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The Future of Syria After the Fall of Assad is Murky

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Introduction

The fog of war has made speculation about Syria's post-Assad future nearly an exercise in futility. Several factors remain relatively clear: Russia and Iran are the biggest losers, Turkey and Qatar are the biggest winners, and Israel is getting a temporary break, thanks largely to its own self-defense initiatives. Much will depend on the role of the Trump administration in reestablishing and maintaining deterrence, on the feasibility of the HTS-led government, and on the ability of other regional actors to capitalize on the current geopolitical shift. Whether Syria is embroiled in chaos, becomes a puppet dictatorship for the Muslim Brotherhood and Turkey, or remains a somewhat neutral decentralized sphere of influence for various state factions will not become obvious for some time, and this latest chapter could still be impacted by unfolding events not only in the Middle East, but other more distant parts of the world.

Was the Fall of Assad Inevitable?

An Italian intelligence report asserts that the Turkish Intelligence had planned the offensive against the Syrian regime right before [the 22nd International Meeting](#) on Syria in the “*Astana format*,” in which Russia, Iran and Turkey had the role of guarantor countries, held on November 11th and 12th, 2024. These trilateral security discussions on Syria had effectively divided spheres of influence inside Syria preventing the Assad regime from taking full control over Idlib and other regions heavily populated by rebel movements and backed by Turkey. Many analysts claim that the offensive, allegedly planned by the Turkish intelligence, was well planned and came as a shock due to the perception of the Assad regime as backed by multiple state actors and far more organized than a coalition of strange bedfellows which advanced with Turkish backing. However, this view of events somewhat ignores inconvenient issues. First, Assad's military was [hollowed out](#) by the devastating civil war, and years of corruption, mismanagement, and cynicism, which contributed to low morale and disloyalty.

Moreover, the struggles between the Syrian army and the opposition took place over the course over many years, shrinking the territory under Assad's control and advancing the position of various rebel groups in strategic areas over time. The latest phase in the conflict which contributed to Assad's downfall could be viewed as the unfreezing of the conflict which very nearly ended Assad's career as an authoritarian rule

of Syria in 2016, before the election of Donald Trump. At the time, Hizbullah came to Assad's aid and effectively rescued him from Ghaddafi's fate, but in 2024, a combination of the pager operation, air strikes, and leadership liquidation by Israel left Hizbullah severely weakened. The motivation for rescuing Assad when Assad's own forces were essentially on the run was quite low.

Another factor was that the Russians, who previously could be relied upon to support Assad with airstrikes, too were dealt a serious blow since the start of the full invasion of Ukraine in 2024, and were in no condition to provide serious resistance. Several factors challenged Russian presence in Syria: significant human and equipment losses, the impact of Russian sanctions, resulting in a scramble for weapons and the need to transfer out fighters and the S-300 system to Ukraine, and a [blockade](#) imposed by Turkey over time, which limit the supply chains of key inventory and even food into Syria. The Turkish-backed forces coalesced effectively in areas Assad could not easily get to. While Assad had to face the impact of Israeli airstrikes on Iran-linked infrastructure, the rebels faced a relief from pressure with the Russians increasingly too preoccupied with the Ukraine war developments to provide them with a serious confrontation.

The intelligence report alleges that the Turkish intelligence capitalized on the Israel - Lebanon ceasefire and on the presence of the disaffected Syrian generals to make the move. It is true that the Israeli - Lebanese ceasefire agreement provided Turkey and the rebels with sufficient distraction and an opening to make a calculated and seemingly unexpected move. Indeed, the most serious part of the offensive came almost immediately after the ceasefire was concluded. However, neither Erdogan nor anyone else could in advance foretell whether and to what extent the agreement would hold. Furthermore, the build up for the offensive had been ongoing, so arguably this move was tactical but pre-planned and would have likely happened eventually and probably sooner rather than later.

There is no clear indication just how many of the Syrian generals were known to be lackluster in their support for Iran. If the Turkish intelligence acted effectively, however, much of the groundwork would have been similar to the work of Israeli intelligence in Lebanon in preparing for the pager operation, infiltrating Hizbullah with moles, and recruiting traitors and facilitators at all levels. Regardless of whether that sort of work was done, it quickly became apparent that the top Syrian brass was not enthused about fighting

and many have switched sides or abandoned the field relatively early on. Time will reveal whether these moves were anticipated by the Turkish intelligence, or whether spontaneous acts of double dealing and betrayal were par for the course given the overall climate.

Just as elements of Savak, the fearsome security service under the Iranian Shah, [joined](#) the “new” Iranian security services and eventually, the IRGC, after the Islamic Revolution, and just as former Baath party elements under Saddam Hussein joined Al Zarqawi’s groups and eventually formed ISIS, it should not come as any surprise if at least some of the Syrian military ends up joining the new Syrian armed forces, whatever they may end up looking like at the end. What is beyond doubt amidst all these questions is that the rebels, for all their differences, had sufficient training, arming, political backing, and funding from the Turkish intelligence and military, to be quite well prepared to take up arms against Assad, and that the elements of the Turkish military present on the ground for some time, likewise provided vital assistance.

The Syrian opposition and the new governance

As the aforementioned intelligence report explains, the opposition coalition was multiethnic and multifactional, temporarily overcoming sectarian and religious divides for a common cause, and also incorporating scores of foreign fighters operating under the management of assorted armed groups. Turks, Albanians, freelance Azerbaijanis, Afghans, Uzbeks, Tajiks, Iraqis, Uyghurs, and others have all joined forces just to overthrow Assad and without a clear plan for the aftermath. The report enumerates over a dozen armed groups and terrorist organizations which joined the offensive. The media has not been closely following most of them.

- Al-Jabha Al-Shamiya (Levant Front): The largest faction in the SNA. Active in Aleppo and Idlib regions.

- Faylaq al-Majd (Glory Corps): Works closely with Turkish forces.

- Ahrar al-Sharqiya: Primarily extremists from Deir ez-Zor. Accused of ethnic cleansing and looting in Kurdish areas.

- Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS): Formerly known as Jabhat al-Nusra. HTS has played a significant role in the Syrian civil war, particularly in the northwest, including the

Idlib region. Many former ISIS commanders are here now. Has a lot of foreign fighters. HTS was aligned with Al Qaeda and informally severed ties with the international jihadist organization in 2016. However, there was never an official renunciation of the ties or the ideology, leaving experts with more questions than answers about the future direction of the movement. Opinions differ with some believing that al-Joulani speaks on his own behalf (and is already being denounced as a traitor or an apostate by his former allies), while others posit that the seeming official moderation of HTS is a temporary ruse out of necessity, to facilitate establishment of control, to avoid internecine squabbles, and to win international recognition, legitimacy, and aid. Reports point to “strategic ambiguity” by HTS with respect to its position on the state ideology, the future of foreign fighters (some of whom could get Syrian citizenships and be incorporated into the official structures), and the protections for the religious and ethnic minorities. So far, HTS declined to attack Israel and did not speak out against Israel’s destruction of the Assad military equipment. It also formally [declined](#) ties with the Taliban – while seeming to adopt [Taliban’s PR methods](#), fostered in Qatar, which helped Taliban with limited global acceptance until it assumed full control and revealed that its true colors never changed.

- Hurras al-Din (Guardians of Religion): The main Al-Qaeda affiliate in Syria. Operates in Idlib and surrounding areas. Splinter group from Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS). Mostly made of Foreign fighters from Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan and Morocco.

- Jabhat Ansar al-Din: This group has fought against Syrian Government forces and rival rebel factions, especially in the Idlib region. It is less prominent than HTS or Huras al-Din but still plays an important role in the ongoing conflict.

- Jund al-Malahim (Soldiers of Epics): Specializes in guerrilla tactics.

- Jund al-Badiya (Soldiers of the Desert): Operates in desert regions.

- Jund al-Tawheed (Soldiers of Monotheism): Focused on beheading “*kafirs*”.

- Saraya Kabul: Foreign fighters.

- Ansar al-Sunna: Active in Aleppo and Idlib; ideologically rigid.

- Ansar al-Islam: Small faction with mountainous strongholds.

- Ansar al-Tawheed (Supporters of Monotheism): Conducts attacks in Idlib and the Euphrates River Valley. Known for suicide bombings and ambushes.

- Ezz al-Kavkaz (Mighty Caucasus): Composed of fighters from the Caucasus region, Ukraine and Balkan. Operates in northwestern Syria.

- Jamaat Imam al-Bukhari: Central Asian fighters, primarily from Uzbekistan.

- Sultan Murad Division: Predominantly Foreign Turkmen fighters. Active in northern Syria, especially Aleppo and Afrin. Sultan Murad division also actively participated in Libya, with Turkey's backing.

- Ninth Division: Composed of former Syrian army defectors. Operates in the northern Aleppo countryside.

- Sultan Mehmed Fatih Division: Named after the Ottoman conqueror of Constantinople. Engaged in Turkish-led operations with Foreign fighters.

- Sultan Suleiman Shah Brigade: Known as "*Al-Amshat*," notorious for human rights abuses in Afrin.

- Hamza Division: Active in Afrin and Al-Bab. Focused on securing Turkish-controlled zones.

- Al-Majd Brigade (Glory Brigade): Composed of various foreign ethnic groups. Operates in Aleppo and Idlib.

- Al-Hamza Division: Focuses on strategic areas in northern Syria.

- Liwa Suqur al-Shamal (Northern Hawks Brigade): strongholds in northern Aleppo.

While HTS was busy forming governance, these other factions appear to have scattered all over the country. Some are reported to be engaging in heavy clashes with SDF in northeastern Syria, with numerous casualties on each side. Others are reportedly terrorizing various civilian minorities, but clear reporting and data is not available to create a viable picture of the situation, as there is no individualized tracking of any single faction.

Situation in some areas of Syria, such as the Kurdish-held territories, and the Alevite held territories, is more chaotic than in others, but overall it is not at all obvious to what extent HTS has control over other factions or how long it can maintain that control. Moreover, with time, as the interest in Syria wanes, and reporters leave the country, these developments will be even harder to track – so if jihadists do wish to flock to Syria and turn it into a new safe haven or operational base, perhaps all they need to do is just wait it out long enough.

Turkey

Turkey is expected to play a significant military and political role in Syria, and to reap the economic benefits of the various reconstruction contracts in the aftermath. Turkish intelligence chief, along with his Qatari ally, was one of the first international figures to visit Damascus, with Al-Joulani acting as a driver. Will Al-Joulani be merely a local governor acting on Erdogan's behalf or even less than that? Turkey is likely to intervene in any potential negotiations between HTS and the Kurds and to block any situation that could allow the Kurdish communities to effect any sort of contiguous presence along Turkish borders or for that matter, a hard-won autonomy even in very limited areas. However, a permanent and broad military presence is expensive especially in light of the current Turkish internal economic troubles. The US presence, too, is blocking Turkey from outright seizing the oil fields in northeastern Syria and using them to fund its campaigns. Over time, however, Turkey is likely to expand its role in Syria, to strengthen its presence in various ways, and to assert Syria as its own sphere of influence.

In the future, Turkey could utilize jihadist groups for abroad to help maintain a permanent state of controlled chaos that would keep Israel or Arab state actors out, and could potentially contribute to the destabilization of Iraq, and open doors for more significant Turkish incursion into northern Iraq, beyond its ongoing anti-PKK campaign there. Moreover, controlling Syria would put Turkey into a powerful position of negotiating concessions and agreements with other state actors, such as Iran and Russia, who view Syria as a geopolitical strategic necessary and are likely to seek a return and a continued maintenance of presence either through negotiations with the HTS or through broader agreements with Turkey. Turkey may be seeking to become the new gatekeeper over all of Levant, effectively limiting Russian access to much Africa, and expanding its

dominance into the East Mediterranean, where it could challenge Greece, Cyprus, Israel, and others over territorial and resources claims even more so than previously, and now better armed with the geographic and logistical advantage.

Turkey, too, likely aims to replace Iran as Hamas's leading patron, and Syria could still be used for transportation of arms into Gaza, but now backed by Muslim Brotherhood-linked terrorist groups rather than by Iranian proxies. After all, Erdogan has long since been competing with Iran and the Gulf states to be seen as the lead champion of the Palestinian cause, especially via the anti-Israel rallying cry. Turkey already has a [small Muslim Brotherhood presence in Lebanon](#) (Tripoli); in addition to utilizing its new position of strength to expand into Libya still more, Turkey could also seek to take on Lebanon by empowering some of the Islamist Sunni elements there and offering new alliances to the Christian parties to displace Hizbullah as a lead influencer. And if Iran is cornered sufficiently by sanctions under Trump, Turkey could also move in more aggressively in Yemen, by advancing its cause through [Muslim Brotherhood alliances and encampments](#) and cutting deals with some of the Saudi actors backing the Muslim Brotherhood affiliates and local tribes. Erdogan is looking to build on his current advantages to turn Turkey from a struggling middle power, which has nearly become a pariah in recent years by alienating members of NATO, Gulf states, and even African countries over its aggressive neo-Ottoman religious nationalism, to a hegemon that could rival Iran at the peaks of its influence and become a force to be reckoned with and present at every major political and military summit. Expanding its presence, in Erdogan's view, could also give him unparalleled access to natural resources, and help fix or prop up the country's shaky economic, also taking Turkey from beyond limited humanitarian and diplomatic influence in even poorer developing countries such as Somalia and Pakistan, to an economic catalyst.

Iran

Iran has suffered a heavy blow as a result of the loss of Assad and Syria, but this is not the end of the Islamic Republic. Despite the fact that it has suffered severe blows in losing Syria and in having many layers of Hizbullah destroyed, there is still political and ideological support for it in parts of the region. It is now refocusing on strengthening its foothold in Jordan and the West Bank; meanwhile, the Houthis and Iraqi militias remain a

potent threat, and there is no indication that the government of Lebanon is fully divorcing from Hizbullah. Iran is even looking towards shaping relations with HTS in Syria just as it has with the Taliban in Afghanistan and with Al Qaeda. Iran is also refocusing on its nuclear program to avoid external attacks from Israel or from other parties. The second reason is that Iran in preparation for the possible Trump administration, which at the end of the day, does not wish to put an end to the regime, but merely to force it to the negotiating table, has reoriented some of its propaganda networks abroad towards supporting Trump's administration. Some of these voices are vocally singing praises to Trump in the media, while otherwise opposing the agenda of ending the regime or striking blows to its nuclear facilities.

Others are closely working with pro-Russian voices to influence the minds of some important nominated Trump officials and through them to influence and soften the direction of the administration. Tulsi Gabbard, who had opposed tough actions towards Iran and supported Assad, and Elon Musk who regularly boosts pro-Russian voices on X, and has allowed Iran regime officials to maintain presence, are just top examples. Another issue is Iran's normalization with Arab states, which has resulted in Saudi Arabia opposing military action against the Houthis who have raked in \$4 billion after disrupting international trade in 2024 alone through highway robbery style "tolls," and in a growing volume of trade with Iran across the Middle East, which despite poor economy, is boosting the regime's ability to recover economically and to continue developing weapons. Moreover, Iran is looking to recoup its Middle East losses by focusing on lucrative trade and militia-building in Africa, and by exploiting its relationships with Europe which has been reluctant to end trade or diplomacy with Iran or even to designate IRGC as a terrorist organization.

It is also clear that Iran is more than willing to promote controlled opposition such as Reza Pahlavi who is deeply unpopular inside Iran but is popular with the opposition groups and Westerns abroad to undercut any possibility of working with other opposition movements to weaken the regime. The regime is also not being making tactical concessions such as giving up its top proxy leaders such as the late Hamas Political Bureau Chief Haniyeh, to Israel to avoid more clear and direct strategy against its own ranks. Like an octopus, Iran has many arms, but it can also regrow them so long as the head remains untouched. Iran's penetration of the Middle East is deep, dynamic, and resilient. It will

take more than military action to destroy the ideology that Iran has entrenched in societies in the region through lobbies, networks, spies, and penetration of Shi'a group. To destroy the regime ideologically, its alliance with Muslim Brotherhood and assorted jihadists and with state actors such as Russia, China, and North Korea needs to be damaged through effectively enforced sanctions, covert action, and effective information warfare, and its networks abroad needed to be rooted out and exposed. Moreover, fake opposition and manipulative influence campaigns aimed at distracting Westerners with false priorities such as the hijab fixation, likewise need to be exposed so the West could focus on lending support to more effective movements.

Because of the strategic necessity to maintain Syria as a crucial logistical supply line between Iraq and Lebanon, if the Islamic Republic has any hope in rebuilding Hizbullah, Tehran will need to establish relations with HTS or to come to some more direct agreement with Turkey over being able to maintain corridors in exchange for more clear cooperation with Turkey on its strategic goals, or even in exchange for subservience in some areas. In the end, the uneasy alliance between Iran and Turkey could potentially grow and flourish in specific areas, as a result of this realpolitik renegotiation of positions. Individually, these countries could still be taken down by Western alliances but if they combine their forces towards controlling the region, in light of potential American vacuum of power in the region, they could collectively still prevail and advance ideological and political agendas far beyond what is possible with a more scattered, disorganized, and self-serving or conflicting approach.

Russia

Russia has suffered blows on two fronts recently – with the heavy losses in Ukraine and in Kursk on the one hand, and with the loss of influence in Syria. So far, Russia has maintained a tenuous link to its only warmwater base in Tartus, despite evacuating much of its diplomatic and military presence. A complete loss of the base would be a nearly irrevocable blow to Russia's ambitions in the Middle East. The base has been there since the 1970s, when the Baathist Syria was considered a crown jewel of the Soviet influence in the Middle East, and Moscow has invested millions in it over the decades. The loss of a passage to Africa would also diminish or freeze Russian influence in Libya and Sudan. Gold deposits and other natural resources in Africa, as well as security contracts with local

regimes and movements, are not only a matter of prestige for the Kremlin, but are a practical means of cementing long-term political influence, funding the war in Ukraine, and gathering tributes for other operations and interests.

Russia has also lost its leverage in surveilling Israeli troops in the Golan Heights and blackmailing Israel over its support for Ukraine, long demanded by NATO. This could put Israel in a better negotiating position with NATO regarding its own security priorities and interests, while cementing the Western coalition. And while Russian intelligence could be behind the recent campaign to put pressure on conservative European governments, such as Italy, by exposing their [alleged intelligence ties](#) with Syria, Russia is still bound to Turkey via some (though increasingly limited) financial agreements and sanctions-busting mechanisms, as well as through common blocs such as BRICS and the defense-oriented Shanghai Cooperation Organization. Independent Arabia, which may have [fronted](#) this operation, is a Saudi outlet which has concluded an agreement with UK's "*The Independent*," which in turn is owned by Lord Lebedev, a Russian Oligarch. It is published under license and owned and managed by Saudi Research and Media Group (SRMG), a major publishing organization with close ties to the Saudi royal family. Some of the power players in Saudi Arabia linked to media management have also been linked to investments in Russia and to various agreements with Turkey. Some members of the royal family retain connections with the Muslim Brotherhood and have been sympathetic to both Iran's and Erdogan's Muslim Brotherhood-linked AKP's role in the region. Thus, the role of this outlet and the potential goal of this exposure adds layers of complexity to the geopolitical context.

Russia is generally reviled in Syria; its campaign to portray itself as a conservative defender of Christendom, including Christians in Syria, has largely failed. Its return to a position of influence in Syria is a hard sell at the current juncture and even in the best-case scenario would be fraught with obstacles.

Qatar

Qatar is likely to reap the benefits of its role in Syria from all sides. Its financial investments will open doors to Doha no matter who ends up in power. Its history of support for fundamentalist Islamist groups, such as the Taliban in Afghanistan, makes it a natural partner for HTS. Qatar is already largely bankrolling Turkey in exchange for

military support by the Turkish base in Doha. Moreover, Qatar shares a gas field with Iran, making Doha a preferred intermediary for Iran's attempted return to Syria. The new developments could open the doors for a long-discussed [Qatar-Turkey gas pipeline](#) through Syria, which could bring even more energy-related income and influence to the scarcely populated Gulf country. The natural gas pipeline would be built from the Iranian–Qatari South Pars/North Dome Gas-Condensate field towards Turkey, where it could connect with the Nabucco pipeline to supply European customers as well as Turkey.

One proposed route to Turkey was via Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Syria, and another was through Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Iraq. “*Agence France-Presse*” claimed Syria’s rationale for rejecting the Qatar proposal was “*to protect the interests of [its] Russian ally, which is Europe’s top supplier of natural gas.*” If the proposed pipeline runs through Iraq, it could serve as an important energy counterpart to the Iraq - Turkey economic [Development Corridor](#), which could provide Turkey with an unparalleled economic influence in the region, but also open doors for smuggling of fighters, weapons, drugs and assorted other contraband likewise giving rise to more organized crime, terrorism, and mainstreaming fringe players under the auspices of the Turkish oversight. On the other hand, despite bypassing Iran, it could also strengthen Iran’s influence indirectly through its Shia allies in Baghdad.

Another big winner, regardless of whichever route, is Saudi Arabia. This energy pipeline would effectively contribute to the final nail in the coffin of IMEC but save Saudi Arabia the expenses of transporting energy and goods through ports, which Riyadh would be charged with maintaining and dislodging, and instead provide an easy and direct source of income, while eschewing the necessity to engage with Israel. While Riyadh may distrust both Turkey and the HTS, out of pragmatic and economy driven concerns, it would probably welcome some level of economic cooperation. The Saudi economy is in [recession](#), with major setbacks to its assorted “*Vision2030*” plans, including [financial obstacles](#) towards progress on Neom, the Line, and other projects, which means that economic opportunities are likely to take precedence over security concerns.

Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia may not be in a rush to normalize with HTS, just as it was not among the first to welcome back Assad, but it will surely seek investment and reconstruction

opportunities in Syria, and likely be open to negotiations with various stakeholders about securitizing and stabilizing the region. There is evidence that HTS [seeks](#) recognition from Riyadh, likely with Qatar's blessing and backing. HTS is desperate for economic support and regional and later international legitimacy; Riyadh's approval would go a long way towards signaling the international community that Syria under the new management is open for business. Ahmed Al-Sharaa also gave [an interview](#) to AlSharq AlAawsat, a London-based Saudi publication linked to the SRMG media conglomerate, in which he claims that Syria is tired of wars and seeks integration with the Arab world. According to the Qatar-backed Middle East Eye, Turkey is set to invite [Saudi Arabia and UAE](#) to support the "new" Syria where it will have a premier role, quite a change from a few years ago where Turkey was one of the leading backers of the political campaign related to the death of Jamal Khashoggi against the Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman.

One of the leading reasons for the stand-off was a geopolitical difference over Syria, where at the time, the Saudis and UAE set to offset Iranian and Muslim Brotherhood influence. Since then much has changed. UAE was the first Arab country to normalize with Assad and welcomed him back to the Arab League. Saudi Arabia's political priorities have shifted; the Al Ula agreement has normalized Riyadh with Doha; a later agreement brought back diplomacy with Iran. Erdogan had traveled to KSA to conclude defense agreements over the purchase of Turkey's famous Bayraktar drones. Regional pragmatism trumped ideological warfare, as Old Guard interests in Saudi Arabia reemerged towards the end of Donald Trump's first term, and as Mohammed bin Salman's international influence weakened under the pressure from political attacks and campaigns.

Still, distrust between the would-be Caliph of Ankara and the Arab states runs deep; a few good will gestures from a terrorist organization with a history of suicide bombings may not be enough to overcome the divide. But the growing economic cooperation in other areas such as defense trade and the emergence of new corridors could do the trick.

What will the Trump 2.0 policy in Syria be?

In the end, much will depend on Donald Trump's administration and interests in the region. The drawdown of US forces in 2019 led to a humanitarian calamity for the Kurds and opened doors for the further entrenchment of pro-Iran elements on the one hand, and

Turkey's strengthened hold in Idlib, on the other. Moreover, the Biden administration negotiated a drawdown of US troops in Iraq, which could open doors for a return of international jihadist groups in much greater numbers and contribute towards the destabilization of the region. For now, there is no sign that Trump is prioritizing withdrawal from Syria, although he has acknowledged Turkey's role in "*taking*" Syria and its future dominant position there. Trump also indicated that he has no particular interest in intervening in Syria (provided it remains stable).

For now, Trump has his hands full with the domestic priorities for his first 100 days in offices, coupled with the urgent need to find a solution to the Russia - Ukraine war, to conclude a ceasefire between Israel and Hamas contingent on the return of the hostages, to restore the freedom of navigation in the Red Sea, disrupted by Houthi attacks and extortion, to advance effective deterrence against Iran with the eye towards forcing it back to the negotiation table, and to establish and enforce red lines against China's economic dominance and national security threats. Syria will remain in the tail end of the Trump agenda unless a sudden escalation forces the White House's hand intervention which could include a range of measures running the gamut from sanctions to air strikes against any potential terrorist enclaves and established positions. For the time being, the US has avoided targeting the Turkish-backed rebels, instead focusing any military measures on ISIS, some Iran-backed positions, and in one instance, the Russian Wagner forces which had the misfortune of attacking the US presence. That could all change in a heartbeat if HTS returns to its jihadist roots and welcomes back Al Qaeda, ISIS, or joins forces with other factions in a way that threatens the US troops, oil deposits, or the general security and stability of the region.

The Biden administration has been prematurely discussing the removal of Al-Joulani from the US sanctions list. That move would have no upside to the outgoing administration; HTS has not thus far announced any clear frameworks for protecting pluralism or for offering effective governance. Much remains unclear. Al-Joulani has not effectively disavowed extremist ideology or his past affiliations with terrorist networks and activity. A preemptive removal from sanctions list would award HTS with legitimacy in exchange for nothing – a move that has backfired in the past. Moreover, it would saddle the incoming administration with a potential security handicap before the Trump officials

even took office. Sanctions could be much easier to remove than to reimpose and enforce.

A show of good faith and a renunciation of extremism, coupled with a clear framework for protecting the rights of minorities and other segments of population in Syria, would need to be in place long before US should take any steps towards normalizing financial activity with the Syrian government, or remove HTS leaders from the blacklist, which was imposed for a reason. Finally, HTS vowed to avoid attacks on Israel, and acquiesced to Israel's destruction of the Assad regime's tanks and other military equipment, but it is currently operating from a position of weakness. In the event HTS is normalized and receives sufficient backing, or if Al-Joulani himself is removed, or if HTS falls to a more radical faction, all that could change.

Israel

For a good reason, Israel remains distrustful of HTS, and therefore conducted numerous airstrikes to ensure that serious military equipment does not end up in terrorist hands. Turkey, too benefits from attacks on Syrian military equipment out of concern that the already well-armed Kurds in the north of Syria could get their hands on the equipment and use it against the new government or against the Turkish military. Israel has taken a pragmatic view of dealing with armed groups next door; in the past, it has had informal understandings with HTS predecessor Jabhat an-Nusra over nonaggression, and even treated enemy Syrian fighters as a show of goodwill. Israel's priority is not HTS or even Turkey, so long as both entities respects Israel's border security and abstain from attacks or other physical damage.

According to media reports and statements, Israel is preparing for a more serious direct engagement with Iran, that could include US-backed strikes on its nuclear facilities. The timing for such an attack appears to be optimal with the regime weakened on multiple fronts, and showing signs of internal weakness and counterintelligence failure among its domestic agencies. Israel prioritizes dealing with state actors such as Iran over disparate factions and quasi-state actors such as HTS; focusing excessively on engagement with minor actors appears to be a distraction from more serious task at hand, even as the ceasefire with Hamas is elusive. Israel is a beneficiary of Assad's fall; while the Assad regime was the weakest link in the Axis of Resistance, and was too drained, to present a direct danger to Israel or to engage in fighting, it provided unparalleled access to Iran and

its proxies, as well as to Russia, for all sorts of hostile and nefarious activities right next door, ranging from surveillance to fairly serious attacks directed into Israel. Thus Israel's move to strengthen its presence in the Golan Heights in the aftermath remains a logical conclusion to years of wary coexistence with a belligerent neighbor who enabled terrorism, drug operations, and state actor plots and smuggling and facilitated Iran's far more serious proxies all around the region.

While some actors criticized Israel for a purported "*land grab*," the Syrian Druze, distrustful of HTS and Turkey, now have an opening for a more direct communication with Israel and have already expressed a prospective interest for joining forces and even becoming part of Israel. If that were to happen, this voluntary annexation of territories for Israel would be a new development and underscore that at least some of the regions minorities feel far safer under Israel's governance than under control by Muslim Brotherhood affiliates and Islamist governments.



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