Inside the New Syria: The First Three Months

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Brief Analysis

Activists and experts from Syria, Europe, and Washington share on-the-ground insights about how the post-Assad transition is going and where local grievances might erupt into bigger problems.

On March 5, The Washington Institute held a virtual Policy Forum with Aaron Y. Zelin, Gregory Waters, Sawsan Abou Zainedin, Ferhad Ahma, and Rahaf Aldoughli. Zelin is the Institute's Levy Senior Fellow and author of The Age of Political Jihadism: A Study of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/age-political-jihadism-study-hayat-tahrir-al-sham) *. Waters is a researcher at the Syrian Archive and a former consultant with the International Crisis Group. Abou Zainedin is CEO of Madaniya, an independent initiative that brings together more than 200 Syrian civil society organizations. Ahma is cofounder of PEL-Civil Waves, a peacebuilding organization in Syria. Aldoughli is a lecturer in Middle East and North African studies at Lancaster University. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.*

Aaron Zelin

Three months after the fall of Bashar al-Assad's regime, the future of Syria remains fragile. The country is still politically and physically divided, with Israeli troops advancing into the south and Turkish-backed proxies like the Syrian National Army (SNA) continuing to attack the U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces, who have helped fight the Islamic State for years. Negotiations continue between the independent Kurdish-led SDF and the new government in Damascus over integrating the force into the Syrian military and addressing border issues, energy supplies, and Kurdish rights. The government also continues to target remnants of the Assad regime, Hezbollah, and Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps while interdicting Captagon and weapons smuggling. Indeed, the new leadership is trying to consolidate governance and maintain security in areas they control while managing a transition process that many—locally and internationally—want to fail. And they are doing all this in a country with a poverty rate of 90 percent, one-third of its buildings destroyed, and a raft of foreign sanctions that hinder its recovery.

And yet, Syria is relatively stable considering the dramatic events it has been through in the past few months. The transitional government has taken favorable stances on key issues so far, such as avoiding a policy of retribution, seeking to work with Western countries, and combating jihadist groups and Iranian proxies. Watching these efforts fail—whether through neglect or active opposition—would be contrary to the interests of the Syrian people, the Middle East, and the wider international community. As has been proven time and again, what happens in Syria does not stay in Syria.

Gregory Waters

The new government's relations with minority groups differ by sect and geography. For instance, it has closer ties with the Ismaili community in Salamiya than with Ismailis in Tartus. Government relations with Christians are similarly varied, though officials held meetings with local Christian leaders in the days after Assad's fall, reflecting a policy shift that began during their years of rule in Idlib province under the banner of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS).

Relations with the former regime's Alawite base remain tense, however. Many Alawites continue to hold their government jobs, and there are no signs of a policy to remove them. Furthermore, crimes of retribution are not occurring on a mass scale. Even so, many Alawites on the coast describe being overwhelmed with fear—first in early December after the sudden arrival of masked, armed fighters from HTS, and now in a more existential sense, since they believe ethnic cleansing will occur eventually. Others are worried about economic conditions, believing that Sunni areas are being prioritized for economic investment over needy Alawite areas.

Meanwhile, Alawite "religious sheikhs" appointed by Assad in the past are now organizing networks of former regime forces with the goal of instigating sectarian conflict and triggering international backlash against the new government. These "sheikhs" discourage any form of engagement with the transitional authorities. Yet they do not represent the whole community. At the local level, Alawites continue to engage—many Assad-era Alawite mayors and municipal councils are now working under HTS-appointed regional directors.

Sawsan Abou Zainedin

Lack of clarity on the political process has made the transition more fragile, as reflected in Suwayda province. Even before Assad fell, Suwayda was one of the few (if only) regime-held areas that saw continuous anti-Assad protests. Religious and community leaders played key roles in sustaining this movement and demonstrating unity.

Today, however, these leaders—along with the commanders of armed factions—are divided over whether to submit to the new government now or withhold their power and arms until there is more transparency. In the civic space, some argue that as Syrian citizens, they should submit to the government regardless, but others believe it would be unwise to do so before the political process is clarified. This division became more stark when Suwayda leaders did not respond to Israel's military incursions in the south, though similar fissures have emerged in many other regions of Syria as well.

The recent national dialogue conference was rushed because numerous actors with sometimes conflicting interests are taking part in the transition

process. Although the conference was “very good for one day of dialogue,” as some put it, the results were insufficient given the extent of substantive disagreement on important issues. A more long-term, systematic process for dialogue is needed as part of this transitional period.

Ferhad Ahma

The people of northeast Syria see Assad’s fall as an opportunity to address deep-rooted historical issues with the government and reintegrate their region with the rest of the country—assuming the new government meets the basic conditions that Kurds and other minority groups have laid out. But after three months, locals feel very uncertain about the future.

Negotiations between the SDF and Damascus have yet to produce clear results, as each party perceives the purpose of the talks differently. While the central government is looking to dissolve the SDF, integrate it into the Syrian army, and regain control over oil fields and border crossings, the SDF views the negotiations as the first step toward political transformation. Both parties also have different ideas about the design of a future political system. President Ahmed al-Sharaa has argued that it should be centralized—an assertion that disappointed people in the northeast.

The new government has also undertaken major steps—such as organizing the national dialogue conference—without meaningfully consulting representatives of the northeast. Instead of inviting Kurdish factional representatives to the dialogue, Damascus invited Kurds as individuals, even though they generally wish to be represented as a group.

In the meantime, armed conflict persists between the SDF and the Turkish-backed SNA, further dimming local hopes that their position in the country will meaningfully change. Some speculate that a new round of negotiations between Sharaa and SDF commander Mazloum Abdi could change the government’s behavior, but these hopes are very limited as well.

Rahaf Aldoughli

The process of integrating armed groups into the Ministry of Defense is not going as smoothly as it first appeared. In the north, Turkey still pays SNA salaries, and fourteen SNA commanders have yet to officially integrate. In the south, Israel’s incursion has further complicated the integration of various armed factions.

Many local commanders do not trust the ministry and are already developing fresh grievances post-Assad, particularly when defense officials adopted a top-down approach to integrating armed groups. For example, many new ministry appointments were seen as based on loyalty rather than professionalism. Additional concerns have arisen over representation, with some commanders in the SDF and southern factions proposing the creation of a representative military council to facilitate integration into the Defense Ministry.

Within the SNA, most commanders fear future government persecution due to the lack of transitional justice efforts so far. Ultimately, lingering grievances among SNA and former regime elements could lead to the emergence of spoilers who seek to derail the integration process.

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