



Media and Politics:

The New Balance of Power in Syria



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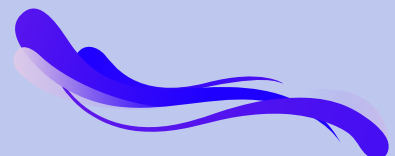
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Introduction: A hollow regime with weakened allies

Towards the end, everything went very quickly, as it seemingly often does when a regime that has been in place for many decades is toppled. Many were surprised when the rebel forces took Aleppo with only a little resistance.[1] Aleppo is special, many of the rebels originated from the city, people argued. When Hama and, a few days later, Homs were taken,[2] the regime said it was concentrating its forces in Damascus. When rebel forces came close to the capital, however, videos of soldiers removing their uniforms appeared online.[3] These soldiers had become more afraid of the rebels than even of Assad's notorious prisons. The emperor was naked.

But how did we get there, and why did things turn so quickly?

The regime had been hollow for a long time. Many of the soldiers were conscripts who did not support Assad in the first place. Those who were employed in the army often received only a few dollars per month,[4] a salary that even by Syrian standards would be considered meager or worse. Assad was kept in power mostly by Hezbollah and Iranian forces on the ground while Russia provided air support. Large parts of the population were living in poverty while billions of dollars that were made by drug production and trafficking went to a few of Assad's relatives or his wealthy companions.[5] Rebel forces, however, had millions of dollars of income from cross-border fees alone each month, which they used to pay their fighters.[6] In 2019, the rebel groups suffered painful losses and it became clear that a unified leadership and strategy were needed in order to be successful. Abu Mohammed Al-Golani consolidated power and a disparate group of rebels slowly became an organized fighting force.[7] The rebels, now under the name of HTS, created specialized units and started producing their own weaponry, vehicles, ammunition and diverse types of drones. A common strategy was developed, forces were training for years, and the final offensive was in preparation for about one year, including communication with other groups from the south.[8]

[1] Jason Burke. Why did Syrian militants HTS seize Aleppo – and how did they do it so quickly? 02 December 2024. The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/dec/02/why-did-syrian-militants-hts-seize-aleppo-and-how-did-they-do-it-so-quickly>

[2] Sebastian Usher. Who are the rebels in Syria? 08 December 2024. BBC. <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/ce313jn453zo>

[3] Al Jazeera. (2024). Facebook. <https://www.facebook.com/aljazeerachannel/videos/605607028496781/>

[4] New Arab. (2024). Syrian regime increases army salaries as rebels call on Alawis to defect. <https://www.newarab.com/news/assad-raises-army-salaries-rebels-call-alawis-defect>

[5] Hesham Alghannam. Border Traffic: How Syria Uses Captagon to Gain Leverage Over Saudi Arabia. 09 July 2024. Carnegie Endowment. <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/07/border-traffic-how-syria-uses-captagon-to-gain-leverage-over-saudi-arabia?lang=en>

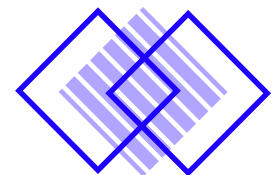
[6] Lauren Frayer. Who's been funding the HTS rebels now in control of Syria? Updated 20 December 2024. NPR. <https://www.npr.org/2024/12/19/nx-s1-5232809/syria-hts-funding>

[7] Archie Bland. Assault on Aleppo: who are the Syrian rebels HTS and why are they advancing? 02 December 2024. The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/dec/02/who-are-syrian-rebels-hayat-tahrir-al-sham-hts-aleppo>

[8] William Christou. Syrian rebels reveal year-long plot that brought down Assad regime. 13 December 2024. The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/dec/13/syrian-rebels-reveal-year-long-plot-that-brought-down-assad-regime>

Things began falling into place when the rebels started their offensive. Bashar al-Assad's regime was despised by many due to widespread corruption, years of civil war, and the murder and torture of hundreds of thousands of its own citizens. The perfect opportunity came while Russia was busy in Ukraine and Hezbollah and Iranian forces in Syria were significantly weakened after years of bombardment by Israel.

Morale among Assad's allies seemed to be low, probably aggravated by the president's refusal to use air defenses against Israeli aircraft to protect Hezbollah and Iranian forces, or to allow Hezbollah to use Syrian territory for attacks against Israel. Many Hezbollah fighters returned to Lebanon when the war with Israel started.[9] For those who remained in Syria, the ceasefire in Lebanon provided them an opportunity to withdraw to Lebanon and help with rebuilding their homes or Hezbollah's command structure. While Iran seemed willing to help, it was apparently not able to provide any assistance on short notice. Two hundred men from Iraq were deployed to Syria,[10] clearly not enough for the size of the country or the task at hand (Syria is about half the size of Germany). Without appropriate ground forces, Russian air support was of limited value only.



[9] Syrian Observer. (2024). Hezbollah withdraws Forces from Syria to strengthen Its Front in Lebanon amid rising Tensions. <https://syrianobserver.com/foreign-actors/hezbollah-withdraws-elite-forces-from-syria-to-strengthen-its-front-in-lebanon-amid-rising-tensions.html>

[10] DW. (2024). Syria: Iraqi militias provide Assad support. <https://www.dw.com/en/syria-iraqi-militias-provide-assad-support/a-70936711>

Outside forces and HTS' rise to power

Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) has operated under Turkish protection, so connections to Turkey were crucial for financing and the supply of weapons and fighters, a detailed report published on the Middle East Forum states.[11] A report from the Council on Foreign relations highlights Turkish support for HTS with respect to arms and drones.[12] Israel decimated Iranian and Hezbollah forces while the US spearheaded the implementation of sanctions, crippling the regime, and supported the Kurdish militias in the north-east of Syria, an area which hosts the country's most important resources, cutting off a vital source of revenue for Assad's regime.

Accordingly, all of them emphasized their role in the toppling of Bashar al-Assad, and Turkey's president Erdogan even urged the rebels on during their offensive, saying, "So far Idlib, Hama, and Homs, and of course the objective, Damascus: the advance of the opponents continues. We hope this advance continues without incident".[13] Benjamin Netanyahu said, "the collapse of the Syrian regime is a direct result of the severe blows with which we have struck Hamas, Hezbollah, and Iran." [14] And former US president Joe Biden emphasized the role of US sanctions against Syria, its troops in Syria, and US support in the weakening of Russia, Iran and Hezbollah, adding that, "our approach has shifted the balance of power in the Middle East." [15]

While it is unclear whether there was any direct cooperation (interests differ substantially among those countries), it would be naive to assume there was no coordination at some level, given that TIME magazine called Biden, "America's Most Pro-Israel President Ever" in a headline [16] and due to the fact that the US and Turkey are NATO allies. While Turkey has dramatically reduced its share of weapons imports from the US, [17] it still relies heavily on the US and its allies for critical components such as software and microchips. [18] Further, Turkey needs the US for any meaningful progress it wants to make with respect to Kurdish control of the northeast of Syria.

It is plausible that none of these outside actors considered its impact sufficient for an immediate regime change; their combined actions, however, yielded exactly that result.

[11] Abdullah Bozkurt. New Syrian Spy Chief Has Long History with Turkish Intelligence Agency. 02 January 2025. Middle East Forum. <https://www.meforum.org/mef-online/new-syrian-spy-chief-has-long-history-with-turkish-intelligence-agency>

[12] Henri J. Barkey. (2024). What Role Is Turkey Playing in Syria's Civil War? Council on Foreign Relations. <https://www.cfr.org/expert-brief/what-role-turkey-playing-syrias-civil-war>

[13] Turkish Minute. (2024). Erdogan says he hopes rebel advance in Syria continues 'without incident'. <https://www.turkishminute.com/2024/12/06/erdogan-said-hope-rebel-advance-in-syria-continue-without-incident/>

[14] Mick Krever. Israel strikes Syria 480 times and seizes territory as Netanyahu pledges to change face of the Middle East. Updated 11 December 2024. CNN. <https://edition.cnn.com/2024/12/10/middleeast/israel-syria-assad-strikes-intl/index.html>

[15] C-SPAN. (2024). Pres. Biden on the Collapse of Syrian Pres. Assad's Backers. <https://www.c-span.org/clip/white-house-event/pres-biden-on-the-collapse-of-syrian-pres-assads-backers/5145226>

[16] Doug Rossinow. Joe Biden Is Turning Out to Be America's Most Pro-Israel President Ever. 29 November 2023. TIME. <https://time.com/6340511/biden-israel-history/>

[17] SIPRI. (2025). Arms Transfers. <https://armstransfers.sipri.org/ArmsTransfer/ImportExport>

[18] Jens Bastian. (2024). Turkey: An Emerging Global Arms Exporter. Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik. https://www.swp-berlin.org/publications/products/comments/2024C06_Turkey_ArmsExporter.pdf

Pragmatism or pretense?

To the victor go the spoils – many Syrians who were hoping for a secular, liberal, and democratic Syria have been regularly confronted with some version of this proverb throughout these last weeks. This attitude has also blurred the lines of whether HTS had liberated or taken over the country. Simultaneously there are both encouraging and discouraging signs. During the takeover, HTS fighters did not act with the same zeal and brutality as ISIL did, a fear that many non-Sunni citizens harbored, and for good reason.[19]

Abu Mohammed al-Golani, dropping his nom de guerre and now using his birth name, Ahmed al-Sharaa, gave interviews to CNN and BBC in which he assured religious minorities that they were safe and that the Taliban ruled “a tribal society. Syria is entirely different”. [20] The people of Syria have lived together for thousands of years, he continued. [21] The general message appears to be that he does not intend to interfere with the daily lives of the citizenry. Many questions such as women wearing a hijab or the consumption of alcohol will not be answered by him, but by the lawyers drafting the constitution. [22] Although there has been some skepticism, politicians and journalists in the West generally showed appreciation of his remarks. “Pragmatic” was a term used regularly to describe his attitude. [23] [24] [25] Tepid optimism and a slew of visits by delegations from across the world ensued shortly thereafter.

When rebel forces arrived in Damascus and other cities, however, many of the fighters were shocked by the liberties that people, especially women, enjoyed. [26] Some asked women to drop their cigarettes, others were asked why they were not wearing a hijab, or why they were walking in the streets with a man who is neither their husband nor a relative. Buses have been stopped at random checkpoints where men and women were ordered not to sit next to each other - even if they were from the same family. [27] [28] Hardline movements have also gained traction, with women distributing face-covering veils (niqabs) to passersby in various Syrian cities. [29] [30]

[19] Ido Vock, Lina Shaikhouni. Inside Aleppo: Family reunions, nervousness at rebel rule and fear of war. 03 December 2024. BBC. <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cvgrezn1929o>

[20] Jeremy Bowen. Syria's new ruler is politically astute - but can he keep his promises? 19 December 2024. BBC. <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cqx8zy8r8jro>

[21] Jeremy Bowen. (2024). Syria's new ruler..., cit.

[22] Jeremy Bowen. (2024). Syria's new ruler..., cit.

[23] Jennifer Hansler, Alex Marquardt, Michael Conte. US removes long-standing bounty on Syrian rebel leader. Updated 20 December 2024. CNN. <https://edition.cnn.com/2024/12/20/politics/us-delegation-meets-syrian-rebel-leader/index.html>

[24] Türkiye Today. (2024). Who's who? The self-rebranding of Jolani, leader of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham.

<https://www.turkiyetoday.com/region/whos-who-the-self-rebranding-of-jolani-leader-of-hayat-tahrir-al-sham-89600/>

[25] Shachar Kleiman. The enigma of al-Julani. 03 January 2025. JNS. <https://www.jns.org/the-enigma-of-al-julani/>

[26] امرأة مسيحية تروي التعامل. (2024). Brother Bashar's broadcasts, humanitarian topics). بنوث الأخ بشار مواضيع إنسانية واجتماعية وجارات (A Christian recounts the racist treatment she was subjected to by the so-called „Free Revolutionaries“ because she did not wear hijab). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O3qt8V9X4q8>

[27] Syrian Observatory for Human Rights. (2025). لصاقات ورقية في وسائل النقل بحمص تثير الجدل حول فصل الركاب حسب الجنس. (Paper stickers on public transport in Homs spark controversy over separating passengers by "gender"). <https://tinyurl.com/32a3377b>.

[28] Yusuf Barghouth. (2025). فصل النساء عن الرجال في باصات دمشق. (Separating women and men in Damascus' buses). <https://tinyurl.com/yj62kxh8>.

[29] حملة دعوية للباس الشرعي في دمشق. (2025). حملة دعوية للباس الشرعي في دمشق. (A campaign to promote Islamic dresscode in Damascus). <https://tinyurl.com/2s32vahp>.

[30] National Center for Documentation of Violations in Syria. (2025). Internal Transport buses in Syria with awareness leaflets about the Islamic hijab. <https://www.facebook.com/reel/9544028425641996>

Armed members of HTS, acting on their own initiative, entered bars and cafés in Damascus and Latakia to preach extremist religious doctrines.[31] A few shops selling alcohol were attacked,[32] people were insulted without any apparent reason, two churches were vandalized[33] and last December, a Christmas tree was burned.[34] In Aleppo and Damascus, there have been multiple incidents where civilians or unidentified armed men, likely feeling emboldened by the new government, have approached Christians, urging them to convert to Islam and asking Christian women to wear a hijab. In one case in Damascus, a confrontation escalated into a physical altercation between Christian youth and these religious enforcers.[35]

The leadership of HTS reacted, saying that these were isolated incidents, that the perpetrators would be punished, and they even set up a hotline for people to complain about any misbehavior. But when the rebel forces, now responsible for the security of the country, went to an Allawi area to make arrests, some of them seemed eager to take revenge. They were insulting people, kicking them, and forcing them to imitate animal sounds.[36] During the arrests, some people (including innocent bystanders) were killed.[37] As a result, Allawi people started to protest and their anger only increased when it became public that an important Allawi tomb had been burned.[38]

[31] Rida Albasha. (2025). (A video circulating from a café in Latakia). <https://www.facebook.com/100092635234179/videos/588117097258241>

[32] World Israel News. (2024). WATCH: Syrian opposition forces chanting Allahu Akbar smash duty-free liquor bottles at Aleppo Airport. <https://worldisraelnews.com/watch-syrian-opposition-forces-chanting-allahu-akbar-smash-duty-free-liquor-bottles-at-aleppo-airport/>

[33] Zeina Antonios. Several Christian places of worship vandalized in Syria. 21 December 2024. L'Orient Today. <https://today.lorientlejour.com/article/1440729/several-christian-places-of-worship-vandalized-in-syria.html>

[34] Lina Sinjab, Jacqueline Howard. Protests in Syria over Christmas tree burning. 24 December 2024. BBC. <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cx27yxly0deo>

[35] Nora Al Jundy. بعد منشورات القصاص.. مسيحيون في دمشق "انتبهوا من هؤلاء" (After Al-Qassaa's posters, Christians in Damascus: "Beware of these people"). 16 January 2025. Al Arabiya. <https://ara.tv/36ded>

[36] Weltspiegel. (2025). ARD. <https://www.ardmediathek.de/video/weltspiegel/weltspiegel-vom-2-februar-2025-aus-syrien/das-erste/Y3jpZDovL2Rhc2Vyc3RlLmRlL3dlbHRzcGlZ2VsLzIwMjUtMDItMDJfMTgtMzAtTUVa>

[37] Ata Farhat. (2025). (What is happening to the Alawites in Syria...A report reveals the facts!!) 01 January 2025. i24 News. <https://www.i24news.tv/ar/%D8%A3%D8%AE%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%B1/middle-east/artc-afba39c2>

[38] Alhadath. (2024). المرصد يكشف تفاصيل فيديو حريق المقام الديني في حلب. (The Observatory reveals details of the video of the fire at the religious shrine in Aleppo). <https://youtu.be/tuPYAVXZljo?si=Qjbmxcn-NjcgT7qU>

Leadership positions and the security apparatus

In the meantime, important positions were filled with people loyal to al-Sharaa, most of whom were Salafi men from Idlib. His brother was assigned the Ministry of Health,[39] one of his cousins, who is married to his wife's sister, became the governor of Damascus,[40] and the General Intelligence Directorate was handed to Anas Khattab,[41] a former jihadist who is on the UN terrorism list[42] and who previously served as the director of the notorious "Al-Aqab" prison in Idlib.[43]

Conservative views immediately permeated the discourse. Ubaida Al-Arnaout, the official spokesperson for the Political Administration, said that women are "incapable biologically" of taking certain leadership roles.[44] These remarks sparked a scandal on social media, prompting al-Sharaa to appoint a woman, Aisha al-Dibs, as the head of the Women's Office. Her responsibilities remain unclear, and while she describes herself as an activist in women's development, she considers Islamic Sharia law the foundation of any model, arguing that women are mostly responsible for their families and husbands,[45] and her political views became obvious very quickly. In an interview on Turkey's TRT channel she questioned why Syria would adopt a civilian or secular model; and when asked about the autonomy of organizations advocating for women's rights, she answered, "If we agree that this support aligns with the model we are building, then welcome. I will not open the way for those who disagree with me." [46]

The "Khalid ibn al-Walid Brigades" (a part of the new Military Operations Administration) organized a military parade in Damascus' Abbasid Square, which coincided with "security campaigns" conducted by the Syrian Ministry of Interior in various cities and provinces. According to the organizers, the parade aimed to send a message to the Syrian people that the Operations Administration forces are an integral part of Syria's social fabric and they will spare no effort in establishing security and stability across all cities and provinces.

[39] DW (2025). German development minister in Syria to talk healthcare. <https://www.dw.com/en/german-development-minister-in-syria-to-talk-healthcare-aid/a-71297441>

[40] Katia Ibrahim. New Syria: Islamic emirate, civil state, or federal state? 11 January 2025. Al Mayadeen. <https://english.almayadeen.net/articles/features/new-syria--islamic-emirate--civil-state--or-federal-state>

[41] New Arab. (2024). Who is Syria's new intelligence chief, Anas Khattab? <https://www.newarab.com/news/who-syrias-new-intelligence-chief-anas-khattab>

[42] United Nations. (2014). UN sanctions list. https://main.un.org/securitycouncil/en/sanctions/1267/aq_sanctions_list/summaries/individual/anas-hasan-khattab

[43] Ahmed Obeid. سجن العقاب.. اخطر سجون جبهة النصرة في ادلب. (Al-Aqab prison is the most dangerous prison of Jabhat al-Nusra in Idlib). 21 April 2020. Syria Untold. <https://tinyurl.com/2m8jdamv>.

[44] New Arab. (2024). Syrian women protest HTS spokesman's comments, demand political inclusion and equal rights. <https://www.newarab.com/video/syrian-women-protest-hts-spokesmans-gendered-comments>

[45] Syrian Observer. (2024). Controversy after Aisha al-Dibs Statements on role of Syrian Women. <https://syrianobserver.com/syrian-actors/controversy-after-aisha-al-dibs-statements-on-role-of-syrian-women.html>

[46] Syrian Observer. (2025). Syrian Women between the Discourse of Empowerment and the Legacy of Marginalization: A Critical Analysis of Aisha al-Dibs Statements. <https://syrianobserver.com/syrian-actors/syrian-women-between-the-discourse-of-empowerment-and-the-legacy-of-marginalization-a-critical-analysis-of-aisha-al-dibs-statements.html>

During their parade, however, they were chanting Islamic slogans,[47] and many people of Damascus were frightened by the nature of the parade. Most importantly, after the army and police collapsed, the new rulers did not ask them to come back for duty; instead, they were replaced with HTS' forces.[48] The security apparatus was disbanded altogether,[49] with HTS forces taking over their responsibilities as well.

Employees are being arbitrarily dismissed under the pretext that their services are no longer needed, or that they were affiliated with the “Shabiha” – Assad’s thuggish supporters. As a result, thousands of families, both from civilian and military or security sectors, are now left without salaries. While the situation is not the same, it is reminiscent of Iraq after the US invasion in 2003. One of the biggest factors facilitating Iraq’s descent into chaos was the fact that hundreds of thousands of former soldiers were left with weapons, but without salaries. So far, only controlled protests have taken place,[50] but there are growing fears of a larger popular uprising.



[47] Euronews. (2024). إدارة العمليات تستعرض قوتها في دمشق. (In the first Military Parade since the Overthrow of Assad, the Military Operations Command displays its Strength in Damascus). <https://youtu.be/QdVwr4g9HF8?si=GC6bfYO1VKQ-VMb5>

[48] Sarah Dadouch. Syrian rebels to disband military wings and form army, leader says. 17 December 2024. Financial Times. <https://www.ft.com/content/1086b515-5021-4d28-9fd8-31995f577a70> Accessed via <https://archive.ph/kSkAu>

[49] CBC. (2024). Syrian rebel leader says he will dissolve regime forces, as Syrians return to work. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/world/syria-curfew-lifted-latest-1.7407268>

[50] Syrian Observatory for Human Rights. (2025). Protesting decision terminating contracts with 762 temporary workers. https://www.syriaahr.com/en/354953/?doing_wp_cron=1738937227.9629731178283691406250

Minorities, Sharia and executions

To appease the West and secure financial and political support, al-Golani makes promises of minority protection. In practice, however, the Minister of Education has altered school curricula, reinterpreting a Quranic phrase, “those who have incurred [God’s] wrath”, to explicitly refer to Jews and Christians, whereas it was previously interpreted as referring to disbelievers in general.[51] Furthermore, the theory of evolution has been removed from the curriculum, as hardline Islamists believe that God simply commands, “Be,” and things come into existence, rejecting the notion of natural development. The phrase “Defending the nation” has been replaced by “Defending Allah” and references to the gods worshipped in Syria before Islam, as well as images of their statues, were removed.[52]

Al-Golani now has his own “Shabiha”, who intimidate people, emboldened by their newfound power and victory in the war. They tell dissenters to either leave for Europe or return to their villages, an implicit insult suggesting that cities belong to Sunnis, while villages are for minorities. Even al-Sharaa’s more moderate supporters exhibit exclusionary tendencies, ridiculing those who speak of protection for minorities. They often outright deny the crimes being committed.[53] Young Alawi men, farmers and civilians with no history of involvement in the conflict, have been kidnapped or killed simply for being Alawites.[54] Anti-Alawi hate speech is rampant on social media. Even Alawi opposition figures, those who have long stood against Bashar al-Assad, now avoid discussing the repression their community faces in order to avoid being accused of being loyal to the former regime. Accordingly, there has been little reaction from minorities or even from moderate Sunni Muslims, as fear prevails. Thus, many horrific incidents like abductions of former Allawi soldiers are not widely reported and often find their way into western media only weeks after they have occurred.[55]

The Kurds, of course, have not forgotten the crimes perpetrated by Islamists, especially the mass murder, rape, and abduction of thousands of Yazidis by ISIL, many of whom were brought to Syria,[56] and how they were abandoned by Donald Trump.[57] Many Kurds are considered liberal and comparatively, women enjoy many liberties. Therefore, some are extremely worried by a government and military spearheaded by Islamists who, additionally, also cooperated with Turkey.

[51] Nadeen Ebrahim. Changes to Syria’s school curriculum spark online outrage. 02 January 2025. CNN.

<https://edition.cnn.com/2025/01/02/middleeast/changes-to-syrias-school-curriculum-spark-online-outrage/index.html>

[52] Sebastian Usher. New Syrian government’s school curriculum changes spark concern. 02 January 2025. BBC.

<https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c1ln12056ppo>

[53] Syriaahr. (2025). مدير المرصد السوري: لا صحة لما يقوله باسم ياخور ان الهيئة أو الإدارة المحلية تعتقل من يعارضها. (Director of the Syrian Observatory: There is no truth to what Bassem Yakhour says that the HTS or the local administration arrests those who oppose it).

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6Ls388ys6Gs>

[54] Syriaahr. (2025). المرصد السوري: إذا ما كان الشرع غير قادر على التحكم بمقاتليه هنا الكارثة. (The director of the #Syrian_Observatory: If Al-Shar’a is unable to control his fighters, then this is a disaster). https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Twj_J7NiIc

[55] Tagesschau. (2025). ARD. https://www.tagesschau.de/multimedia/sendung/tagesschau_20_uhr/ts-69232.html

[56] Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. (2016). “They came to destroy”: ISIS Crimes Against the Yazidis. https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/CoISyria/A_HRC_32_CRP.2_en.pdf

[57] Frida Ghitis. We need the real story of why Trump sold out the Kurds. Updated 14 October 2019. CNN.

<https://edition.cnn.com/2019/10/14/opinions/why-did-trump-abandon-kurds-after-call-with-erdogan-ghitis/index.html>

The individuals prosecuting (often Alawi) perpetrators of crimes include jihadists who have moved between various terrorist organizations, chief among them al-Golani himself. While al-Golani is granting amnesty to major criminals,[58] rank-and-file soldiers who were forced into military service are being prosecuted. And instead of fair trials, executions are carried out on the spot.[59]

Critics of al-Golani, his government, their extremist roots, or officials like Justice Minister Shadi al-Waisi are regularly accused of being regime loyalists. In verified videos that resurfaced recently, Al-Waisi, who was a low ranking Sharia judge in Idlib in 2015, can be seen overseeing the public execution of two women charged with prostitution.[60] The cycle of fear, suppression, and sectarian tension continues, but under a new banner. The new leadership aims to rule by Sharia in a country with religious and ethnic diversity. Even among Sunnis, there are different sects and perspectives, with many being moderates or secularists who will not accept the imposition of Sharia law. Al-Golani “says he has eschewed the jihadist violence of his youth, but there is no evidence that he has broken from a worldview that is anti-democratic”, two senior commentators observed in Foreign Policy.[61] That is why various factions are now seeking international protection, fearing that al-Golani and his government will turn Syria into a state resembling Afghanistan. Some Syrians, therefore, believe the West should withhold legitimacy from the current authorities until a constitution which guarantees the rights of all citizens is drafted.



[58] AlArabiya. (2024). جنرال الأسد طلال مخلوف يُجري تسوية ويسلم سلاحه. (In a settlement Assad's General Talal Makhlof surrenders his weapons). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5da485yeP6g>

[59] Al Mashhad. (2024). أوقف إعدام الضباط العلويين... تحذير خطير للجولاني من طائفة الأسد - المشهد تاغ. (Stop the execution of Alawite officers. A serious warning to al-Jolani from the Assad sect). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3D7twsieqv4>

[60] Alijani Ershad, Mellit Derre. From Sharia judge to minister: Syria's new justice minister tied to public executions. 08 January 2025. France24. <https://observers.france24.com/en/middle-east/20250108-from-sharia-judge-to-syrian-justice-minister-public-executions>

[61] Steven A. Cook, Sinan Ciddi. Erdogan Gets His 'Leader of the Muslim World' Moment. 09 December 2024. Foreign Policy. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/12/09/erdogan-turkey-syria-assad-muslim-world/> Accessed via <https://archive.ph/Qkzto>

HTS' media strategy and the changing media landscape in Syria

ISIL, which al-Golani was a member of before founding the al-Nusra Front (Jabhat al-Nusra) in 2011,[62] had a well organized media strategy, including its own media wing which published professional online magazines in many different languages. [63] While the mercilessness and zealous brutality depicted therein was likely a reason for support from radical Muslims around the world, it was also a reason for widespread resentment and probably ISIL's demise under heavy military pressure from a broad coalition of countries. The al-Nusra Front, on the other hand, had a very different media strategy. It regularly posted photos and videos depicting the group's social or civil services, like the distribution of food.[64] It can be assumed that al-Sharaa paid close attention to the impact the different strategies had on the population in Syria and abroad. Therefore, it should also be assumed that there is a strategy behind the new leadership's approach concerning Syrian media and that al-Sharaa chooses carefully which foreign news channels he is giving interviews to, and when.

Syrian media (TV, radio and newspapers) was under the full control of the regime for a long time and reported only what the leadership viewed as suitable, serving as Assad's main propaganda tool. Journalists reporting the reality on the ground were threatened with imprisonment, torture, and death.[65] Reporters Without Borders ranked Syria 179th out of 180 countries in the world on its 2024 Press Freedom Index.[66] When opposition forces reached Damascus, they took control of Syrian state television and announced "the liberation of the city of Damascus and the fall of the tyrant Bashar al-Assad" live on-air.

Afterwards, the program consisted of a full screen banner announcing the "victory of the great Syrian revolution" for some time,[67] followed for more than one day by religious songs only, but without any instruments or singing, since music is forbidden under a strict interpretation of Islam. Apparently, this occurred either under instruction by the opposition forces or as an attempt to appease them.[68]

[62] Hassan Abu Haniyeh. Who's who in the Nusra Front? 15 December 2014. New Arab. <https://www.newarab.com/analysis/whos-who-nusra-front>

[63] The Independent. (2016). Isis' new magazine Rumiyah shows the terror group is 'struggling to adjust to losses'. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/isis-propaganda-terror-group-losses-syria-iraq-a7228286.html>

[64] Faisal Irshaid. How Isis is spreading its message online. 19 June 2014. BBC. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-27912569>

[65] Reporters Without Borders. (2025). Syria. <https://rsf.org/en/country/syria>

[66] Reporters Without Borders. (2025). World Press Freedom Index 2024. <https://rsf.org/en/index>

[67] France24. (2024). No longer Assad's mouthpiece, Syrian media face uncertainty. <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20241220-no-longer-assad-s-mouthpiece-syrian-media-face-uncertainty>

[68] Odai Mansour. التلفزيون السوري يبث أناشيد دينية إسلامية فقط ما أثار القلق حيال تفهم المعارضة لنسيج المجتمع السوري. (Syrian TV broadcasts only Islamic religious songs, which raises concerns about the opposition's understanding of the fabric of Syrian society). 12 December 2024. MCD. <https://tinyurl.com/3wfwcmz9>.

After protests and ridicule, state TV and radio went off-air altogether and still remain offline.[69] France24 reported that some private newspapers have been allowed to continue operations, others were ordered to, and at least one radio station was ordered to cease operations. These orders were given by the Ministry of Information or by people affiliated with HTS,[70] but without apparent reason or an explanation for the different decisions.

For those publishing human rights violations, the situation has become difficult, too. Verify-Sy, a fact-checking website, had been an invaluable tool for journalists and researchers for many years, being considered highly credible and unbiased. After al-Golani took power, it did not take long until the website started defending the new leadership, even going so far as to argue that the flag used by the Islamic state had already been in use before, therefore waving this flag would not show any ideological affiliation to radical Islamism.[71] Now, people are making fun of their posts and how they are twisting the news.[72] The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR), on the other hand, which has been calling out Assad's crimes for more than ten years, is now publishing reports about the crimes being committed recently by HTS and its supporters or affiliates, and it is being attacked ferociously. Thousands of people are complaining about it, attacking the website and its owner in social media posts and accusing them of spreading lies or misinformation.[73] Many are urging them to stop publishing any information they consider to be causing division among ethnic or religious groups.

The Syrian state news agency, SANA, went silent for more than 24 hours on December 8, 2024, when opposition forces approached Damascus. The following day, it changed its cover picture on Telegram, matching the flag of the Syrian revolution (depicting three stars instead of two). Contrary to state TV and radio, it then resumed operations and is currently active, but its importance has decreased significantly. During Assad's reign, SANA functioned as a central government mouthpiece.[74] The new leadership, however, is not using it as a communications tool but as an appraisal apparatus of secondary importance. To this day, no official channel of communication has been established. The leadership is relying on informal channels instead, giving them the opportunity to test the reaction to any new rules they want to implement and allowing for plausible deniability in case there is widespread opposition or protest.

The first question BBC's Jeremy Bowen asked when meeting al-Sharaa for an interview about ten days after the fall of Assad was the following: "We are meeting in Assad's old palace, does that mean that you are going to be the new president?" Al-Sharaa replied that it was premature at that point to answer the question of the presidency. Before that, Syria would have to go through three stages. Firstly, the receipt of the government by the new authorities, which at that stage, had already happened. Secondly, a call for an inclusive national conference for all Syrians to vote on the dissolution of the constitution and parliament, and the formation of an advisory council to fill this constitutional and parliamentary vacuum. Finally, there was a need for infrastructure for elections, such as a comprehensive census, the re-opening of embassies in other countries, and contacting the millions of Syrians in exile.

[69] Tareq Ali. إعلام الوجه الواحد في سوريا... إغلاق ومصادرات وحل. (One-sided media in Syria: Shutdowns, seizures and closures). 04 February 2025. Independent Arabia. <https://tinyurl.com/j8yw6m9y>.

[70] France24. (2024). No longer Assad's mouthpiece..., cit.

[71] Verify-Sy. (2025). via Facebook <https://www.facebook.com/share/p/1MFZnh7bd8/>

[72] Linn Da. (2025). via Facebook <https://tinyurl.com/4t7pzrv9>.

[73] Syrian Observatory for Human Rights. (2025). via Facebook. https://www.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=122111681822710843&id=61571325303929&_rdr

[74] France24. (2024). No longer Assad's mouthpiece..., cit.

When asked about elections, he answered that the people have a right to choose who represents them in the People's Assembly or the House of Representatives.[75] And while the Islamic flags that were commonplace around al-Golani could not be seen in interviews with al-Sharaa, those who listened closely also understood what he did not mention during his first interviews: democracy, presidential elections, or the participation of Syrians in exile, some of whom had been preparing a constitution for a democratic, multi-ethnic, and multi-religious Syria for many years.[76] Al-Sharaa's first interviews were given to western news outlets CNN and BBC, but after the initial wave of media attention subsided, al-Sharaa switched to giving an interview to an Arabic TV channel, Saudi state controlled al-Arabiya, to announce that the drafting of the constitution would take three years and that elections would not be held for four years. [77]

In December 2024, it was announced that the current constitution would be suspended for a transitional period of three months.[78] At the end of January 2025, in a statement published on Telegram by the Military Operations Command announcing the victory of the Syrian revolution, the cancellation of Syria's constitution and the dissolution of the former regime's parliament was proclaimed,[79] without any vote by a national conference and without formation of an advisory council that could address the most urgent legal issues, as promised earlier. Until today, it is unclear which law now governs the country. Under Assad's regime, Syrians' constitutional rights were severely violated, but currently, Syrians do not even have constitutional rights.

SANA, the state news agency, later published photos of the conference announcing the victory of the revolution, showing all but one of the 13 portrayed speakers wearing military uniform,[80] all of whom were Sunni men. On the same occasion, Ahmed al-Sharaa was declared president and given the authority to form a legislative council by himself.[81] In his first address to the nation as president, al-Sharaa vowed to "pursue the criminals who shed Syrian blood and committed massacres and crimes".[82] Since HTS took power, however, at least 15 people have been murdered under torture.[83]

A month after Abu Mohammad al-Golani and HTS took control of the government, a popular phrase from a famous song by the Egyptian singer Umm Kulthum has been circulating among Syrians: "I hear your words and feel reassured, but I see your actions and I am bewildered."

[75] Abraham Education. (2024). Full BBC Interview of Syrian Leader Abu Mohammed Al-Jolani (Ahmed Al-Sharaa).

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SYhCjXSNUIY>

[76] United Nations Office of the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Syria. (2015). Constitutional Committee.

<https://specialenvoysyria.unmissions.org/constitutional-committee-0>

[77] France24. (2024). Syria's new leader says elections could take up to four years. <https://www.france24.com/en/middle-east/20241229-syria-s-new-leader-says-elections-could-take-up-to-four-years>

[78] Middle East Eye. (2024). Syria's new government to suspend constitution and parliament. <https://www.middleeasteye.net/live-blog/live-blog-update/syrias-new-government-suspend-constitution-and-parliament>

[79] David Gritten. Ahmed al-Sharaa named Syria's transitional president. 31 January 2025. BBC.

<https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c8d9r0vg6v7o>

[80] Sana. (2025). From the participation of military commanders in the conference of announcing Syrian Revolution Victory. <https://sana.sy/en/?p=345623>

[81] Sana. (2025). Statement by Military Operations Command announcing Syrian Revolution Victory. <https://sana.sy/en/?p=345609>

[82] George Wright. Sharaa vows to pursue criminals as Syria's transitional president. 31 January 2025. BBC.

<https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/czep8kyeeyyo>

[83] Syrian Observatory for Human Rights. (2025). بعد اعتقاله.. شاب يفارق الحياة في سجن بحمص (After his arrest, a young man dies in a prison in Homs). <https://tinyurl.com/44sv8z2y>.

Conclusions: Refugees, Russia or Rights?

The delegations that met with the new leadership from the West, Arabic countries, and others alike seemed to be more interested in gaining influence, restoring their relationships, or advancing other goals than in promoting democratic values or even basic rights. A task that is certainly complicated by the fact that al-Sharaa is supported by some who believe he should be given political credit in a new Syria for freeing the people from Assad, and some Syrians with conservative muslim views, especially in the Sunni majority, who argue that it is their turn now to rule Syria.

Across Europe, a chorus of voices both from conservative and right-wing parties can be heard asking for the return of Syrian refugees.[84] [85] [86] [87] The day after al-Assad was toppled, the German migration office (BAMF) issued an immediate freeze on asylum applications from Syrian citizens.[88] For her visit in Damascus, the German foreign minister, Annalena Baerbock, presented an eight-point plan for Syria that states the conditions for future support, some of which she summarized: “Every collaboration is conditional on the security of ethnic and religious minorities, respect for women’s rights, and the prevention of acts of revenge.” [author’s translation].[89] It is worth noting here, too, what was not mentioned: a demand for elections and palpable steps to drafting a constitution *as soon as possible*. And in probably every interview, statement, or press release, women’s rights have been mentioned.[90] [91] One thing has not been mentioned, though: *equal* rights for women.

[84] Morgiane Noel. Syria: how the fall of Assad has affected the asylum debate in Europe. 10 January 2025. The Conversation. <https://theconversation.com/syria-how-the-fall-of-assad-has-affected-the-asylum-debate-in-europe-246689>

[85] Raphaela Schweiger. (2024). A Dangerous Distortion: The Debate on the Return of Syrian Refugees. Bosch-Stiftung. <https://www.bosch-stiftung.de/en/stories/debatte-rueckkehr-syrischer-gefluechteter>

[86] Faeser prüft Rückkehr geflüchteter Syrer. (2025). ZDF. <https://www.zdf.de/nachrichten/politik/ausland/faeser-syrien-fluechtlinge-schutzstatus-100.html>

[87] Nehammer drängt auf Rückführung syrischer Flüchtlinge. (2024). ORF. <https://orf.at/stories/3379285/>

[88] DW. (2025). German, French foreign ministers meet Syria’s new leaders. <https://www.dw.com/en/german-french-foreign-ministers-meet-syrias-new-leaders/a-71207635>

[89] Christina Nagel. Annäherung nach Jahren der Zwangspause. 03 January 2025. ARD. <https://www.tagesschau.de/inland/baerbock-syrien-bundesregierung-100.html>

[90] Auswaertiges Amt. (2024). Ein schwieriger Neuanfang: Syrien zwischen Hoffnung und Herausforderungen <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/de/aussenpolitik/naehermittlererosten/syrien-2690478>

[91] Kim Berg. Deutschlands Plan für Frieden in Syrien. 18 December 2024. deutschland.de. <https://www.deutschland.de/de/topic/politik/stabilisierung-syrien-deutschland>

Democracy or women's rights are most likely not the top priorities of other important actors like Turkey, Israel, the US, or influential Arabic countries. And while Kaja Kallas, the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, also referenced human rights after her first meeting with EU foreign ministers earlier in December 2024, she remarked that many foreign ministers made the relationship to the new Syrian government conditional on the withdrawal of Russian troops.[92] Apparently, Syria has become too important for politics within European countries and in geopolitics to put so-called "Western values" to the forefront of negotiations.

The Syrians, it seems, will have to live with a leader who came to power by the actions of outside forces, but they are largely being left alone in their struggle for a democratic country.



[92] ++ EU will Ende von Russlands Einfluss in Syrien ++. (2024). ARD. <https://www.tagesschau.de/newsticker/liveblog-nahost-montag-218.html>

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