

# With the Gaza War, the Possibility of a Syrian Transition Is Even More Remote

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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Brief Analysis

## Syrians inside the country and in refugee states await a true miracle, especially with their cause becoming highly internationalized and overshadowed by global events like the Gaza war.

In recent years the conflict in Syria has slipped further and further from the international spotlight. But with the war in Gaza and upcoming elections in countries [around the world](#)

<https://aawsat.com/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85/%D8%A3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%A8%D8%A7/4765431-2024-%D8%B9%D8%A7%D9%85-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%AA%D8%AE%D8%A7%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D9%84%D8%B1%D8%B3%D9%85-%D8%B5%D9%88%D8%B1%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85>, attention

on Syria has reached a new low. At this point, Syrians are waiting for a true miracle that seems neither imminent nor probable. 2024 has been dubbed the "Year of Elections" as at least 3 billion voters in 77 countries are expected to cast their votes. For millions of Syrians lacking any political voice, the new year began amidst profound political darkness. The conflict in their country is approaching its thirteenth year, and eight years have passed since the adoption of UN Resolution 2254, which has utterly failed to advance the [political transition](#)

<https://specialenvoysyria.unmissions.org/ar/%D8%A8%D9%8A%D8%A7%D9%86-%D9%85%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%A8%D8%B9%D9%88%D8%AB-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AE%D8%A7%D8%B5-%D9%84%D9%84%D8%A3%D9%85%D9%85-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%AA%D8%AD%D8%AF%D8%A9-%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A7-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%AF-%D8%AC%D9%8A%D8%B1-%D8%A3-%D8%A8%D9%8A%D8%AF%D8%B1%D8%B3%D9%86> in Syria towards the desired direction. There is a lack of regional and international will to end the proxy war and usher the country into an inclusive, fair, and truly democratic system.

This political darkness in the new year is accompanied by additional regional complexities, notably the war in Gaza, which has completely diverted attention from the Syrian issue and fractured international consensus on a solution in ways previously unimaginable. The Israeli military operation in Gaza following the Hamas's October 7 attacks significantly reshaped regional and international alignments, especially in the Middle East. The ongoing conflict has [strengthened](https://arabic.cnn.com/middle-east/article/2023/11/12/bashar-assad-speech-saudi-summit-gaza-social) [Bashar al-Assad's presence](https://arabic.cnn.com/middle-east/article/2023/11/12/bashar-assad-speech-saudi-summit-gaza-social) after years of isolation and has made Iranian proxies in the region not only more palatable, but popular in certain circles. This dramatic boost to Iran's image in the region comes after years of opposition from many Arab publics, not just to Iran's deadly military [intervention](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/ar/policy-analysis/aldtkhl-alskry-alayrany-fy-swrya-alathar-twylt-alamd) [in support of the Assad regime](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/ar/policy-analysis/aldtkhl-alskry-alayrany-fy-swrya-alathar-twylt-alamd), but also to its negative involvement in many Arab countries like Iraq, Lebanon, and Yemen. The lack of prospects for a political solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict has aided Iran in promoting the idea of "Islamic resistance" and its alleged leadership of that axis.

The war in Gaza has also opened the door for other actors to make political inroads in the Middle East at the expense of U.S. interests. Parallel to the rising popularity of Iran and its militias, Russia and China are aiming to [assert themselves](#) <https://www.aljazeera.net/news/2023/11/30/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B5%D9%8A%D9%86-%D8%AA%D8%B7%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A8-%D8%A8%D9%87%D8%AF%D9%86%D8%A9-%D9%85%D8%B3%D8%AA%D8%AF%D8%A7%D9%85%D8%A9-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%BA%D8%B2%D8%A9-%D9%88%D8%AC%D8%AF%D9%88%D9%84> as internationally acceptable powers aligned with Arab publics on geopolitical issues, especially Palestine. Seeking revenge against Western opposition to their military invasions and policies, these two influential UN Security Council members hope to [exploit](https://news.un.org/ar/story/2023/10/1124947) [the Gaza war](https://news.un.org/ar/story/2023/10/1124947) as a means of garnering favor in the region.

Turkey, a regional power and NATO member, is also hoping to profit off of the war in Gaza. Ankara 's posturing has been more in line with the Iranian, Russian, and Chinese axis and diverges from Washington and many Western countries

<https://www.france24.com/ar/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B4%D8%B1%D9%82-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D9%88%D8%B3%D8%B7/20231023-%D8%A8%D8%A7%D9%8A%D8%AF%D9%86-%D9%88%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%AF%D8%A9-%D8%BA%D8%B1%D8%A8%D9%8A%D9%88%D9%86-%D9%8A%D8%A4%D9%83%D8%AF%D9%88%D9%86-%D8%AF%D8%B9%D9%85%D9%87%D9%85-%D9%84%D8%A5%D8%B3%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%A6%D9%8A%D9%84-%D9%88%D8%AD%D9%82%D9%87%D8%A7-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AF%D9%81%D8%A7%D8%B9-%D8%B9%D9%86-%D9%86%D9%81%D8%B3%D9%87%D8%A7-%D9%88%D9%8A%D8%AD%D8%AB%D9%88%D9%86%D9%87%D8%A7-%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%89-%D8%AD%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%AF%D9%86%D9%8A%D9%8A%D9%86> that decisively oppose Hamas and support Israel's right to defend itself. Shortly after a historic visit

<https://www.state.gov/translations/arabic/%d8%ae%d8%b7%d8%a7%d8%a8-%d8%a7%d9%84%d8%b1%d8%a6%d9%8a%d8%b3-%d8%a8%d8%a7%d9%8a%d8%af%d9%86-%d8%ad%d9%88%d9%84-%d8%a7%d9%84%d9%87%d8%ac%d9%85%d8%a7%d8%aa-%d8%a7%d9%84%d8%a5%d8%b1%d9%87%d8%a7%d8%a8/> by U.S. President Joe Biden to Israel, the first by a sitting president to Tel Aviv during wartime, in which he labeled Hamas a terrorist organization committing atrocities reminiscent of ISIS's worst, Turkey issued a response that was starkly different. President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's statements (<https://arabic.cnn.com/middle-east/article/2023/10/25/erdogan-hamas-not-terrorist-organization>) rejected the terrorist label for Hamas, instead describing them as "not a terrorist organization," but "a liberation group." This characterization was particularly sensitive to the United States, a nation fighting (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/ar/policy-analysis/aljihad-alafghany-altaly-jhwd-talban-lahtwa-tnzym-aldwt-alaslamyt-wlayt-khrasan>) jihadist movements globally, including ISIS and Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan, Syria, and Iraq.

Opposition to Israel's military actions in Gaza has shifted political alignments among the myriad actors involved in the Syrian conflict; the Assad regime, Turkey, Iran, and Russia now seem politically closer than ever in the past decade. The Hamas attack on October 7 and the ensuing war further dwindled the already waning international focus on Syria, allowing Syrian and Russian forces to continue deadly attacks (<https://www.hrw.org/ar/news/2023/11/05/northwest-syria-government-uses-cluster-munitions>) against civilians in the northwest Syrian region of Idlib, an area controlled by Islamist militant groups, until October 27. This escalation coincided with the world's preoccupation with the Gaza war and Turkey's evident disregard for those attacks.

In the months following Israel's ground incursion into the Gaza Strip, U.S. forces in the region have faced a barrage (<https://www.alarabiya.net/arab-and-world/iraq/2023/10/20/%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%89-%D9%88%D9%82%D8%B9-%D8%AD%D8%B1%D8%A8-%D8%BA%D8%B2%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%82%D9%88%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D9%85%D9%8A%D8%B1%D9%83%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A7-%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%82-%D8%AA%D8%AA%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%B6-%D9%84%D9%87%D8%AC%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%AA>) of attacks by Iran-backed militias, particularly active in Iraq and Syria. Meanwhile, areas under Kurdish control—Washington's main ally in the fight against ISIS—were targeted (<https://www.hrw.org/ar/news/2023/10/26/northeast-syria-turkish-strikes-disrupt-water-electricity>) anew by Turkish warplanes in a brutal air campaign against infrastructure and energy sources, significantly impacting both Kurdish and Arab civilians in the area. This offensive was in retaliation for an attack (<https://www.aljazeera.net/news/2023/10/1/%d8%b9%d8%a7%d8%ac%d9%84-%d9%88%d8%b3%d8%a7%d8%a6%d9%84-%d8%a5%d8%b9%d9%84%d8%a7%d9%85-%d8%aa%d8%b1%d9%83%d9%8a%d8%a9-%d8%af%d9%88%d9%8a-%d8%a7%d9%86%d9%81%d8%ac%d8%a7%d8%b1-%d9%82%d8%b1%d8%a8>) on the Turkish Interior Ministry in early October, allegedly by militants from northeast Syria, a claim denied (<https://www.rudawarabia.net/arabic/kurdistan/041020234>) by the general commander of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) Mazloum Abdi in a tweet (<https://twitter.com/MazloumAbdi/status/1709600295540376019>) on X (formerly Twitter).

Repeated attacks on international coalition bases by Iran-linked militias from Syria and Iraq, along with deliberate Turkish bombings of infrastructure in northeast Syria, undermine stability in areas liberated from ISIS. Furthermore, the frequent endangerment—and recent deaths (<https://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/PRESS-RELEASES/Press-Release-View/Article/3658484/announcement-of-us-casualties-in-northeast-jordan-near-syria-border/>)—of U.S. troops has made a continued ground presence in the region unpalatable for U.S. lawmakers both Democrat and Republican. Following these events, a bill was proposed in the U.S. House of Representatives to demand the withdrawal of troops from Syria. Although this bill did not pass, it likely won't be the last attempt; vocal elements (<https://newlinesinstitute.org/state-resilience-fragility/preparing-for-withdrawal-from-syria-building-an-immigration-program-for-u-s-partners-of-operation-inherent-resolve/>) in Washington are continuing to advocate for a U.S. withdrawal from Syria and Iraq.

Against the backdrop of repeated attacks by Iran-aligned militias on international coalition bases and Kurdish Peshmerga/SDF forces and Turkey's campaign (<https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2023/10/turkeys-fidan-declares-all-pkk-ygp-facilities-syria-iraq-legitimate-targets>) to undermine a stabilization process in northeast Syria, the future appears bleak. Many Syrians expect the coming year to be filled with bloodshed and a continued proxy war on Syrian soil, leading to continued starvation, destruction, internal displacement, and a new wave of refugees heading to Europe. Until an appropriate international political climate emerges that is conducive to a serious and comprehensive

settlement for Syria, a lasting democratic transition will not be realized.

At the same time, it is likely that the geographical division in areas under the control of competing factions will lead to the erosion and perhaps permanent decline of the Syrian national identity, which became one of the first victims of the Syrian crisis. After more than a decade of conflict, sub-identities have been strengthened at the expense of a shared Syrian identity, making "[Syrian nationalism](https://www.salonsyria.com/%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%87%D9%88%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%87%D9%88%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%85%D8%B6%D8%A7%D8%AF%D8%A9/) (<https://www.salonsyria.com/%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%87%D9%88%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%87%D9%88%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%85%D8%B6%D8%A7%D8%AF%D8%A9/>) not a [sense of] comprehensive belonging capable of standing against other identity affiliations." Moreover, during the years of war, Syria has witnessed practices that, in the view of many, have led to "the [mobilization](https://scpr-syria.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/KnowWar.Identity-politics-in-Syria.SCPR_Arabic.2022.pdf) ([https://scpr-syria.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/KnowWar.Identity-politics-in-Syria.SCPR\\_Arabic.2022.pdf](https://scpr-syria.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/KnowWar.Identity-politics-in-Syria.SCPR_Arabic.2022.pdf)) of individual and collective identities and transforming them into a tool for conflict."

The collapse of Syria into separate territories under competing factions is likely to reduce the role of civil society within Syria to merely local mediators for distributing humanitarian aid. This breakdown of civil society and national belonging is to the detriment of democracy, human rights, and proper civil administration. Meanwhile, the Syrian community in the diaspora finds itself either almost solely focused on achieving tactical successes through accountability and the [missing persons' files](https://news.un.org/ar/story/2023/06/1121562) (<https://news.un.org/ar/story/2023/06/1121562>), or else striving to maintain [political pressure](https://arabic.cnn.com/middle-east/article/2023/11/16/france-arrest-warrant-syria-assad-intl) (<https://arabic.cnn.com/middle-east/article/2023/11/16/france-arrest-warrant-syria-assad-intl>) on the Syrian regime and preventing a genuine "[normalization](https://www.alaraby.co.uk/politics/%D9%85%D8%AC%D9%84%D8%B3-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%86%D9%88%D8%A7%D8%A8-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D9%85%D9%8A%D8%B1%D9%83%D9%8A-%D9%8A%D9%82%D8%B1%D9%91-%D9%85%D8%B4%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%B9-%D9%82%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%88%D9%86-%D9%85%D9%86%D8%A7%D9%87%D8%B6%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AA%D8%B7%D8%A8%D9%8A%D8%B9-%D9%85%D8%B9-%D9%86%D8%B8%D8%A7%D9%85-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D8%B3%D8%AF) (<https://www.alaraby.co.uk/politics/%D9%85%D8%AC%D9%84%D8%B3-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%86%D9%88%D8%A7%D8%A8-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D9%85%D9%8A%D8%B1%D9%83%D9%8A-%D9%8A%D9%82%D8%B1%D9%91-%D9%85%D8%B4%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%B9-%D9%82%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%88%D9%86-%D9%85%D9%86%D8%A7%D9%87%D8%B6%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AA%D8%B7%D8%A8%D9%8A%D8%B9-%D9%85%D8%B9-%D9%86%D8%B8%D8%A7%D9%85-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D8%B3%D8%AF>)" amidst [donor fatigue](https://arabic.euronews.com/2023/12/08/stopping-world-food-program-aid-raises-concerns-among-displaced-people-northwestern-syria) (<https://arabic.euronews.com/2023/12/08/stopping-world-food-program-aid-raises-concerns-among-displaced-people-northwestern-syria>) and the emergence of new international conflicts continuing to sap attention away from Syria.

Meanwhile, Syrians inside the country and in refugee states await a true miracle, especially with their cause becoming highly [internationalized](https://news.un.org/ar/story/2021/03/1072552) (<https://news.un.org/ar/story/2021/03/1072552>) and overshadowed by global events like the Gaza war, the Ukraine conflict, Houthi attacks on commercial ships affecting global supply lines, and the conflict in Sudan—not to mention the Biden administration's focus on upcoming presidential election.

Yet even with the limited attention on Syria right now, there are still options to better Syrians' lives. Until an international consensus on Syria matures, the United States, European countries, and UN organizations can prevent the exacerbation of the conflict and humanitarian crisis by genuinely pressing for a stop to military escalations across Syria and alleviating Syrians' suffering by halting the targeting of deteriorating infrastructure. Such stop gap measures are necessary for preventing Syria from becoming a haven for extremism and will help efforts to reinforce Syrian identity across territorial lines. Moreover, Syria's economic challenges can be addressed in part by a renewed focus on the issue of over-compliance with sanctions by establishing a humanitarian mechanism for carrying out regular tasks to assess unilateral sanctions/measures and attempting to mitigate their effects on civilian populations. Parallel to these measures, there must be support for an independent, geographically transcendent Syrian democratic political movement.

These measures should not allow international and regional powers to dominate and expropriate the Syrian decision-making process. By supporting an independent, inclusive, and unifying Syrian democratic movement, Western nations and international bodies can ensure that Syrian citizens have the final say and eventually secure a peaceful and prosperous future for their country. ❖

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## RECOMMENDED



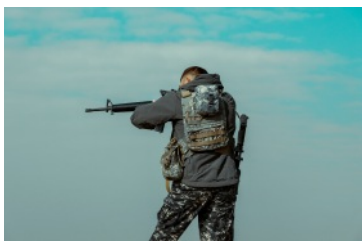
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