

BRIEFING
PAPER

434

April 2026



Post-Assad Syria in transition

Islamist-led interim government and diminished Kurdish self-rule conditioned by the regional power struggle

Toni Alaranta & Olli Ruohomäki

FIIA

FINNISH
INSTITUTE OF
INTERNATIONAL
AFFAIRS

BRIEFING PAPER 434 April 2026

Post-Assad Syria in transition

Islamist-led interim government and diminished Kurdish self-rule conditioned by the regional power struggle

Summary

- Since the fall of Assad's dictatorship in December 2024, Syria has undergone a tense and fragile political transition. The country is now ruled by President Ahmed al-Sharaa, a former jihadi commander who is heading a transitional government.
- As al-Sharaa has sought to consolidate central authority and rebuild the state, his rule and legitimacy have been challenged, particularly by Syria's ethnic and religious minorities, including the Alawites, Druze, and Kurds.
- The Kurdish population, concentrated in northeast Syria, would have preferred a federal state with autonomy, but have been forced by the al-Sharaa government and Turkey to accept a much more restricted form of local self-rule.
- Both the new transitional government and Kurdish self-rule have been significantly constrained by external powers, particularly Israel, Turkey, and the United States.
- The new Syria is no longer in Iran's sphere of influence, but has instead become a battleground between Turkey and Israel in a new regional power struggle defined by increasing multipolarity.

Authors



Toni Alaranta

Senior Research Fellow
The European Union and Strategic Competition
Finnish Institute of International Affairs



Olli Ruohomäki

Visiting Senior Fellow
Global Security and Governance
Finnish Institute of International Affairs

Introduction

After the fall of the decades-long dictatorship of the Assads in December 2024, Syria has witnessed an intense and fragile attempt to consolidate a new centralized power structure. This has taken the form of a Syrian Transitional Government (STG) led by Ahmed al-Sharaa, once a notorious commander of the Salafi-jihadist organization Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS). One of the key aspects of this ongoing state-building process has been the combination of negotiations and military confrontation between the new government and Syria's various religious and ethnic minorities, such as the Kurds, Druze, and Alawites. At the regional level, the collapse of the Assad regime also reduced Iran's longstanding influence in Syria, as the new leadership moved away from Iran.

This Briefing Paper focuses on the first steps in state building in Syria and Ahmed al-Sharaa's role in that process. It then analyses the difficult relationship between the STG and the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), the latter having ruled over the autonomous region in northeast Syria since the start of the civil war in 2011. In addition, the paper discusses how external actors – Turkey, Israel, and the US in particular – have limited the room for manoeuvre for Syrian domestic actors, both the Transitional Government and the SDF.

Key domestic fault lines and external actors' interests

A fruitful way to approach events in Syria after the fall of Assad's dictatorship is to depict them not as the end of the conflict but rather as the beginning of its next stage. The ongoing process involves renegotiating the foundations of a new state, including its governance model and founding principles. In

December 2024, HTS, led by Ahmed al-Sharaa and backed by various Sunni Islamist and even jihadi militias, took control of most of the country and now presents itself as the Syrian Interim Government. It is clearly seeking both domestic and international legitimacy, but has not yet fully achieved either.

Syria's current tensions are rooted in the alignments formed during the civil war. Many religious and ethnic minorities, as well as some pro-government Sunnis, sided with the regime not simply because they supported Assad but rather because they were often against the Sunni Islamist opposition, including international Salafi-jihadist organizations. This was often ignored in depictions of the war that portrayed it as simply Assad against the 'Syrian people', as if there were no crucial cleavages within Syrian society. These cleavages have now resurfaced in a new context since the HTS-centred forces came to power.

Looking back at the early years of the Syrian civil war, al-Qaeda-affiliated Jabhat al-Nusra, which later became HTS, emerged in January 2012, and soon became the most powerful military force in the anti-Assad insurgency. Back then, the group openly declared that its battle was not only against the 'infidel' Alawite Assad regime, but also against other minority sects and religions it likewise considered infidels.¹ Deep mistrust towards Sunni Islamist militias has therefore existed among many Alawites, Druze, Kurds, and even some secular middle-class Sunnis since the beginning of the war. That distrust has greatly increased due to massacres

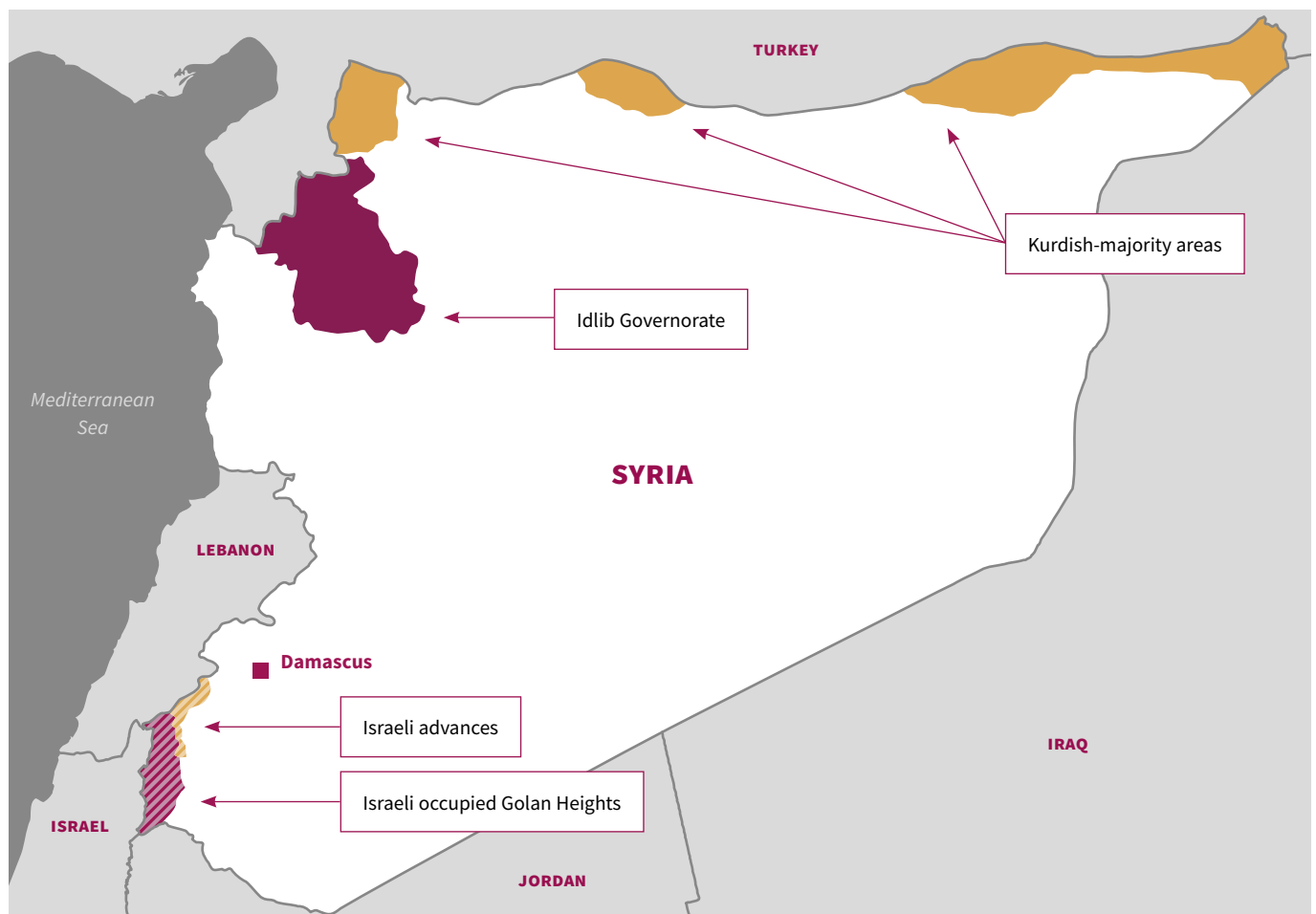
1 Bartolomei, Enrico (2018) "Sectarianism and the Battle of Narratives in the Context of the Syrian Uprising". In *The Syrian Uprising: Domestic Origins and Early Trajectory*, edited by Raymond Hinnebusch and Omar Imady, 223-241.

committed since spring 2025 by the new, unruly government forces on the Alawite coast, against the Druze community in Sweida province, and later against Kurdish fighters and civilians following the government's advance into SDF-held areas of northeast Syria in January 2026.

These long-term local cleavages and threat perceptions have been played out in the context of the rapidly changing positions of the key external powers: the United States, Turkey, Israel, Saudi Arabia, and Russia. After initial reservations, the Americans, Saudis, and Russians quickly started to build relations with the al-Sharaa government, emphasizing the need to midwife a strong central state that no longer leans on Iran and that is capable of providing some stability. Turkey, by contrast, has long been the only real external supporter of Syria's Islamist opposition forces, and early on also cultivated relations with HTS. Over the years, HTS

either accommodated or destroyed all other relevant opposition groups while consolidating its initial state apparatuses and governance model in Idlib province, which borders Turkey.

Russia, for its part, seems to have coordinated with the Turkish leadership during the crucial days of HTS's blitzkrieg in late 2024, withdrawing its military support from the Syrian regime forces and arranging for Assad and his family to be transported to Moscow. Following this non-interference, Russia has been able to build a negotiation framework with the al-Sharaa government, including attempts to safeguard its military bases in the country. At the same time, however, Moscow has provided at least some weapons to the relatively small number of Assad regime remnants in the coastal areas. It should be noted, however, that the majority of Alawite resistance groups formed over the past twelve months in the coastal regions are neither pro-Assad



Map 1. Major territorial divisions and areas of conflict in Syria

nor aligned with Russia, but have instead emerged in order to protect the Alawite community against the sectarian violence and suppression employed by al-Sharaa's forces.²

When it comes to Israel, during roughly the first twelve months following the rise of the HTS regime, it took a highly negative stance towards the new Syrian leadership. The Israeli authorities often openly depicted the new rulers as brutal jihadists who, with Turkish support, were about to establish an Islamist regime in Syria that would directly threaten Israel. Israel thus took illegal pre-emptive measures, destroying much of Syria's naval and air forces and also obstructing Turkey's efforts to implement new weaponry and military bases on Syrian soil. Netanyahu's government also strongly lobbied the Trump administration to withdraw its support from the al-Sharaa government. However, the Israeli stance has changed to some degree since January 2026, when it became clear that Trump was keen to align with the Turkish position and, most importantly, withdrew long-term US backing from the Kurdish-led SDF forces. Together with Alawite and Druze militias, the SDF had been seen by the Israeli government as a potential counterweight to al-Sharaa's centralizing project.

Ahmed al-Sharaa: from radical to pragmatist

Ahmed Al-Sharaa's transition from a jihadist leader to a global statesman is a masterclass in political survival and illustrates the power of adaptability. It demonstrates how skilful diplomacy and ideological flexibility can alter the course of history, yet it leaves open the ultimate question: can a leader truly outrun his own past? Many observers have therefore asked whether al-Sharaa and his movement, HTS, have really left their jihadist past behind, and whether he is steering Syria towards a more inclusive and even more Western-leaning political disposition.

Ahmed al-Sharaa was formerly known by his nom de guerre Abu Mohammad al-Jolani. His path to his current position began with the Iraqi resistance in 2003, when he fought against the US-led coalition in the ranks of al-Qaeda. Having served time in the infamous Abu Ghraib prison, where he met several leading jihadists, including the future ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, he eventually returned to Syria and founded the al-Nusra Front, al-Qaeda's local franchise. Over time, al-Sharaa appeared to have realized that attaining power in Syria required a break with religious fervour. He then formally severed ties with al-Qaeda and rebranded his organization as HTS. This strategic transformation from radical to pragmatist was greatly influenced by the conditions in Idlib Governorate in northwestern Syria, where the diverse population made securing broader local support essential for al-Sharaa's consolidation of power.³ Despite challenges, Idlib Governorate became known for its relative stability and institutional development, and, in this sense, HTS-governed Idlib came to resemble a state within a state in Syria. Given the broader course of the Syrian civil war, this was a remarkable achievement. It appears that the metamorphosis of HTS was thus a survival strategy that paved the way for al-Sharaa's eventual ascendancy to the Syrian presidency.

In December 2024, HTS advanced in blitzkrieg fashion from its base in Idlib, taking Damascus within a matter of days. The experience of governing Idlib then served as a blueprint for rule in the rest of the country. After being named Syria's transitional president in January 2025, al-Sharaa undertook sweeping institutional changes, including dissolving the Assad regime's Ba'ath Party along with its ruthless security apparatus, signing a declaration that initiated a five-year transitional period, and appointing a technocratic government that nominally included representatives from various religious and ethnic communities. At a deeper level, however, one could argue that the authoritarian state structure and

2 Al Tamimi, Aymen Jawad (2026) "The Alawite Insurgency in Syria: Interview with the Leader of 'Saraya al-Zhall'". 28 January. https://www.aymennaltamimi.com/p/the-alawite-insurgency-in-syria-interview-0d6?utm_campaign=post-expanded-share&utm_medium=web&utm_source=twitter

3 Haenni, Patrick and Drevon, Jerome (2025) *Transformed by the People: Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham's Road to Power in Syria*. Hurst & Company.

state-centric political culture quickly re-emerged, now under a different ideological affiliation. Some external observers, such as International IDEA, which tracks democratic development in various countries, noted that the appointment of representatives from different backgrounds to certain government positions was an important symbolic gesture suggesting that the al-Sharaa-led government was not simply a Sunni Islamist dictatorship.⁴ Yet all key ministries are staffed by al-Sharaa's loyal Sunni supporters, and many foreign jihadis have been given prominent positions in the new armed forces.

As al-Sharaa's grip on Syria solidified, Western countries started to view him as a stabilizing force in a country wrecked by years of intense conflict and mismanagement under the Assad regime. The Trump administration's acceptance of al-Sharaa became obvious during the new Syrian leader's visit to Riyadh on 14 May 2025, where President Trump was also present. American approval was then further demonstrated during al-Sharaa's meeting with Trump in the White House in November 2025. This was a remarkable moment and an outright watershed in the way the West started to view HTS and the new authorities in Damascus. No longer treated as a terrorist organization, the new government was able to start attracting international assistance and investment for the ruined economy. In this sense, the Trump administration's decision to lift sanctions and rehabilitate al-Sharaa's fledgling government from a terrorism-designated outfit to a government with a veneer of respectability indicates a more general trend to seek quick solutions by working with authoritarian strongmen.

This growing Western acceptance has been helped by al-Sharaa's pragmatic foreign policy, which has sought to distance Syria from Iran and to keep the country out of wider regional conflicts. He has severed ties with Iran and wants to keep the influence of Hezbollah at bay while carefully balancing relations with the West, Turkey and the wider Arab world, including Saudi Arabia and Jordan. He has also made positive overtures towards Israel, but this relationship remains fraught, particularly

because the Israeli army has seized Syrian territory and bombed the country numerous times since the change of government in Damascus.

The current administration has also actively sought to dispel fears of a radical Sharia-based state. Al-Sharaa has launched a "new civil contract" that prioritizes citizenship over religious identity, and he has made high-profile visits to Christian churches and Druze shrines. These visits have marked attempts to reassure minority communities that the new powerholders want a more inclusive political dispensation than was the case under the Assad regime. At the same time, the visits have also sent a message to the hardliners within HTS that religious fervour, radicalism and Sunni supremacism are not a tenable way to hold power in post-Assad Syria. In one sense, this is an example of al-Sharaa's ideological recentring. Furthermore, while Islamic values rooted in local traditions remain influential in the background, the administration has emphasized civil law in its judicial reforms, particularly in economic legislation.

“Political failure in Syria could lead to a jihadist resurgence and renewed regional discord.”

As in many other countries that have undergone a transition from war to peace, numerous challenges remain. Perhaps one of the most important issues is whether the post-Assad government can address the question of the peace dividend. With peace, people expect not only stability and economic opportunities but also a political voice. Some Syria observers argue that the most promising solution would be to implement a consociational system of peaceful coexistence and proportional political rights among the country's diverse population.⁵ Yet it is not an easy feat to turn from a fighting force into a responsible governance set-up. Hardliners within the inner power circle need to be kept at bay, while at the same time latitude must be granted to those who supported the movement's road to victory.

4 International IDEA (2025) "Syrian Arab Republic March 2025". *Global State of Democracy Initiative*. <https://www.idea.int/democracytracker/report/syrian-arab-republic/march-2025>.

5 Mühlberger, Wolfgang (2025) "Syria post-Assad: 'Power Vertical' or Consociational Covenant?" *AIES Focus* Nr. 2025/1, Austrian Institute for European and Security Policy.

As in many post-conflict settings, movements vying for power need to establish trust among the various factions that tend to emerge in violent struggles that have lasted for years on end. Then there are the difficult questions of accountability and the legacies of the past, which at some point need to be addressed. Fixing the broken social contract takes years, and this is equally true in the case of al-Sharaa's HTS. Whether a peace dividend materializes for the post-Assad government will determine the fate of the new Syria. While Syria has few friends, its strategically crucial location means that it cannot be ignored.⁶ Political failure there could lead to a jihadist resurgence and renewed regional discord.

The fate of Kurdish autonomy and pressure from Turkey

Regarding Kurdish self-rule in northeast Syria – known as Rojava (Kurdish for “Western Kurdistan”) – one can argue, following Mehmet Gürses, a well-known scholar of Kurdish affairs, that the latest developments and the agreement signed on 18 January 2026 by al-Sharaa and the Syrian Kurdish leadership do not mark the end of the Rojava project but rather its rebirth in a new context.⁷ The agreement stipulates that three SDF brigades will be incorporated into the Syrian army as whole units, and that the Hasakah division of the Syrian army will include the all-female Kurdish fighting unit. In addition, civil servants from the previous autonomous government will keep their positions while being integrated into the Syrian state bureaucracy.

The agreement thus paves the way for significantly diminished Kurdish local self-rule. This, however, is now taking place within the context of a transformed Kurdish ‘national space’, in which the Syrian Kurdish region has generated a powerful pan-Kurdish national awakening across all parts of Kurdistan and among the diaspora. This, in turn, means that the Syrian Kurdish autonomy project has expanded beyond its original, ideologically more

limited PKK-linked support base and is now winning over Kurdish constituencies more broadly.

Behind this process, Turkey has exerted strong pressure on al-Sharaa to swiftly end Kurdish autonomy in the northeast. Yet while large circles in Turkey have been cheering the defeat of Kurdish autonomy in Syria, proclaiming this a significant victory for Turkey, the reality is more complex. At this stage, Mazlum Abdi, the representative of the Kurdish-led SDF, has gained official recognition as the formal addressee with whom the interim government has now signed official state documents, initially demarcating forms of partial self-rule for the Kurdish-led region, as well as a military structure maintaining Kurdish units and police forces. Implementing this agreement is no easy task, but the first steps have now been taken. Most recently, Sipan Hamo, a commander of the Kurdish People's Defence Units (YPG), has been appointed Syria's assistant defence minister.

The STG-Kurdish agreements and broader attempts to negotiate the new foundations of the Syrian state, however, take place within an otherwise highly centralized and authoritarian context, with al-Sharaa unwilling to tolerate any challenge to his rule. The STG and the Kurdish-led Rojava emerged from drastically different political milieus: the STG from Sunni Islamism advocating a conservative, religiously inspired model of society, and Rojava from the radical, secular and egalitarian ideals of the PKK and the leftist Kurdish movement. Both movements now stand at a threshold, as their long-term agendas are being reformulated. The PKK-affiliated Kurdish group has been able to generate broader pan-Kurdish solidarity, yet it is also forced to renegotiate its place within a newly built Syrian state. The radical Islamists are also undergoing a transformation in their attempt to safeguard external legitimacy and the domestic ability to govern a heterogeneous society.

In the long run, however, the fate of the already diminished Kurdish local self-rule in Syria will depend on the main external actors and developments in the larger states of the region – Turkey, Iraq and Iran. Relations between Turkey and the US, as well as between Israel and the US, will also shape the Syrian Kurds' room for manoeuvre. This is particularly true

6 Hokayem, Emil (2025) “Syria's Unsteady Transition”. *Survival*, Volume 67 Issue 6, 237–244.

7 Medyascope, “Rojava efsanesi bitti mi?” [Is the legend of Rojava over?], 31.1.2026. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m-FdBxvmyM>.

in relation to Iran: much will depend on what comes next there, and on the extent to which the Trump administration and the Israelis are inclined to cooperate with Iranian and Iraqi Kurds in their efforts to keep Iran weak. Because of increasing pan-Kurdish cooperation and sensitivities, such regional dynamics will also affect the negotiating power of the Syrian Kurds in the years ahead.

Regional power struggle and the Iran War: impacts for Syria

All these developments still take place in a regional context that is strongly inclined to emphasize state-centric solutions and that also witnesses new forms of cooperation and competition. Some analysts have even spoken about a new Sunni conservative arc being formed between Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Qatar, Egypt, and Pakistan as a counterweight to Israel's regional hegemony. Regarding the fate of Kurdish local self-rule, Turkey remains the key external actor, forcing Kurdish militias to lay down their arms and have their local governing structures abolished or at least, in practice, subordinated under central authority. The process in Syria is also closely intertwined with Turkey's own negotiation process with the PKK and, ultimately, the broader Kurdish political movement. In Turkey, the PKK has already declared its dissolution. The imprisoned PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan and the leading figures of the pro-Kurdish DEM party have, however, signalled that safeguarding self-rule and at least the main elements of the gains won by the Syrian Kurds since 2011 remains a red line for them.

The regional impact of the US and Israeli attack on Iran is still unfolding, and its consequences will be felt for a long time. However, as noted above, al-Sharaa and his government have already distanced themselves from Tehran since the collapse of the Assad regime. During the Syrian civil war, Iran played a direct military and security role, supporting former government forces, sending advisers and fighters, and backing multiple armed groups. This intervention left a deep imprint on Syrian society, particularly among broad segments

of the population who view Iran as a central actor in military operations that targeted cities, neighbourhoods, and residential areas. The new government in Damascus has condemned the Iranian attacks against several Arab countries, rejecting any threat to their sovereignty and security.

“Syria’s transition may face serious financial challenges, which in turn could weaken the peace dividend that the country so desperately needs.”

From the perspective of the new government in Damascus, the further weakening of Iran is only good news, at least from a security and political standpoint. Tensions are nevertheless likely to remain with both Lebanon and Iraq, where pro-Iranian parties are present. The economic side of things may pose some challenges. Rising tensions in the Gulf are already sending shockwaves through energy and financial markets. Global oil flows, inflation expectations, and market sentiment are all under pressure. Although Syria itself is not in the eye of the storm, potential investors from the West and Asia may have less appetite to engage with such a volatile region. Syria's transition may therefore face serious financial challenges, which in turn could weaken the peace dividend that the country so desperately needs.

Whereas Iran's influence in Syria has greatly diminished, the strained relationship between Israel and Turkey is likely to deeply affect the country in the coming years. For some time now, Israeli foreign policy debates have increasingly framed Turkey as the 'new Iran',⁸ and Israel has been particularly nervous about Turkey's presence and strong influence in Syria, in addition to their conflicting agendas in Gaza, the Eastern Mediterranean, and the Horn of Africa. Thus, while all major external powers – Israel, Turkey, and the US – welcome Syria's escape from Iran's sphere of influence, they are likely to remain heated competitors, if not outright adversaries, in Syria. This will continue to influence the country's fragile transition in an increasingly conflict-ridden regional setting.

8 Lidenstraus, Gallia (2025) “Turkey is Not Iran, but It Is a Threat”. *INSS Insight* No 2061, 18 November. Institute for National Security Studies. <https://www.inss.org.il/publication/turkish-threat/>.

Conclusions

The thus far relatively successful state-building efforts of al-Sharaa's transitional government and, under strong external pressure, its ability to negotiate a settlement with the Kurdish administration, allow for cautious optimism about Syria's future.

The country has embarked on a difficult path of rebuilding not only formal state structures but also social trust, the latter being by far the more difficult task. This process has been hampered by recurrent sectarian violence and revenge killings, in particular against the Alawite community, but also against the Druze and other minorities. It needs to be acknowledged that being governed by a former jihadi commander is far from what many Syrians dreaming of a democratic future would have preferred. Regarding the Kurds, it is no secret that many of them would have preferred a federal state with an autonomous Kurdish region, similar to that of Iraq. The current agreement is therefore seen by the Kurds not as an ideal outcome, but as better than nothing.

The new Syria has now been emancipated from Iran's sphere of influence. This can be seen as a major gain not only for Turkey, Israel, and the Arab monarchies but also for the West. The rebuilding of Syria, however, is currently taking place in a regional context defined by profound uncertainty due to the Iran war and Israel's pursuit of regional hegemony. It is not difficult to predict that the increasingly strained relations between Israel and Turkey will be a key factor shaping Syria's regional status, especially given Turkey's position as the dominant external power supporting Syria's state-building. The US and key European states have by now thrown their support behind the al-Sharaa government, hoping that it evolves into a responsible state actor capable of generating domestic legitimacy and thus long-term stability. ●

BRIEFING
PAPER

434

April 2026

ISBN 978-951-769-854-2

ISSN 1795-8059

Language editing: Lynn Nikkanen

Graphics: Joonas Juutilainen

Cover photo: Aref Tammawi / AFP / Lehtikuva

FIIA
FINNISH
INSTITUTE OF
INTERNATIONAL
AFFAIRS

Arkadiankatu 23 b
POB 425 / 00101 Helsinki
Telephone +358 (0)9 432 7799
www.fii.fi

The Finnish Institute of International Affairs is an independent research institute that produces high-level research to support political decisionmaking and public debate both nationally and internationally.

All manuscripts are reviewed by at least two other experts in the field to ensure the high quality of the publications. In addition, publications undergo professional language checking and editing. The responsibility for the views expressed ultimately rests with the authors.

While all FIIA publications are freely accessible, they may not be republished, in whole or in part, without prior written permission from the Institute.

