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Examining the 'New Syria'

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Marveling at the rapid pace of change in Syria in December 2024 and rejoicing with caution at the newly won freedom of the Syrian people, the world held its breath to see what came next. However, in the West, holidays and new terrorist attacks committed on U.S. soil by suspected Islamic State-affiliated actors left little news coverage beyond specialty international affairs and conflict outlets regarding how events in Syria are unfolding. This is no surprise, as Americans often tend to forget about headline-grabbing events once they appear to have calmed.

That is not only a common occurrence with the public but also with policymakers and others as they continue to monitor the next possible threat to global stability. As I described in a [July 2023](#) article on the Islamic State in the Sahel, in military parlance, there is a concept called DDRR: Disarmament, Demobilization, Reintegration, and Reconciliation.^[i] This is what is supposed to happen at the end of a conflict (D₁) to ensure that those in rebellion lose their fighting tools; (D₂) their basing and ability to move as one; (R₁) learn new skills to be able to support their families by other than violent means; and (R₂) are held accountable for what they have done and can atone and reintegrate into society.

That is what is supposed to happen, but once the first two Ds are completed — usually by members of a legitimate military or the United Nations or some other broker — the work gets much more complicated, and the funding usually stops after the Ds since the conflict is considered over. This often causes conflict to

resurge, leaving experienced and hungry militants and disgruntled former leaders on the loose and in need of work.

After the 2003 invasion of Iraq, General Order No. 2 issued by the U.S.-led Coalition Provisional Authority initiated demobilization by disbanding the Iraqi Army (D₂) without disarming it (D₁). This order also dismissed the top several layers of medical and operational government leadership, including hospital administrators, doctors, nurses, engineers, plant managers, and others who had previously kept the government running and the power and water flowing. That development is now seen universally as an enormous error, which caused widespread disruption of basic services and installed questionable exiles and less-experienced or toadying public servants into key positions.

We still do not know what will happen on the Disarmament, Demobilization, Reintegration, and Reconciliation front in Syria after a little-known former al-Qaida-affiliated group called Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), or the “Organization for the Liberation of the Levant,^[ii] defeated Syrian government troops and took over the country with lightning speed in a week after the fall of Aleppo on Nov. 30, 2024. On Dec. 8, the Russian government announced it had accepted the asylum request of longtime Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. The 40-year Assad family’s grip on the country was suddenly over.

The rebel-turned-new-leader of Syria, once using the assumed name Abu Mohammad al-Julani, is now using his given name, Ahmed Hussein al-Sharaa. As has been widely reported, he was born in Riyadh, the capital of Saudi Arabia, and joined the opposition to U.S. coalition forces in Iraq in 2003 and was arrested and imprisoned with leaders who would later form the Islamic State in Syria. Not wanting the Islamic State to absorb his own group of fighters, al-Sharaa changed his affiliation to al-Qaida, later distancing himself from that group as well, claiming to forge a more “pragmatic” form of jihad.

Once his group had taken over Syria’s Idlib province, he had to learn not just to conquer but to govern and carefully managed his image as an enlightened Islamicist. He retained the military garb and leadership of a militant group until HTS took over most of Syria, resulting in Syrian troops abandoning their posts and Assad’s flight.



Abu Mohammad al-Julani in 2016, then in 2023, now Ahmed al-Sharaa in December 2024

Almost immediately after claiming the leadership mantle in Damascus, he dropped his militant moniker and donned a Western suit and tie (shown in graphic),^[iii] the uniform of civilian President Assad. So, he has demilitarized himself, but his fighters are still guarding him and major Syrian borders and assets, including access to Russia’s military bases in Syria.

Al-Sharaa has since provided mixed signals about the path forward and his continued allegiance to jihadist principles by praising the Taliban leadership in Afghanistan, while stating repeatedly that he did not liberate Syria, but that it was the strength and resilience of the Syrian people, the opposite of the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan. He has also given verbal assurances that Syria’s ethnic and religious minorities would be protected under his regime.

In an early meeting with U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs Barbara Leaf, he gave a positive impression, which caused her to remove a \$10 million bounty from his head.^[iv] Al-Sharaa has said in a public statement, “We do not want any conflict whether with Israel or anyone else and we will not let Syria be used as a launchpad for attacks. The Syrian people need a break, and the strikes must end, and Israel has to pull back to its previous positions.”^[v] This refers to Israel “temporarily” moving its border with Syria in the Golan Heights about 150 miles into Syrian territory, in violation of the 1974 agreement (shown on map).^[vi]



Israeli expansion into Syria, December 2024

In the meantime, the U.S. and Israel have been systematically destroying military stockpiles, bases, and anti-aircraft systems across Syria to ensure the new government cannot wage war on citizens or neighbors. The U.S. has also been conducting surgical drone strikes against senior Islamic State groups still in Syria. Russia has been busily transferring military material from its bases in Syria to an enlarging base in northern Libya to expand its operations in Africa under the new Russian Africa Corps, which is now directly under defense ministry control, succeeding the Wagner mercenary group in Africa. Syria's al-Sharaa had not definitively announced whether Russia will retain its bases in Syria.

With Russia's complicity in keeping the Assad regime in power glaringly apparent to Syrian civilians, there are likely quiet negotiations to allow Russia to retain its bases but not interfere with the new government. Reports surfaced on Jan. 2, 2025 that Assad had been poisoned in Moscow and was recovering. As of this writing, these are unconfirmed,^[vii] but the complete removal of Assad could be on the new Syrian regime's list of demands. Assad also reportedly left for Russia with access to at least \$1 billion in assets, a portion of which Russia is likely to demand for the cost of moving its operations to Libya and other claimable losses in Syria.

Assad's political prisons were opened, and thousands of families and loved ones are reuniting after years and even decades of separation, starvation, and torture. The United Nations High Commission for Refugees reported on Dec. 23 that, since 2011, more than 14 million Syrians have fled their homes with roughly half of them internally displaced in Syria. About 70% of the population needs humanitarian assistance and 90% live below the poverty line. Approximately 5.5 million Syrian refugees live in the five countries neighboring Syria – Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, and Egypt. Germany is the largest non-neighboring host country with more than 850,000 Syrian refugees.^[viii] There are an additional 280,000 Syrians with refugee status living in the U.S. since 2015.^[ix] All of these people are now considering whether and how to return home.

Syria has been devastated by 14 years of war with parts of many of the world's longest-inhabited cities destroyed. Assad did little to rebuild, instead blaming rebels for the destruction while amassing his immense fortune. There will need to be an intense reconstruction period to restore housing, water, sanitation, electrical power, education, and health care services. Those fighting on both sides of the civil war will need to learn new trades or be otherwise reintegrated (R₁) into society and whatever economy can be reestablished after Assad's pillaging and stagnation.

It will be up to the Syrian people to decide whether the current ruling party will continue in that role. Al-Sharaa has declared a "New Syria" and said there will need to be a new constitution and at least four years of stabilization efforts before holding national elections. Such a declaration concerns democracy advocates, but it is not unprecedented. In Iraq, the U.S. rushed the drafting of a new constitution and held elections, which contributed directly to the civil war and continued violence.

In my view, four years is not a long time to complete all the tasks needed to get the population back on its feet and determine who can be reintegrated and reconciled (R₂) into society and who should be punished for war crimes. It is encouraging that no immediate statements on repercussions have been made by the new regime, but any efforts at "truth and reconciliation" will need to be supported by external honest brokers, such as the United Nations or the Arab League, to ensure it is reconciliation, not retaliation, that is intended.

References

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