran that collectively oppose Western influence and Israeli policy in the Middle East. Initially coalescing around groups such as Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Assad regime in Syria, and later including Hamas in Gaza, the Houthis in Yemen, and factions within Iraq's Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), this loosely co-ordinated alliance has adapted to regional shocks through deep economic, military and political entrenchment in local states. It functions less as a formal bloc and more as a flexible system of networks operating across formal and informal spheres. For an excellent overview of the evolution, structure and adaptability of this network, see Mansour, R., Al-Shakeri, H., and Haid, H. (2025), The shape-shifting 'axis of resistance': How Iran and its networks adapt to external pressures, Chatham House.

21 (Fraioli, 2025) (Black and Kaushal, 2025)

22 (Zelin, 2025e)

23 (Zelin, 2025e)

24 (Zelin, 2025a)

25 (Gall, 2025)

26 (Zelin, 2025d)

27 (Zelin, 2025d)

28 (Al Monitor, 2025b; Haid, 2024; Kajjo, 2025)

29 Numbers are unclear, as many IDPs live in Idlib, unregistered in latest census from 2021. (EEAA, 2024)

30 (Drevon and Haenni, 2021)

31 (Zelin and Cahn, 2023)

32 (Haenni and Roy, 2024) (Krause, 2024)

33 (UNSC, 2025)

34 (EEAA, 2020)

35 (Dass, 2024)

36 (Levy, 2024)

37 (Frayer, 2024a)

38 (Zelin, 2025c).

39 (Al-Zaraee & Shaar, 2021; Enabbaladi, 2020; Frayer, 2024b; Zaman Arabic Staff, 2020)

40 (Al-Zaraee and Shaar, 2021a)

41 (Al-Zaraee and Shaar, 2021b)

42 Other scholars have offered more detailed and comprehensive accounts of the evolution of HTS; see, for instance, (al-Tamimi, 2017; Drevon and and Haenni, 2025; Keser and Fakhoury, 2025; Zelin, 2023b).

43 One push factor may have been the mounting pressure from U.S. and coalition airstrikes, which were decimating both ISIS and al-Qaida across Iraq and Syria.

44 (Financial Times, 2012)

45 (Hassan, 2018)

46 (Al-Zaraee and Shaar, 2021b)

47 For a detailed account of the rise, marginalisation and eventual dissolution of Hurras al-Din as well as its complex relationship with HTS and al-Qaida, see Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, in CTC Sentinel, May 2025 (al-Tamimi, 2025).

48 (Haenni & Drevon, 2020; Haenni, Patrick, & Roy, Olivier, 2024)

49 The Astana Process, launched in 2017 by Russia, Turkey and Iran, was a diplomatic initiative aimed at de-escalating the Syrian conflict and managing zones of control. While nominally focussed on ceasefires and political dialogue, it effectively institutionalised a division of the country into spheres of influence, enabling regional powers to stabilise frontlines and manage their interests without resolving the core conflict.

50 (Turkey's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2025)

51 See section on Syrian National Army in the chapter: Introducing the disruptors.

52 (Crisis Group, 2022)

53 (Hobhouse, 2025)

54 (Turkey's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2024)

55 (Financial Times, 2025)

56 (Azhari and Mills, 2025)

57 (Reuters, 2025b)

58 (Azhari, 2025)

59 (Al Monitor, 2025a)

60 (BBC News, 2025a)

61 Azhari, T. (2025). Syria gets new cash shipment from Russia in sign of warming ties. Reuters. https://www.reuters.com/world/syria-gets-new-cash-shipment-russia-sign-warming-ties-2025-03-06/

62 (Morris and Zakaria, 2025a)

63 ('Russia, Seeking to Keep Bases in Syria, Says It Held 'frank' Talks with New Leader', 2025)

64 (Jordan Times, 2025)

65 (Hof, 1998; Ratka and Rimmel, 2025)

66 (China in the UN, 2025)

67 (Rumley and Zelin, 2025)

68 (Reuters, 2025c; Ward et al., 2025)

69 (OPCW, 2025)

70 (U.S. Department of the Treasury, 2025)

71 (Ward et al., 2025)

72 (Azhari & Al-Khalidi, 2025)

73 (BBC News, 2025b)

74 The flag of Kurdistan (Kurdish: ئاڵای کوردستان, Alaya Kurdistanê) was first created in 1920 by the Society for the Rise of Kurdistan. Over time, different versions of the flag have been used by various Kurdish entities, including the Republic of Ararat, the Republic of Mahabad, and, most recently, the Kurdistan Region, which officially adopted it in 1992. (Danilovič & Owtram, 2016)

75 This variation stems from Syria's lack of reliable census data especially after the 1962 citizenship purge in al-Hasakah. This means exact numbers are difficult to verify. Numbers used in this report stem from (Philip Loft, and Claire Mills, 2025) (Gunter, 2014).

76 (Özoğlu, 2004a)

77 (Özoğlu, 2004b)

78 (Eppel, 2016; McDowall, 2013)

79 (UN OHCHR, n.d.)

80 (Gunter, 2014)

81 For other autoritative scholarship on Syrian Kurdish Politics, please see (Allsopp and Wilgenburg, 2019; Anna Borshchevskaya, 2020; Crisis Group, 2014; Galbraith, 2006; Lawrence, 2009, 2009; Library of Congress, n.d.; Marcus, 2009; McDowall, 2013; Power, 2005; Tejel, 2011).

82 This report uses transliterations from both Kurdish, Assyrian and Arabic. Kurdish terms, especially those related to political organisations, are rendered using the Latin-based Bedirkhan alphabet, which remains widely used among Kurmanjî speakers. Where possible, Kurdish place names are used in line with local usage, as many towns and villages in Kurdish-majority areas continue to be referred to by their original names despite Arabisation policies. Arabic terms and names follow standard transliteration conventions or appear in their most commonly recognised form. In both cases, the aim is to preserve local usage and facilitate reader understanding, rather than enforce a single linguistic standard.

83 Given the contested nature of place names in Syria, this study uses locally used minority-language names alongside its Arabic name where applicable. This approach seeks to balance sensitivity to historic, local identities and toponyms with the need for clarity and consistency for a broader audience.

84 Original Kurdish name: Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê. An insurgent Kurdish nationalist group in Turkey, was co-founded in 1978 by Abdullah Öcalan, who remains its leader while serving a life prison sentence in Turkey since 1999. It claims to seek cultural and political rights for Kurds in Turkey, a change from its earlier goal of an independent state. Turkish policies denied Kurds, estimated at 15 to 20% of the country's population, basic language and legal rights, fuelling an insurgency that began in 1984. At least 30,000 have died on both sides of the conflict.

85 (Bradley and Parkinson, 2015)

86 In February 2025, Abdullah Öcalan, the imprisoned leader of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), called for the group to disarm and dissolve, aiming to end the decades-long conflict with Turkey. Responding to his appeal, the PKK declared an immediate ceasefire on 1 March 2025. This initiative has opened avenues for renewed peace negotiations between the Turkish government and Kurdish representatives, though challenges remain in addressing long-standing political and cultural issues.

87 (Dinc, 2020)

88 (Media Center (Asayiş), 2025)

89 (Wimmer, 2024)

90 (Boyle Espinosa, and Ronan, 2023; Holmes, 2024; Schmidinger and Schiffmann, 2018)

91 In Kurmanjî: Yekîneyên Parastina Gel.

92 (Deutsche Welle, 2019; Just Security et al., 2023)

93 Due to their lack of recognition as Syrian citizens, Kurds are excluded from the official national census. Population estimates are instead derived from local censuses conducted by the autonomous Kurdish administration.

94 (Congressional Research Service, 2025)

95 (Aldoughli, 2025; International Crisis Group, 2025; Menmy, 2025a)

96 (Congressional Research Service, 2025)

97 (Allsopp, 2015; Badinjki, 1994; Khalidi, 1984; Kreyenbroek and Sperl, 2005; Moshe Ma'oz, 1972; Suçin, 2024; Zisser, 2006)

98 More on these camps on page 31.

99 (Abdulrahim et al., 2025; France 24, 2025a; RUDAW, 2025)

100 (Azhari et al., 2025)

101 (Middle East Eye, 2025; Reuters, 2025d)

102 (Everett, 2019)

103 (Task and Purpose, 2019)

104 (Levy, 2025)

105 (Anna Borshchevskaya, 2020)

106 (EBSCO, 2025)

107 (Menmy, 2025b)

108 (ANF News, n.d.; BBC News Türkçe, 2025; Bianet, 2025; Evrensel, 2025; Haber Sol, 2025; Kısa Dalga, 2025)

109 (North Press Agency, 2025)

110 (Hacaoglu, 2025)

111 The Druze avoid religious images but use five symbolic colors (green, red, yellow, blue, and white) known as the "Five Limits" (دودح سمخ, khams ḥudūd), first listed by Ismail al-Tamimi (d. 1030) in The Epistle of the Candle. These colors are typically shown either as vertical stripes, like a flag, or arranged in a five-pointed star. The stripes are said to represent layers of existence in Neoplatonic thought, while the star reflects the golden ratio, symbolizing balance and moderation. (Stewart, 2009)

112 Reliable English-language sources on the emergence and evolution of newer Druze armed actors remain scarce, leaving significant gaps in the literature. Much of what is known derives from local reporting, diaspora commentary or sporadic accounts filtered through broader analyses of the southern communities.

113 (WSJ, 2025)

114 For qualitative data and interviews with Druze actors, see (Al-Tamimi, 2025a).

115 (Al-Hajj, 2021)

116 (Al-Tamimi, 2025b)

117 (Al Nofal, 2023)

118 (AFP, 2025a)

119 (The New Arab, 2025)

120 For an in-depth examination, see (Al-Tamimi, 2025b).

121 A growing body of scholarly literature has examined the Islamic State's trajectory, from its origins in the Iraqi insurgency to its rise as a transnational actor during the Syrian conflict. Hassan Hassan and Michael Weiss provide a detailed account of IS's internal organisation and strategic logic in ISIS: Inside the Army of Terror (Weiss and Hassan, 2016). Fawaz Gerges places the group within the broader historical context of jihadist movements in ISIS: A History (Gerges, 2017). Charles Lister offers a comprehensive analysis of IS's role in Syria's civil war and its rivalry with other armed factions in The Syrian Jihad (Lister, 2017).

122 (Zelin, 2023a)

123 (Gritten, 2025)

124 (France 24, 2025d; Zelin, 2025f)

125 (U.S. Central Command, 2024)

126 The Soufan Center highlighted the tactical sophistication of the latest attacks (Tejeda, 2024), while the Inspector General for Operation Inherent Resolve said there was no advancement in the tactical sophistication (US Congress, 2025).

127 (Margolin, 2025)

128 (Reuters, 2025a)

129 (Al Arabiya, 2025; AP News, 2025)

130 (U.S. Central Command, 2025)

131 (Department of Treasury, 2024; U.S. Congress, 2025)

132 (Voice of America, 2022)

133 (Kurdistan24, 2019; Security Council Report, 2023; Shatz, 2018)

134 (Davis, 2024)

135 (Al Jazeera, 2025; France 24, 2025b, 2025c)

136 (Knights, 2025)

137 (Knights, 2025; Krotoff, 2025)

138 (European Council, 2025)

139 (Amnesty International, 2025; Human Rights Watch, 2025b)

140 (United Nations Security Council UNSC, 2025)

141 (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, 2025)

142 (Zelin, 2025b)

143 (Michael, 2025b, 2025a)

144 (Waters, 2025a)

145 (European Council, 2025)

146 For a closer look at the militia networks utilised by Assad throughout the conflict, see (Lister & Nelson, 2017). This reference illustrates the ecosystem of violent actors sustained by over a decade of war, an enduring security challenge no matter their ideological orientation. This underscores the central government's continued inability to assert a monopoly over the use of force.

147 (BBC News, 2018)

148 (Le Monde, 2024)

149 (Carter Center, 2020)

150 (Al-Tamimi, 2019; Hayek and Robertson, 2024)

151 (Human Rights Watch, 2025b)

152 (Deutsche Welle, 2020)

153 (McKernan, 2020)

154 (Tsurkov, 2022)

155 (Prasad and Stall, 2022)

156 (Human Rights Watch, 2025a)

157 (North Press Agency, 2023)

158 (Yüksel, 2019)

159 For authoritative scholarly examinations of Hezbollah and its ideological evolution, political integration and regional activities, please consult (Alagha, 2006; Berti, 2016; Blanford, 2011; Cambanis, 2010; Haddad, 2006; Jaber, 1997; Khatib et al., 2014; Lefèvre, 2014; Levitt, 2013; Mansour et al., 2025a; Norton, 2007; Sullivan, 2014)

160 (Norton, 2007)

161 (Azani, 2013; Daher, 2016; Mansour et al., 2025b; Raad, 2007; Wiegand, 2009)

162 (Smyth, 2015)

163 (Smyth, 2013, 2015)

164 (DeVore and Stähli, 2015; Zhaoying and Akbar, 2020)

165 (Zelin, 2025c)

166 (Knights, Michael, 2024)

167 (Beeri, 2025)

168 (Tamimi, 2025; Zelin, 2025g)

169 (Eddé, 2025)

170 For in-depth analysis based on curated local sources, please consult (Tamimi, 2025; Zelin, 2025g).

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