Rebuilding Syria May Require Federalism

by Fabrice Balanche **(/experts/fabrice-balanche)**

Feb 28, 2025

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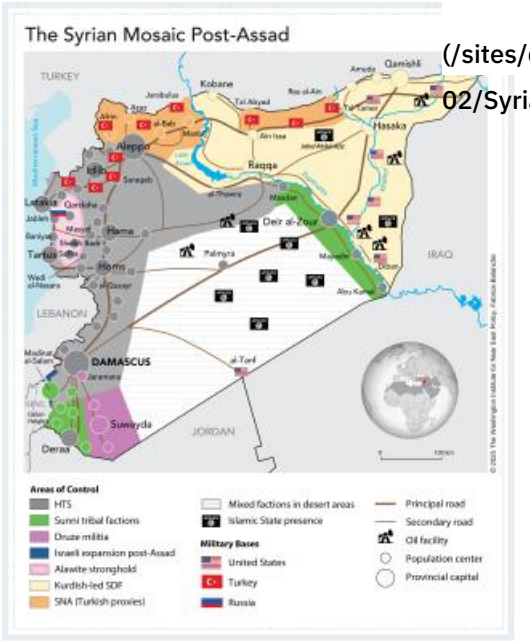
Can interim president Ahmed al-Sharaa bring Syria together? Even if one sets aside the often-conflicting interests asserted by regional **(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/new-age-turkish-relations-syria)** and global powers **(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/paris-conference-syria-coordination-and-roadmap-are-needed)** , the country's internal landscape alone makes this a difficult question. After a devastating fourteen-year civil war, Syria is fractured. The once-unified nation has disintegrated into tribal and sectarian loyalties as the main source of local legitimacy. Sharaa and his group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) primarily represent Sunni Arabs, who make up more than two-thirds of the population. After leading the campaign that ousted Bashar al-Assad, he rejects the notion of establishing a federal system and instead aspires to create a centralized political system that draws its strength from popular support **(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/status-syrias-transition-after-two-months)** . Yet a federal approach could prove more efficient—and perhaps indispensable—in promoting national reconciliation and rebuilding the country.

A Fragmented Syria

As the map below shows, Sharaa's interim government controls relatively modest portions of Syria, including most of the western cities and parts of the countryside. In the Euphrates Valley, Sunni tribal loyalty to HTS is less certain, while in Deraa, forces controlled by former rebel Ahmad al-Awda and other southern factions are resisting integration into the new Syrian army. In the northeast, the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) are engaged in discussions with Sharaa but remain wary **(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/inside-latest-pkk-talks-part-1-kurdish-actors-and-interests)** of his intentions.



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Elsewhere in the north, the pro-Turkish militias that comprise the Syrian National Army (SNA) retain their hold on key strongholds (Afrin, Jarabulus, and a separate zone between Tal Abyad and Ras al-Ain). On January 29, Turkey compelled the head of this group, Sayf Abu Bakr, to travel to Damascus and personally congratulate the new president, but this is the only concession he has made to Sharaa so far. The two leaders have a long history of mutual animosity, especially since many SNA fighters are veterans of the bloody war that HTS waged for control of Idlib province in 2017-20.

These disparate local situations cast doubt on Sharaa's ability to seamlessly integrate all factions and ethnic groups into the emerging Syria. The Arab population may find itself drawn toward Damascus, but the Kurds seem eager to maintain their self-governing status, while the Druze have taken control of Suwayda province and are preventing HTS forces from entering. The same goes for Druze-populated districts in the suburbs of the capital, including Jaramana, Sahnaya, and Jdeidat Artouz. In the **Alawite coastal region (https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/alawites-under-threat-syria)** , celebrations greeted Sharaa's visit to Latakia and Tartus on February 16, but the jubilation was limited to local Sunni Arab communities. Alawites—the Assad family's sect and the core of the former regime—did not participate, instead barricading themselves in their neighborhoods and villages. Ex-regime officials have also formed new militias to revive the area's historical role as a fortified mountain retreat for Alawites.

In short, Sharaa's political project for a centralized Syria contradicts the current reality on the ground. He believes that federalism could divide the "nation"—a perception that rests in part on anti-Israel sentiment among the Syrian population. That is, many Syrians believe the United States imposed federalism on post-Saddam Iraq to weaken the country for Israel's benefit, and they fear Washington wants to do the same in post-Assad Syria.

For now, Sharaa's primary goal is to consolidate various Sunni Arab groups into a new Syrian army after disbanding the previous one. Yet at the **January 29 rebel meeting (https://www.fdd.org/analysis/op_eds/2025/01/30/ahmad-al-sharaas-victory-conference-syrias-new-era-and-an-exclusive-translation-of-sharaas-speech/)** in Damascus celebrating his appointment as interim president, it became clear that he only had the support of his original coalition. His likely next objective is to assert authority over the bureaucratic machinery in Damascus and surrounding regions, echoing the deeply centralized approach he adopted in Idlib. He has also initiated a national dialogue process, though the opening talks raised legitimacy concerns due to the reportedly hasty manner in which they were organized and concluded.

Idlib Was the Crucible of a National Opposition

When the Syrian uprising began in 2011, armed rebel groups and political opposition factions alike were rooted in local communities. Initially, there was no genuine "national" opposition inside Syria—the structures that attempted to assert such a movement, such as the General Staff of the Free Syrian Army and the Syrian National Coalition, were based outside the country. This hampered the opposition's attempts to formulate and implement nationwide strategies.

In contrast, HTS predecessor group Jabhat al-Nusra welcomed fighters from all across Syria who had fled areas seized by the regime (e.g., Deraa, Damascus, Ghouta, Homs, east Aleppo). Although based in Idlib, Nusra was the only group to operate in all of Syria and participate in all rebel alliances. Yet its status as an al-Qaeda affiliate made the group ineligible for use as a unifying national opposition force, especially after the United States and other countries designated it as a terrorist organization early in the war.

Nusra's inclusive military background helps explain why members of the new HTS-led interim government hail from all corners of the country despite spending years in Idlib. Sharaa himself has roots in Damascus, which has helped him gain greater acceptance among residents of the capital. His family is well-known there, with preexisting networks of neighbors and friends allowing for direct contact with him and his circle. This helps simplify problem-solving post-Assad—for example, one entrepreneur told the author how personal ties with the Sharaa family enabled him to quickly recover a factory that one of Assad's nephews had stolen.

The same goes for other regions, since many of the governors and other high-ranking officials appointed by the new government originally hail from the areas they are placed in charge of. This gives them a degree of familiarity that eases local engagement and helps smooth over potential conflicts—including prompt efforts to return illegally occupied housing and looted property. Yet their ability to effectively manage and rebuild these provinces seems limited by a lack of funding and efficient staff.

The Promise and Challenges of Federalism

Currently, personal loyalties are propping up Syria's political, military, and bureaucratic structures. In his effort to consolidate power and stabilize the situation, Sharaa recognizes the importance of relying on a tight-knit group of HTS members who are personally loyal to him, as seen in Idlib, where locals formed a solidarity organization (*asabiyya*) that helped them take the reins of power (*mulk*). Yet in a country of 20 million people—which may grow to 28 million if refugees return—the current approach of centralization and personal clientelism will almost certainly prove ineffective at the national level.

Bashar al-Assad learned this lesson the hard way. Although he initiated a decentralization policy, it was limited to administrative decentralization, which wound up paralyzing the state without yielding any of the benefits of true decentralization. In the end, this deficiency accelerated the country's slide into civil war. If Sharaa want to avoid repeating Assad's mistakes, he may have to genuinely decentralize political power and establish a federal system. The United States and Europe have repeatedly emphasized the importance of inclusive governance post-Assad, but how can this outcome be realized under a centralized political system in which HTS holds absolute power and minorities are relegated to the margins?

To resolve this dilemma, foreign powers should consider conditioning their sanctions relief and financial support to Syria on the adoption of a federal system. The Kurds, Alawites, and Druze already hold substantial territories that could accommodate autonomous regions. Creating separate regions for Christians, Ismailis, and Turkmens is impractical given their limited size and scattered nature, but they could be granted special-status districts (e.g., the Christian area of Wadi al-Nasara in Homs province; the Turkmen district between Azaz and Jarabulus).

Although federalism may help address Syria's sectarian divide and promote a more equitable distribution of power,

it would also raise a crucial new challenge: resource allocation. In addition to control over oil and natural gas, officials would have to make difficult decisions about usage rights for the country's water supplies, arable land, sea access, and so forth. For example, the bulk of Syria's oil facilities are in SDF-held territory; if the Kurds decide to assert control over this resource post-Assad, they risk losing access to other key resources (not least the Euphrates River). Similarly, coastal communities may be tempted to assert themselves via taxes on the goods passing through their ports.

A careful balance would therefore need to be struck. Events in Iraq have shown that hydrocarbons do not always need to be under central government control—in fact, Baghdad has often used them as a tool of coercion against the northern Kurdish region. Moreover, Syria's hydrocarbon riches are likely not substantial enough to merit the risks of trying to monopolize them—daily oil production was around 400,000 barrels before the conflict, far below Iraq's 6 million barrels. Syrians must therefore consider how best to distribute all resources between the regions and the central government—while ensuring that Damascus does not assert a monopoly.

Hence, if federalism is adopted, it must be implemented all across Syria, not limited to minority groups. Regional leaders around the country need some degree of autonomy from a cumbersome central bureaucracy in order to ensure Syria's swift rebound and long-term stability. Otherwise, the country could find itself trapped in an endless spiral of conflict. ❖

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