

Kamal Malhotra

Non-Resident Senior Fellow

THE “NEW” EMERGING SYRIA¹

Recent History and the Changed Context

The rapid fall of the Assad government in Syria after less than 2 weeks of military battle between November 27 and December 8, 2024, marked the end of two major episodes in modern Syrian history:

- Sixty-one years of strongman dynastic rule by a family from the minority Shia-linked Alawite community in a predominantly Sunni Muslim country; and,
- the end of more than 13 years of civil war which started after the failed Arab Spring uprising by students and other protestors in 2011.

During the Arab Spring, Saudi Arabia, had tried to exploit the situation by engineering a “regime change” – an attempt which failed because the US under then President Obama did not support it. More recently, Assad seemed increasingly in control of Syria (except for Idlib province adjacent to the Turkish border in the north-west of the country), leading to his being rehabilitated in the Arab mainstream between 2021-23.

In 2019, Assad, attempted to take back Idlib province by means of a series of military offensives by the Syrian Armed Forces in 2019-20 with the support of Russia, Iran and Hezbollah which were named “Dawn of Idlib 1 and 2” and lasted just under a year. The brutal offensives, where the use of chemical weapons was alleged by the US, (DailySabah. 22 May 2019. “Assad regime likely used chemical weapons in Syria’s Idlib”) saw Russian backed pro-Syrian government forces clash with Turkish backed opposition groups, directly impacting 3 million people in the province, leaving close to one

EVALUATION NOTE

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million civilians displaced. (UN News. 17 May 2019.” Risk Grows of ‘catastrophic humanitarian fallout’).

Türkiye directly intervened in March 2020 when half of Idlib had already fallen to pro-Assad forces. It successfully negotiated a ceasefire with the support of Russia, probably facilitated by the close relationship and mutual admiration between Presidents Putin and Erdogan. This stopped the Syrian army from taking control of Idlib province. While the result was viewed as a tactical victory for the Assad government, its forces failed to establish their complete authority over the strategically important opposition stronghold of Idlib province. A strategic stalemate resulted.

Türkiye, having been impressed by the successful defence of Idlib in 2019-2020 by HTS (**Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham**, the Sunni Islamist militant and political group) despite the odds, then entered an alliance with HTS and its affiliated groups who then maintained control over the province.

Türkiye's alliance with HTS and its affiliated organizations must have come as a surprise to Putin, Assad and even the Iranians. Certainly, at least in hindsight, accepting the ceasefire halting the pro-Assad forces attack in Idlib, was probably regarded by both Assad and Putin as well as Iran and Hezbollah as a strategic mistake because it can be regarded as a turning point in the broader civil war which ultimately led to Assad's defeat by the opposition forces in Idlib province.

Neither Iran or Hezbollah are likely to have had any role in the ceasefire decision, given both the considerably greater Russian military and political influence over Assad and his dependence on them, and the Putin-Erdogan chemistry. Putin now probably regrets agreeing the ceasefire with President Erdogan but clearly placed greater value on Russia's relationship with Türkiye then - and perhaps even now.

That the victory of HTS was greeted with utter surprise by most Syria watchers in the regional and broader international community can be viewed as significantly related to the fact that most of them had taken their eyes off Idlib province after 2020, especially since 2021.

In relation to the civil war preceding the HTS victory, there had been two competing peace processes underway, the Astana Peace Process, involving Russia, Iran and Türkiye and the UN led Geneva process. Neither had made much headway.² Despite their different nature in many respects, both acknowledged and referred to UNSC Resolution 2254 regarding peace and reconciliation in Syria, adopted in 2015. Even though many sections of that Resolution are still valid for Syria's future, the Resolution does, of course, now need to be updated and adapted.

The question that arises is whether the dramatic end of a six-decade chapter in the country's history in December 2024 can be regarded as another significant fallout of the broader Israeli genocide in Gaza, the Israeli Defence Forces (IDFs) actions in Lebanon, and Russia's illegal war in Ukraine? Did these illegal interventions and actions ironically not create the conditions for the surprise offensive spearheaded by (HTS) supported by the Türkiye-backed Syrian National Army (SNA)? The rebel militias supported by Türkiye, Saudi, Qatari and other US allied Gulf countries deftly exploited the fact that Assad's main backers (Iran and Lebanon's Hezbollah, as well as Russia from 2015),

² <https://genevasolutions.news/peace-humanitarian/geneva-peace-talks-on-syria-sputter-as-assad-looks-east>
<https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/syria-peace-talks-in-geneva-a-road-to-nowhere/>

were distracted and thinly spread. These backers also probably calculated that Assad’s Syria was a lost cause and that they should cut their losses. Furthermore, the HTS and SNA correctly calculated that without this backing, and the accompanying threat of constant US-backed Israeli aerial bombing, Assad’s military would desert him by either quickly surrendering or disbanding, paving the way for their version of a “new” Syria.

The new emerging interim coalition government in Damascus, is now led by HTS, its most prominent political and military group, but HTS is not the only rebel entity in power. On January 29, 2025, this coalition held a “victory conference” during which it formalized much of its consolidation of power since the fall of Bashar al Assad, also disbanding all Assad regime institutions as well as the current Syrian Constitution. The conference also stated that “all military factions, political and civil revolutionary bodies will be dissolved and integrated into state institutions.” HTS was previously known as Al-Nusrah Front for the People of the Levant, and had been, on 14 May 2014, designated a terrorist group by the UN Security Council’s Al Qaida and Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) Sanctions Committee. (<https://main.un.org/securitycouncil/en/content/un-sc-consolidated-list>). That designation shut the group out of the international banking system, denied it access to its assets, and placed an arms embargo on it.

The US, EU and many other governments subsequently also placed HTS on their own terrorist lists. Türkiye, a NATO member, also officially classifies HTS as a terrorist group. Despite this terrorist classification, HTS has, over the last five years, cemented a security partnership with Türkiye’s National Intelligence Organization, MIT, which was led from 2010 till mid-2023 by Türkiye’s current Foreign Minister, Hakan Fidan. On 19 December 2024, Mr. Fidan told Al Jazeera that Türkiye recognized the new administration in Syria as a “legitimate partner” and that the Turkish embassy in Damascus had reopened. He also said that HTS should be delisted as a terrorist organization by the international community, starting with the UN. (<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2024-12-19/turkey-may-shortly-remove-new-syrian-leaders-from-terror-list>).

The leader of HTS, Ahmed al-Shara, also known as Abu Mohammed al-Julani, was formally announced as the transitional Syrian President on January 29, 2025, although he has de-facto been playing this role since Assad’s fall. Al Shara was included on the UNs Al Qaida sanctions list, even earlier than HTS, on July 24, 2013. Al-Shara was a member of both ISIL and Al Qaida before cutting ties with them both. In 2021, he redefined himself and HTS as moderate, and religiously and otherwise accommodative, and was even interviewed by PBS and CNN in 2022 on which he portrayed himself as a moderate and modern Muslim. This may have helped appease the US which had a USD 10 million bounty on his head which it appears to have cancelled after a senior State Department official met him recently wearing his western style suit in Damascus soon after the HTS-led interim government took power.

What Lies Ahead: A New Emerging Civil War?

On December 19, UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres said that while fighting has stopped in many parts of the country, civilians were still getting injured, killed, and displaced.

That statement was made before the Syrian Resistance Movement (SRM), likely a pro-Assad group, announced its armed opposition to the interim government on December 29, 2024, only ten days later. SRM claimed its first attack on the new Syrian HTS-led government on January 5, 2025, in Latakia City, in north-western Syria. On January 4, a likely Iranian-backed organization, the Alawite Islamic Forum (AIF), also accused the HTS led interim Syrian

government of failing to address instances of sectarian violence. (The Institute for the Study of War, Washington DC, Syria and Iran Updates, December 2024 and January 2025). Indeed, individual opposition fighters continue to target members of the minority Alawite community. SNA-SDF (Syrian Democratic Forces) clashes have also increased in the last few weeks while in-fighting within the HTS led coalition, given its internal contradictions and mix of Syrian, Uighur, Chechen and other foreign elements, is ongoing. Israel has chosen to exploit the vacuum created by the overthrow of Assad by establishing a ground presence and mounting air attacks on Syria with US support, using the previous presence of Iranian militias and Hezbollah as “pretext” for their illegal presence and attacks. Having now occupied parts of Syria “temporarily” as they proclaim, and having claimed to have destroyed most of Syria’s military assets in the first few days after Assad fled, large numbers of Israeli troops remain in the Golan Heights “buffer zone” which was previously patrolled partly by Assad’s Syrian army which has disbanded. Interim Syrian Foreign Minister Assad al Shaibani recently said “Syria must defend our country and people” also suggesting that Israel should withdraw its ground troops from all occupied Syrian territories and honour the 1974 Disengagement Agreement (January 17, 2025, <https://www.jpost.com/middle-east/article-838026>). HTS has also called for a greater role for UN peacekeeping troops in the Golan Heights including its buffer zone.

The Turkish Foreign Minister, on January 7 threatened “military operations” against the SDF which Türkiye falsely equates with the Kurdish People’s Protection Units (YPG). Türkiye wants to eliminate both organisations. Türkiye classifies the US backed SDF, led by the Syrian Kurds, which defeated ISIS in Syria in March 2019, as a terrorist group. Moreover, Türkiye’s actions have shown, and continue to show, that it takes this classification seriously - despite neither the UN Security Council nor any other country considering the SDF as terrorist. (In this context, it is also worth noting that the Turkish-backed SNA are under sanction by the US for their abuses against the Kurds).

Syrian interim government officials met with senior Turkish defence officials in Ankara on 15 January, most likely to discuss military coordination between HTS and Turkish efforts to coerce the SDF to disarm. The SDF has recently also witnessed “defections” of many of its Arab constituents in Raqqah, Hasakah and Deir ez Zor. Some Arab tribal forces are now in fact fighting SDF, increasing the SDFs resource and bandwidth constraints as it contends with separate and existential fights. Nevertheless, SDF has continued both to advocate for a decentralized government in the northeast of the country despite Turkish and HTS pressure and push back against HTS demands for its disarmament, seeking to integrate into the “new” Syrian Defense Ministry as a military bloc rather than on an “individual” level. This position was recently rejected by HTS’ interim Defense Minister and HTS now looks ready to join Türkiye’s and SNAs military operations against the SDF. In the meanwhile, on January 19, the interim Defense Ministry announced that over 60 military factions have agreed to join the new Syrian armed forces.

Barzani’s Iraqi Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) appears to be trying to appease President Erdogan once again. It is pressuring the US-backed SDF to avoid a full-scale conflict with Türkiye and the Turkish backed SNA. The leadership of the KDP and SDF have reportedly discussed ways in which to distance the SDF from Türkiye’s outlawed Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) now known as the Kurdistan People’s Congress or Kongra-Gel (KGK). The latter itself is under increasing political pressure within Türkiye through both the recent arbitrary dismissal of a number of elected Mayors allegedly affiliated to it and as a result of a reported deal between the PKKs erstwhile leader, Abdullah Ocalan and the Turkish government for the PKK/KGK to lay down its arms, in exchange for Ocalan’s release from prison where he has

been for over a quarter of a century. While it is unclear how much sway over the PKK/KGK is still exerted by Ocalan, it is possible that his influence is very limited since he has been out of action since 1998 when he was incarcerated. PKK/KGK, meanwhile, has offered to withdraw from Syria if the SDF is given solo or joint decentralized control of northeastern Syria, a demand which would appear impossible to meet.

The US effectively cut its support to the SDF under Trump 1.0, leaving only 900 US soldiers in Syria, linked to its Al-Tanf military base, asking Türkiye to take care of the situation. It is almost certain that Trump has made a “deal” with Erdogan and that the Syrian Kurds will be totally abandoned once again by the Americans under Trump 2.0.

The difference in how the SDF and Türkiye define the PKK/KGK and its role in the SDF makes a ceasefire in northeastern Syria very difficult to obtain. To start with, Türkiye likely still considers the SDFs leader, Mazloum Abdi, a Syrian but former PKK member between 1990 and 2011, as still an active member of the outlawed Türkiye-designated terrorist group due to his role within the YPG and SDF. But that is not the view held by Abdi and the SDF.

HTS now also appears certain to join efforts by the Turkish military and the SNA to try and militarily exterminate the SDF and YPG. While the US under Trump 2.0 cannot be relied upon to continue supporting the SDF, it will, nevertheless, not be easy to defeat SDF and YPG.

All these continuing and even escalating conflicts, taken together, are creating a dangerous cycle and there is a real risk of Syria coming apart under pressure from this variety of terrorist groups, local militias, and Israeli airstrikes. The “new” Syria is also clearly fertile ground for a larger armed conflict and perhaps even a new civil war if the current situation is left unchecked.

The nightmare scenario is that the Islamic State could re-establish its stronghold in the fledgling “new” Syria and export or inspire more terrorism around the world - such as appears to have been the case in New Orleans, USA on New Year’s Eve 2025.

Turkish attempts, and those of its proxy the SNA, to fight the SDF are likely to lead to another protracted military conflict and further help the resurgence of the Islamic State in Syria. To a certain extent, this is already happening since the SDF, the Islamic State’s main nemesis and most formidable foe, is increasingly distracted by its escalating and existential conflict with Türkiye, with the SNA, and now with the HTS-led interim government. A recent example of this is that the current authorities in SDF- and YPG-ruled northeastern Syria announced plans on January 25, 2025, to release internally displaced persons (IDPs) from the heavily ISIS-penetrated al Hol refugee camp. There were also reports, on 26 January, indicating that ISIS tried to attack the Sayyeda Zeynab shrine in Damascus, a prominent Shia religious site, most likely to stoke sectarian tensions in Syria (Institute for the Study of War, Washington DC, Iran Update).

ISIS is not the only concern with respect to igniting sectarian tensions in the “new” Syria. Iran is clearly making new attempts to support anti- HTS forces especially through Alawite led forces. It will also continue to stoke conflict over the Shia Sayyeda Zeinab Shrine in Damascus. Recent skirmishes in southwestern Syria also demonstrate that HTS does not yet have full control over terrain in the south of the country.

In this context, Ahmed Al-Shara, the HTS-led interim government leader’s statements on addressing sectarianism have been underwhelming and vague at best.

Can Syrians Expect a “Normal” Life in the “New” Syria?

There were understandable scenes of relief and even joy on the part of some Syrian citizens after the liberation of their country from the brutality of the Assad regime. These, however, were even more understandably both short-lived and interspersed with great sadness, horror and anger at the unaccounted disappearance or murder of loved ones. Negative emotions were on highly visible display when the Sednaya Prison, north of Damascus, also known as the “Human Slaughterhouse” was opened to the public.

At Sednaya, “between 5000 and 13000 people were extrajudicially killed between September 2011 and December 2015”, according to Amnesty International estimates in February 2017. In January 2021, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SORH) estimated that 30,000 detainees at Sednaya prison had been killed by the Assad regime through torture, ill-treatment and mass executions since 2011. SORH also says half a million people have been killed in the Syrian civil war between 2011-2024.

Given this horrific recent history and the prospect of a new emerging civil war in the “new” Syria, there does not appear to be any respite for the Syrian people in the short-term, (defined as one-year in this paper), whether they are already inside the “new” Syria or are refugees hoping to return in the short-term to long broken homes and families.

Indeed, it is hard to imagine a return to any kind of normalcy in the short run for the average Syrian family. An important step towards longer run normalcy will be the creation of an independent national “truth and reconciliation” commission. Normalcy cannot return till such a body has credibly completed its formidable tasks and fearlessly delivered its findings, reparations and recommendations. Unfortunately, it is hard to imagine even the establishment of such a commission in the near-term.

At the 29 January “victory” conference, Al Shara was given the responsibility of forming an interim legislative council until a new constitution is drafted and approved. However, two other essential important pre-conditions for normalcy - independent elections and the writing of a new Constitution - have both been delayed. Al-Shara has previously indicated that the interim government would oversee a three- or four-year transition period during which he will now presumably rule and consolidate the HTS’ and his personal political power. While the interim government had previously proposed the holding of a representative Syrian national dialogue to write a new constitution, it is unclear whether a date or any participants have been identified thus far. In this context, it should be noted that while the SNA and all other HTS-allied military groups were invited to the 29 January “victory conference”, the SDF appears not to have been invited.

Respect for the UN Security Council’s Terrorist List and the 1951 UN Refugee Convention

The designation of HTS as a terrorist listed group by the **UN Security Council** (UNSC) presents significant challenges to the HTS and to Syria. There is clearly no rush on the part of the UNSC to delist it, as was clear at its 8 January 2025 meeting when the Council, that had been divided for most of Syria’s civil war from March 2011 till early December 2024, seemed united on its refusal to remove HTS from its list of terrorist groups.

While it is not yet clear what Russia, a veto holder, both as host to the ousted Assad family and a clear net short-run loser in the Syrian conflict, will do in the coming months, the UNSC and experts in the international community appear to be largely united in the view that Ahmed al-Sharra’s words alone are insufficient, and need to be backed by concrete developments on the ground that demonstrate substantial progress towards a credible, inclusive “new” Syria

which respects women’s rights, and protects religious and ethnic minorities, before there is any prospect of delisting HTS and some of its associated groups from the UNSC terrorist list. This will clearly take at least some time.

Geir Pederson, the UN Special Envoy on Syria, seemed to endorse this view when he recently said that the easing of sanctions is the first step to rebuilding Syria and addressing the needs of the Syrian people which will require a smooth end to sanctions and “appropriate action on designations” of top leaders, and that such rebuilding “could only be addressed with broad support” from the whole international community.

Related to the HTS-led interim government’s terrorist designation by the UNSC, as well as its ISIL and Al-Qaida linked historical origins, neither the UN nor any other Western government has so far recognized the interim government. Normalcy can only return when such recognition is given to the interim government.

Normalcy will also be impossible to achieve if Syrian refugees in third countries cannot or will not return. Neither the United States under Trump 2.0 nor a European Union member country - not even Türkiye - can currently legally send back any Syrian refugees or asylum seekers to the “new” emerging Syria since it is a state led by a UN, US, EU and Türkiye designated terrorist organization. If they seek to do so, they will be in violation of both the United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (the 1951 Refugee Convention), a legally binding document on its signatories, especially its principle of “non-refoulement” (Article 33). Refoulement refers to the forcible return of refugees or asylum seekers to a country where they are liable to be subjected to persecution. Both international and EU law prohibit “refoulement” while the US Citizen and Immigration Services (USCIS), as recently as 1 January 2018 under Trump 1.0 stated that the principle of “non-refoulement” under human rights law guarantees that no one should be returned to a country where they would face torture, cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment and other irreparable harm. While the US is not a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention, this principle is binding on all UN Member States as accepted customary international law irrespective of their status as parties to the 1951 Refugee Convention.

A Formidable Challenge: The Magnitude of the Syrian Humanitarian and Development Crisis

UNHCR recently stated that Syria remains the world’s largest refugee crisis. Since 2011, more than 14 million Syrians out of a population of 23 million had fled the country to escape the long civil war and conflict. Another 7.2 million Syrians are internally displaced, with 70% of the population still living in the country requiring humanitarian help. The UN’s World Food Program (WFP) in its recent appeal, indicated that over 12 million people, or over half the population, are in the grip of hunger. According to UNICEF, about 90% of Syria’s population is poor.

So, it is enormously challenging to provide humanitarian assistance to those currently in Syria, let alone to any returning refugees. Sanctions for more than a decade have had an enormous impact on the Syrian people, especially those most vulnerable. The economy is largely based on a cash system as both the country and its people are unable to access credit. Many essential goods have been restricted since imports have been subject to sanctions on dual-use products such as fertilizer and water pumps. Crucial service providers such as banks, airlines, and many businesses voluntarily withdrew from what became a pariah state.

The HTS caretaker government cannot significantly and meaningfully undertake even purely short-term humanitarian and reconstruction work in the next few months in the “new” Syria

without full international support. This will be hampered by the sanctions in place. As the UN's Special Envoy on Syria said, these sanctions need to be relaxed, and near-term waivers given for humanitarian, reconstruction and development purposes. However, a broader delisting of HTS and other such groupings and individuals who are part of the ruling coalition cannot be gifted but must be earned.

In recognition of this, just before the UN Security Council meeting on January 8, 2025, the US issued General License 24 to expand authorizations for six months, subject to monitoring and review. These expanded authorizations ensure that US sanctions do not impede activities to meet basic human needs, including the provision of public services or humanitarian assistance. The UN, through the OCHA, WFP, UNICEF, WHO and other agencies has dramatically increased its humanitarian assistance and appeals for Syria. These UN actions will now be seriously compromised in the essential public health area, by Trump's notice, on his first day in office on January 20, 2025, to withdraw the US from the WHO.

Türkiye, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the UAE will (and no doubt, must) be the major contributors to humanitarian and reconstruction efforts for the emerging “new” Syria in the short-term. But their support will be inadequate given the magnitude and multi-faceted nature of the humanitarian, reconstruction and development crises facing the country. Much more will be urgently needed.

Major Geo-Political and Regional Consequences: Short-term Winners and Losers

One can currently hope to discuss only Syria's very short-term future, defined as one year, not even the medium-term, let alone the long-term future. This is not only because of the current internal dynamics within Syria but also the significant volatility in West Asia and the broader Middle East. Indeed, it would be ill-advised and even foolish to attempt to make projections over a long-term horizon given the current situation on the ground in the “new” Syria and its broader geographic region.

Turkish President Erdogan and Foreign Minister Fidan are moving quickly to consolidate Türkiye's influence over the new Syrian government and state. It is evident that Türkiye's regional and broader geo-political ambitions are the biggest immediate winner in the “new” Syria,” at least for the short-term. President Erdogan's dream of a neo-Ottoman Empire and leadership of the Sunni Muslim world has been given a boost at a sorely needed time for him and his AK Party and their allies when his future, and theirs, was looking uncertain, given the deep economic and broader domestic crises in Türkiye leading to the convincing nationwide victory of the main opposition party (CHP) in the municipal elections on March 31, 2024. But now, after Assad's downfall, there is even grandiose talk in some Turkish governmental circles of the 21st century being a “Türkiye Century”.

Putin's Russia and Iran, on the other hand, as well as the Iran backed Lebanese Hezbollah, which relied heavily on Iranian supply routes through Syria, appear to be the biggest losers, at least in the near-term.

Putin's Russia has suffered a strategic political defeat in Syria from which it will be difficult for Putin and his country to easily or quickly recover. Russia is focusing on negotiations with the interim Syrian HTS-led government to maintain its military presence at the Hmeimim Air Base and the Port of Tartus on the Mediterranean coast of Syria. This is the country's second largest port after Latakia. It is unlikely, however, that Russia will be able to rely on these bases beyond the next few months since the talks are reportedly “stuck.” In fact, a high-level Russian delegation, led by Deputy Foreign Affairs Minister Bogdanov and Special Presidential

Representative to Syria Lavrentyev failed to reach agreement on the future of Russian bases in Syria with the HTS-led interim government on January 28, only agreeing to continue discussions. In the meanwhile, Russia continues to evacuate its military assets from its bases.

These bases were crucial for Russia’s power projection not just in the Mediterranean, but also in Africa and in the Black Sea region. While Putin may hope to replace its Syrian bases with Iranian military bases in the medium-term because of the Iran-Russia Comprehensive Strategic Partnership agreement of January 17, 2025, this notably lacks a defence clause and does not promise Russia any military bases in Iran. These are unlikely in any timeframe and, in any case, Iranian ports and military facilities are nowhere near as favourable to Russia geographically and in geo-political terms as the ones in Syria.

The Kremlin is also continuing to leverage the prominent Kremlin-linked Rybar Telegram channel to cultivate increased Russian influence in Iraq as an alternative to its loss of influence in Syria, after the fall of Assad. On January 25, Telegram claimed that the Iraqis had expressed interest in developing Russian Iraqi relations further, especially in trade and foreign investment. This needs to be understood in the context of Russia wishing to supplant the US as a security partner in Iraq in anticipation of the US possibly reducing its military presence there.

Iran is still struggling with coming to terms with its defeat in Syria and appears to be taking an approach which is openly antagonistic to the HTS-led interim Sunni government by stirring Shia-linked Alawite groups and causes. It is too early to gauge if their de-stabilization tactics will succeed. What seems clear however is that they will, at least in the short-term, not be able to use Syria as a major supply route for Hezbollah in Lebanon as has been the case for decades. Recent attempts to continue to use traditional smuggling channels through Syria for even small military arms appear to have failed since they have been apprehended by the new Syrian interim government.

While the US is closely watching developments, it has been in informal contact with HTS and its allies for a few years and is likely to make a deal with Turkiye, effectively abandoning the Syrian Kurds and SDF early in Trump 2.0. The US is probably happy that the “new” Syria has altered regional West Asian geo-politics in favour of its allies in the region, weakening especially Iran and Russia, both avowed enemies. Since both the US and Israel are keen to weaken Iran, and the US wishes to debilitate Russia, it is likely the US will support the HTS-linked alliance and will want to bring the “new” Syria into the Western alliance in West Asia. Given Syria’s size, strategic geographic location and geo-political importance in the region, this will result in a sea change in West Asia if its membership of the Western alliance is sustained in the medium-term. However, at least in the short-term, Syria is unlikely to add much value to the Western alliance in the region, given both its internal fractures and their related and other innumerable domestic uncertainties.

Despite the visible contradictions within the HTS led alliance, given its attempts to project itself as a moderate Islamic force notwithstanding its extremist Islamist roots, the US will, most likely, follow the adage “an enemy’s enemy is a friend” as it continues to rationalize Ahmed Al-Sharaa as a moderate, modern leader. Is there not a danger and obvious naivete in doing that? Has the US really learnt little or nothing from its failed experiences in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya?

Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Egypt will immediately support reconstruction and rehabilitation efforts through the HTS-led alliance, rationalizing this to their own peoples as facilitating the empowerment of their Sunni Muslim brothers and sisters. The UAE may be more wary of

supporting a self-declared Islamic coalition such as the HTS-led one, but will probably, under US pressure, support relief and reconstruction efforts in the “new” emerging Syria.

India and the “New” Syria

Bilateral relations between India and Syria are historic for civilizational reasons. Both countries were on the Silk Road through which civilizational exchanges took place for centuries. Syriac Christianity, originating in ancient Syria, created the first Christian communities in Kerala.

Both countries were members of the Non-Aligned Movement. Syria, under the Assads, supported the Indian stance on Kashmir, while India till recently under its current government, was seen as a clear supporter of the Palestinian cause as well as Syria’s position against Israel’s on regaining the Golan Heights. In 2010, then Indian President Patil, on a visit to Syria, called on Israel to return the Golan Heights. Sadly, since then, there has been a sea change in India’s position on Israel, especially under the Modi BJP government, most recently evidenced by its noticeable silence on Israel’s genocide in Gaza.

Bashar al-Assad who visited India in 2008 wanted to strengthen relationships, but India took neither him nor Syria under his leadership seriously. Instead, Israel and the pro-US Gulf States became India’s allies, especially after Prime Minister Modi came to power in 2014. India also became part of the West Asia Quad (India, Israel, UAE and the United States). As such, in West Asia and in the broader Middle East, India has been aligned more with the pro-US Gulf States and Saudi Arabia and more recently even Israel, rather than Assad’s Syria.

In the context of the “new” Syria, India’s historical and current strategic ally and friend, Russia, is a big short-term regional and geo-political loser of Assad’s fall as is another long-time friend, Iran. On the other hand, the main regional and geo-political short-term winner thus far, Türkiye, is a close ally and brother of Pakistan, India’s arch enemy, and a long-term supporter at the UN of its stance on Kashmir. India has not spoken out against Netanyahu’s Israel’s illegal bombings and presence in Syria which will not endear it to Syria’s interim government, to Türkiye or to the Palestinians.

Even though the Assad regime was not supported by the Indian government, it does not appear to have any direct relationship or entry points with the new HTS-led interim government. So, India is likely to follow the cue of the US, Saudi Arabia and pro-US Gulf States and the West Asia Quad of which it is part. However, India could also learn lessons for how to deal with the “new” Syria from how it is currently proposing to deal with the Taliban government in Afghanistan. In the short run, while not providing recognition to the Syrian government, if it remains on the UNs terrorist list, India can and should provide humanitarian and reconstruction assistance to the Syrian people, perhaps in close consort with the UAE, its fellow West Asia Quad member.

A Possible Future Scenario

As already indicated, it would be foolish to make projections for either the newly emerging Syria or its impact on the broader West Asian and Middle East region for anything other than the short-term defined as a year.

What can be stated for this short period is that Türkiye and the international community led by the UNs Special Envoy on Syria must lay the conditions for an inclusive and lasting peace in Syria. Part of the preconditions include the provision of large amounts of short-term humanitarian and reconstruction assistance by the international community to prevent the “new” Syria from descending into a new civil war.

At the same time, the West Asian and broader Middle Eastern, North American Australasian and European regions must prepare to accept a new wave of Syrian refugees comprising minority Alawite, Syrian Kurds and other disaffected groups impacted by continuing strife in the “new” Syria. This time around they will not be able to rely on Turkiye to take any of these groups since Turkiye is in economic crisis and has, in any case, been a long-term enemy of the Syrian Kurds, whom it has labelled terrorist. Nor can Europe rely on Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq, Iran or any other already overburdened Middle Eastern country to accept these likely new Syrian refugees since many of these countries are now fighting existential battles for their very survival amidst a flow of Palestinian refugees, despite the temporary Israel-Hamas ceasefire. Nor can the European Union rely on the US or Canada to take any refugees under Trump 2.0 and the likely new conservative right-wing government in Canada after Trudeau’s recent resignation. Australia is not a migrant friendly country and, in any case, is too geographically distant, so the burden this time will fall almost entirely on Europe through, perhaps, an Iraqi land route.

When it comes to Syria in particular, most European countries with the notable exceptions of Germany (under Merkel), Sweden and Luxembourg did not comply with the 1951 UN Refugee Convention’s requirements during the 2011-2024 civil war. All of Europe, this time around, would do well to respect the Convention to which the European Union is a signatory. Their memory appears to be short since many Europeans, even of an older generation, do not appear or care to remember that the 1951 UN Refugee Convention was created to protect fleeing Europeans from Nazi Germany.

Note: ISIL, also sometimes called the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) or simply the Islamic State, is also known by the Arabic acronym Da’esh.