

# Building a Post-Assad Syria: How to Ensure the Process Reflects the Will of the People

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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## Brief Analysis

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# Syrian civil society figures join a former U.S. official to discuss local sentiments on the ground and assess the daunting challenges of building a better state.

**O**n December 19, The Washington Institute held a virtual Policy Forum with Andrew J. Tabler, Ibrahim Al-Assil, Farouq Habib (Abu Fares), Rafif Jouejati, and Mahmoud Meslat. Tabler is the Institute's Martin J. Gross Senior Fellow and former director for Syria on the National Security Council. Assil is a senior fellow at the Middle East Institute, with extensive expertise in Syrian civil society groups. Habib is deputy general manager of the White Helmets humanitarian organization. Jouejati is the principal architect of the Syrian Freedom Charter project and director of the Foundation to Restore Equality and Education in Syria (FREE Syria). Meslat is co-chair of the Syrian Democratic Council. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

## Andrew J. Tabler

Syrians now face the daunting task of rebuilding their state after the fall of Bashar al-Assad. In a country long divided, various domestic and foreign actors will vie for control, while power vacuums, minority rights violations, and terrorist violence are just some of the obstacles Syrians might face. To reconstruct the state, Damascus must address national security challenges and usher in a political transition that reflects the will and diversity of the people.

## Ibrahim Al-Assil

Throughout Syria, there is a profound sense of relief. Yet taking the governance model used in Idlib province—the former home base of the dominant rebel group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS)—and expanding it to the rest of the country will be an immense challenge. Sporadic violence is likely, among other obstacles. Political activists and opposition figures are concerned about inclusivity, power sharing, and the lack of discussion about elections. Civil society is bouncing back, with protests in the capital's Umayyad Square calling for secular governance. For now, though, Syria's leaders need to concentrate on establishing stability and security.

To move forward, the new government must be inclusive. There must be a national dialogue with representation from different voices. Freedom of expression must be guaranteed, particularly through the media. HTS leaders are the dominant voices in the current rebel alliance, but they should not be permitted to dominate the public space.

As for the role of international actors in Syria, the United States can be a constructive mediator between Kurdish forces in the north and Turkey. Washington has leverage over Ankara through its military presence. The United States can also incentivize HTS to fulfill certain demands on security and governance in exchange for lifting sanctions. Yet sanctions must indeed be lifted to facilitate economic recovery.

## Farouq Habib

Throughout Syria, people are relieved that the Assad regime fell. Political leaders must now leverage the widespread sense of unity and ensure stability and continuity in state services. The interim leadership has been communicating messages of assurance, but these statements are largely addressed to the international community rather than the domestic population.

In the new governance structure, all Syrians must have a role. The system must be inclusive, representative, and democratic, with elected officials. Efforts should concentrate on the following areas: establishing an independent commission for truth and justice that investigates missing persons; empowering civil society to participate in a diverse government; and guaranteeing freedom of expression. Concerns persist about the lack of a clear political vision and roadmap to achieve these goals.

People are also hoping that the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) will join the rest of the country. Supporting the Kurdistan Workers Party in the northeast will not foster stability. Moreover, the rest of Syria watched the recent shooting at the Raqqqa protests with concern. Taken together, the Syrian revolution will not achieve full victory until the people build a free, democratic, and prosperous nation.

In this context, international forces can play a role in stabilizing the country. Foreign military officials should collaborate with each other and with Damascus. They should not support militia groups, but encourage international legitimacy for the central government instead. In particular, the United States should mediate between the Kurdish forces and Turkey. In turn, Turkey should pressure Damascus to encourage the adoption of a democratic system. And Israel must halt its airstrikes on chemical weapons evidence from the Assad regime and other targets. Ultimately, foreign forces should vacate Syria as soon as the state can independently provide security and stability.

## Rafif Jouejati

The Syrian victory over the Assad regime did not result from an eleven-day offensive, but from more than thirteen years of sacrifice and activism. Civil

society expanded and matured during the war, such that Syrians are now prepared and poised to rebuild their nation. This is evident in the reemergence of local coordination committees and other civil society groups. Additionally, political groups are no longer forced to operate in exile. Of course, there is reason to be cautious, since the political system must be held accountable to the values of the Syrian revolution. Yet it is also a time for optimism.

Within Syria, efforts should concentrate on updating the constitution based on the 2012 National Covenant and the 2014 Freedom Charter. In particular, it should codify the separation of powers, freedom of speech, independence of the media and judiciary, and the government's commitment to human rights. The country also needs an independent, Syrian-led watchdog agency.

Reconstruction must be led by Syrians as well. Furthermore, the international community must recognize that refugees cannot return until the infrastructure drastically improves. Rebuilding the state will require patience and the lifting of international sanctions. Indeed, Syria is caught in a chicken-and-egg situation—sanctions relief is necessary for reconstruction and progress, but foreign states are using sanctions to incentivize political progress.

## Mahmoud Meslat

Officials from the AANES are optimistic about the country's future. Syrians deserve to celebrate together, and there is cause for hope about relations between the AANES and the new government. Yet Turkish aggression is a serious challenge that dampens celebrations in northeast Syria. The Kurds have sacrificed for the country and seek unity and integration. The political transition must reflect the will of the Syrian people, and this will require inclusive political dialogue and constitutional reform.

For its part, the international community must support Syrian stability through its military presence. The Syrian army lacks the organization, planning, and capacity to manage security throughout the entire country. Both the international coalition and Turkey can serve as partners in addressing such challenges in the short term, including Islamic State threats and Captagon smuggling networks. In turn, the new Syrian government must be open to establishing positive relationships with all neighboring states. This includes Israel and Turkey—despite their recent attacks in Syria, which threaten the new relationships.

Lastly, international sanctions against HTS and Syria cannot remain. Keeping them in place would impede reconstruction and worsen the country's risk of becoming a failed state, which is still a serious concern. Syria desperately needs international support to bolster its infrastructure, services, and resources. Syrians know how to generate positive progress toward a peaceful, unified future, but the international community must support their efforts.

*This summary was prepared by Audrey Kost. The Policy Forum series is made possible through the generosity of the Florence and Robert Kaufman Family.* ❖

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