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# Syria After Assad's Fall: Between International Rivalry and the Redrawing of Influence Maps



## introduction

As 2025 begins, Syria stands at a historic crossroads following the fall of Bashar al-Assad's regime in December 2024. While this marks a major shift, the country's future remains uncertain. Syria now finds itself in a complex equation of opportunities and challenges, as regional and global powers compete to reshape its political and economic landscape.

The return of Donald Trump to the White House has further complicated the situation. Washington is reassessing its Middle East strategy, raising a critical question: Will the U.S. impose new political arrangements to secure its interests, or will it continue prioritizing economic deals while minimizing direct military intervention?

However, the United States is not the only player in this equation, as regional powers such as Turkey, Iran, Russia, and the Gulf states, alongside China and the European Union, are all seeking to shape the new Syria according to their strategic interests. Amid this complexity, Syria finds itself facing decisive choices: will it become a battleground for major power rivalries, or will it manage to assert its own agenda and exploit economic opportunities to rebuild itself? This is particularly pertinent given the economic and security dilemmas and the collapse of state institutions.

## ■ Trump's Approach to Syria: New Shifts or Continuity?

During his first term, Trump's Syria approach was marked by inconsistency—first withdrawing from northern territories, only to reverse course under internal and external pressure. Now, with a bolder and more aggressive stance in his return to office, he appears inclined to abandon traditional diplomacy in favor of economic and security deals that directly serve U.S. interests.

Trump sees Assad's fall as an opportunity to curb Iranian influence in the region. He is likely to intensify economic sanctions on Tehran. Although his relationship with Russian President Vladimir Putin was previously pragmatic, Russia's continued military presence in Syria could become a point of friction if Washington perceives Moscow's actions as an attempt to expand its influence.

Although Trump appears inclined to conclude trade deals to arrange world affairs, including in the Middle East, to bolster American economic interests—which might prompt him to adopt a more pragmatic approach with the new rulers in Syria and their key backers (Turkey and Qatar)—he may, on the other hand, seek to revive the "deal of the century." This is evident in his allusions to the displacement of Palestinians from the Gaza Strip, in response to journalists' questions about whether Egypt and Jordan might accept Palestinians displaced from Gaza: "Both of them will do that". Additionally, he may support Israel's ambitions to retain the border areas it occupied from Syria under the pretext of protecting its borders on the eve of the fall of the Syrian regime. He had previously stated in August 2024, before his electoral success, that "Israel's territory appears small on the map, and I have long thought about how it could be expanded."

### ■ Regional Rivalry: How Will the Balance of Power Be Reshaped?

Turkey, closely monitoring the developments, views Assad's fall as a chance to solidify its grip on northern Syria. Ankara may seek a new deal with Trump's administration that secures its control over border areas while assuring Washington that it will not escalate operations against the Kurds. However, Turkey faces the challenge of balancing its strained relations with the West against its deepening ties with Russia, which remains a key Syrian stakeholder.

Iran, meanwhile, has suffered significant setbacks in Syria, which it may seek to compensate for through its local agents and its clandestine networks. With Trump's return, Tehran faces the risk of renewed escalation—through harsher sanctions or increased U.S. support for Israeli strikes targeting Iranian intelligence and military assets in Syria, Lebanon, and beyond.

Israel, sought to exploit the turmoil following the collapse of the regime through airstrikes that destroyed the Syrian army's strategic capabilities. It also breached the 1974 disengagement agreement and advanced up to 15 kilometers into the provinces of Quneitra and Daraa.

Although Western mediators have reassured that the new administration in Syria will not pose a threat to any country and will adhere to the disengagement agreement, political and security voices within Israel contend that the fall of Assad's regime—which paved the way for a coalition of Sunni groups led by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham—could present a strategic challenge, especially with the increasing Turkish influence supplanting the diminishing Iranian presence. Other opinions, however, suggest that this change might prove beneficial for Israel by weakening the Iranian presence along its borders.

Consequently, the Israeli government views the new rulers as unreliable in the long term despite their promises. It may therefore seek to pressure the Trump administration into persuading it to maintain control over strategically important positions that have been recently occupied—foremost among them Al-Sheikh Mountain—under Israeli military oversight. Yedioth Ahronoth has revealed an Israeli plan aimed at establishing an "enclave" for the Israeli army 15 kilometers inside Syria and a "sphere of influence" with intelligence control extending 60 kilometers inward. Thus, Israeli involvement may play a key role in efforts to destabilize Syria by exacerbating the social fissures created by the conflict among Syrian society's components .

Russia retains a strong military presence in Syria but may need to recalibrate its strategy in response to shifting U.S. policies. Moscow will likely attempt to position itself as a mediator among Syrian factions to maintain its role as a stabilizing force while safeguarding its military bases and economic interests in Syria. It may seek to include them in any upcoming negotiations with the American administration and the European Union regarding the potential peace plan in Ukraine.

For Gulf states, Assad's fall presents an opportunity to expand their regional influence through reconstruction projects, but they will demand political concessions.

Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar see economic investments in Syria as a means to counterbalance Iran's influence, provided a future Syrian government aligns with their divergent regional priorities.



## ■ Russia and China: Old Influence Amid New Changes

Russia has long been a key supporter of Syria, dating back to Soviet-era alliances. During the Syrian conflict, Moscow intervened militarily in 2015 to protect its naval base in Tartus and maintain regional influence. Now, with Assad gone, Moscow is attempting to adapt to the new reality by repositioning itself strategically, seeking to build relationships with the new administration in Syria through Turkey and the UAE. This approach aims to ensure its continued presence in warm waters and pave the way for future economic cooperation, particularly in the energy and reconstruction sectors.

China, by contrast, has pursued economic influence rather than military involvement. Beijing, which favors "soft power" diplomacy in the Middle East, may extend financial aid and long-term development plans to integrate Syria into its Belt and Road Initiative. This would grant China strategic leverage without direct military engagement. Chinese firms have already begun assessing large-scale infrastructure projects, backed by soft loans that position Beijing as a key player in Syria's reconstruction.

## ■ The European Union: The Dilemma of Politics and Economics

Despite its lack of military presence, the European Union remains a significant player in Syria through economic aid and humanitarian assistance. The challenge for Brussels is determining how to provide financial support without inadvertently propping up a government that fails to meet human rights standards. In addition, the eagerness of some European countries to weaken Russia's role in Syria may not be shared by other international and regional players. Consequently, European influence will be subject to competition from more flexible donors, particularly the Gulf states.

A senior European diplomat told The Guardian: "We won't sign a blank check—any financial aid will be contingent on clear political reforms." This cautious stance reflects Europe's desire to balance humanitarian efforts with geopolitical considerations, especially as Turkey and the Gulf states assert greater influence in post-Assad Syria.

## ■ The Turkish and Qatari Role: Influence Through Economy and Politics

If there is a clear winner from Assad's fall, it is Turkey. Since the Syrian conflict began, Ankara has played the roles of mediator, military force, and economic beneficiary, making it the dominant actor in northern Syria today.

Turkey's influence has expanded through strategic coordination with Washington, positioning itself as the primary U.S. partner in shaping Syria's future. A likely tacit agreement between Ankara and Washington will allow Turkey to maintain control over border areas, while offering assurances to the U.S. regarding Kurdish forces' integration into Syria's new political order.

Turkey is also leveraging its economic power—Turkish companies are already involved in reconstruction projects, backed by Qatari funding. Syria may also become a key market for the disposal of Turkish goods during the reconstruction phase, supporting the Turkish industrial sector.

Since the conflict's onset, Doha has been a key backer of the opposition and is now shifting its role to a financial enabler, funding infrastructure, housing, and energy projects in northern Syria. This allows Qatar to maintain influence while ensuring that neither Russia nor Iran regains a foothold in the country.

## ■ The UAE and Saudi Arabia: Competing for Influence Through Different Approaches

Although the UAE and Saudi Arabia are strategic partners, their approaches to Syria are entirely different. The UAE, despite its reserved engagement with the new rulers in Damascus, adopts a politically pragmatic approach. It seeks to build relationships with all parties to secure its role in Syria's reconstruction. This strategy makes it more open to engaging with Russia, China, and various Syrian factions to safeguard its investments in the energy and infrastructure sectors. Therefore, the UAE may cooperate with the new Syrian government if it obtains guarantees regarding certain political, social, and security issues, ensuring that Iran does not regain its previous influence and that investment projects do not face security risks.

This approach aligns with Saudi Arabia's objectives to some extent. However, Riyadh adopts a stricter strategy aimed at balancing regional powers, focusing on curbing Iran's influence in the new Syria. It seeks to support a government more aligned with its regional vision and leverages its economic and political influence to achieve this goal. While Saudi Arabia is open to cooperation on reconstruction efforts, it conditions its participation on securing a greater role for Riyadh to counterbalance Ankara's significant influence in the Syrian file.

### ■ The Political Challenge: Who Will Lead the New Syria?

In the wake of the political vacuum following Assad's fall, a new Syrian administration has begun to take shape, with the rise of political and technocratic figures striving to strike a delicate balance between competing factions.

After the collapse of Bashar al-Assad's regime in December 2024, a transitional government was formed under the leadership of Mohammad Al-Bashir, the former head of the Syrian Salvation Government, to manage the transition period with the goal of establishing political stability and restructuring state institutions. Al-Bashir, an engineer with an Islamic political background and a pragmatic approach, represents a shift away from the traditional security-based rule. In his first statement after being appointed, he declared: "Syria needs practical solutions, and we will not allow it to become a battleground for endless conflict. We will work to build balanced international partnerships that serve the interests of the Syrian people."

Alongside him, Asaad Al-Shaibani, a diplomat educated in Turkey, was appointed as Minister of Foreign Affairs. Meanwhile, Murhaf Abu Qasrah, a former military commander in Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, took over the Ministry of Defense—a move reflecting the government's intent to maintain a balance between military strength and civil administration.

Additionally, with Sharaa appointed as the head of the transitional phase by military factions—who subsequently dissolved themselves and integrated into a unified national army—he has gained legitimacy and the authority to implement decisions, manage state affairs, and initiate the transitional process. His appointment has received the endorsement of several regional powers, most notably the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Qatar, and Turkey. This official backing grants him the authority to conclude agreements, sign deals, and represent Syria before the international community as the leader of the transitional phase.

One of the biggest challenges facing this government is balancing relations with regional and international powers. On one side, Turkey and Qatar, both of which played a significant role in supporting the armed opposition, seek to ensure that the new government's policies align with their interests. On the other side, the United States and the Gulf states, particularly Saudi Arabia and the UAE, are keen on fostering a moderate government that does not fall entirely under the influence of Ankara and Doha.

### ■ Is Syria Moving Toward a New Economic Model?

As the global landscape shifts, Syria's new government faces a strategic dilemma: Should it rely on traditional military alliances, or pursue economic development through international partnerships and investments? Damascus is likely to focus on attracting Chinese and Gulf investments to revitalize key sectors such as energy, agriculture, and infrastructure while reducing its dependence on Russian military support.

Transforming Syria into a regional economic hub could be the key to its stability, especially if it succeeds in maintaining a balance between international powers without falling into dependence on any single side. If the Syrian government manages to create a stable investment environment, major powers will compete economically rather than engaging in direct military confrontations.



## ■ Can Syria Seize the Opportunity, or Will It Remain a Battleground?

The interim government in Syria is not merely a temporary administration; it represents the first phase of a broader political restructuring. Its success will hinge on its ability to navigate the conflicting interests of regional and international powers while managing security and economic challenges with strategic foresight.

While Turkey and Qatar remain the most influential players in the current equation and seek to gain Washington's trust to play a greater role in the Syrian file, the Gulf states will not remain idle and will attempt to shape the landscape to safeguard their interests. Additionally, Arab states and Turkey may find themselves compelled to cooperate in the face of Iranian and Israeli attempts to destabilize Syria. Despite the contradictions between Israeli and Iranian interests, the latter, alongside Russia, is striving to maintain a foothold in Syria.

The coming days will be critical in determining the course of the new Syria—whether it will succeed in building a stable and independent system or remain hostage to the conflicts of major powers.