

Syria in Transition

The logo for Syria in Transition (SiT) consists of the letters 'SiT' in a white, serif font, centered within a dark blue square.

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Message to our readers

With Bashar Assad's regime now toppled, the title of our publication has never been more fitting. When we launched *Syria in Transition* in June 2023 our goal was to provide quality information and analysis to seasoned experts as well as professionals grappling with the complexity of the Syrian conflict. Recognising that many in this field are new to their roles and often overwhelmed by acronyms, we sought to offer clarity and insight.

A key focus of our work has been to examine critically the assumptions that have shaped Syria policy in recent years. Perhaps the most striking was the widespread belief that Assad had “won” the war. This narrative, coupled with a retreat from principled positions under the guise of avoiding past interventionist mistakes, led to policies by governments and international organisations that ultimately harmed Syrian civilians and destabilised the region. It created a fertile ground for misguided normalisation efforts, and propped up a mafia regime whose pretensions to state legitimacy were always illusory.

Syria in Transition is the product of a small but dedicated team: Malik al-Abdeh and Lars Hauch are the co-founders and lead writers. Dr Alan George serves as consulting editor. Carolin Birkners transforms the text into visually pleasing PDFs.

Operating on a *pro bono* basis has proven to be an asset, enabling us to maintain independence and flexibility. This model, however, naturally limits the journal's potential. The positive feedback from our readership reinforces our belief in the value of well-sourced and critical analysis; and this will only grow more essential as

Syria navigates a difficult transition to democracy.

Our consultancy, Conflict Mediation Solutions (CMS), combines practical knowledge of the diplomatic and humanitarian spaces with well-sourced conflict analysis, and in many ways *Syria in Transition* has evolved into our in-house think tank.

As we look to 2025, we are committed to scaling up our activities to ensure that the journal remains a trusted source for incisive reporting and actionable insights at this pivotal and exciting moment of Middle East history.

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SiT thrives on continuous exchange with professionals. We kindly invite you to reach out with criticism, ideas, information, or just to say hello at sit@cms-consulting.co.uk

The quasi-coup

Assad is gone but the deep state lives on

For the past 13 years Syria has endured what could best be described as an “internationalised civil war.” Winning and losing was not in the hands of local parties but their external backers whose competition over the Levant dealt the cards to the warring armies and militias on the ground. What transpired between 27 November and 8 December therefore was not only a victory by a people against a dictator, but also an “internationalised coup d’etat.” The speed of Assad’s deposition, and the apparent indifference of loyalists to his fate, suggest an understanding between local, regional, and international actors including, crucially, elements of Syria’s deep state. This could well explain certain peculiar events in Syria since Assad’s flight to Moscow, and why a legitimate, inclusive and credible transition to democracy might be harder to achieve than some might imagine.

The sponsors

In the 1950s Britain and the US worked with dissidents and rebels to organise coups against Communist-leaning regimes in the Third World. Those days are long gone, but the skillset to implement swift and decisive regime change persisted. Since 7 October all actions that would degrade and destroy Iran’s Axis of Resistance were contemplated, and the lynchpin of that Axis was also its weakest link: Syria.

Reports that Russia and Iran had grown weary of Assad circulated for much of 2024. Over the summer Israel destroyed much of Iran’s military capacity in Lebanon and Syria, including IRGC senior and mid-level leadership. Iran had itself grown suspicious of Assad because of his neutrality on the Gaza and Lebanon wars, and it correctly suspected him of falling under UAE influence and colluding with Israel. Russia, meanwhile, had scaled back soft and hard power projection since mid-2023, and it did not have the bandwidth to micromanage the many troubles of Assad’s dysfunctional system. Circumstances were ripe for knocking Syria out of the Axis altogether; and best placed to deliver that blow was Turkey and its rebel allies.

Turkey had long attempted to use the favourable regional climate since 7 October to drive a hard bar-

gain with Assad to resolve its own Syria dilemmas: refugee return and elimination of the YPG/SDF threat. As *Syria in Transition* revealed back in October, Turkey had prepared a plan to increase the size of its ‘safe zone’ to include Aleppo city, and had ordered rebels to prepare for a limited military operation to grab territory in northern Syria. This came after Assad had rebuffed Ankara’s many offers of talks. Putin had wanted Assad to reconcile with Erdogan even at the cost of placing Aleppo under Turkey’s sphere of influence, but Assad had stubbornly refused. The 27 November offensive was greenlit by Ankara with Moscow’s tacit agreement.

While the capture of Aleppo was on the cards, the push south towards Hama, Homs, and finally Damascus, was not initially part of the plan. Once Aleppo had been taken, rebel leader Ahmad al-Sharaa decided to test the limits of what he could achieve. Well aware of the US and Israeli desire to weaken Russia and evict Iran from Syria, and sensing that Ankara may be happy to claim Assad’s scalp, he ordered his troops to keep advancing well beyond what Russia and Turkey had agreed. It was an audacious move: a once in a lifetime opportunity to enter the history books.

When the regime’s defensive line in Hama crumbled on 5 December, both Russia and Iran had already conveyed to Assad that they would not be coming to his rescue. Putin had refused to meet Assad during the latter’s visit to Moscow, under way when the rebel offensive started; and he refused to take his calls after he returned to Damascus. Rumours about a giant convoy of PMF fighters coming from Iraq proved just that. Assad’s desperate pleas to the UAE were rebuffed by its ruler Mohammad bin Zayed, who told him that there was nothing that he could do. Even Riyadh, which had sponsored Assad’s normalisation last year, turned its back on him by torpedoing an Arab League foreign minister’s meeting to discuss the situation in Syria.

Assad had become the gambler who could no longer service his debts. Turkey, Qatar, and the US – the principal sponsors of the coup – met in Turkey on 5 December to draw up plans for his ouster. Two days later in Doha, Russia and Iran formally traded in Assad for military bases, religious shrines, preservation of state institutions and protection of minorities. Turkey gave assurances to all externals that their core interests in Syria would be respected, that HTS would be contained, and that a transition in line with UNSCR 2254 would occur. The stars had finally aligned.

The contractor

Coups tend to be carried out by generals, and Sharaa is nothing if not a general. He had proved his credentials in Idlib with his clampdown on Islamic State and Al-Qaida, and now had assembled an impressive array of combat-ready units, well-armed and trained in the latest Western military doctrines. He is also a shrewd politician. In Idlib his Salvation Government had established a neo-liberal economic model that had improved living standards and created investment opportunities. Overall, it had governed around 4.5m Syrians to a far higher standard than anything the regime could offer.

Syria's predominantly Sunni economic elite – a key constituent of the regime's deep state – began seeing in Sharaa a pro-business saviour who could bring about an end to the war and with it Assad's predation and crippling US and EU sanctions. More than anything else, Syria's monied class wanted a return to normality and a chance to cash in on the likely reconstruction bonanza that would follow Assad's departure. Sharaa actively courted this class, particularly those with connections to Turkey and the Gulf, because he correctly identified them as the key to unravelling the regime from the inside. What Sharaa could offer them was continuity and stability.

Having turned against Al-Baghdadi and Zawahiri, Sharaa was no stranger to coups; and he had never hidden his ambition to conquer Damascus. Capturing power, however, carried a price: to the regionals and internationals who had contracted him to do the deed; and to elements of the deep state in Syria who would aid him in the controlled demolition of the dictatorship. These were businessmen, state bureaucrats, diplomats, tribal leaders, and army and security officers that HTS's spy network had managed to communicate with and influence.

Magnanimity was Sharaa's key currency. He issued assurances of safety for army and security officers and pro-regime militiamen. In a testament to his credibility, thousands took up the offer and deserted their posts, while hundreds of others cooperated with the HTS-led Military Operations Directorate to sabotage their own side. The bureaucracy also received clemency: mass sackings and reprisals were forbidden, public and private property were strictly protected, and the Assad-appointed prime minister remained in post.

Soon after the loss of Aleppo, the regime's inner circle of perhaps several dozen high-ranking army and security officers saw the writing on the wall and began tying up loose ends before escaping to Lebanon and Libya. For second- and third-tier regime officers and apparatchiks, however, an overnight switch to the revolution sufficed to guarantee their safety and jobs. The passivity and apathy of loyalists to Assad's fate amounted to collective complicity in the coup.

The lightning blitzkrieg on Damascus may have been the *coup de gras*, but the underlying factor behind the collapse of the Assad regime was economic. Rebels were shocked to find legions of beggars on the streets of Damascus, and in Homs children showed signs of malnutrition. Assad's Syria was utterly impoverished, broken, and hopeless, while HTS-run Idlib offered 24-hour electricity and free wi-fi at bus stops. Less than a week after Assad's fall, Idlib's shopping malls and car markets thronged with Syrians from previously regime-held areas keen to see how the other side lived. Courtesy of Islamists, neo-liberal economics triumphed in Syria.

The hangover

The international media and the opposition portrayed what happened as an unmitigated victory for the revolution. If the target was the Assad family and the immediate inner circle, and if the goal was to free political prisoners, change Syria's flag, and reform a corrupt administration, there can be no doubt that the revolution won. There is, however, growing unease among elements of the political and armed opposition who say that the price paid for a swift decapitation was high. No major war crimes and crimes against humanity perpetrators had been arrested. In the Alawite heartlands along the coast, statues of the Assads had been toppled but there had been minimal effort to arrest the *shabiha*.

Regime stalwarts (including Maher Assad's wife) signalled their loyalty to the new regime by using the revolutionary flag as their WhatsApp profile pictures. Diplomats like Bashar Jaafari, who for years had been Assad's committed servants on the international stage, turned into vocal regime critics and warmly embraced the change. The Katerji Holding Group, which had held the monopoly on transportation and sale of crude oil and that operated a militia that had participated in the regime's 2016 Aleppo offensive, announced on 14 December that it was resuming operations. The press statement was adorned by two revolutionary flags.

Senior and well-respected opposition figures have responded. Ex-prime minister Riyadh Hijab wrote on X: “Caution, caution.. What the Syrians took by force must not be taken away from them through ‘soft’ arrangements.” Former Syrian Opposition Coalition president Moaz al-Khatib went further: “If the leaders of the security branches are not arrested.. then everything that is happening is a completely unclean play and a conspiracy against the Syrian people.” Survivors of Sednaya prison have taken to social media and called on the new authorities to implement mass arrests. Some rebels have taken matters into their own hands.

In an attempt to calm the enraged revolutionary street, on 9 December Sharaa announced that the new government would pursue war criminals and anyone complicit in torture. This puts him in a difficult spot as his promises of clemency and continuity could end up as open-ended impunity. Genuine accountability can occur only once a credible transition is unfolding and with the establishment of a legitimate justice system. The nature of the internationalised coup, however, makes it doubtful that accountability will be high on the agenda for any future government.

With emotions running high, postponing accountability to some unspecified point in the future risks undermining Sharaa’s credibility, and may trigger dangerous revenge cycles. To appease the revolutionary street, however, he would have to arrest his deep state cooperators, including bureaucrats who administered the violent state for decades. Should that happen, the deep state may turn against him, and that would mean an end to the carnival-like atmosphere and the loss of a key constituency that is ready to support Sharaa as the new strongman.

What next?

Syria is at a fork in the road. The deal made with elements of the deep state that was blessed by the external powers is likely to deliver important elements of political and economic change; but it will not satisfy many on the opposition side who will use the issue to undermine Sharaa’s *de facto* leadership. They assert that the power and prestige of the “Syrian Che” is the product of media hype, note that the number of men he commands directly does not exceed 10,000, and claim that ultimately he will buckle under the combined weight of Turkish, Qatari, and US pressure to share power with the political opposition. It seems highly likely, meanwhile, that the experiences with

the deep states of Egypt, Libya, and Tunisia following regime changes there will be deployed with energy by his detractors in the coming period.

Unstable alliances

The main fear is that the military coalition that Sharaa had pieced together could unravel. The rebels of the Southern Operations Room, which were the first to enter Damascus and were under the direction of Jordan, could decide to establish their own authority in alliance with the Druze of Suwayda.

Within Sharaa’s own alliance, the groups that had no option but to obey him when they were holed up in Idlib are now back in their home towns and cities where they are likely to grow in number and local support. In time they could develop sufficient confidence to challenge Sharaa’s authority. Jaish al-Islam – by far the best organised outfit within the Syrian National Army – is re-establishing itself in Duma. The presence of well armed and independently-minded rebels with connections to Saudi Arabia within 25 minutes’ striking distance of the capital poses a challenge for any future government. HTS’s base remains in Idlib and the north. Challenges could well emerge in southern Syria, the Damascus countryside, Homs, and Deir Ezzor.

Minority issues

A military challenge to an HTS-led transition may also come from the Alawites and the Kurds. The former are presently much weakened and may bide their time, re-organise and await the right moment to stake a claim to a form of autonomy for which they may well receive Iranian, Russian, or Israeli support. Rebels who have returned to Homs report great unease at having to live side-by-side with thousands of *shabiha* members who are still heavily armed and whose intentions are as yet unclear.

For the SDF and the Kurds, the regime’s fall was a strategic catastrophe. It unleashed Turkey and the SNA against them, with the result that Arab members of the SDF are defecting *en masse* to their Arab kin in the SNA and HTS. It is likely that a US-brokered agreement will confine what remains of the SDF to Kurdish-majority areas and strip them of control of Syria’s oil. The imposed end of the PYD’s political project will feed a sense of grievance that may lead to instability in the northeast for months to come.

More than mercenaries

The SNA is likely to undergo significant restructuring now that it is no longer confined to the north. The group has often been dismissed as “Turkish mercenaries” because of their role in Turkish campaigns against Kurdish groups. Several SNA factions, however, played key roles in the November 27 offensive and will seek to be rewarded.

SNA leaders will now further entrench in local communities. The most prominent and powerful SNA factions are in Aleppo governorate where they live within their own communities and significantly outnumber HTS. Their regions have been administered officially by the Syrian Interim Government (SIG) over the past eight years, and they are poised to demand recognition, influence, and a piece of the Aleppo reconstruction cake. Their political and administrative structures have not disappeared, and the SIG intends to administer its areas independently of the HTS government until a legitimate transitional government has been formed.

The moderate opposition

The SIG operates as a governance arm of the Syrian Opposition Coalition (SOC), which is also part of the Syrian Negotiation Commission (SNC) platform of the UN-recognised opposition. The SNC is mandated to represent the Syrian opposition in international negotiations to implement UNSCR 2254, the internationally agreed framework for resolving the conflict. These opposition institutions are intertwined with SNA factions and collectively represent what is often referred to as the “moderate opposition.”

SOC president Hadi al-Bahra has already called for the creation of a Transitional Government Body (TGB) per UNSCR 2254 with full executive powers, and for Sharaa’s Interim Government only to oversee service provision. This will not please Sharaa, who currently enjoys the *de facto* powers of the president and appears to prefer a process without the UN. For any transition to succeed, however, Sharaa must bring the political opposition to the table.

Having been the recognised body of the regional and international political process for over a decade, and being in competition with HTS over the representation of the revolution, the SIG/SOC/SNC bloc won’t buckle easily. It will likely act as the conveyers of the will of internationals to conduct the transition in line with UNSCR 2254. The commitment to 2254 was reaf-

firmed by statements by the US Secretary of State, the Germany foreign ministry, the G7, and the Aqaba Joint Contact Group ministerial meeting on 14 December. Central to the resolution is the principle of power-sharing and legitimate governance, which in effect will boil down to keeping a check on HTS.

Sharaa’s parallel path

Aware of the potential challenges to his authority, Sharaa has moved quickly to establish facts on the ground that sideline UNSCR 2254. By transferring power peacefully from the regime’s Prime Minister, Mohammad al-Jalali, to the Syrian Salvation Government (SSG) – led by cadres loyal to him – he has sought to demonstrate that Syria does not require a UN-sponsored governance process. That resonates well with many Syrians who associate the internationally-backed political process with years of pointless diplomacy and endless suffering. It also pleases former loyalists who prefer that the matter of transitional justice is not internationalised. It has also garnered the interest of some think tankers and diplomats who are dismissive of what they consider as fig-leaf diplomacy and Western interventionism, and are ready to grant Sharaa the *carte blanche* to consummate the popular revolution of 2011 in a “grassroots manner,” away from UNSCR 2254.

The Interim Prime Minister, Mohammed al-Bashir, has announced that he will “serve as Prime Minister until March 2025, ensuring a peaceful transition and providing leadership during this crucial period.” That Sharaa has carefully avoided reference to UNSCR 2254 raises fears among many that this self-directed transition might be the prelude to an authoritarian style of leadership sustained through alliances with deep state interests and amenable rebels.

UNSCR 2254 is often misunderstood as an attempt to impose a solution on Syrians. In reality, it is about guaranteeing a process between Syrians that delivers on legitimate governance, a new constitution, free-and-fair elections, and a country free of terrorism. These are the minimum requirements for any credible transition process. Any actor in Syria must be judged against *that* standard.

Correcting wrongdoings

What UNHCR needs to learn from its mistakes in Syria

Bashar Assad's fall will prompt critical reappraisals of humanitarian and policy approaches to Syria since 2011. One such was UNHCR's strategy of publicly distancing itself from politics while simultaneously presenting the Assad regime as a relatively benevolent actor. The aim was to secure political and financial support from donors, thereby strengthening UNHCR's institutional standing and enabling comprehensive early recovery efforts. "They've been manipulating their surveys and reports to that end," a UN source told *Syria in Transition*. The voices of Syrians who urged the UN to put their safety concerns on top of the agenda were ignored.

This strategy proved to be dangerously misguided. It reinforced the false narrative that Assad had emerged as the war's victor, thereby positioning gradual normalisation as the logical next step. It thus contributed to a broader regional and international discourse that fuelled pushbacks and *refoulement*. At the same time, the strategy ignored UNHCR's own guidelines that emphasised the importance of addressing the root causes of conflict; and it marginalised non-regime areas, leading to a loss of trust in the UN by Syrians.

Turning a blind eye

The sudden influx of an estimated 500,000 refugees from Lebanon in October 2024 – 70 per cent of whom are believed to have been Syrian – was a gift for Assad. Syrians who had initially fled to Lebanon to escape his regime's violence found themselves having to choose between plague and cholera. Yet for the regime it was an opportunity to assume the role of 'host'. International humanitarian funds were swiftly mobilised to accommodate the new arrivals; and a prevailing narrative quickly took hold: relief aid, while important, was insufficient; what was needed was comprehensive early recovery assistance without too many inconvenient questions.

This narrative was pushed by both the Assad regime and UNHCR. The regime had long insisted that it was ready to welcome refugees back, but that the international community first needed to fund the creation

of a conducive environment for returns, including adequate shelter and livelihood opportunities. Similarly, UNHCR boss Filippo Grandi had urged donors to fund early recovery to make areas of return viable, while suggesting – without evidence – that Assad had made concrete strides in addressing legal and security issues. The UNHCR/Assad narrative, however, did not change the reality that safety concerns remained the primary obstacle to returns. In reality, it was Israel's heavy bombardment of Lebanon that changed the risk assessments of many refugees.

Given that these returns were neither voluntary nor dignified, monitoring the wellbeing of returnees should have been critical. UNHCR, however, lacked the capacity to do so. While it operates centres along the Syrian-Lebanese border where returnees can register to return, there was no effective oversight once they continued their perilous journeys into Syria. Although UNHCR maintains centers and mobile units throughout the country, these were managed by the regime-affiliated Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC), Asma Assad's Syria Trust for Development (STD) and pro-regime NGOs such as the Al-Nada Society. Distrusted by returnees, these organisations were at best unreliable and at worst complicit in passing information to the *mukhabarat*. As a result, many Syrians avoided contact with them. Private groups and NGOs documented numerous instances of returnees being detained, abused, and killed; but, with an eye to maximising resources, UNHCR was keen to avoid alarming donors with such information.

Despite the glaring lack of monitoring capacity, UNHCR's head in Syria, Gonzalo Vargas Llosa, told the Danish *Jyllands-Posten* on 24 November that while it was too early to draw firm conclusions, "we are seeing some first positive indications from the Syrian government, and it is certainly something that the whole world is watching." UNHCR continued to echo this contradictory line to donors, acknowledging that proper monitoring was not possible yet claiming that things appeared positive, and that the priority now should be providing aid and early recovery assistance. In conversations with *Syria in Transition*, several donors expressed concern over UNHCR's selective approach, pointing out the organisation's tendency to overlook the Assad regime's blatant and persistent violations of human rights.

Critical appraisal needed

At least on paper, UNHCR has in fact committed to the holistic approach that is needed. In November 2023 UN agencies, including UNHCR and UNDP, together with various governments and other partners, adopted a Common Position on addressing forced displacement within the framework of the humanitarian-development-peace Nexus (HDP Nexus.) The Position Paper clearly states that peace actors must be engaged and peacebuilding needs must be supported to facilitate solutions to conflict. This commitment aligns with a 2023 multi-stakeholder pledge co-led by the UN Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs (DPPA) which called for all relevant actors to address the root causes of forced displacement.

An OECD study released in November 2024, entitled “The Humanitarian-Development-Peace Nexus and Forced Displacement” and co-authored by UNHCR itself, found, however, that the HDP Nexus remained insufficiently implemented, although the institutional and operational framework were already in place. Peace activities, it noted, had largely focused on social cohesion and had primarily been implemented by humanitarian or development organisations. The study recommends investment in areas of origin to address the drivers of forced displacement, particularly through peace negotiations, transitional justice, reconciliation and institutional and security sector reform.

While the fighting since 27 November has caused some new displacement, Assad’s fall has facilitated significant returns despite the lack of livelihood opportunities, thus confirming that safety was always the primary concern. Reports emerging from the notorious Sednaya prison further validate this perspective, even for those who may have missed the shocking abuse revealed in the 2014 Caesar files.

UNHCR’s role in providing protection and addressing legal issues remains crucial, but it must avoid repeating the mistakes of the past decade that have caused UNHCR and other agencies to lose the trust of Syrians. This moment calls for introspection and a reimagining of how the UN engages with Syria. The country still needs the UN, but not the one of 2011-2024.

The Sunnis strike back

Capture of Damascus paves way for more regional shifts

Ever since the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 Sunni Arabs have been having a hard time. That destabilising act allowed Iran to project power into Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Yemen in ways that shocked and dismayed the moderate Sunni Arab states of the region. King Abdullah of Jordan was the first to issue a public cry of help when in 2005 he warned of an emerging “Shi’ite crescent.” On the whole, however, the Arabs proved ineffectual in confronting Iran. By 2023 they were resigned to their loss and mediated a *modus vivendi* with Tehran and its satrap Bashar Assad.

No viable alternative

Part of the problem was that moderate Arabs did not have the knowledge or the skills to take on the ideologically-motivated groups backed by the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC.) They had an inflated reliance on buying influence with cash and relied on weak secular politicians and groups with questionable support bases. They were also heavily reliant on US leadership and support at a time when the US was in *de facto* partnership with the self same IRGC-backed groups to defeat ISIS in Iraq, and with the Kurdish PYD/YPG in Syria – a group that had little ideological or even emotional connection to the Arabs. President Obama’s years were particularly difficult because his Middle East policy during the crucial 2008-2016 period was geared towards an accommodation with Iran. The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) traded a pause on the nuclear programme in exchange for recognising “Iran’s equities.” The Sunnis of Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and Lebanon suffered the consequences. The lack of a Sunni regional power able and willing to stand up to Iran was not the only problem. Also, those four countries lacked any Sunni political or military group that had the organisational capability to win on the battlefield *and* the political nous to be marketable to the West. ISIS and Al-Qaida were formidable Sunni militant groups; but they were also globally proscribed terror organisations. In Iraq and Syria many non-terrorist Sunni armed groups emerged in the past twenty years but they were divided, largely ineffective in lengthy, attritional confrontations, and generally had a weak grasp of geopolitics and diplo-

macy. Moreover, they lacked charismatic leadership respected by the wider Sunni community. In short: the Sunnis had no answer to Hasan Nasrallah.

A hero comes along

On the eve of 7 October 2023 the Sunnis were at their nadir. Then Israel launched its war against the Axis of Resistance and everything changed. Two actors stepped up to seize the opportunity: Turkey, as the “Sunni” regional power (albeit a secular one), and Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) as the local Sunni militant group. The combination proved highly effective. Under the protection of the Turkish army and under the watchful eye of Turkish intelligence, HTS implemented a policy that allayed all the usual fears about Sunni disunity, disorganisation, and radicalism. A model was built on military professionalism, administrative efficiency, and political discipline. The 27 November blitzkrieg that swept Assad from power turned HTS into a household name. The HTS project, however, was years in the making, largely Turkish-incubated, discreetly encouraged by the US and other Western powers, and implemented by clever young Syrian Islamists. For Sunnis, it was a stunning turnaround.

The end of Sunni rule in Iraq will forever be associated with the toppling of the Saddam Hussein statue in Firdos Square. In Syria, Assad’s statues have also been torn down and dragged through the streets in every city, symbolising an end to Alawite rule. The difference, of course, is that in Syria it happened at the hands of Syrians, not an invading army. That’s not to say that foreign powers were not intimately involved; but the job was done in a smarter way and at less cost than sending in 150,000 troops.

On 13 December Turkey’s National Intelligence Organisation (MIT) chief Ibrahim Kalin was driven around Damascus by none other than HTS leader Ahmad al-Sharaa. He prayed at the Umayyad mosque and strolled around the Old City of Damascus. Conspicuously absent were the Iranian militias that had once

dominated the capital. The message is not subtle, and it is clear: Turkey is a Great Power willing and able to act decisively.

Mission not yet accomplished

Syria’s stabilisation and transition to a form of representative democracy will require much political and financial investment. It will also be in part contingent on Sharaa’s readiness to move away from political Islam and share power. Ankara and its partner Qatar have taken it upon themselves to guide the process and guarantee desirable outcomes for regional and international stakeholders. That includes Europeans, who are already reaping the benefits of regime change in Damascus on the migration front. Voluntary refugee returns from Turkey are now running at 20,000 a day.

Syria comprises the four central squares on the Middle East chess board and its capture is a geopolitical triumph for Turkey. Iran continues to project significant, if weakening, influence in Iraq. As long as the Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMFs) continue to exist, Syria faces the threat of destabilisation on its eastern border. Iraq is an oil-rich country run by Iran-backed elites, both Sunni and Shia, with poor services, weak governance, and eye-watering levels of corruption. It is ripe for “smart” regime change. There too the Sunnis will make a partial comeback, this time in partnership with secular and nationalist Shia politicians not tainted by twenty years of misrule.

The powers that are shaping the Middle East today have identified the agents of chaos: the PKK, the Resistance Axis, and political Islam. In the emerging order, Sunnis will be given a chance to lead; but it won’t work out well for them unless they become truly inclusive and responsible actors willing to embrace international law and multi-party political systems. If the lessons of the past twenty years are properly heeded, ex-jihadists and ex-Baathists might have a second chance.