

# WHERE DOES SYRIA STAND AFTER DECEMBER 8TH?

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## **Introduction**

Nearly five months have passed since December 8<sup>th</sup>, 2024, in Syria. The initial revolutionary fervor has now given way to sobering realities. In other words, the country has returned from its honeymoon to grim reality on the ground.

That being said, despite the enormous challenges the country faces, ranging from the provision of essential public services, like electricity and water, to delivering on more complex and significant issues, such as establishing and implementing transitional justice and alleviating the effects of the giant economic crisis, the country is making progress, though gradually, as expected.

## **Regional Outlook and EU and US Stance**

Following the establishment of the new inclusive transitional government that is reflective of Syria's ethnic and religious diversity in Damascus in late March 2025, the new Syrian leadership is doubling down on its efforts to rebuild the country. What is more important than this is that there seems to be a growing regional consensus to bring Syria back to the regional and international fold despite Israel's growing expansionism and its spoiler role in Syria. For over a decade, Syria was a primary source of various problems for regional countries in the wake of the outbreak of a vicious war in the country in 2011. Today, most regional countries seem to prioritize a stable Syria, including the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Sisi-led Egypt<sup>1</sup>, which situated themselves in the anti-revolution axis during the Arab Spring. The mentioned regional consensus was further exemplified in a regional security summit held in Amman<sup>2</sup>, where Syria's neighbors—Türkiye, Iraq, Lebanon, and Jordan—established a quintet mechanism<sup>3</sup> against ISIS within Syrian territory.

Meanwhile, Syrian President Ahmed al-Sharaa and Foreign Minister Asaad al-Shaibani are touring numerous regional and global capitals<sup>4</sup> and intensifying their diplomatic campaign. Sharaa has toured a number of Arab states, including the UAE<sup>5</sup>, which notably supported the ousted Assad regime until its downfall. His earlier visits included stops in Saudi Arabia, Türkiye, Jordan, and Egypt. Damascus is also a very vibrant hub, with delegations flocking to the capital from various regional countries.

Additionally, Foreign Minister Shaibani has been engaged in a parallel European tour<sup>6</sup>, seeking to secure vital support from the EU—particularly in the form of sanctions relief. A growing divergence between Brussels and Washington in their approach to Syria has become apparent. To date, the EU has pledged significant financial assistance to Syria, citing the

country's promising political trajectory since December 8<sup>th</sup>, and has accordingly relaxed some sanctions. Recently, the UK—a non-EU member—also opted to ease its sanctions on Syria, lifting restrictions on the country's defence and interior ministries, as well as its intelligence services.<sup>7</sup>

Moreover, having received a partial visa<sup>8</sup> from the US, Shaibani recently traveled to New York where he raised the new Syrian flag at the United Nations headquarters.<sup>9</sup> He also addressed the UN Security Council, delivering the new Syrian administration's message to the international community, with particular emphasis on the continued Israeli occupation.<sup>10</sup> Prior to Shaibani's visit, Syrian Finance Minister Yasser Barnieh and Central Bank Governor Abdelkader Husriyeh had arrived in Washington to meet with officials from the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, seeking crucial financial assistance. In a significant development, Saudi Arabia and Qatar announced their intention to pay Syria's \$15 million debt to the World Bank.<sup>11</sup>

Despite these promising signs, the United States has yet to articulate a clear and comprehensive policy toward the new Syrian government. Washington has not formally recognized the current Syrian administration, as reflected in the restricted nature of the visas issued to Syrian officials for their US visit. At present, there are no formal diplomatic relations between the two governments.

Reportedly, there are two wings<sup>12</sup> within the US administration with differing views on Syria. The more hawkish faction, led by Director of National Intelligence Tulsi Gabbard, advocates against the establishment of diplomatic ties with the new Syrian leadership due to the leadership's background and the UN Security Council resolutions on HTS. Israel's security also seems to be playing in this attitude, although Israel has unjustly carried out more than 700 strikes<sup>13</sup> since December 8<sup>th</sup>, and despite this, it failed to provoke Damascus to retaliate, thus denying Israel a pretext for further escalation.

The most recent wave of Israeli aggression has drawn heightened international attention, particularly due to Türkiye's initiative to establish a military base in Syria and deploy air defence systems. The T-4 airbase<sup>14</sup>, which was intended for use by Turkish forces, was subjected to a fierce Israeli attack. Concurrently, Israeli officials voiced strong opposition to Türkiye's growing involvement in the new Syria. This rising tension ultimately prompted technical talks<sup>15</sup> between Ankara and Tel Aviv, held in Baku, Azerbaijan, aimed at creating a deconfliction mechanism in Syria.

The other wing of the US administration, reportedly<sup>16</sup> represented by US Secretary of State Marco Rubio and the CIA, is in favor of selective engagement with the new Syrian administration, although Rubio also took a very harsh stance during the bloody coastal developments in Syria, condemning 'radical Islamist terrorists, including foreign jihadists'<sup>17</sup> in his lexicon. Rubio seems to be favoring a gradual and step-for-step approach regarding Syria.

Albeit this divergence of views in the US administration, the recent developments, such as granting the partial visa to the new Syrian officials, the Pentagon's declaration to reduce US troops numbers in Syria to less than a thousand<sup>18</sup> in the coming months, partial withdrawal (or relocation/redeployment)<sup>19</sup> of US military vehicles loaded with equipment from the American bases in Eastern Syria, some Republican figures' visit to Syria, their meetings with the Transitional President al-Sharaa, and their favorable remarks<sup>20</sup> on him, are all positive signs. Many Republican figures have also called<sup>21</sup> on the US government to remove sanctions on Syria, taking a pragmatic stance, as in the opposite scenario, an unstable and unprosperous Syria can generate new challenges for the US in the near future. Furthermore, President Donald Trump appears to favor assigning the chief role in Syria to Türkiye, as reflected in his statements praising<sup>22</sup> President Erdoğan and in line with his administration's broader strategic pivot toward countering China.

Also, according to Republican Congressman Cory Mills, who met Sharaa, the President expressed that Syria could join the Abraham Accords 'under the right conditions'<sup>23</sup>, although Sharaa's statement was quite vague. Subsequent reports<sup>24</sup> indicated that the new Syrian government ultimately rejected the proposition of US sanctions relief in exchange for normalization with Israel through the Abraham Accords, citing Israel's continued occupation of Syrian territory.

At the same time, the US has reportedly submitted a list of demands<sup>25</sup> to Damascus, including taking action against (banning) Palestinian groups' operations in Syria for sanctions relief and unfreezing Syria's frozen assets amounting to 500 million USD. A short while after US demands became apparent, and while the Syrian officials were in the US, two Iran-backed Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) leaders were arrested<sup>26</sup> in Syria. Israel had also bombed the 'alleged' PIJ sites in Syria after the December 8<sup>th</sup> Revolution.

The arrests also came after Palestinian Authority Leader Mahmoud Abbas met with Ahmad Shara in Damascus. The PIJ is known to have a very negative relationship with Abbas, who visited Damascus after 16 years.<sup>27</sup> Although PIJ claimed that the detentions were related to individual legal matters and that the group remained active in Syria, the circumstances

suggest that the arrests were more than mere coincidence. During the Syrian Crisis, the PIJ remained silent vis-à-vis the plight of Syrians and sided with the Assad regime and Iran. In contrast, Hamas spoke out against the Assad regime, expressed support for Syrians demanding political change, and subsequently relocated its headquarters from Damascus to Doha. Nevertheless, beginning in 2021, Hamas initiated efforts to restore ties with the Assad regime, although relations have not returned to the pre-2011 status quo.

The PIJ arrest, and Shara's vague remarks on normalization with Israel 'under the right conditions', led to speculation that, in line with Washington's expectations, the new Syrian administration may side with the US-Gulf axis with regards to the Palestinian cause in the coming period, causing skepticism and concerns among Palestinians. The upcoming stance of the new Syrian administration towards the Palestinian organizations that sided with the Assad regime in Syria will tell whether this claim is valid or not.

The US has outlined several additional demands as prerequisites for lifting sanctions and normalizing relations. These include cooperating with the US on the chemical weapons dossier, designating the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) as a terrorist organization, continuing the fight against ISIS, and clarifying the fate of missing American citizens. These conditions appear more feasible for Damascus, and in fact, the Syrian authorities have reportedly made progress on some of these fronts.

However, the demand regarding Damascus allowing the US and anti-ISIS coalition members to continue to conduct antiterrorism operations against foreign fighters freely is challenging to accept, as this infringes on Syria's sovereignty at a time when the new administration aspires to have full sovereignty over every inch of Syria. In exchange for compliance with these demands—some of which are considered unrealistic—Washington has offered a phased easing of sanctions. According to various sources, Syria has signalled its willingness to cooperate on five of the eight demands presented by the US. Among the most significant impediments to economic recovery are the Caesar Act sanctions, imposed during the Assad era, which continue to stifle progress and foreign investment.

US President Donald Trump is expected to embark on a tour of the Middle East in May, with Saudi Arabia and Türkiye<sup>28</sup> among the anticipated stops. According to reports, Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman intends to facilitate a meeting between Trump and President Sharaa. If such a meeting occurs, it may serve as a catalyst for clarifying and solidifying the US approach to Syria going forward.

## Syrian Kurds and the New Syrian Administration

In addition to the aforementioned developments, the Kurdish issue in Syria appears to be progressing along a constructive path under the new Syrian administration. While the United States remains involved, France has also been actively engaging with Syrian Kurdish actors, encouraging them to cooperate with Damascus. In a recent diplomatic initiative, the French Foreign Minister Jean-Noel Barrot met in Erbil with Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) leader Masoud Barzani, Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) Commander Mazloun Abdi, and Elham Ahmed, Co-Chair of the External Relations Department of the PYD-led Democratic Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria.<sup>29</sup> Significantly, Abdi also held talks with Nechirvan Barzani, President of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, in Erbil.

Following a landmark agreement<sup>30</sup> between Syrian President Ahmed al-Sharaa and Mazloun Abdi—concluded after the bloody events in Syria’s coastal regions—both parties consented to the integration of military and administrative institutions in northeastern Syria under the authority of Damascus. As part of recent arrangements, the SDF decided to withdraw from the Tishreen Dam<sup>31</sup>, where heavy fighting had previously occurred between the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army and the SDF, and transfer control to a civilian administration. Abdi personally visited the site<sup>32</sup> and declared an end to hostilities, emphasizing the progress made in negotiations with Damascus. Although Syrian officials were expected to join SDF representatives at the Dam during Abdi’s visit, technical disagreements between the two sides reportedly prevented their participation.

The SDF also withdrew from the Kurdish-populated Ashrafiyya and Sheikh Maqsoud neighborhoods of Aleppo<sup>33</sup> and handed over the security to the forces of Damascus.

Concurrently, Ankara has notably softened its rhetoric regarding the SDF. For the first time, the Turkish Defense Minister explicitly referred to the “SDF”<sup>34</sup> by name, departing from the longstanding practice of labeling the group solely as “YPG/PKK.” In his remarks, the minister also signalled Türkiye’s willingness to support initiatives that promote peace—an indirect but significant reference to the Abdi-Sharaa agreement and the broader peace process with the PKK.

As a result of the Abdi-Sharaa understanding, tensions among the SDF, Türkiye, and the Syrian National Army have significantly subsided. SDF representatives have acknowledged a discernible shift in Ankara’s tone, which they view as a positive development.

Moreover, Barzani-backed the Syrian Kurdish National Council, the rival of PYD, reached an agreement with the SDF/PYD. The sides got together in an intra-Kurdish national unity conference<sup>35</sup> on April 26, with the participation of the DEM Party from Türkiye. This intra-

Kurdish initiative is unfolding in apparent alignment with the peace process in Türkiye and likely with Ankara's approval. Nevertheless, the demand for decentralization/federalism raised during the unity conference was promptly criticized by the Syrian Presidency.<sup>36</sup> The Presidency reiterated its expectation that the SDF would honour the commitments outlined in the Sharaa-Abdi agreement, saying that federalism calls threaten Syria's territorial integrity. While federalism stands a far-fetched idea in Syria, the developments in the Syrian coast, the situation with the SDF, and unresolved problems with the Druze is likely to lead the new Syria to make some new administrative concession for the inclusion of every segment of the Syrian society into the new state as a hyper-centralized administrative system is unlikely to work in the country.

Amid this flurry of developments, the PKK is expected to dissolve itself at any moment. Different sources suggest that the PKK is likely to dissolve itself by the end of April, in a secret congress that is likely to be held in Suleymaniyah,<sup>37</sup>-a stronghold of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and an area where the PKK maintains a significant presence. The anticipated disbandment of the PKK would mark a historic turning point, not only for the Kurdish population in Türkiye but also for the Syrian Kurds. It would likely usher in a new era of optimism and contribute meaningfully to the long-term stability of the new Syria.

### **Southern Syria, the Israeli Role and Concluding Remarks**

The unresolved tensions involving Syria's Druze community remain one of the most serious threats to the country's future. On April 26, sectarian tensions escalated after a provocative audio recording allegedly featuring a Druze individual insulting the Prophet Muhammad was circulated on social media<sup>38</sup> Some Druze militias-labeled as "outlaws" by Damascus-later launched attacks that resulted in the killing and desecration of bodies of 11 government security personnel, significantly intensifying unrest in rural Damascus, particularly in Jaramana and Sahnaya.<sup>39</sup>

To suppress the threat posed by these Druze factions, the Syrian government dispatched reinforcements to Sahnaya. Some Druze groups also mobilized reinforcements to the capital. This mutual escalation led to deadly sectarian clashes, with casualties on both sides. Amidst the chaos, Israel continued to provoke the Druze and launched several strikes on Syrian territory, even targeting areas near the presidential palace in Damascus.<sup>40</sup> At the later stages, the Druze notables met with Syrian officials, and through a statement declared that they rejected separation<sup>41</sup>, and sectarianism. They also reaffirmed their vision of a unified Syria where all citizens can coexist and condemned both Israeli provocations and foreign intervention efforts. These leaders sought an agreement with Damascus to integrate local Druze into the police, security forces, and judicial institutions in an attempt to ensure local representation and stability in Druze-populated areas.

Despite these reconciliatory efforts, deep divisions remain within the Druze community. Before the public declaration by Druze notables, prominent religious leader Sheikh Hikmat al-Hijri left the mentioned meeting. He later issued a statement expressing his loss of faith in the new government, accusing it of perpetrating massacres under a 'takfiri ideology'. Hijri also called for international intervention in Syria to halt what he described as "systematic mass killings," aligning his rhetoric closely with the Israeli narrative.<sup>42</sup> In a nutshell, Hijri seems to be acting in line with the Israeli narrative. The Suwayda Military Council also backed Hijri and called for international intervention. The mentioned council is known to include some generals from the deposed Assad regime. In a noteworthy development, while sectarian tension was still high, Israel confirmed the evacuation of some wounded Druze figures from southern Syria to Israel by helicopter. The evacuated people are likely affiliated with Hikmat al-Hijri and the Suwayda military council.

Reasonable figures that were trying to bridge the Druzes and the new Syrian government were also faced with assassination attempts. The mayor of Sahnaya and his son were assassinated shortly after welcoming government forces into the area. Laith al-Balous, the leader of the Druze Rijal al-Karama faction and an ally of the current administration in Damascus, also survived an assassination attempt. He is now emerging as a key figure among Syria's Druze population.

Although tensions remain high, a significant portion of the Druze community has aligned itself with Damascus. Some Druze-affiliated armed groups have previously joined the new Syrian army. Through targeted agreements and continuous dialogue with influential religious and military Druze figures, the Syrian government appears to be securing the loyalty of much of the community.<sup>43</sup>

Nevertheless, Israel's continued attempts to exert influence, mainly through financial incentives, on the Druze pose a potential risk, especially in the context of Syria's ongoing economic crisis. This could create new problems in Southern Syria in the upcoming period.

In Sunni-majority Southern areas such as Dar'a, Israeli influence appears to be minimal. Local resistance to external involvement was recently demonstrated when villagers in Dar'a<sup>44</sup> clashed directly with the Israeli army, resulting in civilian casualties and reinforcing the anti-Israeli sentiment in the region.

Lastly, Ahmad al-Awda's 8<sup>th</sup> Brigade, which was dragging its feet on the integration of the army, was cracked down on by the new Syrian army. As a result, the 8th Brigade officially declared its dissolution<sup>45</sup> and subsequent integration into the Syrian armed forces, eliminating yet another potential source of instability for the country.



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