

Why the West Should Pursue Stability, Not Transformation, in Post-Assad Syria

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The eruption of sectarian violence in southern Syria last week, which began with a Bedouin attack on a Druze man and escalated into a battle involving Israeli airstrikes and Syrian government forces, left more than 350 dead. While the violence may seem localized, it underscores a more profound truth: Syria's fragile post-Assad transition is unraveling, and with it, the illusion that the country can be quickly democratized or rebuilt in the image of Western liberalism.

For many in Washington and Brussels, the fall of Bashar al-Assad seven months ago was greeted as a turning point—an opportunity for democratization, accountability, and international reintegration. But the resulting power vacuum has revealed a hard truth: state collapse does not guarantee political reform. It often breeds further fragmentation and renewed conflict. As Iraq (2003)¹, Libya (2011)², and Afghanistan (2021)³ demonstrated, political engineering without firm institutional ground is not only naive—it is dangerous.

¹ U.S. Department of Defense. "Operation Iraqi Freedom." 2003

² Bellamy, Alex J. *Responsibility to Protect: The Global Effort to End Mass Atrocities*. Polity, 2009

³ Council on Foreign Relations. "The Taliban's Return and the U.S. Withdrawal from Afghanistan." 2021

This is the lens through which Western policymakers must now view Syria: not as a tabula rasa for nation-building, but as a broken state requiring managed containment and pragmatic stabilization.

Strategic Stakes

Syria remains a geopolitical fault line. Its disintegration risks reviving jihadist networks, empowering Iranian militias, and provoking further Israeli military responses—all of which could spiral into a broader regional confrontation. Moreover, Syria's borderlands continue to be conduits for arms, fighters, and narcotics, including the amphetamine Captagon, which has emerged as a major illicit export⁴.

The collapse of the Assad regime created an uncertain power vacuum. The interim government in Damascus, led by Ahmad al-Sharaa—a former jihadist who has repositioned himself as a transitional leader—rules precariously. His administration is nominally Sunni, composed of several former rebel factions and Islamist-aligned militias. These groups were united by a common enemy: the Assad regime. Now that Assad is gone, old rivalries, ethnic resentments, and political ambition are resurfacing.

At the same time, minority groups that once saw the Assad regime as a bulwark against extremism now view the transitional government with suspicion. The Druze, Alawites, and Christians, as well as the semi-autonomous Kurdish administration in the northeast, are not merely skeptical of al-Sharaa's ability to govern—they question whether his government even intends to represent them.

The recent violence in the south, where Syrian troops were reportedly aiding the Bedouin militias against the Druze, only exacerbates these fears. Israel's intervention, under the pretext of defending the Druze, risks internationalizing a domestic conflict and underscores the absence of credible governance in the region.

⁴ European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction. "Captagon trafficking and Syria's illicit economy." 2023.

From Transformation to Containment

The West should recalibrate its strategy with three clear, realist objectives:

1. Preserve Territorial Integrity

Fragmentation creates vacuums that regional powers—Iran, Turkey, and Russia—will exploit. U.N. Resolution 2254⁵ affirms Syria’s sovereignty and territorial unity; Western engagement should work within this framework to prevent further partition. Despite its imperfections, a unified Syria remains more manageable than a fractured one dominated by proxies.

2. Protect Strategic Minorities

Syria's long-standing pluralism is under threat. The Druze, Alawites, Christians, and Kurds have each faced targeted violence in recent months. These groups are not only minorities in the demographic sense—they are also geopolitical bellwethers. Their treatment will shape regional alignment and the willingness of external actors to recognize the new regime. Western diplomacy should pressure al-Sharaa to incorporate minority protections into Syria’s transitional framework—not merely as a moral imperative, but to prevent further rebellion and destabilization. The Responsibility to Protect (R2P) doctrine supports limited external action in defense of threatened populations without necessitating regime change⁶.

3. Prevent Extremist Resurgence

Syria remains a fertile ground for Salafi-jihadist revival, including remnants of ISIS and factions aligned with al-Qaeda. The interim government, itself born out of a constellation of Islamist militias, walks a thin line. Intelligence cooperation and targeted counterterrorism efforts—in tandem with regional partners like Jordan and Iraq—must be maintained. Abandoning Syria entirely would risk a resurgence that could again spill across borders.

⁵ United Nations Security Council Resolution 2254, December 18, 2015.

⁶ ICISS. *The Responsibility to Protect: Report of the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty*, 2001

Engagement Without Illusions

None of this implies endorsement of al-Sharaa's regime. He is no liberal reformer. But the alternative to his rule is not democracy—it is either fragmentation or renewed civil war. This logic echoes Henry Kissinger's view that "order should precede justice," especially in states where the basic monopoly on force has collapsed⁷.

Indeed, the West must learn from its own recent policy misadventures. U.S. support for political transitions in Iraq and Libya was grounded in liberal optimism, not institutional readiness. The result was chaos, power vacuums, and regional instability. In Syria, restraint is not abdication; it is strategic prudence. Diplomacy must focus on managing the regime, not transforming it.

There are precedents for this approach. In the 1990s, the West engaged with authoritarian regimes in Algeria and Egypt not because they were democratic, but because they were capable of containing violence and preventing regional contagion. Syria is in a similar position today.

Moreover, attempts to forcibly transform states in the absence of functional institutions have often had unintended consequences. The Arab Spring demonstrated that mass mobilization and regime collapse do not inevitably lead to liberal governance. In many cases, they have led to greater authoritarianism or lawlessness.

The Role of Regional Powers

Regional actors complicate Syria's path to stabilization. Iran, which lost a key ally in Assad, is working to regain influence by supporting militias and exploiting power vacuums. Turkey views Kurdish autonomy as an existential threat and continues to conduct military operations in the north. Israel, for its part, sees the instability in southern Syria as a strategic liability and has shown willingness to use force preemptively.

The West must adopt a policy of strategic balancing. Support for the Kurds must be calibrated to avoid antagonizing Turkey, while efforts to limit Iranian influence should be pursued through sanctions, covert operations, and partnerships

⁷ Kissinger, Henry. *World Order*. Penguin Books, 2014.

with Arab states like Jordan and Saudi Arabia. Israel's security concerns must be acknowledged, but unilateral military strikes risk further destabilization.

A Fragile Government Worth Managing

The Syrian transitional government is deeply flawed. But for now, it is the only political structure capable of maintaining basic sovereignty. Al-Sharaa may lack international legitimacy, but he possesses something more valuable in the short term: internal leverage. His ability to mediate between factions, maintain some semblance of order in Damascus, and coordinate a fragile ceasefire in the south makes him a necessary interlocutor.

The United States and its allies should open discreet diplomatic channels with Damascus, not to endorse al-Sharaa, but to ensure that any stabilization process includes guardrails. Aid, reconstruction funds, and security assistance should be tied to measurable outcomes: de-escalation of sectarian violence, incorporation of minorities into the transitional government, and cooperation in counterterrorism operations.

Western powers must also push back against efforts by Gulf states to reengineer Syrian society through proxy funding of Sunni hardline groups. The future of Syria should not be left to a bidding war between regional powers with sectarian agendas.

Conclusion: Stability Before Reform

There are no good options in Syria, only less-bad ones. Western policymakers must recognize that the current regime in Damascus, for all its flaws, is the most viable vehicle for preserving the Syrian state—if not the Syrian ideal. Managing this reality will require restraint, leverage, and a willingness to accept a partner who does not share our values but may serve our interests.

The West must stop measuring success in Syria by the presence of elections or constitutional reform. For the foreseeable future, success will look like quiet borders, a reduction in armed conflict, and a halt to extremist resurgence. That requires engaging with the government in Damascus—not embracing it, but managing it, selectively and conditionally.

A fractured Syria benefits no one. A stable—if illiberal—Syria may not be the ideal outcome, but in a region already saturated with failed experiments, it is the only acceptable one.