



# Syria: The Crossroad of Middle Eastern Uncertainty

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ISBN 978-5-907845-24-4



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# Contents

- 3 I. A baker's dozen of years  
in transformation
- 9 II. Agenda for Syria: Institutions
- 14 III. Agenda for Syria:  
Territorial realignment
- 19 IV. Emotional aspects  
of statehood
- 21 V. Syria and neighbouring countries

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# I. A baker's dozen of years in transformation

For nearly a decade and a half now, the word “transformation” has arguably been the most popular term to describe the Middle Eastern developments, including transformation of societies and economies, political systems and institutions, foreign policies and international alliances, strategies pursued by non-state and state actors, and regional and global powers. In a word, transformation of everything in the whole wide world. Presumably, this is enough time to at least begin to see the general outlines of a new regional order. However, each year something happens that compels analysts to start their reflections anew with the timeless acknowledgment of uncertainty of the current situation.

Changes have unfolded in cyclical patterns. The tumultuous upheavals of the early 2010s were followed by a relative slowdown towards the end of the decade, only to give way to a new escalation. This process can be divided into four phases.

## *First phase*

The first phase lasted from 2011 to approximately 2013–2015 (varying by country). It was a period of mass uprisings, regime changes, weakening statehood, and integration of moderate Islamist forces into the legal political framework in most countries in the region.

## *Second phase*

The second phase began around 2013–2014 in some countries and in 2015 in others. It was marked by a *revanche* launched by anti-Islamist forces in Egypt and Tunisia, along with the emergence of a more defined – compared to the first phase – structure of armed conflicts.

In Libya, the 2014 elections to the House of Representatives formalised the internal East-West face-off that persisted into the following decade, regardless of changes in the institutional façade of the political system.

In Yemen, the military operation launched against the Ansar Allah movement by a Saudi Arabia-led coalition of countries cemented the political landscape in 2015. It set Ansar Allah and the former ruling party, the General People's Congress, against the "legitimate" government (Shar'iyah) and its ally, the Southern Transitional Council, which pursued its own agenda.

In Syria, the deployment of a Russian military contingent in the autumn of 2015 allowed the government in Damascus to survive for nearly a decade, providing an opportunity for political reforms and progress towards a political settlement.<sup>1</sup> As is well known, Damascus failed to seize this opportunity. Like Libya and Yemen, Syria also experienced a reconfiguration of its conflict. Kurdish forces emerged as an independent (and major) player, ISIS<sup>2</sup> took control of a significant territory, and after the establishment of de-escalation zones, the Syrian opposition, which was based in Turkish-controlled areas, began forming territorial government bodies. This phase concluded in 2019–2020.

### *Third phase*

Over three to four years that followed, a trend emerged towards reduced armed conflict intensity, though not towards resolving them. ISIS appeared to have been defeated. Despite numerous initiatives to settle conflicts in Libya, Syria, and Yemen, none achieved a lasting peace. Other countries that had also experienced painful transformations showed a noticeable trend towards weaker political opposition and

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<sup>1</sup> See Vasily Kuznetsov, Vitaly Naumkin, Irina Zvyagelskaya. Russia in the Middle East: The Harmony of Polyphony. 21.05.2018. URL: <https://valdaiclub.com/a/reports/report-russia-in-the-middle-east/>

<sup>2</sup> Recognised as a terrorist organisation in Russia

## FOUR PHASES OF ESCALATION IN THE MIDDLE EAST

A period of mass uprisings, regime changes, weakening statehood, and integration of moderate Islamist forces into the legal political framework in most countries in the region

A trend emerged towards reduced armed conflict intensity, though not towards resolving them

- 1 Despite numerous initiatives to settle conflicts in Libya, Syria, and Yemen, none achieved a lasting peace
- 2 A sweeping wave of protests ripped through Lebanon, Iraq, Algeria, and Sudan resulting in government overthrows in Algeria and Sudan

2011–2015

2013–2020

2020–2023

2023–2024

I

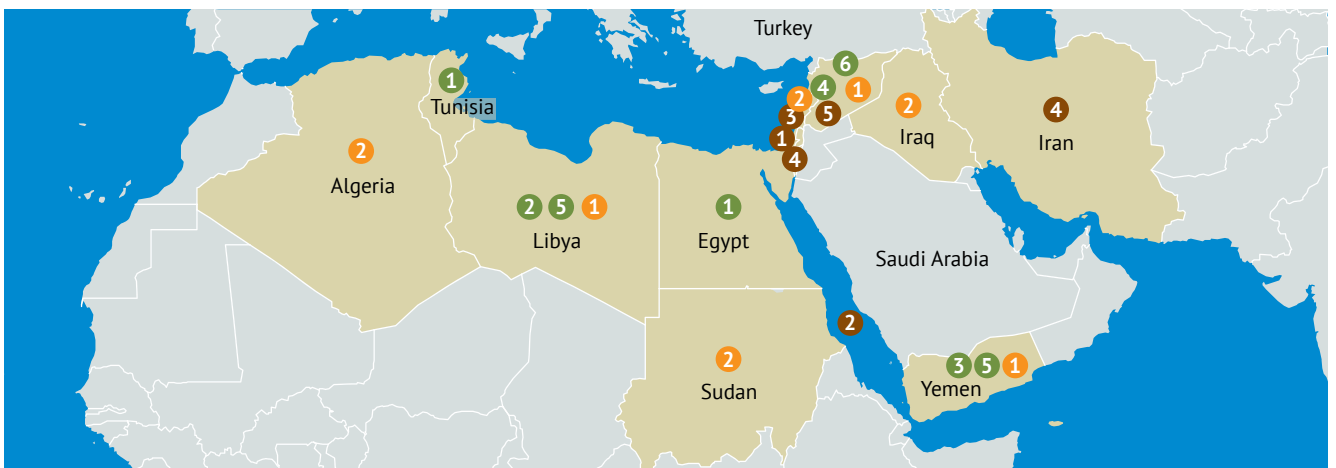
II

III

IV

- 1 Revanche launched by anti-Islamist forces in Egypt and Tunisia
- 2 In Libya, the 2014 elections to the House of Representatives
- 3 In Yemen, the military operation launched against the Ansar Allah movement by a Saudi Arabia-led coalition of countries in 2015
- 4 In Syria, the deployment of a Russian military contingent in the autumn of 2015
- 5 Reformatting of conflicts in Yemen and Libya
- 6 The Syrian opposition, which was based in Turkish-controlled areas, began forming territorial government bodies

- 1 The war in Gaza
- 2 Ansar Allah's activity in the Red Sea
- 3 Escalated tensions along the Lebanon-Israel border
- 4 Exchanges of fire between Israel and Iran
- 5 The toppling of Bashar al-Assad in Syria



**Fundamental principles underlying Russia's policy in the Middle East, in general, and Syria in particular, which are non-negotiable:**



Moscow's commitment to reinforcing Syrian statehood, protecting its sovereignty and territorial integrity



Continuing the fight against terrorism



Rejecting all forms of neocolonialism



Supporting the legitimate Syrian government



Advocating for a political settlement of the conflict in accordance with international law

Combined with tactical flexibility, adherence to these principles should suffice for Russia to continue playing a positive role in Syria and, more broadly, the Middle East

power consolidation in the hands of governments. These governments, however, faced serious economic challenges and failed to propose new social contracts similar to those that had previously ensured relative stability of the political regimes in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Back then, tacit agreements implied limited political freedoms in exchange for security and growth. Yet, in the modern context of growing international tensions, uncertainty, crises in global governance institutions, the pandemic, and food market shocks, prospects for growth have faltered.

A sweeping wave of protests ripped through Lebanon, Iraq, Algeria, and Sudan resulting in government overthrows in Algeria and Sudan. Algeria managed to recover quickly and restore internal stability, but Sudan spiralled into yet another armed conflict. Some analysts referred to this process as Arab Spring 2.0.

#### *Fourth phase*

The fourth phase is unfolding right before our eyes. In 2023–2024, the war in Gaza, Ansar Allah's activity in the Red Sea, escalated tensions along the Lebanon-Israel border, exchanges of fire between Israel and Iran, and the toppling of Bashar al-Assad in Syria have marked the beginning of a new phase.

Importantly, this phase is far from being over. For it to conclude, stable political systems must be established in Syria, Libya, and Yemen; clarity must emerge regarding Palestine's status; political crises in Lebanon and Iraq must be settled; the issue of mercenaries must be addressed; and political authorities in a number of countries must gain public trust and implement workable development programmes.

None of that is in place, and it's unclear how it might come about.

One possible reason for this transformational deadlock is that the challenges faced by regional societies are tied not only to the



institutional design of political relations, but also to their ideological and conceptual content.

It is striking that, despite the eventful nature of recent years, prevailing political narratives in the region have been enviably consistent. In most cases, we witnessed the same interpretations of liberal, conservative, Islamist, or nationalist realities. Each of them offered its own explanation of global, regional, and national events, postulated its own set of values that shape responses to change, and suggested specific strategies for political behaviour. Each such narrative also had its own set of supporters and antagonists, whose competition determined the alignment of socio-political forces in specific contexts. For instance, after a brief period of enthusiasm in 2011, the liberal camp yielded to Islamists, whose triumph was also short-lived. Conservative and nationalist forces then emerged, seemingly reflecting a global trend of the past decade. However, the fall of Bashar al-Assad's regime has reopened the door for Islamists to re-enter the political scene.

All of the above creates a sense of perpetual *déjà vu*. Years pass, generations of leaders change, the world around them transforms, revolutions give way to stagnation, yet the agenda remains the same: endless unsolvable conflicts, debates over the same social development challenges, and attempts to reconcile the dichotomies of civilisational choices.

On the face of it, the GCC countries, primarily Saudi Arabia and the UAE, have come up with an exception to the general rule. They have launched several strategic development projects, which, however, failed to make a significant difference for the broader regional situation.

Things are quite different in the case of political institutions. The "uprising of the masses" that began in 2011 tested not the narratives, but rather the institutional architecture of Arab political systems, which took shape over decades of independent development, and were simply

not designed to accommodate political participation of that magnitude. This led many experts in the 2010s to speak of a crisis of the Middle Eastern (or Arab) model of statehood and to revisit questions about whether the concept of a nation state is even applicable to regional polities, whether alternatives exist, and whether new social contracts in the region could be forged.

Traditional political transitology recipes failed to work in the Middle East (the issue of whether they are effective elsewhere in principle deserves a separate study.) Despite numerous declarations of being committed to democratic ideals, the West failed to provide support for institutional change in the region, and things came down to little more than simplistic slogans.

The upheavals revealed not only the fragility of many political systems, but also the resilience of more traditional political institutions, such as tribes, family and clan groups, ethno-religious communities, and others. Their significant adaptive capacity made it possible to form horizontal social links even amidst the critical weakening of state, as seen in Lebanon and Libya. Ironically, the stability of informal institutions took a toll on public demand for strengthening formal ones, which in some cases became completely detached from social realities. This is evidenced by electoral campaigns in the Arab world, which revealed critically low levels of public support for the ruling elites. In Syria, for instance, the destruction of whatever feedback mechanisms between society and the state were available became a key factor in the decline of the Ba'athist rule.

At the systemic level, the region faces two key goals which are to break free from the vicious cycle of entrenched interpretations of reality and to restore balance between formal and informal institutions, thereby strengthening statehood.

Both of these challenges are perhaps most evident in Syria today.

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## II. Agenda for Syria: Institutions

Though Syria's political system has undergone little formal change, it has transformed significantly during the conflict. By 2024, the system bore all the hallmarks of a fragile order with limited access. In practice, it meant a weak ruling coalition held together by personal guarantees provided by individual leaders around whom various groups of stakeholders coalesced. Its key features included an overabundance of mechanisms in charge of decision-making and control, but a shortage of mechanisms to convey demands from the lower level up; parallel power verticals, including family and clan groups, security entities, the state apparatus, the Ba'ath Party (Arab Socialist Renaissance Party), and religious institutions; and direct fusion of public administration institutions, resource distribution systems, and business entities. This system, while outwardly cohesive, was in reality highly chaotic and dependent on strong personalism for survival. The continuous efforts to reinforce it further eroded the institutional foundations of power.

The fall of Bashar al-Assad and the rise of new forces pose serious questions about the future of the state, which can only be preserved through a series of comprehensive reforms. Five following key areas stand out.

*First.* The new government must reintegrate partially or wholly independent security entities into a unified national system of armed forces and intelligence services. The country's leadership is fully aware of the importance of this objective, and has taken steps to ensure loyalty of national security forces and to integrate various militias. This process, however, will take time and require significant restraint from all parties involved.

In theory, ensuring local armed groups' loyalty shouldn't be a problem and can be achieved by integrating their leaders into the

governance system and providing them with security guarantees. In practice, this seemingly straightforward move is complicated by weak oversight over pro-government armed forces on the ground and actual external threats faced by border region residents, primarily in the southern regions.

The more complex issue lies in ensuring that, once it has assumed power, former armed opposition groups identify with the state itself rather than individual political forces.

This gives rise to more challenges such as preventing blood feuds between former adversaries; making sure that membership in security forces is perceived as everyday public service rather than access to rent; and, finally, ways for the civilian administrations to gain armed forces' loyalty.

*Second.* The second set of challenges that can be resolved only by way of conducting extensive reforms includes fostering trust in the new government among the technocratic bureaucrats, who represent the state at the local level and have suffered from mismanagement just as much as the rest of the Syrian population. As demonstrated by the experience of other countries, the absence of such trust can undermine any political regime in the long term.

The new leadership recognises the importance of maintaining interaction with the former state apparatus and has made no changes to the diplomatic corps so far.

However, the old system can hardly be retained in a number of areas, including the security sector and ideologically meaningful institutions such as the education system, the Ministry of the Economy (its influence in the state apparatus needs to be increased), and the Ministry of Local Administration and Services. The latter appears to be particularly crucial in the medium term, as one of the primary tasks will be ensuring public access to basic services. This will be no easy feat to

accomplish amid economic devastation and hyper-urbanisation, since up to 40 percent of the country's population resides in Damascus and its suburbs.

*Third.* The leadership must establish feedback channels between the government and society, as well as mechanisms for legal political expression of demands which will entail revising policies regarding political parties and movements.

The Ba'ath Party had approximately 1.8 million members in recent years, which is less than during Hafez al-Assad's era when up to 18 percent of the population was its members. Despite declining activity and popularity, the Ba'ath Party remained a meaningful tool for consolidation and elite renewal, as well as local governance. It was the only body whose members were sufficiently skilled to be able to balance the interests of various societal groups at the local level. Six decades in power allowed the Ba'ath Party to gain administrative expertise, while simultaneously eroding other governance mechanisms. Following the repeal of Law No. 8 in 2012, the party legally transitioned to self-sufficiency, managing its immense assets of its own accord.

This raises several questions: What should be done with the assets owned by the Ba'ath Party, which are now officially managed by various state agencies? Who will be able to use the competences gained by the party cadres? And what new governance mechanisms will replace those of the Ba'ath system?

As a reminder, in Egypt under Anwar Sadat (just like in the Soviet Union during perestroika), the ruling party was dismantled from inside out through formation of separate platforms that eventually gave rise to new parties. The Ba'ath Party has the potential to carry out this kind of transformation. However, Syria embarked on a different path and effectively froze the Ba'ath Party's activities. Tunisia employed a similar mechanism and dissolved the Democratic Constitutional Assembly. Initially, new forces like the Ennahda Movement (Renaissance Party) and

later Nidaa Tounes (Call of Tunisia) tried to take its place. When this failed, a deep crisis broke out in Tunisia's party system. Syria's mature tradition of party politics does not rule out such risks.

Two scenarios are likely to play out given the circumstances. Either military-political organisations morph into political parties, or traditional institutions of societal self-organisation, such as tribal groups and ethno-religious communities, take centre stage. These processes may well occur simultaneously, effectively Lebanonising Syria. However, unlike Lebanon, where communal self-organisation and strong local leadership traditions have continued uninterrupted, Syria has largely lost them. Reconstructing it under current circumstances appears highly improbable.

*Fourth.* Separating state agencies from sources of rent will be among the most critical challenges for the new government. This involves more than combating corruption, but redefining the *raison d'être* of state institutions. It is not so much a how-to methodological question, but more a value-based inquiry into "what" to do and "why" to do it that stems from the fundamental understanding of the purpose of the state.

*Fifth.* The concept of the political system's inclusivity is directly related to *raison d'être*, but remains ambiguous in modern-day Syria.

In its narrowest sense, it, without a doubt, refers to the inclusion into the political system of a variety of entities that once represented the Syrian opposition and have now come to power. Over the past several years, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham<sup>3</sup> consolidated control over most factions in Idlib, but failed to become the sole representative of the opposition forces. Ironically, achieving consolidation now that it has come to power will pose an even greater challenge for it due to the lack of a single strong adversary, on the one hand, and opposing visions for Syria's future, on the other hand. Questions remain about how the new elite will form and who will be part of it and who will be excluded.

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<sup>3</sup> Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham – Organisation for the Liberation of the Levant – is recognised as a terrorist organisation and banned in Russia.

In a broader sense, inclusivity entails representation for all Syrians. This could follow a consociational model, as seen in Lebanon and Iraq. Quite naturally, the new government and especially its international partners will push to replicate the experiences of neighbouring states. However, even if we turn a blind eye to the fact that neither Lebanon, nor Iraq can be considered models of stable and effective political systems, we cannot forget about restrictions imposed on consociationalism by Syria's ethno-religious makeup. Sunnis comprise three-quarters of Syria's population, with other confessional groups being highly fragmented, which makes proportional representation impractical. Similarly, Arab dominance makes proportional ethnic representation unviable. Instead, efforts should focus on protecting minority rights. The third option, regional inclusivity, is doubtful and is complicated by the conflict-driven population redistribution.

Another approach to inclusivity could involve incorporating a broad spectrum of ideological perspectives in the political system. This raises questions about the return to power of officials from the former regime (and the potential for lustrations, which failed in Iraq) and the kind of restrictions that may be imposed on creating political parties. Will regional or ethno-religious parties be allowed (likely not), and how will Islamist activity be regulated? Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham's history makes Islamist participation in the government unavoidable. Truth be told, Islamists are represented in the political systems of most other Arab countries, but their representation tends to be limited to moderate factions and implies strict bans on radicals. Criteria for distinguishing between the two vary across different countries and remain unclear in the context of a new Syria.

The political integration of Islamists has not brought them political dominance in any country, and their efforts to Islamise political systems have failed. This is why they strive to Islamise societies across the board which, in turn, calls for overseeing individual institutions.

This underscores the importance of the ministries of education, justice ('adala), and Awqaf. In recent years, the Ministry of Awqaf gained

extraordinary powers to oversee the religious life and infrastructure. However, historically, Syria managed its religious sphere through decentralised systems and complex relationships among various institutions and leaders. Some of these leaders remained loyal to Damascus during the conflict, while others joined the opposition. Deciding who will manage Syria's religious infrastructure today is as critical as addressing the Ba'ath Party's legacy.

Overcoming the above issues will pose a challenge for the new government. On the one hand, they will desperately need the support of external forces, without which it will be nearly impossible to improve the economic situation and secure public loyalty during the period of transition. On the other hand, to implement the necessary reforms and address the complex issues outlined above, they will have to demonstrate a commitment to Syria's national sovereignty and their willingness to act in the nation's interest.

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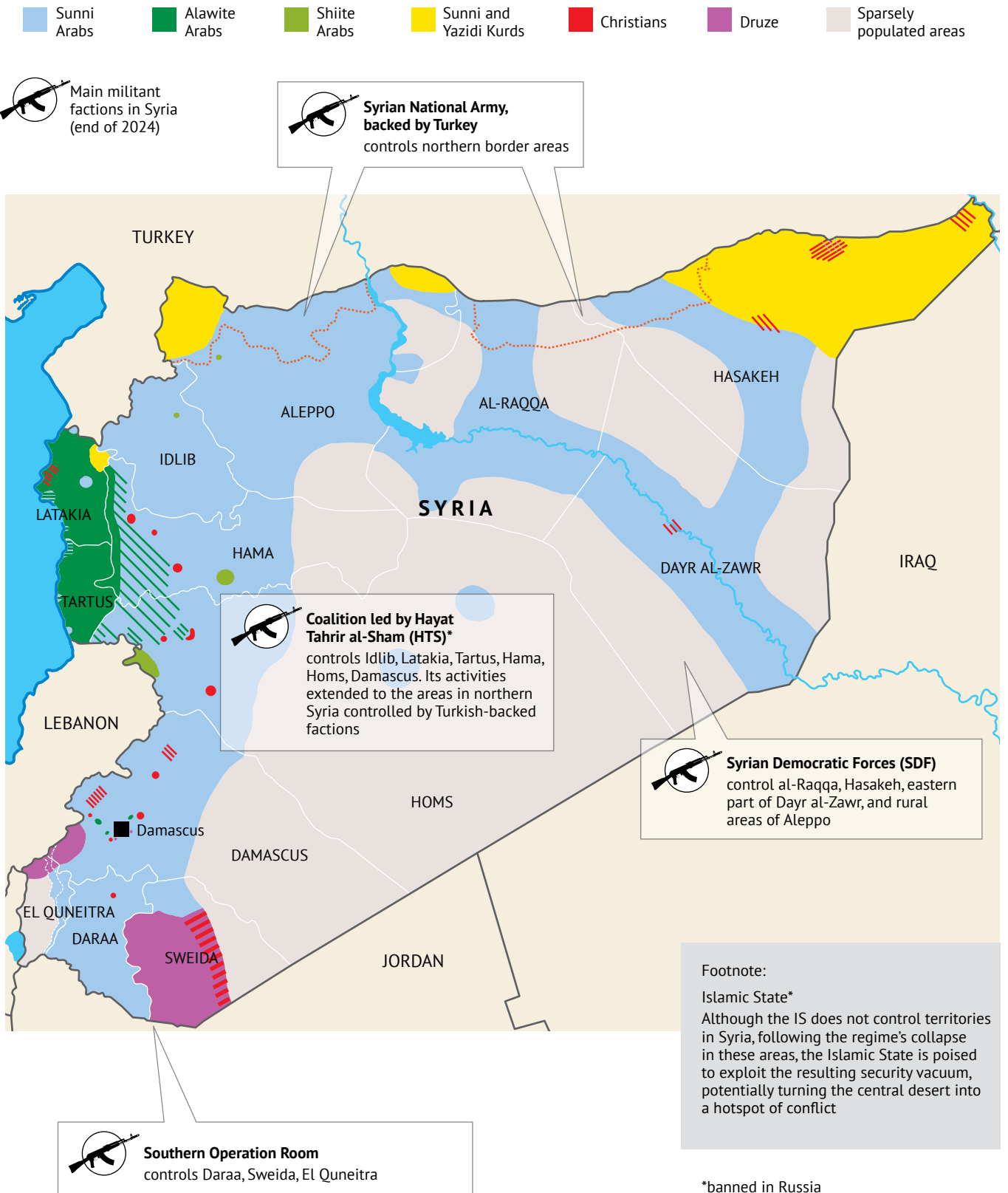
### III. Agenda for Syria: Territorial realignment

So far, the discussion has focused on the functional aspects of the political system, but there is a host of issues related to its geographical dimensions, including boundaries and administrative-territorial arrangements. Today's agenda includes a variety of options ranging from fragmentation of Syria to various forms of decentralisation.

The fragmentation of Syria, or forgoing its territorial integrity, is arguably the worst way to conduct territorial realignment. Romanticised narrative about establishing several states (Alawite, Sunni, Kurdish, and Druze) similar to the Mandate-era model have little basis in reality. There are no guarantees such entities would succeed. Recent global



ETHNO-RELIGIOUS GROUPS AND MAIN MILITANT FACTIONS IN SYRIA



developments suggest that instead of one conflict-ridden state, we are likely to see multiple unstable states, none of which would have the economic potential to survive.

Moreover, any change to borders sets a dangerous precedent for the entire region. While the post-colonial agreements that shaped the modern-day map were imperfect, and the circumstances surrounding their development and adoption were none other than flawed, the region has existed within these borders for nearly a century now, and revisiting these agreements could open Pandora's box.

In this regard, expansionist ideas expressed by a number of political forces in Israel and Turkey appear dangerous. Attempts to implement these ideas will pose a threat not only to Syria, but to these countries as well, and their identity will be called into question. Certainly, there should be no talk of annexing (or acknowledging the annexation) of Syria's southern regions, including the Golan. Even the mere threat of this scenario playing out could be used by Syrian Islamists and nationalists as a consolidating factor.

Another realignment option includes a variety of strategies to decentralise Syria, including federalisation, which has so far been rejected by the authorities.

Regarding decentralisation, its principle is theoretically declared as an almost imperative by all Arab states. However, the situation is more complex in practice. Typically, the discussion revolves around choosing between administrative decentralisation, which implies delegating authority from the centre to the periphery; economic decentralisation, which involves the distribution of resources; and political decentralisation, which entails regional representation in national governing bodies. The first type is implemented relatively often, the second less frequently (e.g., in Lebanon), and the third almost never, unless federalisation is in question.

The very idea of decentralisation or even federalisation in the case of Arab countries implies a social contract between the elites of individual regions and the groups inhabiting them regarding the distribution of resources and rent. The most striking example of this model today is Iraq, whose constitution provides for the allocation of oil royalty among regions in proportion to their population.

However, other examples can be found in the 20<sup>th</sup> century as well. For instance, although the unification of Saudi Arabia occurred through the annexation of various regions into Najd with the use of force, the status of each region was determined individually based on the existing balance of power. As Arabist Grigory Kosach demonstrated<sup>4</sup>, while the elites of Hejaz were not directly co-opted into the country's political leadership, they assumed a dominant position in several domains of state policy. In the history of the UAE's formation, similar agreements between the ruling families of the emirates were even more pronounced. The refusal of Qatar and Bahrain to join the federation was directly linked to the inability to establish the necessary balance. Finally, in the Sultanate of Oman, modern statehood emerged from the union of two entities, namely, the Sultanate of Muscat and the Imamate of Oman. In Yemen, the process unfolded first through the unification of the country's southern regions into South Yemen and later through the merger of the south and north.

All these examples (monarchic Libya and Iraq can be listed among them as well) confirm the 20<sup>th</sup>-century Arab world's trend towards forming states by consolidating disparate regions into one whole. In all these cases, the trajectory unambiguously followed the path from fragmentation to unity through local elite groups striking agreements that were followed by centralisation. Successful examples of reverse process from a (hyper) centralised state to a state comprised of autonomies or a federation are nonexistent. Iraq is probably the only, albeit highly controversial, exception to this rule.

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<sup>4</sup>Косач Г.Г. Саудовский дипломатический корпус: этапы эволюции источники формирования. М.: Ин-т Ближнего Востока, 2008.

The Syrian case, however, stands apart as well. Historically, the country has been characterised by a high degree of territorial fragmentation. One can speak of several culturally, politically, and economically distinct areas that have taken shape historically within its borders, namely, Damascus and Aleppo, which have competed with each other for centuries; the coastal region of Latakia; and the country's inland areas, particularly Al-Hasakah. Economically, before the conflict broke out, Damascus and its suburbs, Aleppo, Homs, Hama, and Al-Hasakah, were Syria's most developed regions. However, Idlib, which in recent years has become one of the most densely populated regions, has remained an agricultural and economically underdeveloped province.

Both Hafez al-Assad and Bashar al-Assad sought to address decentralisation, with the former passing Law No. 15 On Local Government on May 11, 1971, and the latter enacting a law No. 107 of the same name on October 1, 2011. However, as the conflict unfolded, the chances of seeing these laws ever implemented dwindled. Damascus increasingly viewed decentralisation as a direct threat to Syria's unity, while territories beyond its control have developed independent economic systems, which aligned either with Iraqi Kurdistan or Turkey.

These factors have created a brain-wracking puzzle for Syria's new leadership. On the one hand, decentralisation appears to be a promising strategy to integrate regional elites into governance and to share responsibility for the country's future with them. In theory, it could also offer a potential resolution to the Kurdish issue, leveraging the experience gained during the Damascus-Kurdish authorities' talks.

On the other hand – and the Assad regime's logic comes into play here – decentralisation amidst grave external threats, fragile institutions, weak central authorities, economic devastation, and economic disparities between the regions, many of which are simply unable to sustain themselves, risks leading the country to disintegration.

Co-opting regional elites into national governance bodies rather than formal decentralisation might be a potential alternative given the circumstances.

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## IV. Emotional aspects of statehood

The emotional aspect of strengthening statehood is also at play.

The startlingly swift collapse of Bashar al-Assad's regime can be attributed not only to the institutional crisis, but also to the simple fact that, in a hyper-militarised country that has endured a decade or so of civil conflict no one was willing to take up arms to defend the ruling group. While covert operations and informal agreements helped the insurgents prevail, these factors are still secondary to society's unwillingness to support the regime.

This marks a significant difference between the 2024 developments and 2011, when Syrian society was deeply divided. The events of 2024 bear similarities to Tunisia and, to a lesser extent, Egypt in 2011, where leaders like Ben Ali or Mubarak were also left without anyone to defend them.

During the height of the Syrian civil war, both sides were driven to consolidate by an existential sense of survival where defeat meant physical annihilation.

Today, the absence of the existential dimension of the conflict opens doors to compromise. However, compromise alone is not enough to build a new state. Spanish philosopher and sociologist José Ortega y Gasset noted in his essay *Invertebrate Spain* that understanding national unity as a dynamic system requires both centrifugal and centripetal forces. While centrifugal forces remain in the system naturally from the way it had been formed, centripetal forces are shaped through "an inspiring plan for a life in common": "nations are made and go on living by having a program for the future."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> *Invertebrate Spain*. Howard Fertig, New York, 1974

In fact, proposing a project of the future has indeed become a crucial step forward for the Arab states such as the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, and several others in strengthening their sovereignty in recent years. In the case of Syria, the way the new authorities envision the country's future is important in this context.

Considering the history of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), the first thought that comes to mind is the establishment of an Islamic state. Over the years of HTS's control over Idlib, it has shown a capacity for internal transformation towards reduced radicalism and greater pragmatism. Today, its positions are closer to those of the Muslim Brotherhood.<sup>6</sup>

The experiences of some countries suggest that HTS's interpretations of religious norms could align well with the idea of a "civil state" (*dawla madaniya*), encompassing protection of the ethno-religious minorities, procedural democracy, and other elements. But the problem lies not in the situation-specific decisions, but the overall approach on which they rely. Critics of Islamism argue that its political flexibility is purely opportunistic and does not negate its ultimate goal of establishing a true Islamic state. This implies that threats to minorities will not go anywhere no matter how soft the Islamists' position may be.

Clearly, within the Islamist logic, assuming control over the education system, the judicial system, and the Ministry of Awqaf is of paramount importance. In fact, the initial steps taken by the new authorities demonstrate efforts precisely in these areas.

Several areas of potential conflict are in the offing. One is inside the Islamist camp between radicals and moderates, as well as among supporters of various currents of political Islam; and between Islamists and nationalists of different stripes. Syria's territorial integrity, primarily linked to Israel's expansionist ambitions, could serve as a point of consolidation. While Syria currently lacks the capacity for waging a full-scale war against Israel, the push to restore the country's territorial integrity retains its unifying potential at the level of ideology.

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<sup>6</sup> Recognised as a terrorist organisation and banned in Russia.

It is worth noting, however, that the attempts to focus on restoring territorial integrity were made by Bashar al-Assad's administration as well.

The post-conflict recovery effort could serve as another idea behind unifying Syrian society. In addition to sizable financial investment, this requires fostering an ideology of collaboration among different social strata for a shared future. A promising approach could involve converging Syrian nationalism with Islamism while leveraging Syria's historically strong civil society tenets, both traditional that are rooted in community activities, and modern.

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## V. Syria and neighbouring countries

All of these Syrian statehood-related issues (though not exclusively Syrian) have become particularly urgent against the backdrop of a rapidly changing regional balance of power. The weakening positions of Iran, Hamas, and Hezbollah in Lebanon, along with the fall of Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria, have created a window of opportunity for other regional players, primarily Israel and Turkey, as well as the Gulf monarchies. However, the situation is more complex than it might appear at first glance.

Regarding Israel, the country's foreign policy has traditionally been explained by Israelis themselves as an imperative to ensure their own security, including in the Golan. Indeed, massive barrages of strikes on Syria's military infrastructure in late 2024 were supposedly aimed at taking military capabilities away from a potential adversary. However, today the issue is also about further territorial expansion, which is much harder to justify by security concerns. This expansion rather fits into the logic of Jewish ultranationalism, which largely draws on historical mythology. The question remains as to what exactly Israel is aiming

for: establishing direct control over certain (which exactly?) territories or creating a wide buffer zone, possibly under the aegis of a friendly political regime. This question, as well as the reaction to Israel's actions not only from Damascus but also from the Druze population in southern Syria, remains open.

The situation with Turkey is equally complex. Ankara's interest in inflicting a strategic defeat on the Kurds and possibly creating a buffer zone along the Syrian-Turkish border is understandable. The outcome here will primarily depend on what the Kurds and the United States which supports them will do. The United States is interested in maintaining leverage over its Turkish partners and the new Syrian authorities, but the extent of their commitment to investing in the Kurds under the Trump administration remains uncertain. It's also unclear whether the positions of the Kurds and the Islamists holding key positions in Damascus may converge.

The Gulf monarchies which feel triumphant in Syria and Lebanon, especially given the new Lebanese president's alignment with Saudi Arabia, represent another group of actors. Unlike Iran, Turkey, or Israel which are militarily engaged in the Syrian affairs, the Gulf monarchies can strengthen their position primarily using economic leverage. This mitigates threats, but also limits the prospects for enhancing their influence in the country. Potential escalation of the Syrian-Israeli conflict and the likely radicalisation of new Damascus authorities clearly do not align with the interests of the Arab monarchies. Truth be told, the interests of various GCC countries vary, and their alignment is not always clear. While Qatar has always been in opposition to the Assad regime, the United Arab Emirates and, to a lesser extent, Saudi Arabia had shown willingness, until recent events, to improve relations with Damascus. Considering these circumstances, the mediation efforts of Abu Dhabi and Riyadh, which maintain relations with all Syrian actors, could come handy.

Iran, whose interests suffered the most from the events of late 2024, should not be overlooked when discussing the role of external actors in Syria. Following the critical weakening of Hezbollah and the fall of the Assad regime, it appears that the Islamic Republic has lost



a significant portion of its clout in the region. However, things can change. Ultimately, the portion of Lebanon's population whose interests Hezbollah represents did not go anywhere, nor have the competencies and resources gained by the organisation over decades of activity. The same applies to Syria. Tehran has invested heavily in building a support base on the ground, and if the new Syrian authorities fail to consolidate society, Iran may have another shot at restoring its influence, even if only partially.

Finally, Damascus itself also matters. At this juncture, it appears to be facing several foreign policy goals.

**First**, it needs to achieve as much international legitimacy as it can, which is why we witness numerous visits by high-ranking foreign diplomats, the opening of embassies, and a meeting of foreign ministers in Riyadh. Notably, the temporary nature of the current situation is almost always emphasised.

**Second**, it must strengthen its position inside the country, preventing it from turning into a battleground for armed rivalry between various external forces. This will require not only addressing the numerous domestic political development issues mentioned above, but also ensuring economic support (the lifting of sanctions and the interest on the part of the Gulf monarchies seem critically important). Additionally, it will depend on the new authorities' ability to maintain a complex balance of interests among regional and global external actors, including Russia. It is also important to what extent Damascus will be ready to adhere to its declared strategy for implementing the provisions of UN Security Council Resolution 2254.

**Third**, the forces that have come to power in Damascus need to identify their foreign policy priorities. Will they act in the interest of strengthening Syrian statehood, or will a group that is more focused on bolstering Islamist forces across the region prevail? In the latter case, the outlook for Syria overcoming the crisis any time soon does not look too good.



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The situation in Syria gives rise to numerous questions. This, in itself, is not unusual, since everyone has become accustomed to perpetual Middle Eastern uncertainty. What is unusual, however, is the intensity of the situation at hand, and future developments will significantly impact the entire Middle East. The importance of this situation is not only dictated by Syria's geographic location or the intertwining interests of nearly all regional and most global actors in the Syrian conflict, but also by the nature of the challenges haunting the republic. To varying degrees and in less acute forms, these challenges have appeared and continue to manifest in most countries of the region.

As for Russia's policy in Syria, it must account for the above uncertainties and the variety of possible scenarios.

Indeed, there are fundamental principles underlying Russia's policy in the Middle East, in general, and Syria in particular, which are non-negotiable. These include Moscow's commitment to reinforcing Syrian statehood, protecting its sovereignty and territorial integrity, continuing the fight against terrorism, rejecting all forms of neo-colonialism, supporting the legitimate Syrian government, and advocating for a political settlement of the conflict in accordance with international law.

Combined with tactical flexibility, adherence to these principles should suffice for Russia to continue playing a positive role in Syria and, more broadly, the Middle East.

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