

Forging Syrian National Unity Is Key to Regional Peace

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Articles & Testimony

Damascus has already taken steps toward this end, but intensive international economic assistance and political mediation will still be vital—the latter drawing on relevant elements from Iraq’s governing model.

The Gaza ceasefire has been the culminating step in a dramatic reordering of the Middle East. With the crushing defeat of the Islamic State (IS) as a major political force in 2019, the major remaining threat has been Iran, with its regional proxy network fuelling wars in Syria, Yemen, and, from 2023, Gaza, supported by its nuclear programme, terrorist networks, and ballistic missile arsenal.

But by mid-2025, this regional threat—at least for the moment, with all the elements of Iran’s power system with the exception of the Houthis—is seriously degraded. The result is a Middle East with no immediate regional threat at either the national or ideological levels for the first time since the immediate aftermath of Kuwait’s liberation. This opens the door to a transformation of not just regional politics, but the lives of hundreds of millions, as Trump laid out in his Riyadh, Jerusalem, and Sharm el-Sheikh speeches.

The region’s future could thus resemble South America over the past 30 years, being largely free of state-to-state and ideological violence, with overall prosperity growing. Nevertheless, earlier moments of such hope in the region—after the 1973 War and Kuwait’s liberation—were followed by spasms of extremism and violence.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the unsettled situation in Syria are two areas where the potential for violent conflict sits at the surface. But with the first somewhat assuaged by the Gaza ceasefire, Syria could be the main obstacle to long-term regional stability.

International observers, including senior American officials, thus have stressed the need to maintain the country’s unity as the precondition for long-term stability and reconstruction. But these same observers note the need to

protect individual rights and the cultural traditions of minorities, and, to some degree, accept local governance and security in certain areas.

Squaring this circle will not be easy, but it could possibly begin with the Kurdish-dominated northeast, where a unification agreement signed in March has produced negotiating rounds but little progress. The Kurds should jump-start the process with symbolic acceptance of Damascus sovereignty over their area, while continuing talks on more difficult issues such as local governance and integration of security forces.

One example of the way forward is the Iraqi constitution and practice since 2005—not so much the special case of the Kurdistan region, as that model would not work in Syria, but the division between local and central government administration in the rest of Iraq, and tolerance of security forces loosely attached to the government.

A Sordid History

Syría certainly has had a long history of both internal and regional destabilisation. It launched wars against three of its neighbours, Israel, Jordan, and Lebanon, and long hosted the leader of the terrorist Turkish Kurdish PKK. During the 2011-2024 Syrian civil war, Syria generated the Al Qaeda 2.0 successor Islamic State (IS), while serving as the backbone of Iran's "Shiite Crescent" proxy empire. This history, along with its large educated population, traditional significance in the Arab and Islamic worlds, and geographic location at the heart of the Levant, makes the success or failure of integrating the country and its people into a new, stable regional order critical for the future of the entire Middle East.

Syria has done surprisingly well under its new president, Ahmed al-Sharaa, especially given the brutal 14-year civil war, which saw half the population displaced and over 500,000 killed, the destruction of much of urban Syria, and continued crushing economic sanctions. The country has held together since al-Assad's fall almost a year ago, due to al-Sharaa's leadership and the support of the international community, which has been largely united in supporting the new Damascus government. Israel is an important question mark, but its negotiations with the al-Sharaa government and cessation of military strikes strongly suggest that Israeli leaders—with some prodding by Washington—are willing to give the new Syria a chance. This international unity is a crucial point; the absence of a unified position among Türkiye, Israel, the US, the Arab states, the Europeans, and the UN hampered a common position during the civil war, contributing to its prolongation.

Key Challenges

Syría's immediate challenge is internal unity, given the separate armed enclaves held by the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and its civilian Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) in the northeast, and a Druze area, along the border with, and supported by, Israel, in the southwest. In addition, the Alawite Arab areas along the coast have spawned various armed and civil society resistance movements. In March, al-Sharaa and SDF leader Mazloum Abdi signed an agreement on the military and political-economic integration of the northeast into the Syrian state.

But the outbreak of fighting between the central government and militias and the Alawites in March, and between the government and Bedouin militias against the Druze in June, were major setbacks to al-Sharaa's efforts to unify the country and project a stable, functional picture of the new Syria to both its citizens and the international community. Those attacks froze the slow execution of the March Damascus-SDF agreement and opened Syria up to much international criticism. But so far, Damascus has handled the fallout from these setbacks fairly well.

Most importantly, in contrast to the Assad regime in 2011, rather than escalating military action, Damascus pulled back, opened talks with the affected groups (and with the Druze sponsor Israel, which was conducting its own military operations throughout the country against pro-Iranian remnants, heavy weaponry inherited from the Assad regime, and in support of the Druze). It also investigated the violent exchanges, issued reports, and arrested some

alleged perpetrators.

And while many still see those steps as insufficient, they reflect a different approach than seen previously in Syria and in its neighbours, Lebanon and Iraq, during their various internal conflicts. Meanwhile, the new government held parliamentary elections, even if flawed, and continued talks with the SDF, which have recently shown progress on integration of military forces, and certain other symbolic issues.

Syria's second immediate problem is a collapsed economy, with everything from industry and the currency to fuel and electricity in dire straits. Syria cannot recover from the disastrous economic effects of the civil war without help. Beyond sustained humanitarian aid, it will need major international reconstruction assistance, investment, and the lifting of the remaining American and UN sanctions.

These two challenges—minorities and economics—are intertwined. International economic support, or even sanctions relief, will lag if Syria is seen as internally divided and teetering on the edge of civil war. Likewise, a Syria with a gradually improving economy and continued international support is a more attractive partner for minority groups when weighing whether and to what degree they should integrate.

Finally, governmental and societal support for core individual freedoms—such as independent justice, free speech and media, religious and linguistic freedom, and free elections—simultaneously builds trust with minorities, strengthens ties with the international community, and encourages economic growth, particularly by critically important private businesses.

Integration Roadmap

The way forward, then, could well begin with two coordinated moves: continued government support for those freedoms, starting with the formation and behaviour of the new interim parliament, and steps by minorities to acknowledge central government sovereignty. By far the most important actor here is the SDF. While the Druze enclave poses similar challenges, its small size and support from Israel suggest it should be left for later. But the northeast is a huge part of Syria, with millions of inhabitants and much economic power.

In addition, the March Sharaa-Abdi agreement set a deadline of the end of the year. And while it's hard to imagine such a complicated integration agreement being completed by this time, initial steps should be taken to assuage Damascus and buy more Turkish patience, given Ankara's strong interest in seeing a PKK offshoot be better integrated into a national state friendly to Turkiye.

Such initial steps by the SDF, as this author has proposed [in a Washington Institute Policy Watch \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/time-unify-kurdish-northeast-rest-syria\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/time-unify-kurdish-northeast-rest-syria), could include the transfer of administrative and security control of Deir ez-Zor province with its largely Arab population to the central government in Damascus, along with its border crossings in the northeast with Turkiye and later Iraq. Meanwhile, the current informal oil trade between the northeast and Damascus could be formalised, and the SDF could provide written commitments not to export hydrocarbons without Damascus approval and control. In addition, both Damascus and the SDF should follow up on the US CENTCOM Commander's proposals for the SDF and Syrian army to cooperate more closely on intelligence sharing, operations, and eventually joint training against IS.

Iraq as a Model

But by the end of the year, Damascus and the northeast should make progress on implementing the most important issues—local governance, military integration, and governorate versus central government responsibilities. One possible model could be the basic ideas taken from [Iraq's 2005 constitution \(https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Iraq_2005\)](https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Iraq_2005) and its practical application.

Iraq, after all, is the best recent similar example of a Baathist dictatorship overthrown by a popular pro-democracy

uprising. The constitutional section on federalism is not proposed here as this author does not believe a federal system is workable for Syria, but a strong division of powers and enumeration of rights is compatible with a unified Syrian government. The terms worked out with the Kurds in the northeast should be applicable not just there, but to Syria's other major ethnic and religious groups, beginning with the Druze and Alawites.

Individual rights: The Iraqi constitution begins with a clear commitment to minority rights in Article 4, with the Arabic and Kurdish languages as the two official languages of Iraq. Section Two, Chapters One and Two, of the constitution lay out key freedoms, including individual rights, separation of powers, and an independent judiciary.

Governorate authorities: Article 122 of the constitution establishes the authorities and privileges of governorates (in the case of Iraq, not incorporated into regions under the country's federal system): "Governorates that are not incorporated in a region shall be granted broad administrative and financial authorities to enable them to manage their affairs in accordance with the principle of decentralized administration, and this shall be regulated by law. Governorate Councils shall not be subject to the control or supervision of any (central government) ministry or any institution not linked to a ministry. The Governorate Council(s) shall have independent finances."

Important here is that with Iraq, both rights and self-government apply at the individual and political-geographic (i.e., governorate) level, not to ethnic/religious groupings as formal components of the state as in Lebanon. This is a critically important distinction for effective governing and overall stability.

Military forces: The Iraqi constitution calls for all military forces to be under the central government, but this has been exercised loosely in the case of the various Shiite militias, the predominantly Sunni Arab "Awakening" Forces after 2007, and from 2006 on the Peshmerga. Some individual Peshmerga soldiers, especially officers with prior experience in the Iraqi army, were incorporated directly into the military. Whole Peshmerga brigades were also incorporated into the national army, although they were usually stationed in the KRG. At the same time, other Peshmerga units remained under the control of the KRG (effectively under the two Kurdish political parties). In addition, local governments have considerable control over local police recruited from each governorate. Such arrangements could make sense for the SDF.

The international community, led by the United States and key Arab countries, should together urge and mentor both Damascus and the Kurdish authorities to begin this process, which is important not just to Syria, but to the region.

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