



Balances of Weakness: Syria's Post-Assad Security Sector Governance

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Abstract

Syria today finds itself in a post-Assad but not post-war phase. While the regime has fallen, the country remains fractured, and Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS)—now in control of Damascus—faces the immense challenge of consolidating power. A unified command and control structure is essential for political, economic, and social reconstruction. To establish order and form a national army, HTS must either coerce or persuade other factions—including Kurdish, Druze, and southern groups—to disarm and accept its rule. However, the HTS lacks the military strength, economic resources, and political legitimacy to enforce or incentivize such unification. More concerning is that HTS appears to be pursuing a statist, victory-driven approach to unification, reminiscent of Assad's failed strategy. Like Assad, HTS shows little willingness to share power or accommodate the political demands of rival actors.

Syria's historical pattern of deep internal fragmentation and repeated violations of its sovereignty by external powers continues to shape its post-war trajectory. The presence of foreign actors—Turkey, Israel, the United States, and Russia—exploits this fragmented landscape, further undermining the emergence of a stable and sovereign Syrian state. This paper argues that the path to lasting peace lies in inclusive political governance that reflects Syria's social and ideological diversity, and in restoring national sovereignty through mutual restraint by international actors. Without these foundations, Syria is likely to remain trapped in a cycle of instability, fragmentation, and foreign interference.

Introduction

The fall of the Assad regime and the collapse of its army after years of a bloody civil war in Syria is a source of both joy and concern for many within Syria and beyond. Celebrations are justified: Syrians deserve to reclaim and rebuild their country after decades of estrangement, and the international community hopes for the restoration of security following years of destruction, mass displacement, and the spillover of terrorism. Yet, concerns are hard to ignore as the successor of Assad family ruling Damascus is a radical Islamist armed group that is at odds with many of the other armed groups and designated as a foreign terrorist organization by many countries and the United Nations. While Syria is freer from prisons and Syrians feel safer, the new rulers are yet to unify the divided territories, ensure justice and accountability, reconstruct the economy, and build a new political system.

Central to political and economic reconstruction is the success in forming a new security force (military, police and intelligence) that could provide security for all Syrians. It is safer to say that Syria is now in a post-Assad, but not a post-war phase. Neighboring countries and

Europe hope that the return of Syrian refugees will alleviate domestic economic and political pressures. Creating conditions for voluntary return requires ensuring safety and adequate services for returnees. Syria's security sector now is still as fragmented as before Assad's fall. The multiplicity of armed groups poses a serious challenge to stability, both domestically and regionally, and therefore to refugee return. The bloody sectarian violence in the Syrian coast in March 2024 is evidence that loose command and control over armed actors could exacerbate insecurity and violence, and more central control is a pre-requisite for order, and stability.¹

Syria's history shows persistent fragmentation of its security sector. The only exception to this rule was the period between 1982 and 2011, during which Syria managed to build an oppressive security apparatus, widen the base of regime supporters via more inclusive economic policies, and exercise more sovereignty over its territory. The end of this exception was due to the failure of suppression to produce order, and the limits of the economic model to substitute demands for political change. A rebellion erupted in 2011 as part of the Arab Spring, followed by foreign forces such as Iran, Turkey, the US, and Russia entered the scene to protect their interests against what they perceived as threats to their national security.²

Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham's (HTS) victory over Assad does not automatically translate into control over the remaining armed groups. Unifying the country under the new rulers of Damascus would require either the use of force to coerce Kurdish, Druze, and southern armed factions to disband, or the provision of political and economic incentives to encourage their peaceful integration. HTS is currently unable to use force due to its military weakness relative to other groups and appears unwilling to offer the political incentives and guarantees necessary for integration into a future political system. The dire economic situation further undermines HTS's credibility in making material promises and limits its capacity to effectively form a unified army. The resulting vacuum, caused by the absence of a unified force to control borders and enforce agreements with external actors, opens the door to foreign presence—Turkey, Israel, Russia and the United States—through pre-emptive actions that continue to undermine Syria's sovereignty.

In 2025, HTS is confronting the same structural challenges in unifying security structures that Assad faced following his military gains after the Russian intervention in 2015. Ironically, HTS is now approaching the same factions with the same statist, victory-driven strategy that previously failed under Assad. Both HTS and Assad share similar limitations: neither is militarily strong enough to coerce others, economically equipped to offer meaningful incentives, nor politically willing to share power.

This policy paper argues that unless the broader political concerns of the armed groups are addressed, these groups will continue to resist disarmament and the integration of their command structures into a national army, opting instead to retain control over their territories. To break this vicious cycle of fragmentation and foreign intervention, Syrians—together with the international community—should prioritize two core objectives: a) enhancing the inclusivity of the political system and promoting good governance, so that armed groups feel secure enough to disarm and integrate into a national security structure that serves all Syrians; and b) safeguarding Syria's sovereignty, both rhetorically and in practice, to reduce the incentives for continued foreign interference that erodes the country's legitimacy.

¹ Federica Marsi, 8th March 2025, "Syria updates: Gov't forces battle al-Assad loyalists; hundreds killed," Al Jazeera. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/liveblog/2025/3/8/syria-live-news-fighting-between-government-forces-and-al-assad-loyalists>

² For more on fragmentation of Syria's security sector please see: Ibrahim, Abdulla, 2025, "Rules of the Exception: the trajectories of Syria's security sector governance," CCDP, forthcoming.

A New Syrian Army Formation: Political, Economic, and Geostrategic Aspects

Beyond the technical and operational aspects of forming a new Syrian army, two key major factors will shape its structure in terms of consolidation or fragmentation. The first is the degree of inclusivity or exclusivity in the political system and institutional development for governance—whether good or bad. The second is the degree to which Syria's sovereignty is respected by other countries, and vice versa.

Army Formation is a Political Rather Than a Security Process

Both Assad and HTS have approached the integration of armed groups into the army from a security rather than a political perspective. Unlike Assad, HTS is not a formal army yet, and the size of its forces does not constitute a majority when compared to the broader spectrum of armed groups, which spans between 134,000 and 210,000 fighters. Syria's Democratic Forces (SDF) are estimated at 70,000–100,000;³ the 8th Brigade Forces in the south at 2,000–5,000; Druze forces at 2,000–5,000; ISIS forces at around 7,000; the Syrian National Army (SNA) at 70,000;⁴ and HTS forces at approximately 30,000 at max.⁵ This makes HTS forces barely 12% of the total. If half of the SNA forces will align with HTS, the ruling coalition could command up to 30% of the total. Still, such consolidation seems unlikely without sufficient resources for an HTS-led coalition, especially given the international support afforded to Kurdish, Druze, and southern forces. This leaves HTS with few options: either offer concessions for the armed groups to consolidate or maintain the fragmented *status quo*.

While there is no clear, open rejection of HTS authority, the Kurds, the Druze, and Daraa remain reluctant to concede their semi-autonomy to a central authority. This autonomy, developed since 2011, reflects aspirations for greater political and economic inclusion than Assad once offered. However, like Assad, HTS lacks the military and economic strength to compel these groups to disband or integrate into a new national army. Armed groups are, in fact, representations of broader political and social constituencies. These constituencies may be willing to concede autonomy if they are guaranteed inclusion in a truly representative political system and safeguarded from future marginalization.

Assad's tolerance of the creation of the Kurdish People's Defense Units (YPG) in 2011 and the formation of the Syrian Democratic Forces in 2015 was born out of necessity.⁶ Damascus and Qamishli then tacitly agreed to an informal non-aggression pact that gave Assad space to focus on opposition forces advancing on the capital. Thanks to Russian and Iranian support, Assad managed to survive and retake parts of Aleppo and the south. Despite feeling victorious by 2019, retaking Kurdish areas by force remained unthinkable due to his relative weakness, the SDF's relative strength after its fight against ISIS, and the protection of U.S. troops. Several attempts to negotiate the SDF's integration into the Syrian army were always part of a broader political and economic reintegration of the northeast into the Syrian state.

³ VoA, 8th Dec 2024, "US to stick with Kurdish allies in Syria," <https://www.voanews.com/a/us-to-stick-with-kurdish-allies-in-syria-7892183.html>

⁴ MEE, 7th Dec 2024, "The Syrian National Army: Rebels, thugs or Turkish proxies?" <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/who-are-syrian-national-army>

⁵ Al Jazeera, 6th Dec 2024, "Who are Hayat Tahrir al-Sham and the Syrian groups that took Aleppo?" <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/12/2/hayat-tahrir-al-sham-and-the-other-syrian-opposition-groups-in-aleppo>

⁶ Lt. Cmdr. Joshua M. M. Portzer, 2024, "The People's Protection Units' Branding Problem Syrian Kurds and Potential Destabilization in Northeastern Syria. Military Review. <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/Military-Review/English-Edition-Archives/May-June-2020/Portzer-Peoples-Protection-Unit/>

Ongoing HTS-SDF negotiations indicate that these issues persist. The Kurds want a role in an inclusive political system, wish to maintain the SDF as a unified bloc under the Syrian army umbrella, seek shares of northeast natural resources, and demand the continued existence of the local governance structure of the Autonomous Administration.

On 10 March 2025, HTS and SDF signed an initial agreement intended to pave the way for further discussions on the political system, army structure, public administration, and resource distribution. Context matters: the SDF was under U.S. pressure to engage with Damascus to avoid chaos amid potential U.S. withdrawal⁷, while HTS needed to demonstrate progress after sectarian violence on the coast that left hundreds of Sunnis and Alawites dead.⁸ The agreement outlined follow-up meetings, with all outcomes—including failure—still possible.

HTS's approach to accommodating Druze forces is unsurprisingly similar to Assad's, given the balance of power. Since 2014, Druze forces and communities have developed and maintained control over their security and religious affairs. Tensions have consistently followed any attempt by Damascus to reassert control or challenge religious leadership, especially amid severe economic constraints. Consistently, Suwayda resisted HTS's symbolic and physical attempts to assert authority. Despite an earlier agreement to deploy HTS security forces, local Druze militias rejected an HTS convoy to the city. A subsequent understanding to keep local police staffed by Druze and respect local political self-rule is in line with previous agreements with Assad. Israeli statements about protecting the Druze in Syria are another deterrent against possible future HTS interference.⁹

Parts of Daraa is also within the Israeli-declared buffer zone intended to prevent HTS military presence. Armed factions in Daraa have remained independent since the civil war's onset due to geographic distance from northern battlefields and ties with the U.S., Jordan, and the UAE.¹⁰ While these factions were nominally integrated into the Syrian army in 2018, they remained effectively under Russian and Jordanian influence.¹¹ The region retained relative autonomy despite Assad's attempts to reassert control. Daraa's factions are mostly tribal and secular, and historically at odds with HTS due to ideological differences and past violent clashes. Ahmed Ouda, a key leader in Daraa, did not attend HTS-led unification meetings and is known for his disdain for HTS leadership.¹²

Geopolitical Competition Undermines Sovereignty

Syria is caught between competing foreign forces. The onset of the civil war in 2011 enabled local non-state actors to connect with foreign powers, escalating regional threats. This, in turn, drew external intervention aimed at mitigating those threats, often through alliances with local actors, thus perpetuating a cycle of insecurity and eroding Syria's sovereignty.

⁷ NBC News, 5th February 2025, "Defense Department drafting plans to withdraw all U.S. troops from Syria after recent Trump comments." <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/national-security/dod-drafting-plans-withdraw-us-troops-syria-recent-trump-comments-rcna190726>

⁸ Federica Marsi, 8 March 2025, "Syria updates: Gov't forces battle al-Assad loyalists; hundreds killed," Al Jazeera. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/liveblog/2025/3/8/syria-live-news-fighting-between-government-forces-and-al-assad-loyalists>

⁹ AP, 10th March 2025, "Syria's Druze seek a place in a changing nation, navigating pressures from the government and Israel." <https://apnews.com/article/syria-druze-damascus-alsharaa-sweida-war-ace48a6e138dc1197cca77c3d25d829b>

¹⁰ Ibrahim, Hamidi, 2020 September, "The South Syria Deal: Two Years Later," New Lines Institute. <https://newlinesinstitute.org/state-resilience-fragility/international-intervention/the-south-syria-deal-two-years-later/>

¹¹ The Syrian Observer, July 2021, "Russian General Meets 8th Briade Commander." <https://syrianobserver.com/foreign-actors/russian-general-meets-8th-brigade-command.html>

¹² Kian Sharifi, 17th Jan 2025, "Who Is Ahmed Al-Awda, The Man Who Could Be A Threat To Syria's New Rulers?" Radio Free Europe. <https://www.rferl.org/a/ahmad-al-awda-syria-leadership-threat-islamists-uae-ties/33279067.html>

The early foreign intervention came from Hezbollah and other Iranian-backed militias, supporting Assad against radical Sunni groups in 2011-2013. Simultaneously, the rise of Kurdish forces—viewed by Turkey as a national security threat—prompted direct Turkish intervention and future partnership with the Syrian National Army (SNA) that dominated the northwest. ISIS's rapid expansion into Syria justified U.S. and International Coalition military presence and partnership with the SDF. Iranian involvement triggered Israeli strikes against perceived Iranian interests across Syria. These actors did not want a sovereign Syria that could constrain their freedom to act against their enemies.

Post-Assad geopolitics continue to impact sovereignty and security force development. Turkish and Israeli actions reflect a deep distrust of HTS's control over Syrian territory. Turkey still sees the SDF as a threat and demands it sever ties with the PKK and expel foreign fighters. To that end, Turkey is applying pressure in multiple forms, including drone strikes against SDF targets in the northeast—a clear violation of sovereignty. Similarly, the Israeli government distrusts HTS's ideology and foreign fighter presence and is taking expansive proactive steps to prevent any formation of hostile military capability near its borders.¹³

HTS, like Assad, lacks the capacity to deter such infringements. Where Assad turned to Russia for hard and soft security guarantees, HTS has currently no options except Turkey.¹⁴ Turkey's expected expansion into central Syria may unsettle not only Israel but also Iraq, the Gulf, and Egypt.¹⁵ However, Turkey's offers is no match with Iran and Russia's in terms of the possibility to provide ground fighting forces, sophisticated and hard weaponry. HTS balancing ties with Russia to offset Israeli pressure is unlikely, given that Turkey is seen as the future security guarantor and Syria lacks the economic means to purchase advanced Russian military systems. The lack of mutual trust between Turkey, Israel, and Damascus's new rulers continues to undermine state legitimacy and sovereignty.

Balances of Weakness

Syria appears to be heading toward a balance of weakness—where no actor is strong enough to assert control over others, yet each is capable of resisting consolidation. HTS is expected to maintain control over Damascus, Homs, Hama, Idlib, and parts of Aleppo, concentrating its limited resources on improving local security and service delivery. Sanctions relief remains unlikely due to demands for the removal of foreign fighters from the army. Yet, these fighters are crucial for HTS stability in the short term. Their dispersal creates vulnerabilities, especially in Damascus, and their loyalty provides a counterbalance to other Syrian factions and effective deterrence against Iran and Assad remnants. Foreign fighters now command the Presidential Guard and Damascus Security—strategic roles meant to secure HTS leadership against coups.¹⁶

Outsourcing external security to Turkey allows HTS to focus on internal policing. The collapse of Assad's police left a significant void. Reappointing former intelligence head Anas Khatab as Interior Minister signals continuity of the same functions he assumed in Idlib. Still, capacity gaps remain. In early 2025, only half of Damascus's 20 police stations were

¹³ Ehud Yaari, 21 March 2025, "Avoiding an Israel-Syria Showdown (Part 2): An Opening for New Negotiations," Washington Institute for Near East Policy. <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/avoiding-israel-syria-showdown-part-2-opening-new-negotiations>

¹⁴ Ahmed Sharawi, April 2025, "Turkey reportedly plans to take control of airbases in Syria," Long War Journal. <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2025/04/turkey-reportedly-plans-to-take-control-of-airbases-in-syria.php>

¹⁵ The Sunday Times, 3rd April 2025, "Israel hits Syria with airstrikes in 'warning for future.'" <https://www.thetimes.com/world/middle-east/article/israel-syria-airstrikes-warning-bcwlsfsjb?region=global>

¹⁶ France 24, 20th December 2024, "'Foreign jihadists' in Syria leader's pick for army officers: monitor, experts." <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20241230-foreign-jihadists-in-syria-leader-s-pick-for-army-officers-monitor-experts>

operational, with serious staffing shortages. The city needs not only counterterrorism forces to face ISIS and regime loyalists, but also everyday policing to address crime and urban unrest. Rebuilding law enforcement will require rehabilitating stations, training personnel, and equipping agencies with investigative tools. Policing is also central to justice—inability to arrest and prosecute criminals risks undermining public trust.

HTS is working quickly to fill the void. As of February 2025, 700 recruits had completed a three-week crash course in basic policing, with longer training planned.¹⁷ Some 200,000 applicants await selection decisions.¹⁸ HTS salaries are reportedly 10 times higher than under Assad, though inflation may erode their competitiveness.¹⁹ Securing HTS's large territorial holdings will demand significant investment. For now, the army is likely to remain in cities to counter terrorism and sabotage. This shapes army doctrine and limits HTS's ability to expand militarily into Suwayda, the south, or northeast.

Israeli protection of Druze areas and continued interventions in the South are likely to influence the doctrine of any new national army. Depending on how the southern population reacts to Israeli actions, local armed factions may choose to align with either Israel or Damascus. Security threats originating from the South, coupled with ongoing challenges to HTS governance, could result in a tense and unstable border between Damascus and southern regions. If Israeli airstrikes persist and frequent ground incursions escalate and result in Syrian casualties, consolidation of some local armed groups with Damascus might happen, along with emergence of anti-Israel clandestine military capacity.

In the North, a U.S. decision to extend its military presence in Syria would reduce pressure on the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) to make concessions. Conversely, a U.S. withdrawal could accelerate negotiations. Under sustained political and economic pressure, HTS may be compelled to offer serious concessions to the SDF, potentially resulting in a nominal political and military integration—although such an outcome would likely face opposition from Turkey. Even if an agreement between HTS and the SDF is reached, its implementation would be difficult. The SDF remains too large and costly to absorb into HTS structures without undermining the economic benefits of any political deal. A successful integration would mark a rare precedent in the integration of Marxist/secular and Salafi/Islamist movements and armed groups.

The current dynamics suggest that fragmentation is likely to persist for the foreseeable future. Some smaller armed groups may naturally disband due to a lack of resources to maintain their independence or in response to opportunistic offers from HTS to integrate. However, the main ideological blocs—the Kurds, Druze, and southern factions—will be considerably more difficult to assimilate without a comprehensive political agreement. The challenges of integration also extend to certain Islamist armed groups, such as Jaish al-Islam, that do not align with HTS's doctrinal positions. While external actors may push for nominal integration under a loosely defined national framework, achieving meaningful integration

¹⁷ France 24, 19 Jan 2025, "Syria's new HTS-led regime reinforces police force with the help of its fighters." <https://www.france24.com/en/middle-east/20250119-syria-s-new-hts-led-regime-reorganises-police-force-with-the-help-of-its-fighters>

¹⁸ Al Arab, 24th Jan 2025, "Focusing on Sharia in Training Syrian Police stirs worries." <https://www.alarab.co.uk/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AA%D8%B1%D9%83%D9%8A%D8%B2-%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%89-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B4%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%B9%D8%A9-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%AA%D8%AF%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A8-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B4%D8%B1%D8%B7%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%8A%D8%AB%D9%8A%D8%B1-%D9%82%D9%84%D9%82%D8%A7?amp>

¹⁹ NPR, 20th December 2024, "Who's been funding the HTS rebels now in control of Syria?" <https://www.npr.org/2024/12/19/nx-s1-5232809/syria-hts-funding>

will require significantly greater resources, deeper political accommodation, and, most importantly, time.

Breaking the Cycle: Where to Start?

There are no quick fixes to consolidate Syria territorially and institutionally. Europe might be trying to create an impression of engagement via making short term progress in security through intelligence sharing to prevent threats to Europe, and economically through some partial sanctions lifting and increased humanitarian assistance. That is not enough. Breaking the cycle of fragmentation and division is a must, and it requires two priorities to be always guiding the policies: strengthening inclusive governance and restoring Syrian sovereignty. New leadership must focus on building a political system that reflects Syria's religious and ideological diversity. Participation, accountability, and protection against abuse must be institutionalized.

Syria's neighbors should initiate dialogue on shared security concerns. Europe can provide platforms for negotiation and use its leverage to discourage destabilizing behavior. Ultimately, policies toward Syria should serve the interests of its people—not just its rulers. Only by rebuilding institutions and protecting sovereignty can Syria contribute to regional stability and reduce external threats.

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