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# The new Syria: regional and international implications

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## Introduction

On December 8, 2024, Bashar al-Asad left Syria, marking the end of the Syrian regime after 14-year civil war. Days earlier, Syrian rebel groups, spearheaded by *Hayat Tahrir al Sham* (HTS), launched an assault from Idlib, capturing Damascus in a swift offensive. Several factors contributed to al-Asad's downfall, including the country's dire economic conditions, the already weakened legitimacy of the regime and the disengagement of his traditional allies. The "New Syria" has thus emerged, with Ahmad al-Sharaa, formerly al-Jolani, as its leader. Leveraging on external diplomacy to bolster internal consensus, the Syrian leadership is focusing on economic and security cooperation through alliances in the neighborhood while building the new political set-up of the State. The regime change has had a variety of regional and international implications, which this brief aims to address, underlining the role of the main actors involved. The paper is based on the main results of a closed-door meeting organized by CeSPI in March 2025 with experts on Syria, Türkiye and the Gulf to address the implications of al-Asad's fall in Syria, with updates on recent developments in the positioning of both regional and international players. The event was part of the project 'Mediterranean and Middle East Observatory' of CeSPI, supported by Fondazione CSF – Fondazione Compagnia di San Paolo.

## The end of al-Asad's regime

Fourteen years after the initial protests in Daraa, which marked the beginning of Syria's uprising, the al-Asad's regime appeared to have weathered the storm of the civil war. With over 600,000 deaths and 14 million displaced, the conflict had devastated Syria, yet al-Asad—backed by Russia and Iran—managed to maintain control. From 2022 regional dynamics shifted, with the UAE initiating normalization efforts involving both Iran and Syria. These developments culminated in Syria's readmission to the Arab League in 2023 under Saudi sponsorship, followed by renewed ties with European states, including Italy<sup>1</sup>.

Domestically, in the last few years, the al-Asad's regime promoted controlled dialogues with compliant opposition groups to project a façade of reform and stability. As in many other regimes in the region, the inclusion of opposition political forces has been more formal than substantive. In most cases, these were either 'loyal' opposition groups aligned with the regime or independent figures whose personal interests were closely tied to the inner circle of the al-Asad family<sup>2</sup>.

However, this perceived stability was abruptly shattered on December 8, 2024, when the jihadist group *Hayat Tahrir al-Sham* (HTS) launched a decisive offensive. After reclaiming Aleppo, HTS advanced through major cities and eventually seized Damascus. The regime's collapse unfolded rapidly, exposing deep internal weaknesses and the declining influence of its foreign allies. The fall of al-Asad's government, once thought resilient, underscored the volatility of externally supported authoritarian regimes and highlighted the ongoing fragility of post-conflict Syrian state structures.

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<sup>1</sup> L. Lahoud, *Towards the normalisation of the Syrian regime in Europe?*, IRIS France, November 2024. <https://www.iris-france.org/en/vers-une-normalisation-du-regime-syrien-en-europe/>

<sup>2</sup> That was the case of some *Government-organized non-governmental organizations (GONGOs)* or some political personalities as Nabil Saleh, a Syrian MP who first entered parliament in 2016. He launched a social media campaign titled the "Alliance of Honest people" to challenge attempts to control the voices of the "patriotic opposition," of which he considers himself a member. See: S. Al-Saadi, *Syria's new loyal opposition: Demanding participation in exclusion*, Al-Jumhuriya, March 2019. <https://aljumhuriya.net/en/2019/03/28/syrias-new-loyal-opposition-demanding-participation-exclusion/>

As many regimes across the region — such as Algeria, Egypt, Libya, and Iraq — the army has historically functioned as a symbol of national unity and a bulwark against external threats. Syria has been no exception, particularly considering the army's role in the Arab-Israeli wars of 1948 and 1967, and more recently in its fight against the jihadist terrorism of the Islamic State.

Following the outbreak of the Syrian conflict in 2011, numerous armed factions — many of which sectarian and backed by regional and international powers — emerged, complicating the military landscape, transforming the Syrian context as a proxy civil war. While the army retained its role as the official force maintaining public order, factions aligned with external interests despite claiming their loyalty to the State, contributed to a structural weakening of Syria's defense forces. This resulted in the erosion of centralized military command and significantly undermined the regime's defensive capacity against advancing rebel forces. Syria's dire economic conditions, facing Western sanctions as well as the reliance on the Captagon trade, also played a huge role in affecting Assad's popularity and his grip over the state apparatuses. The increase of prices in basic goods and services, severe electricity and fuel shortages, and extremely high poverty and unemployment rates had been raising criticism in the last few years, also in regime-held areas<sup>3</sup>.

Externally, other active conflict zones — most notably Gaza, Lebanon, and Ukraine — played a crucial role in reshaping the regional and international environment. Although unconnected, all three conflicts contributed to the weakening of al-Asad's key allies. In Lebanon, the decapitation of Hezbollah's leadership and repeated strikes against its positions in Syria led to the retreat of one of the regime's most crucial partners. Similarly, Iran, under mounting pressure from sustained Israeli military operations, was unable to provide adequate support, leaving a strategic vacuum that facilitated rebel advance. The rapid fall of cities such as Aleppo, Hama, and Homs can be largely attributed to Iran's diminished capacity to counter the insurgency.

On the Russian front, despite Syria's strategic importance to Moscow, limited support was granted to the al-Asad's regime. The main reason for such a stance is reportedly the fact that Russian forces were significantly tied down in Ukraine, while Türkiye's positioning could also have contributed in constraining Moscow's response. Although officially rejecting any direct involvement, Ankara's favorable stance towards the 'march in Syria'<sup>4</sup>, could have complicated Moscow's capacity to intervene effectively in defense of the al-Asad government.

With the collapse of the army comes the collapse of the state; in Syria, this has resulted in the disintegration of the autocratic state structure, leaving behind a political vacuum that now demands reconstruction and re-legitimation. The seizure of power by Mohammed al-Sharaa (formerly al-Jolani), the leader of the jihadist group *Hayat Tahrir al-Sham*, has necessitated a comprehensive rebranding of his leadership. Al-Sharaa now seeks to position himself as a legitimate political actor on both the regional and international stage, in an effort to consolidate power and shape a new Syrian order. A recurring pattern in the region appears to be the precedence of international recognition over domestic legitimacy, whereby political authority is first validated externally before gaining acceptance within society.

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> C. Edwards, H. Strange, R. Picheta, *Syrian rebels challenge Assad regime on two fronts as new uprising emerges in south*, CNN, December 2024. <https://edition.cnn.com/world/live-news/syria-rebels-homs-advance-12-06-24-intl>

## *Regional Shifts Towards the “New Syria”*

Right after the toppling of al-Asad’s regime, Ahmed al-Sharaa began his diplomatic activism in the region. Amid a destroyed economy, with manufacturing, agriculture, energy, infrastructure, and transport all dramatically affected by the 14-year civil war, the primary focus of the Syrian leadership is to ensure National recovery as the key component for a successful political transition.

According to a recent report by ESCWA-UNCTAD<sup>5</sup>, restoring GDP per capita to its 2010 level would take until 2041. The Syrian pound lost around two-thirds of its value in 2023 alone, pushing consumer inflation to 40% in 2024 and the humanitarian situation remains dire with 16.7 million people requiring some form of aid.

In this framework, inadequate funding and support to the country’s economy could contribute to further exacerbating the conditions of already entrenched poverty and socio-economic inequalities, potentially aggravating existing communal tensions. Since December 2024 mass revenge killings have been reported throughout the country, intensifying during the first weeks of March with large-scale violence and summary executions in Tartus, Latakia and Hama governorates apparently carried out on a sectarian basis<sup>6</sup>, as well as the more recent attack at Mar Elias church<sup>7</sup>.

Along the Sunni-Alawi divide, Syria is still parcelled out in ethnicities and rivalries, with a number of different actors operating within its territories. In this regard, both the agreement between the Kurdish-led/U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces and Damascus and the one reached with the Druze in April, represent important steps towards national reconciliation. However, progress on their implementation could face some obstacles due to both the risk of internal divisions, particularly when it comes to the SDF, as well as external threats<sup>8</sup>.

With national stability still walking on a tightrope, al-Sharaa believes in reversing the course of the country focusing on security cooperation and foreign investment attraction, starting with the help of regional actors. His first foreign trips included Saudi Arabia and Türkiye, while Qatari Al Thani was the first Arab leader to pay visit to Damascus. Al-Sharaa’s visit to the UAE came then in April.

Whether Doha had always maintained a strong stance against the former regime also by providing financial, military, logistical, and intelligence support to the armed groups opposing Assad, Saudi Arabia, Türkiye and the UAE all switched their position towards the country’s leadership.

After an initial policy of cutting ties with al-Asad while supporting rebel groups<sup>9</sup>, the UAE reestablished relations with the Syrian regime, reopening their embassy in the country already in 2018, at the time when al-Asad’s forces had regained control over most of the country’s territory. This stance went as far as to sponsor, together with Saudi Arabia, Syria’s reintegration into the Arab League back in 2023. Riyadh, which had also favored factions against al-Asad during the years of revolution, decided to re-involve diplomatically with Syria as part of a broader regional

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<sup>5</sup> UNESCWA Press release, *Syria at the Crossroads: New ESCWA-UNCTAD report warns of economic ruin, pointing to potential pathways to stability*, January 2025 <https://www.unescwa.org/news/syria-crossroads-new-escwa-unctad-report-warns-economic-ruin-pointing-potential-pathways>

<sup>6</sup> UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, *Syria: Distressing scale of violence in coastal areas*, March 2025, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-briefing-notes/2025/03/syria-distressing-scale-violence-coastal-areas>

<sup>7</sup> Al Jazeera, *At least 22 killed in Syria church bombing attack, dozens wounded*, June 2025, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/6/22/at-least-15-killed-in-damascus-church-bombing-attack-dozens-wounded>

<sup>8</sup> To go into depth see S. Al Ahmed, *The Damascus-SDF agreement two months on: Fragile progress or delayed collapse?*, MEI, May 2025 <https://www.mei.edu/publications/damascus-sdf-agreement-two-months-fragile-progress-or-delayed-collapse>

<sup>9</sup> A. Devereux, *The United Arab Emirates’ Long-Term Goals in Syria: Managing Militant Proxies and Geopolitical Adversaries*, The Jamestown Foundation, May 2022, <https://jamestown.org/program/the-united-arab-emirates-long-term-goals-in-syria-managing-militant-proxies-and-geopolitical-adversaries/>

rapprochement useful to its Vision 2030 as well as to tackle the smuggling of Captagon trade,<sup>10</sup> which was also a key goal of other Arab League Members.

With the same logic, Türkiye, after long backing al-Asad's opposition along with Doha, had to come to terms with the regime retaining power and involved in direct talks with Assad's backers Russia and Iran, launching the Astana process in 2017. Later, Ankara explored attempts to normalize relations with the Syrian regime, with the primary aim of addressing the refugee issue and protect its borders.

But with the fall of al-Asad, both regional and international actors quickly understood the highways of opportunities for trade, investments, economy and policy leverage coming with regime change as well as the potential challenges in the case of a power vacuum in Damascus. Thus, they have been acting to prioritize Syria's stability over the nature of its leadership, putting aside the initial cautiousness for HTS past links to al Qaeda, at least for the Gulf monarchies. The same reasons that guided earlier dialogue with al-Asad are behind this shift.

Türkiye was the first one to capitalize. Right after the toppling of the regime, Türkiye's intelligence chief visited Damascus and a few days after Türkiye's embassy was reopened. A number of reciprocal diplomatic visits at both Presidential and Ministerial levels have been reported since then, with Ahmed al-Sharaa also participating at the Antalya Diplomatic forum 2025, all aimed at ensuring a successful transition while pursuing two main goals of Ankara in Syria: securing the border and relocating Syrians.

Despite PKK's announcement to dissolve after a February call to lay down arms from the group's leader Öcalan, Türkiye made clear that has no intention to withdraw or relocate its troops from northern Syria before the country "achieve peace and stability" and "when the threat of terrorism in the region is fully removed"<sup>11</sup>. Although Türkiye considers PKK's Syrian offshoot must equally follow Ocalan's call to disband, it is still unclear whether this call will be embraced by the other groups as well as how the expected process of disarmament and reintegration will proceed<sup>12</sup>.

Thus, Ankara and Damascus have been negotiating a defense agreement since December aimed at providing air cover and military support to the new Syrian government as well as building military infrastructure in coordination with the administration in Damascus.<sup>13</sup> Interestingly, also in terms of commercial purposes, flag airlines of both Qatar and Türkiye were among the first companies to resume flights to Syria.

But the regime change has also provided an opportunity for returning Syrians, who reached about 4 million in Türkiye during the time of the civil war. At the core of the public discourse in Türkiye, the return of Syrians has been reported as a bipartisan political goal reflecting an increasing and broad-based nationalistic sentiment in the country. Although it is uncertain whether Syria should be

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<sup>10</sup> The Unit for Political Studies, *Saudi Arabia's Cautious Embrace of The New Syria*, Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies, January 2025. <https://www.dohainstitute.org/en/PoliticalStudies/Pages/saudi-arabia-cautious-embrace-of-the-new-syria.aspx>

<sup>11</sup> T. Gumruku, *Exclusive: Turkey backing Syria's military and has no immediate withdrawal plans, defence minister says*, REUTERS, June 2025. <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/turkey-backing-syrias-military-has-no-immediate-withdrawal-plans-defence-2025-06-04/>

<sup>12</sup> B. Ozelik, *After the PKK: Peacebuilding Challenges in Turkey, Syria*, RUSI, June 2025 <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/after-pkk-peacebuilding-challenges-turkey-syria>

<sup>13</sup> M. Yeşiltaş, *Syria is the new front of Türkiye-Israel rivalry*, SETA, April 2025, <https://www.setav.org/en/opinion/syria-is-the-new-front-of-turkiye-israel-rivalry>



considered, also by the EU, a safe space for orderly and voluntary returns the number of Syrians who left Türkiye for Syria reached 200,000 at the end of April, according to media outlets<sup>14</sup>.

Along with domestic interests however, the success of al-Sharaa's "New Syria" translates in limiting the Iranian influence in the region, a traditional objective for both Türkiye and Riyadh. This is despite the long-standing compartmentalized cooperation between Ankara and Teheran, the 2023 rapprochement between Iran and Saudi Arabia and the condemnation of the recent Israeli attack to Teheran. In the context of a boiling region, key regional actors have considered regime change in Syria as an opportunity to reshape their regional influence and explore economic opportunities, while maintaining reliability in dialogue with Western allies. That soon resulted in a *win-win* cooperation: as a first example, at the end of May, a consortium led by Qatar's UCC Concession Investments, including both Turkish and US companies, signed a \$7 billion energy deal with Syria aiming to generate 5,000 megawatts through gas-powered plants in central and eastern Syria and a solar farm in the south of the country<sup>15</sup>.

From the outset, both Türkiye and GCC countries have demonstrated a strong commitment to mediating the lifting of international sanctions, recognizing their impact on both the country and regional stability as well as their strategic interests in Syria. This stance aligned with the US position in May, with both Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan emerging as the key diplomatic players in the process, as underlined by same US President Trump in Riyadh during the 2025 Saudi-US forum<sup>16</sup>.

But while Türkiye primary interest in cooperating with Syria lies in security considerations, GCC countries are seemingly more committed to consolidating the country's economy. These differences in focus can currently help maintain a balance of interests and room for manoeuvre among regional powers without interfering with each other's agendas. While competition cannot be ruled out in the long term, relations between Saudi Arabia and Türkiye proved to be stable, and the alignment of Saudi Arabia and Qatar on Syria suggests that all interests converge in securing a successful political transition in Damascus.

Hence, Riyadh and Doha have been the main financial sponsors of Syria's new authorities in terms of funding, to the extent of paying off Syria's debt to the World Bank and offering joint financial support to state employees in the country<sup>17</sup>. Doha has also announced the provision of natural gas supplies to Syria through Jordan, in collaboration with the United Nations Development Programme<sup>18</sup>. Saudi Arabia remains committed to advancing economic cooperation with prospects for investment partnerships across productive and service industries, with the goal of supporting Syria's economic development and enhancing regional financial integration<sup>19</sup>. Along the same line, in May, the Syrian government and DP World- a subsidiary of United Arab Emirates investment

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<sup>14</sup> S. Dincel, *Number of Syrians who have returned home from Türkiye since last December has reached 200,000, says Turkish president*, Anadolu Agency, April 2025. <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/number-of-syrians-who-have-returned-home-from-turkiye-since-last-december-has-reached-200-000-says-turkish-president/3550944>

<sup>15</sup> Al Arabiya, *Syria inks \$7 billion energy deal with Qatari, Turkish, US firms*, May 2025 <https://english.alarabiya.net/business/energy/2025/05/29/syria-signs-7-billion-power-deal-with-qatar-s-ucc-holding-led-consortium>

<sup>16</sup> See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aM8mNAuwCX0>

<sup>17</sup> Al Jazeera, *Saudi Arabia says it will jointly fund Syria state salaries with Qatar*, May 2025, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/5/31/saudi-arabia-says-it-will-jointly-fund-syria-state-salaries-with-qatar>

<sup>18</sup> UNDP Arab States, *Qatar provides reliable natural gas supplies to Syria, critical for improving electricity supply*, March 2025, <https://www.undp.org/arab-states/press-releases/qatar-provides-reliable-natural-gas-supplies-syria-critical-improving-electricity-supply>

<sup>19</sup> N. El Shaeri, *Saudi Arabia and Syria explore investment cooperation in bid to boost economic integration*, Arab News, June 2025, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2603478/business-economy>

company Dubai World- signed a MoU worth \$800 million to develop Syria's port of Tartous and to cooperate in establishing industrial and free trade zones<sup>20</sup>.

On his side, Ahmed al-Sharaa made clear the position he aimed for Syria since the very beginning. As a matter of fact, in one of his first interviews, he declared to have served the region's interests by removing Iranian militias and closing Syria to Iranian influence, while underlining his admiration for the development of Gulf countries, particularly Saudi Arabia's bold plans and vision<sup>21</sup>.

But while GCC and Türkiye's priorities can support the success of the Syrian transition, Israel's activities in Syria and the region pose a significant challenge to the country's stability.

After expanding into a buffer zone between the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights and southern Syria and with no prospects of withdrawal, Israel has kept on with military actions across the country, also reaching the suburbs of Damascus. Syrian authorities have repeatedly underlined they are not looking for war and have accused Israel of 'coordinated provocations aimed at undermining Syria's progress and stability'<sup>22</sup>. On paper Israeli authorities are looking for a fully demilitarized zone in southern Syria<sup>23</sup>, justifying their interventionism either with the defense of the Druze minority or with the fight against terrorism. However, Israel has seemingly no interest into a unified Syria with the backing of Türkiye, Saudi Arabia and Qatar, especially when it faces increasing regional isolation. This explains why Tel Aviv has reportedly hit the T4 air base and other military capabilities at air bases in Hama and Homs provinces citing security concerns over Turkish influence in the country<sup>24</sup>. Also, despite recent indirect talks between Syria and Israel under UAE mediation<sup>25</sup>, at the beginning of June the Israeli army bombed the south of the country, claiming to fight Hamas.

In this context, the new Syrian government has exerted efforts to be accepted by the international community presenting itself as a stable partner distant from designated terrorist groups, with the aim of supporting an inclusive transition. The process has been welcomed so far, particularly by Western countries, which are keen to ensure Syria's stability for both security and economic calculations. Despite the 'relative' premises for the country's all-round rehabilitation, uncertainties remain over the future of Syria and the region in the aftermath of Israel-Iran war, however.

## ***The US and the EU's positioning***

The process of de-jihadization of Mohammed al-Sharaa (formerly known as al-Jolani) must be interpreted within the broader context of a country ravaged by fourteen years of civil war. His jihadist past now appears to be undergoing revision, as he positions himself as the head of a state and increasingly engages with the international community. The prospect of internal stability — particularly considering Syria's severe economic crisis and the need for comprehensive national

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<sup>20</sup> Middle East Monitor, *Syria and UAE's DP World ink \$800m deal for port development*, May 2025 <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20250516-syria-and-uaes-dp-world-ink-800m-deal-for-port-development/>

<sup>21</sup> B. El-Cheikh, *Al-Sharaa to Asharq Al-Awsat: Revolution Ended with Regime's Fall, Will Not Be Exported*, Asharq Al-Awsat, December 2024, <https://english.aawsat.com/interviews/5093482-al-sharaa-asharq-al-awsat-revolution-ended-regime%E2%80%99s-fall-will-not-be-exported>

<sup>22</sup> Al Jazeera, *Israel strikes Syria again, claims to have killed alleged Hamas member*, June 2025, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/6/8/israel-strikes-syria-again-claims-to-have-killed-alleged-hamas-member>

<sup>23</sup> Al Jazeera, *Israel won't allow Syria military forces south of Damascus: Netanyahu* <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/2/23/israel-wont-allow-syria-military-forces-south-of-damascus-netanyahu>

<sup>24</sup> The New Arab, *Israel hit Syrian bases scoped by Turkey, hinting at regional showdown*, April 2025. <https://www.newarab.com/news/israel-hit-syrian-bases-scoped-turkey-amid-simmering-tension>

<sup>25</sup> T. Azhari, S. Al Khalidi, *Exclusive: UAE mediating secret talks between Israel and Syria, sources say*, Reuters, May 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/uae-mediating-secret-talks-between-israel-syria-sources-say-2025-05-07/>

reconstruction — hinges largely on international legitimacy. Al-Sharaa’s recent efforts to rebrand himself through diplomatic engagement with Western states and pledging to uphold minority rights and human rights norms should be viewed within this broader political and economic strategy aimed at sustaining Syria’s recovery.

His overtures toward the West are closely tied to the longstanding economic sanctions imposed on Syria since the 1970s. A turning point came with former U.S. President Donald Trump’s announcement at the Riyadh summit of the intention to lift sanctions on the “new Syria,” signaling a significant shift in American policy<sup>26</sup>. Similarly, European institutions have initiated the gradual lifting of sanctions targeting Syrian economic entities. The European Council’s May 2025 decision to revoke certain sanctions aimed to stimulate economic recovery and ease fiscal pressures. It also delisted 24 entities, including key banks such as the Central Bank of Syria and firms in vital sectors like oil, cotton, telecommunications, and media.

Nonetheless, these measures represent only a partial shift. The broader sanctions framework remains constrained—particularly due to the U.S. Caesar Act of 2019<sup>27</sup>, which cannot be repealed without Congressional and Treasury approval. Thus, any substantive relief is subject to long-term conditionalities tied to Syria’s domestic stability and geopolitical alignment. These conditions include cooperation in counterterrorism—especially against ISIS—allowing U.S. military presence, limiting or repressing Palestinian factions in Syria (notably Hamas and other radical groups in the Yarmouk Camp), and protecting minority communities.

From a political standpoint, al-Sharaa’s strategic alignment with Western interests appears consistent with evolving American and European approaches to the Middle East. In a region undergoing deep restructuring, Syria may now serve as a prototype for Trump’s vision of a “New Middle East.” His visit to Riyadh marked a pivotal shift, signaling a willingness to expand the Abraham Accords, including a potential normalization between Syria and Israel, even if challenged by the current Israeli operations in the country as well as the region. Al-Sharaa’s cautious openness to a peace framework with Tel Aviv could mean a step forward in this direction—despite historical (as well as present) tensions over the Golan Heights — underscoring Syria’s need and desire for international recognition and reintegration.

The lifting of U.S. sanctions on Syria must also be understood within the broader framework of President Trump’s diplomatic approach, characterized by a transactional, “win-win” strategy — benefits in exchange for benefits. This logic has been central to the push for normalization with Israel on some Arab states in the broader dynamics behind the Abraham Accords. Indeed, all four countries that formalized ties with Israel under this initiative received significant concessions aligned with their domestic or geopolitical interests.

Morocco, for instance, gained U.S. recognition of its sovereignty over Western Sahara; the United Arab Emirates secured multiple endorsements enhancing its regional influence; Sudan obtained support in navigating its fragile political transition; and Bahrain was offered guarantees related to internal stability and regional positioning. In each case, normalization with Israel was effectively reciprocated with targeted strategic benefits.

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<sup>26</sup> M. Bahah, *Will lifting US sanctions be a key turning point for Syria?*, The New Arab, March 2025. <https://www.newarab.com/analysis/will-lifting-us-sanctions-be-key-turning-point-syria>

<sup>27</sup> Foley Hoag, *U.S., EU, and UK Move to Ease Sanctions on Syria, but Compliance Complexity Remains*, Foley Hoag, May 2025. <https://foleyhoag.com/news-and-insights/publications/alerts-and-updates/2025/may/us-eu-and-uk-move-to-ease-sanctions-on-syria-but-compliance-complexity-remains/>



In the Syrian context, the removal of sanctions would likely serve a similar function: exerting pressure on Damascus to move toward, if not with a full normalization, at least with a security arrangement concerning the Golan Heights. Such a development would align with the broader U.S. objective of reshaping regional alliances and reducing the influence of rival actors through pragmatic, interest-based diplomacy.

While the normalization process is ongoing, al-Sharaa is not viewed as inherently antagonistic to U.S. interests. Rather, his leadership coincides with broader American objectives in the region: ensuring security, reducing instability, and achieving comprehensive normalization. These goals have been further advanced by Israel's military campaign in Gaza, which has weakened key U.S. opponents such as Iran, Hezbollah, and the al-Asad regime. Iran's diminished influence has opened a window for renewed U.S. diplomacy in the region. A Syria less beholden to Tehran, despite lingering pro-Iranian sentiment among some minorities in the country, aligns well with American strategic interests<sup>28</sup>.

The European approach mirrors this trajectory. Conditions attached to sanctions relief have been met with an unprecedented crackdown by Damascus on Palestinian militant groups, which have recently announced plans to exit Syrian territory. Meanwhile, the refugee issue remains central. With nearly one million Syrian refugees residing in Europe — especially in Germany, Sweden, and Austria — some states now deem Syria a "safe country," limiting new visa issuances. Austria, for instance, has suspended 5,000 family reunification cases and may begin repatriations in the near future<sup>29</sup>.

This matter has become increasingly central, particularly in countries governed by right-wing coalitions such as Germany and Austria. For these governments, migration concerns have become politically sensitive and influential in shaping foreign policy toward Syria. As a result, the EU's engagement in Syria must balance economic interests with domestic political pressures, especially those tied to the repatriation and reintegration of Syrian refugees.

In this context, the European Union — despite differing positions among its Member States — aims to establish a foothold within Syria's emerging economic landscape. Having largely remained on the sidelines of the civil war, Europe has maintained a relatively "neutral" stance, which, while preserving its diplomatic flexibility, has also drawn criticism from segments of civil society for perceived inaction.

Nonetheless, in diplomatic terms, neutrality appears to have served the EU's interests, particularly by enabling it to recalibrate relations with both the former al-Asad's regime and the new government without major political constraints. Compared to the United States, the EU may not wield the same geopolitical influence, but it can offer substantial incentives in the form of economic cooperation and reconstruction aid.

The primary challenge facing Europe remains the coherence of its foreign policy. While the conditions imposed on the Syrian government — particularly those related to human rights, interethnic violence, and counterterrorism — highlight a normative distinction from the U.S. one, it

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<sup>28</sup> N. Quilliam, *The meeting of al-Sharaa and Trump has shifted the balance of power in the Middle East*, Chathamhouse, May 2025. <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2025/05/meeting-al-sharaa-and-trump-has-shifted-balance-power-middle-east>

<sup>29</sup> M. Pinna, *Are Syrian refugees' rights at stake in Europe after Assad's fall?*, Euronews, February 2025. <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2025/02/05/are-syrian-refugees-rights-at-stake-in-europe-after-assads-fall>

is equally important to recognize the support of individual Member States to authoritarian regimes across the region in the light of preserving stability<sup>30</sup>.

Such pragmatism risks producing fragmented and inconsistent policies, ultimately undermining the credibility of the European Union's normative framework. This pattern has already emerged in the cases of Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya, where the prioritization of national interests over common European values has exposed the fragility of the EU's principles when confronted with *realpolitik*. The resulting dissonance between rhetoric and practice not only weakens the EU's external legitimacy but also challenges the development of a unified and effective foreign policy towards the Middle East and North Africa.

## **Conclusion**

With the New Syria in the making, the future of the national transition remains fragile, even with some positive premises. The country's leadership, which has yet to demonstrate its real commitment to inclusiveness and support for national reconciliation, is walking the path of reliability building, primarily looking at the regional and international actors. The strategy seems to have paid off, at least considering the withdrawal of Western sanctions, the economic support granted by Qatar and Saudi Arabia, as well as the security cooperation with Ankara. GCC countries and Türkiye are committed to supporting a successful transition for both security and economic reasons. But also, the US and the EU, nowadays increasingly at odds over many issues, are aligned in stabilizing Syria, aware of the consequences that the 14-year civil war has had over the country, the region and Europe. This stance could represent a new course of action, if well exploited. On the one hand, together with engaging in economic and humanitarian diplomacy, there is a need for external actors to relate with the Syrian leadership by closely monitoring its approach to minorities and eventual oppositions, to avoid any violent turn within the country. On the other hand, this favorable 'association of intents' between both neighboring and Western actors should be preserved, without leaving room for competition in the long run over the regional primacy. It is also evident that diplomacy should become central for both regional and international actors to address and resolve regional instability. This is particularly crucial following the '12-day war' between Israel and Iran, whose further and yet unclear developments have the potential to undermine all efforts towards a different future for Syria and the entire region.

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<sup>30</sup> EU council, *Syria: EU adopts legal acts to lift economic sanctions on Syria, enacting recent political agreement*, Council of the EU, May 2025. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2025/05/28/syria-eu-adopts-legal-acts-to-lift-economic-sanctions-on-syria-enacting-recent-political-agreement/>