DECEMBER 2024

The New Syria:

Implications and Uncertainties for International Responders and Donors

Crowds gather in Damascus' Umayyad Square following news of former President Bashar al-Assad's ouster. Photo by Ahmed Akacha.

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Funded by the European Union

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Executive Summary

- Syrian President Bashar al-Assad has been ousted following opposition armed forces' entry into the city of Damascus. The former President's authoritarian system of governance and violent suppression of anti-government demonstrations during the Arab Spring are recognised as having contributed to the start and prolongment of Syria's armed conflict.
- Succeeding his father's 29-year long tenure, and having been in office for 24 years, Bashar al-Assad's departure represents a paradigmatic shift for Syria's near-term future, and also for the international aid response in Syria. Syria's opposition factions now face the task of having to create a new governance model and restore stability at a time when the country is at its most vulnerable, while the aid system must adapt to lines of engagement that have been wholly redrawn by recent events.
- The implications of the Assad regime's departure necessitate a comprehensive reassessment of existing strategies and programme approaches on the part of aid actors. The massive socio-political organisation now underway has not only introduced new humanitarian priorities, but produced new possibilities and problems of international engagement, to include the role(s) of the multi-partite opposition, challenges of social cohesion, issues around the control of key infrastructure and natural resources, probable impacts on the Syrian economy, contention around the operationalisation of key concepts like early recovery, and inevitable recalibrations around aid access, donor strategies, and aid fund design.
- For years, the aid and development community has operated under a series of assumptions which informed its operational strategies, resource allocations, and risk management frameworks for a Syria that was irretrievably under al-Assad. Many of those assumptions are now practically immaterial. While this is in some respects a 'tabula rasa' opportunity for the response community, the potential for shifting alliances, competing, ineffective, and/or malicious governance structures, and internecine conflict is equally a very real possibility and must be factored into future planning.

The Fall of Assad

On December 8, the Assad dynasty's half-a-century long rule over Syria came to an end following rebel forces' takeover of the city of Damascus, and former President Bashar al-Assad's reported resignation and departure from the capital. The Assad regime's defeat comes as a result of the Syrian Arab Army's (SAA) collapse amid week-long, multi-fronted rebel attacks and uprisings across the country. The Syrian opposition's victory is rooted in Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham's (HTS) initial November offensive in Aleppo's western countryside which saw little-to-no resistance from the SAA, and which allowed the group to capture the major cities of Aleppo, Hama, and Homs in quick succession - with the latter two localities having been the sites of fiercer, but ultimately short-lived clashes between HTS and the SAA. Capitalising on the SAA's apparently demoralised and weakened state, other opposition groups such as the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), the Revolutionary Commando Army (RCA), Syrian National Army (SNA), and the Southern Operations Room (SOA) - took to launching simultaneous offensives on Syrian Government positions elsewhere throughout the country, culminating in the eventual ousting of Bashar al-Assad.

Though rebel forces have declared total victory over the Syrian regime, fighting still rages on between SNA and SDF forces for control over the city of Menbij, whilst Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) have launched a ground incursion into Syria's southern regions and have undertaken large-scale airstrikes on border crossings, government buildings, military sites, and ammunition depots in previously SAA-held territory. Ascertaining how much further these sites of conflict may deteriorate, how lines of control over key localities will shift, and/or how the opposition will resolve itself into the country's dominant military-political force is extremely difficult owing to the nascent and rapidly developing nature of ongoing developments. What is clear, however, is that the dissolution of the Syrian regime is emblematic of a paradigmatic shift in the country's history.

With that shift will come far-reaching implications for Syrians, first and foremost, but also regional parties and the international aid and diplomatic community. Fundamental assumptions about how the latter should act in Syria were predicated on the endurance of the Syrian regime and that the conflict was fundamentally frozen, sliding glacially towards the Pyrrhic victory of the regime. Those assumptions are no longer applicable. In many respects, the fall of Assad entails an opportunity to reset the response, to begin anew, to fulfil its rhetoric, and to shape the contours of a future Syria. If the spirit of the revolution is to be redeemed, such optimism must feature in future strategies for the country alongside necessary processes of truth, justice, and reconciliation. However, the foreseeable future also presents considerable uncertainty. This is a moment of great fragility in Syria's history, and international parties have seldom managed such transitions well. If they are to develop strategies and programmes adapted to the present and designed for a stable Syria, they will have to consider many of the issues covered by this report, anticipating and moving in step with change, and thinking creatively about a crisis which may have just witnessed the beginning of the end.

Precursors to Conflict Escalation

HTS' November 27 offensive - referred to as *Radd al-ʻAdwan* (Operation Deterrence of Aggression) - was characterised as a retaliatory measure intended to deter the SAA and its Russian allies from targeting Idleb Governorate. From the beginning of the year to late-October, civilian areas in the northwest had been subject to a substantial uptick in aerial, artillery, and drone bombardment.[1] Already home to the country's largest IDP population, these cross-line attacks had been steadily increasing displacement among local communities, and were responsible for the loss of power at the Ein al-Zarqa Water Station after damage to the Al-Kilani power station.

The group's offensive also came at a time when the Syrian regime's primary allies were logistically and militarily preoccupied in other conflict theatres - Russia in its years-long war of attrition in Ukraine, and Iran in its direct and indirect confrontation with Israel. Hezbollah was a particularly critical element of the Syrian state's security apparatus in northwestern Syria, which besides undertaking direct combat operations on behalf of the Syrian state, also coordinated logistical and operational matters between Iranian-backed forces and the SAA. The extent to which HTS had deliberately timed its military operation to coincide with this diminished external support to the regime remains unknown.

Besides reduced military support, the sheer speed at which the SAA collapsed was arguably a result of the Syrian Government's failure to rebuild and reform state institutions during the interregnum that followed its ceasefire with the northwest in 2019. Perhaps in a bid to preserve power, the Assad regime had neglected structural weaknesses within the Syrian state and instead worked to serve a small but loyalist business elite. By contrast, HTS seems to have spent years consolidating its armed forces, improving its training[2], and fostering a strategic alliance with Turkey. Morale among many of the reportedly under-trained, ill-equipped, and undersalaried[3] SAA conscripts was said to have been so poor in the northwest that desertions and surrender to HTS forces promising clemency snowballed, preventing greater loss of life and the possibility of more devastating clashes.

Equally important was the fact that hostilities among Syria's belligerents had never truly dissipated. What had persisted until this month was merely a "negative peace" - meaning an absence of active combat, not a "positive peace" achieved through the presence of a genuine and just political agreement. Indeed, a comprehensive political solution and genuine reconciliation among involved parties was never a plausible prospect, and it was only ever likely that further conflict would result. Here again, the Assad regime was seen by many — including Türkiye's Erdogan[4] — as having been stubborn and non-committal towards any form of sincere reconciliation with the country's opposition movement, both armed and unarmed. This, and other factors, may have factored into Ankara's open endorsement of and, according to some, more hidden and direct involvement in HTS' initial advance on Aleppo.

1 Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, "Regime forces attack Idlib and Aleppo countryside causing casualties and "Al-Fath Al-Mubin" factions respond to bombing", 31 October 2024.
2 Syria Justice and Accountability Centre, "Militant Enterprises: The Jihadist Private Military Companies of Northwest Syria", 9 May 2024.
3 Troops were reportedly paid just USD 26 per month.
4 Reuters, "Turkey's Erdogan hopes Syrian rebels will advance, but raises alarm about some fighters", 6 December 2024.

Implications for the Wider Syria Response

The implications of the Assad regime's departure and the more immediate consequences of recent military escalation across the country necessitate a comprehensive reassessment of existing programming on the part of aid actors. Needs on the ground continue to change, posing new challenges of emergency and development assistance which will demand careful and proactive calibration in the context of a new and as yet undefined socio-political landscape. Similarly, there may be emerging opportunities to foster a humanitarian response in which aid is more wide-ranging, sustainable, and inclusive, and less beholden to systematic diversion and state interference. Capitalising on that opportunity will be extremely challenging. While the battle against al-Assad is over in the military domain, the war on Syria's state of ongoing crisis continues. Indeed, it may even worsen if stability escapes the now dominant opposition. If response actors are to help support the country's recovery and cultivate a stable transition at this critical juncture, they will need to consider the immediate implications of present conditions on the response.

Early Recovery

The concept of early recovery programming in Syria has long been a contentious issue, with concerns that undertaking such activities in the absence of a political settlement sailed too close to normalisation with the Assad regime. International sanctions and financial regulations had further complicated early recovery, preventing the concept from meeting its ostensible promise both in theory and practice. With the Assad regime now gone, and an opposition movement in which the Foreign Terrorist Organisation (FTO)-designated HTS has assumed a dominant role, the feasibility and trajectory of early recovery remains just as uncertain as it ever was.

Assad's departure will ease donor concern that they might inadvertently legitimise a widely-condemned regime and fall afoul of a raft network of sanctions designed to hamstring al-Assad's Syrian Government and its affiliates. But an escalation in conflict across the country could equally deter international parties from committing to long-term recovery projects, as the potential for instability would undermine the foundations necessary for sustainable development. It equally remains to be seen which donors prove optimistic, viewing current events as a unique opportunity to rebuild Syria, and which might adopt a more cautious stance, focusing on more immediate humanitarian needs rather than structural investments. Much remains to be played out in the diplomatic domain on such points, not least at the national and local levels within Syria itself, where the colour and shape of the country's authorities will be critical in dictating the form and tempo of the international response.

In time, these dynamics will play out to the extent that a comprehensive reassessment of early recovery frameworks is possible. Naturally, this will require attention to the contours of the emerging political landscape, ensuring, for instance, that balance is achieved across competing zones of control, social groups, and rural and urban areas so as to avoid the potential for grievances and instability. Presently however, it may be possible to continue with existing projects and partners where their work does not appear likely

to contend with potential spoilers, either in their undertaking or expected outcomes. Longer-term, it may be that early recovery is dispensed with altogether. It must be recalled that the approach was conceived by Russian design, largely in an attempt to press ahead with the gradual normalisation of the regime by steering the discourse away from conflict and towards more technical recovery and 'post-conflict' assistance issues. Depending on the appetites of international donors, a bridge between relief aid and reconstruction may no longer prove valid or politically expedient in the 'new' Syria. Indeed, reconstruction may simply be on the table given the soft power wins that it might deliver, including as this relates to both refugee return and the creation of an additional defence against westward migration into Europe.

Shifting Emergency Priorities

Though clashes seem to have subsided in large parts of the country following the regime's defeat, aid actors must contend with the lingering emergency needs that have arisen from the past week's clashes as well as prolonged violence in certain regions, namely in Menbij and other SDF-controlled territories along the Syrian-Turkish border. Recent countrywide military escalation will for now, dramatically reshape humanitarian priorities, necessitating the pivot from longer-term programming to immediate relief efforts. Naturally, relative stability in some areas may allow for a cautious continuation of broader recovery projects.

The past weeks' wave of countrywide armed clashes — short and bloodless as they may have been — has caused substantial civilian casualties requiring urgent support for healthcare services[5], as well as search-and-rescue operations responding to instances of continued bombing. Healthcare services in many parts of the country remain debilitated, and the sudden increase in demand has stretched many facilities to the brink, with both medical staff struggling and resources inadequate to meet short-term and long-term health needs. The deliberate targeting of hospitals had become a troubling norm throughout the war, and indeed, the Syrian Air Force had struck numerous civilian hospitals in opposition-held territory during the early stages of HTS' offensive, threatening to induce a collapse in healthcare delivery for the more populated parts of northwest Syria.

Similar to the targeting of northern Syria's health sector, water stations, electrical grids, and other essential infrastructure have also been susceptible to attacks. With many communities still deprived of essential services such as clean drinking water, functional sewage systems, and stable energy, shifting efforts to restore these amenities will be pivotal in halting the deterioration in living conditions and establishing a platform for future efforts.

Large Scale Population Movements

Irrespective of ongoing clashes, Syria's war has already created the largest displacement crisis of the 21st century. Northwestern Syria remains the epicenter of this humanitarian emergency, while individuals and communities across the country have endured repeated displacement due to persistent violence, economic deterioration, and environmental challenges. The ripple effects of current hostilities have only aggravated the situation. In October, increased security incidents generated a steady stream of displacement in Idleb Governorate - which had become the choice of settlement for an estimated 6,600 Syrians who had fled the conflict in Lebanon.[6] Our sources reported that HTS' initial November offensive triggered the forced migration of between 10,800 and 11,000 families in a single day, marking the beginning of the region's largest displacement crisis in the past five years. This particular wave of displacement included over 25,000 children and approximately 20,000 women, adding to an already overwhelming need for emergency support.

5 UN News, "Syria escalation: Deadly attacks continue, healthcare and access compromised", 3 December 2024.

6 UNHCR, "Northwest Syria Flash Update #5, Response to Displacement from Lebanon to Syria", 25 October 2024.

Existing IDP centres, concentrated in what were considered relatively safer parts of the northwest, were unable to accommodate the sudden influx. Winter naturally intensifies these existing vulnerabilities, with many IDPs lacking adequate shelter, heating amenities, and essential supplies. Families who were displaced as a result of the offensive and subsequent clashes were reported to originate from areas of Aleppo's western countryside - in towns such as Maarat al-Naasan, Sarmin, Ketayan, Kafranoran, Taqad, and Ketayan. While around 4,000 IDPs have been documented as having arrived further north of Aleppo's countryside, the vast majority have been seen heading westwards within Idleb Governorate - where the main IDP reception centres are located in Atmeh, Qah, Harem, Armanaz, Al Dana, Idlib city, Al Bardakli, and Maarat Tamsarin. When HTS' offensive reached the northern outskirts of Homs, many residents - fearing both the dangers of violent clashes and potential acts of reprisal - were said to have fled west, towards the Governorates of Tartous and Lattakia, which were still under SAA control at the time. Ongoing and past clashes in the Tel Rifaat and Menbij areas have also pushed families towards SDF-controlled territory east of the Euphrates river.[7] The closure of a number of the country's border crossings, as well as national transit routes, restrict IDPs' freedom of movement and impede their ability to return or reach designated shelters.

Meanwhile, news of the regime's ousting and mass amnesties granted by governing authorities has reportedly propelled thousands of Syrians residing in neighbouring countries to voluntarily migrate home. Turkish authorities had decided to reopen the border crossing into Lattakia Governorate in order to prevent congestion[8], highlighting just how many people have sought to return at this early stage. Many Syrians are also entering the country from Lebanon[9], despite fierce Israeli airstrikes between Damascus and Zabadin. In fact, the more proximate vicinities of the Syrian-Lebanese border crossing have themselves been struck by the IDF, supposedly in an effort to target "smuggling networks." At the time of writing, there are no accurate figures concerning the mass voluntary and involuntary movement of Syrians both domestically and abroad. Indeed , certain European states' decision to - perhaps prematurely - suspend asylum applications may also incentivise many Syrians residing abroad to return home, potentially contributing to an increase in overall returnees.[10] Such movements, if untracked, will make forecasting changes in population difficult and their humanitarian implications will be equally challenging to address. In the near-term, they will also introduce substantial housing, land, and property issues which have been left unattended for years, necessitating liaison with whatever authority is presented and extensive legal expertise.

Control of Key Infrastructure and Natural Resources

The shift in territorial control across the county has significant implications for the contemporary management of key infrastructure such as water stations, energy facilities, and transportation networks. Areas under opposition control have now expanded to include the country's main population hubs, as well as resources and key facilities previously overseen by the Syrian Government. In northeast Syria, Kurdish-majority forces have announced full control over the Syrian Government's prior pockets of control in the cities of Al-Hasakeh and Quamishli, leaving the Autonomous Administration as the sole authority managing much of the country's natural resources east of the Euphrates river.

Water resources, particularly in the now contested regions along the Euphrates river, are critical for agriculture, drinking water, and energy production. Recent changes in control of infrastructure, such as dams, irrigation networks, and water treatment plants may shift the power of balance among Syria's less-unified opposition factions, and may ultimately result in further disputes and disruptions if mutual understanding on resource management is not achieved. Ensuring equitable service access in the parameters of Syria's newly-shaped areas

7 Voice of America, "Displaced Syrian Kurds face dire conditions amid intensified fighting", 5 December 2024.
8 Al-Monitor, "Turkey to reopen crossing for returning Syrians as Erdogan hails rebel victory", 9 December 2024.
9 The New Arab, "Syrian refugees in Lebanon begin to return after Assad regime's ouster", 8 December 2024.
10 Reuters, "European countries halt Syrian asylum applications after Assad's fall", 11 December 2024.

of control will be critical to fostering stability, and may require humanitarian frameworks that transcend territorial divides between variously competitive opposition parties, some of which may remain in flux.

Prior to the November offensive, many power grids, hospitals, schools, and transit routes across the country were already partially or wholly inoperable owing to previous violence, poor maintenance, international sanctions, and deliberate targeting. Damage to infrastructure — particularly in remote or newly-contested areas — has exacerbated development needs, while the closure of border crossings and highways directly affect the speed and efficiency of aid distribution. Humanitarian actors will have to conduct comprehensive assessments of both operational and nonfunctional infrastructure across all territories, factoring in newly-charted borders and control dynamics. There also exists an opportunity to empower local governance structures in the management and maintenance of essential infrastructure, with increased funding and supporting the fostering of technical expertise.

Impact on Syrian Economy

The economic impact of Syria's recent nationwide military escalation has already been felt with the Syrian Pound having significantly decreased in value after a period of relative stability.[11] For over a decade, socioeconomic conditions in the country have drastically deteriorated due to the prolonged conflict's continuation, the negative effects of which were exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic, recurrent periods of drought, the devastating 2023 earthquakes, the collapse of the banking sector in Lebanon, and financial crisis in Türkiye. These challenges, alongside other global events, have severely undermined Syria's economic resilience and stability. And while hostilities have ceased in large parts of the country following the regime's departure, the compound effects of a decimated national infrastructure, fractured governance, and the legacy of systematic corruption linger on, perpetuating concern over Syria's economic resilience.

Changing economic circumstances will necessitate a shift in donor strategies to help address Syria's multi-faceted weakness. The absence of the regime's once highly centralised governance system and the emergence of more novel, localised power structures - many of which are lacking in formal coordination - make the prospect of market stabilisation and recovery highly unpredictable. Adding to this unpredictability is the question of international sanctions. While some may be rescinded in light of Assad's departure, concerns among the international community regarding the Syrian opposition's method of governance, efforts to restore stability, and commitment to the principles of international human rights may lead to the continuation, or indeed, replacement, of restrictive measures. Cash programmes and development actors will be forced to reevaluate their market considerations as a result.

Cross-Border Aid Mechanism

Since 2014, United Nations Security Council (UNSC) Resolution 2165 has authorised cross-border and cross-line access for the United Nations (UN) and its partners to deliver humanitarian aid without Syrian Government consent. Out to mid-November 2024, that Resolution had seen its points of entry diminish from an initial four border crossings to one, in Bab al-Hawa, along the Syrian-Turkish border. This crossing has long been the subject of considerable contention, and was heavily politicised by the Syrian Government and its allies to generate pressure for concessions from those that sought to keep it operational. Now, however, Syria's new political landscape may pave the way for a significant expansion of cross-border access in spite of the present-day — likely temporary — closure of many border points.

The UN may very well expand its operations as a result, opening additional crossings along the Turkish border, as well as restoring past access points via Jordan and Iraq. Non-UN agencies engaged in cross-border

11 Enab Baladi, "Syrian pound hits record low against dollar in Aleppo", 3 December 2024.

programmes may also experience fewer bureaucratic and operational hurdles, enhancing their ability to deliver aid resources throughout the country. The possibility of expanded access would significantly bolster aid actors' capacity to meet urgent humanitarian needs and facilitate more comprehensive, cohesive, and coordinated response efforts, and particularly in areas that have suffered from years of neglect and isolation.

Just as critically, the 'expansion' of cross-border access, also means the 'end' of cross border assistance. Resolution 2165 was passed due to the inability of the Damascus-based UN to assist large populations in the country, cross-line. This reliance on the cross-border modality effectively created two UNs in Syria; now, there is no need for this structure. The UN now faces a major administrative and programmatic challenge, as it must combine what have been two related but distinct operations. In practice, the UN in Syria now faces something similar to a major corporate merger, where decisions must be made on what programs should be incorporated into each other, what kinds of regional area-based divisions make sense (or if a truly whole of Syria approach is possible), and what staff and systems have been made redundant.

Aid Fund Recalibration

In the immediate sense, recent change in Syria will require thought as to which ongoing programming remains a priority, how it can be administered, and the extent to which emerging needs obligate resource redistribution. Indeed, portfolios designed on the basis of a pre-December Syria may have been rendered fundamentally unviable and/or ineffective, may require expansion to address associated emergency needs or, conversely, may now host programmes which are ripe for further commitment and/or reconceptualisation. Programme managers will be wrestling with these issues in the coming weeks, likely adopting something of a wait and see approach to the ways in which Syria's new operational realities will impinge upon their existing response activities and working to salvage as much of these programmes as possible.

Longer term, however, the aid community will have to confront the fact that no emergent domestic actor will be able to sustain the functions of governance, stability, and reconciliation without heavy dependence on foreign assistance. Such points in history have seldom been handled well. If the Syrian opposition does manage to present a unified and pragmatic plan for transitional governance which receives widespread donor support, the latter's reconstruction and recovery plans must be equally practical, coordinated, and aligned with whatever strategic roadmap has been conceived for Syria, ideally in partnership with local leadership systems and likely — necessarily — alongside regional actors like Turkey and Jordan. Divergence, duplication, and disarray in the aid and diplomatic response across these parties will almost certainly subvert the country's processes of stabilisation, potentially enlivening the various conflict legacy issues and uncertainties that lie in wait, many of which are not isolated to Syria and could have severe regional implications.

If a more disparate and competitive governance and security picture emerges, it may be that the aid community confronts many of the obstacles witnessed in recent years, albeit along different lines. A similar scramble for relevance could be reflected across aid funds as a result, in turn intensifying the kind of inter-agency atomisation that has been an enduring feature of the response to date. Certain types of work in certain areas may be considered impractical or politically impermissible for some international parties, whereas others may have few such unsureties. Were such lines to emerge, it is improbable they will be drawn neatly around needs, nor around the domestic resources required to bring about the kind of wholesale response necessary to reduce Syria's aid dependency. Such eventualities are ultimately beyond the reach of aid donors themselves, but more preferential operational realities might be induced through the kind of aid conditionalities and milestones associated with collective political strategies which are concrete in their determination to achieve X by means of Y. Transparency on these points could prove pivotal in navigating a politically complex post-Assad reality, and may go some way to reducing dissonance across any new or evolved 'zones of control'.

In fact, thinking along such lines may be more possible now than at any time since the response began: It is unlikely that whatever new authority(ies) emerge(s) in the coming months will be as obdurate as the Syrian regime when it comes to working with international actors given their capacity and legitimacy is now in the spotlight, and neither are they likely to have the resources to similarly resist conditionalities incorporated into aid and development assistance. Increased access, and with it, more feasible (if not increased) aid, might therefore create opportunities for forms of systemic engagement which greatly exceed that which was considered possible by donors before current events, yet this will only be possible if leadership on this body of opportunities is strong, clear, and sufficiently ambitious in scope. It remains to be seen whether any actors are prepared to assume this role, and is likely heavily contingent in the first instance on their ability to adapt existing portfolios in ways which demonstrate their sensitivity to Syria in 2025.

Operational Uncertainties of the New Political Landscape

Besides the aforementioned implications for the wider Syria response, recent developments in the country also present several uncertainties regarding the country's foreseeable future. The outcome of Syria's governance deliberations, ongoing conflict, and the effects of several compounding crises caused by the war and other regional events may harm or indeed help facilitate contemporary humanitarian programming. Much remains unknown at this early stage, with the shape, policies, and ambitions of a likely HTS-influenced transitional government being one such key consideration. Similarly, sources of operational incertitude are presented by the ability of key actors to maintain or indeed, restore social cohesion across deeply fragmented regions, most pointedly at a time when much of the population — at home and hitherto abroad —is undergoing a massive social reorganisation and will be wrestling with the consequences of both its new reality and the legacy of violence to which they have been subjected since 2011.

HTS and its Role in Syria's Future

With HTS now cementing itself as a bulwark of the Syrian revolution following the regime's defeat, its role as a key player in the country's future introduces significant implications with respect to administration, governance, and international engagement. The group's role in Syria's new socio-political reality will be subject to intense scrutiny given the formerly Al-Qaeda affiliated group's designation as an FTO and the persistence of hardline Islamist leanings within its political philosophy as practiced in Idleb. Inevitably, the presence of HTS-affiliated elements in large parts of the country may create an environment rife with legal, ethical, and operational challenges for international parties, which could deter future engagement or make pre-existing operations in some regions totally unworkable.

The governance structure HTS pursues in its newly acquired role — along with its treatment of Syria's minority groups — will serve to influence international perspectives. There are a spectrum of options here, bookended on one side by the attempt to extend the semi-technocratic mandate of the controversial Salvation Government, which has long entailed significant interference from the group's more centralised and authoritarian military wing, and, on the other, and as it has sought to publicly demonstrate in recent days, a more pragmatic method of governance which advocates for a locally-derived civilian administration with limited HTS involvement in matters of public service provision and stabilisation. Whether HTS can deliver on the latter is an open question, however. So too, critically, decisions as to whether its FTO designation is warranted in spite of its rhetoric.

HTS leader, Ahmad al-Shara'a (also known as Abu Mohammad al-Jolani), has made concerted efforts in recent years to campaign for the greater inclusion of minority groups in Idleb Governorate. Such moves, contrasting with HTS' roots in extremism, as well as its conduct to date in this month's offensive, have opened the door to a change in the group's international status. Regardless of whether its FTO designation is removed or not however, humanitarian actors will now have to reevaluate due diligence practices applied in formerly Syrian Government-held areas, extending the rigorous scrutiny once reserved for Idleb

to much larger, more complex, and more populated regions of the country. A failure to do so will expose aid programming to the evolved risks presented by Syria's new operating landscape, ranging from those linked to the emergence of new governing authorities, the standing, networks, and leadership of alternative partners, and the various capacities therein. Of course, if HTS' designation does persist in some quarters, its probable status as the most dominant military-political force in Syria's core cities will constrain programmatic possibilities, retain risks around the inadvertent violation of counterterror laws, and raise broader questions about the sustainability, financing, and effectiveness of aid engagement in much of the country.

Social Cohesion

Social cohesion — or lack thereof — was one of the more prominent drivers of the Syrian conflict, as deep-rooted sectarian divisions were exacerbated by extremist violence, the marginalisation of minority groups under authoritarian rule, and the politicisation of religious sentiment. Since undertaking its November offensive, HTS now finds itself governing a majority of the Syrian population which is substantially more ethnically and religiously diverse than HTS' de-facto capital in Idleb Governorate. HTS statements and al-Shara'a himself have stressed that in their vision of a post-Assad Syria, the country's minority groups will not be subject to discriminatory abuse or harassment. Such language long predates the November offensive and appears to have been successful since moving into formerly Government-held areas; indeed, it frequently enabled the group to negotiate a peaceful transfer of powers with ethnic and religious minority notables in these areas. The case remains, however, that while a nationalist rhetoric focused on regime change has alleviated fears amongst many minority groups, others question HTS's sincerity.

The treatment of Kurdish populations in regions like Tel Rifaat and Menbij will likely prove the litmus test for HTS and the wider opposition. Here, the matter of ensuring social cohesion is particularly challenging considering that the constellation of armed militias that constitute the SNA — the driver of a separate offensive — has yet to unite behind the kind of rhetorical commitments made by HTS with respect to minority groups. The SNA have a particularly marked past with Kurds residing in Syria's northern borderlands following Turkish-led military operations and refugee resettlement schemes in these areas. For Ankara, the armed and politically active Kurdish population along its international borders has always been interpreted through the lens of the former's own decades-long conflict with Kurdish political groups at home - namely, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). Given the potential of Türkiye's incoming influence in the country and such historical patterns, it is no great leap to sympathise with the fears of marginalisation or repression expressed by Kurdish communities. Ankara's denial of involvement in the HTS offensive does little to mitigate such concerns, particularly given that the ongoing military operations in the Menbij area are orchestrated by the fundamentally Türkiye-supported SNA.

For humanitarian actors, the question of social cohesion in HTS' newly-acquired territory is directly linked to the feasibility of programme implementation and the potential for broader instability. Determining HTS' commitment to its moderate rhetoric and implementation of inclusive governance policies will be key in determining future operational risks. Without such considerations, the aid and development community may find itself facing significant ethical and legal challenges concerning compliance issues, most worryingly at the risk of enabling an oppressive, sectarian governance structure, or at least one in which the participation of Syria's minorities is limited and their rights are only partially recognised.

The New Syrian State

The fall of the Assad regime represents one of the most dramatic shifts in Syria's modern history, with the country now left in a potentially perilous state of fragility. The Syrian state, long defined by a highly-centralised authoritarian system of rule, now faces the challenge of formulating a new national identity during

one of the world's most substantial and enduring humanitarian crises. With the SAA having essentially evaporated, questions regarding the survivability of the previous government's other services, ministries, and infrastructure arise, including the aid architecture which was once responsible for helping address needs in about two-thirds of Syria's national territory.

Indeed, addressing the real-world drivers of systemic corruption, repression, and inequality, all the while ensuring the continuation of adequate governance and basic service provision may prove too tall an order for any incoming administration. Moreover, the resilience of these systems will be strenuously tested subsequent to recent and likely foreseeably continuing voluntary returns to Syria, not to mention the past months' influx of approximately 400,000 refugees from Lebanon produced by Israel's intervention. Without adequate management and effective support, social tensions and resource competition could lead to further instability down the line.

In this new context, an opportunity lies in the potential return of diaspora organisations and Syrian individuals who have avoided participation in the conflict. Alongside their peers in Syrian civil society, these actors will be crucial in helping draft a new chapter in the country's story. The return of Syrian aid organisations in particular, all of which have been steadily internationalised due to the circumstances of the war, may help foster greater localisation within the response if they are empowered to do so. Similarly, the return of refugees could — besides posing an additional strain on already weakened state infrastructure and service systems — rejuvenate local economies and communities.

The question of who will govern this "New Syria" looms large, and though the once deeply fragmented Syrian opposition appears to have unified on several fronts, the possibility for competing socio-political visions to turn deadly remains with philosophies ranging from that espoused by the locally entrenched but HTS-driven SG, the internationally-backed but less popular Syrian Interim Government (SIG), and the federalist Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AA). In some areas, local civil administrations associated with these parties may assume some degree of authority, though most will almost certainly suffer from limited resources and will lack the competence to fill the expansive vacuum left by Assad's departure. The process of establishing a nation-wide cohesive governance model at a time when the country's conflict has yet to conclude will be an arduous task, but it is a necessary one not only for ensuring stability and retaining public trust, but also for the surety of the kind of international assistance Syria so badly needs.

Transitional Justice

The total defeat of the Assad regime and the subsequent dismantling of its repressive security apparatus have created fertile ground for mob justice, with decades worth of resentment and anger simmering under systematic repression. The harrowing images and released detainees' vivid recollections of atrocities that have taken place in the former regime's notorious prison system may serve to further fuel a drive for revenge, making it tempting for the country's new power-holders (and indeed, duty bearers) and angered communities to bypass due process and enact their own forms of justice. There is clearly a need to punish offenders; however, the means in which these offenders are selected, and the level at which prosecutions will take place, is critical. The way in which justice is administered during the country's transitional period may set a precedent for Syria's immediate and long-term future. If mob justice and extrajudicial punishment is to prevail - as it reportedly has in some incidents where pro-regime militiamen have been summarily executed - it will risk entrenching lawlessness, undermining efforts to rebuild trust and stability. Conversely, a commitment to fair and transparent accountability efforts could lay the groundwork for a more unified and just society, as well as international recognition.

Perhaps in recognition of intense international scrutiny and the dangers of failing to enact an effective and fair justice system, Syria's opposition coalition thus far seems very much aware of the importance of preventing both extrajudicial killings and personal acts of reprisals. Moreover, HTS has stated that - at least for now - they intend to keep the large majority of state employees in place, as seen in the relatively smooth handovers of power in Damascus, Aleppo, and other major cities and government ministries. However, the capacity of the coalition's courts to handle the complex - and sometimes years-spanning - cases of regime-affiliated war criminals is uncertain, as is their ability to guarantee rogue elements and other armed opposition factions prone to acting independently, commit to their reconciliatory efforts. Additionally, their vision for a new Syrian justice system has yet to take concrete form, raising questions as to whether it will prioritise impartiality or risk replicating the arbitrary detentions, kangaroo courts, and summary executions of the Assad regime - a betrayal of the principles at the very heart of the Syrian revolution.

This publication was funded by the European Union. Its contents are the sole responsibility of COAR and do not necessarily reflect the views of the European Union.

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Funded by the European Union