

Editors: Dr. Brandon Friedman & Mr. Ido Yahel  
Volume 18, Number 2      December 15, 2024

## **Syria After Asad: A Conflict Without Closure**

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On Sunday, December 8, the Asad regime collapsed, losing the capital, Damascus, to rebel forces. During the past week HTS (*Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham*)<sup>1</sup> led Syria's rebels on a lightning offensive, capturing all of Syria's major cities: Aleppo, Homs, Hama, and Damascus. Regime forces quickly retreated, withdrawing from large swathes of territory they could no longer hold or defend. The HTS offensive surprised the regime, exposing Asad's tenuous grip on power. The question of whether there would be a repeat of the 2015 Iranian-Russian military intervention was rendered moot by the speed of events on the ground.<sup>2</sup> The 2015 intervention to reinforce the Asad regime began months earlier.<sup>3</sup> There was simply no time, resources, or manpower to rescue the Asad regime this time.<sup>4</sup> As Ghassan Charbel, the Editor-in-Chief of the pan-Arab daily *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, wrote, Asad's fall is an "earthquake (*zilzal*)," and it is the end of an era (*haqmatun kamilatun tuwiyat*).<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For background on HTS, see: Hassan Ibrahim, "[Al-Jolani...From Extremism to Moderation](#) [Arabic]," *Enab Baladi*, December 8, 2024; Charles Lister, "How al-Qa'ida Lost Control of its Syrian Affiliate: The Inside Story," Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, *CTC Sentinel* 11:2 (February 2018); Aaron Zelin, "Jihadi 'Counterterrorism': Hayat Tahrir al-Sham Versus the Islamic State," Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, *CTC Sentinel* 16: 2 (February 2023); Paul Cruickshank, "Journey to Idlib: Interview with Wasim Nasr, Journalist, France24," Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, *CTC Sentinel* 16: 5 (May 2023).

<sup>2</sup> There are reports that a December 7 meeting between the Astana three (Russia, Iran, and Turkey) plus Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia in Doha sealed the fate of the Asad regime. See: @aljumhuriya\_eng, [Post](#), X.com, December 9, 2024, 12:18 pm.

<sup>3</sup> Eyal Zisser, "[The Russian and Iranian Military Intervention in Syria](#)," The Moshe Dayan Center (MDC), *Tel Aviv Notes*, September 25, 2015; and, John W. Parker, "[Qassem Soleimani: Moscow's Syria Decision – Myth and Reality](#)," Institute for National Security Studies, National Defense University, *Strategic Insights*, February 4, 2020.

<sup>4</sup> Samir Atallah, "[From Here](#) [Arabic]," *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, December 9, 2024.

<sup>5</sup> Ghassan Charbel, "[The Fall of the Lion and the Night of Damascus Destinies](#) [Arabic]," *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, December 9, 2024; See, also: Sami Moubayed, "[Assad's fall: The end of an era](#)," *Majalla*, December 8, 2024.

The civil war in Syria was just one component of a multidimensional conflict, that began in 2011. It led to approximately 5.5 million refugees (with the majority residing in Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, and Germany), to more than 12 million Syrians displaced from their homes, and to what is estimated at more than 600,000 deaths. Despite the magnitude of these figures, the scale of death, destruction, and human suffering caused by the war cannot be adequately quantified.

The war began as a popular uprising in 2011 and evolved into a civil war between the Bashar al-Asad regime and its opposition. The Syrian war is best understood as five interlocking conflicts:

1. A civil war between Asad/Iran/Hizballah/Russia on one side, and the armed Sunni opposition groups (led by groups rooted in Salafi-Jihadi ideology) backed by Turkey.
2. A war between the Salafi-Jihadi groups: HTS, al-Qa'ida, the Islamic State, and others.
3. A war between Syrian Kurds/U.S.-led coalition and the Islamic State.
4. A war between Turkey and the Syrian Kurds.
5. A war between Israel/U.S. and Iran in Syria.

Last week's developments have ended the core conflict: the civil war between the Asad regime and the largely Sunni opposition in Syria. However, Turkey has renewed its war against the Syrian Kurds during the past week, using the Syrian National Army (SNA) and Turkish air power to attack Manbij and Kobani, which lie in territory controlled by the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF).<sup>6</sup> And, on Sunday, December 8, U.S. forces carried out "dozens" of precision airstrikes on Islamic State camps in central Syria.<sup>7</sup> The fate of the 'Alawi minority and the state's Ba'th Party infrastructure remains unclear. Whether Russia and Iran will regroup and seek to project influence through former regime loyalists is also an important question. In other words, the Asad era is over, but Syria must now grapple with the unresolved dimensions of the conflict, as well as the enduring strategic interests of foreign powers.

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<sup>6</sup> Amberin Zaman, "[Syria's Kurds faced with all-out war as Turkey, Sunni allies target Kobani](#)," *al-Monitor*, December 10, 2024.

<sup>7</sup> Press Release, "[U.S. Central Command conducts dozens of airstrikes to eliminate ISIS camps in central Syria](#)," U.S. Central Command, Release Number 20241208-01, December 8, 2024.

### *A New Map?*

The HTS-led offensive is redrawing the political map of Syria. The regime's Syrian Arab Army (SAA) has collapsed and regime loyalists may seek refuge in the mountains of Jabal al-Ansariyah, the 'Alawi hinterland. It is unclear whether regime loyalists will attempt to defend a rump statelet that includes the strategically valuable port cities of Latakia and Tartus.<sup>8</sup> In Latakia, opposition forces have already celebrated the downfall of the regime in parts of the city. Russia has withdrawn from its naval base in Tartus and Hmeymim air base outside of Latakia.<sup>9</sup> The HTS-led rebels now control the demographic spine of central Syria, extending from Aleppo to Damascus, north to south. Rebels, who are not affiliated with HTS-led groups, have also driven the regime out of southwest Syria (the Hauran region), including the Nassib border crossing with Jordan. In the east, the rebels have recaptured Palmyra, and regime forces have abandoned the Euphrates corridor, including Raqqa, Deir Ez-Zour, and the strategic border with Iraq, Abukamal. Much of this territory along the Euphrates River is now controlled by the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF),<sup>10</sup> which have been backed by the United States. The SDF also controls much of northeastern Syria, which includes Manbij in the west and Qamishli and Hasaka in the east.<sup>11</sup> The Turkey-backed Syrian National Army (SNA), a component of the Syrian rebels, controls Afrin and the area north of Aleppo up to the Manbij countryside, as well as a strip of territory further east, in Hasaka Province. These territories were seized and occupied by Turkish-backed forces during three separate military offensives between 2016 and 2019, which sought to shatter Kurdish autonomy and territorial contiguity along Turkey's southern border. Turkey views the Kurdish leadership in Syria as an extension of the PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party), which is recognized as a terrorist organization by the United States.<sup>12</sup>

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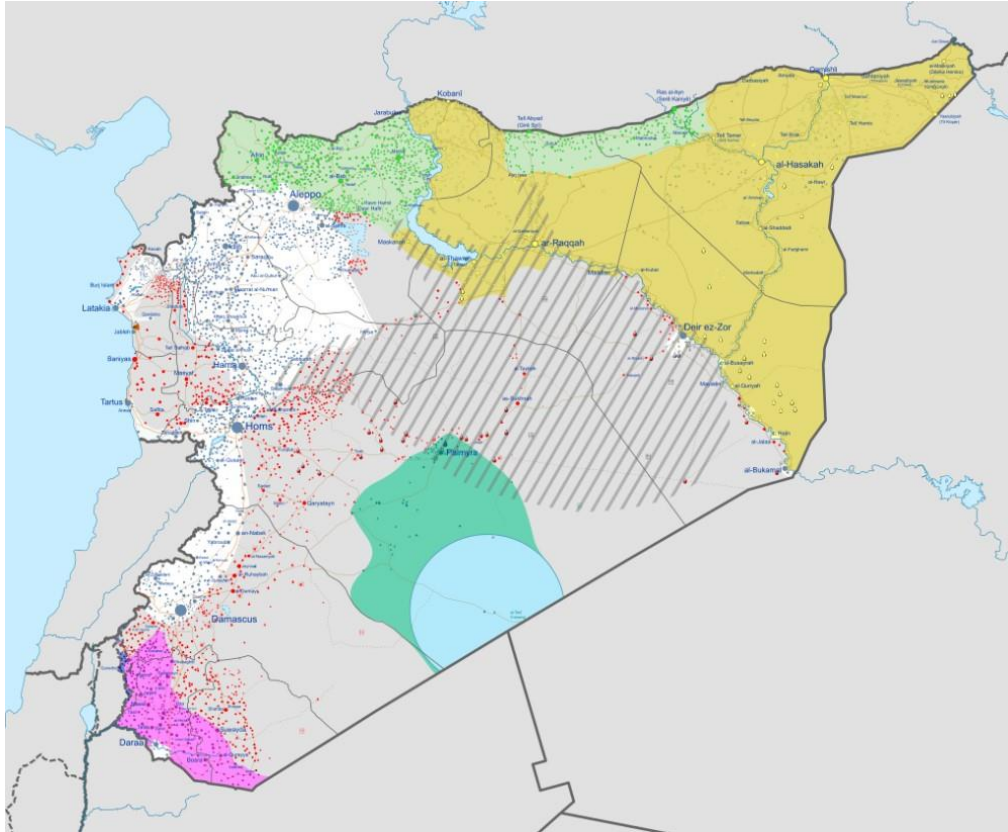
<sup>8</sup> Hussein Ibish, "[How Russia Could Maintain a Foothold in Syria](#)," *The Atlantic*, December 8, 2024.

<sup>9</sup> It is unclear whether Russia has permanently withdrawn from Syria. See: Tuvan Gumrukcu, Suleiman Al-Khalidi, and Guy Faulconbridge, Exclusive: "[Russia pulling back but not out of Syria, sources say](#)," *Reuters*, December 14, 2024; "[Future of Russian bases in Syria to depend on its new authorities – top Turkish diplomat](#)," *TASS – Russian News Agency*, December 13, 2024.

<sup>10</sup> The latest reports suggest the SDF has withdrawn from Deir Ez-Zour, transferring control to the rebels. See: "[Military Operations Command takes control of Deir Ezzour, SDF withdraws](#)," *al-Mayadeen*, December 11, 2024.

<sup>11</sup> There were reports on December 11 that U.S. mediation led to the SDF's withdrawal from Manbij. See: "[Syrian democratic forces, rebels reach US-brokered ceasefire agreement in Manbij, SDF commander says](#)," *Reuters*, December 11, 2024.

<sup>12</sup> See: U.S. Department of State – Bureau of Counterterrorism, [Foreign Terror Organizations](#).



Map of the Syrian Civil War, created by Institute for the Study of War and AEI's Critical Threats, via [Wikimedia Commons](#) [CC BY 4.0].

The emerging lines of control in Syria bear some similarity to the borders established during the pre-independence French Mandate after World War I, particularly between 1925 and 1936.<sup>13</sup> The French divided Lebanon and Syria into statelets that separated the Sunni majority from what was perceived as its vulnerable “compact minorities”—‘Alawis, Druze, and Maronite Christians.<sup>14</sup> The French also encouraged a large Kurdish migration from Turkey into northern Syria during the late 1920s and 1930s (along with Turkmen, Assyrians, and Armenians).<sup>15</sup> During the inter-war period, the Sunni nationalist elite sought to unite Syria, absorbing the minorities and their territorial patrimony into an independent Syria. Today, Syria’s rebels, who are led by Salafi-Jihadi Ahmad al-Shar‘a (formerly known as Abu Mohammad al-Jolani), have diverse (if not contradictory) aims, but they appear united in seeking to overcome the territorial divisions imposed by foreign powers. However, the Salafi-Jihadi rebels have a history of intra-jihadi war that was a major

<sup>13</sup> For a different perspective on the same historical comparison, see: Sami Moubayed, “[The short-lived experience of ‘Federal Syria’](#) [Arabic],” *Majalla*, December 8, 2024.

<sup>14</sup> See: Itamar Rabinovich, “The Compact Minorities and the Syrian State, 1918-1945,” *The Journal of Contemporary History* 14:4 (1979), 693-712.

<sup>15</sup> See: Jordi Tejel, “The Terrier Plan and the Emergence of a Kurdish Policy under the French Mandate in Syria, 1926-1936,” *The International Journal of Kurdish Studies* 21: 1-2 (2007), 93-108.

component of the Syrian conflict. It is not clear whether the Islamic State, al-Qa'ida, or even HTS cadres will accept Jolani's Syria-centric vision.<sup>16</sup> Jolani has used rhetoric infused with nationalist themes (despite rejecting notions of popular sovereignty) to promote the idea of a unified and sovereign Syria, liberated from foreign domination.<sup>17</sup>

### ***Foreign Powers***

Since the 2017 “de-escalation” process that followed the joint Russian-Iranian military intervention in September 2015, Turkey has served as an informal sponsor and guardian for the Syrian rebels. Its military forces prevented the Asad regime, Russia, and Iran from destroying the jihadi-rebel safe haven in Idlib Province in 2019 and again in 2020 and 2021. Turkey has also built an army of loyal Syrian rebels (the Syrian National Army – SNA), which it had used to occupy and hold Syrian territory. In 2022, Turkey's president, Recep Tayip Erdoğan, floated a plan to build 200,000 homes in northern Syria to repatriate and resettle Syrian refugees living in Turkey.<sup>18</sup> Turkey hosts more than 3 million refugees from Syria. Now that Asad's regime has fallen and Russia has withdrawn its forces, Turkey is likely to try and achieve its longstanding goals of dismantling Kurdish-led SDF's territorial control in north and eastern Syria; and repatriating as many Syrian refugees living in Turkey as possible.<sup>19</sup> On Sunday, December 7, Erdoğan's public statement appeared to reflect the approach of the Syrian rebel leadership, “Syria belongs to the Syrians, with all its ethnic, sectarian and religious components. The Syrian people will determine the future of their country.”<sup>20</sup> For the past five years, Russia and the United States have prevented Turkey and its Syrian National Army (SNA) from invading SDF-controlled territory. The United States is in the midst of a presidential transition, and Asad and Russia are no longer in a position to obstruct Erdoğan's plans for Syria.

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<sup>16</sup> HTS militants have already issued statements declaring their intention to continue their jihad until they reach Al Aqsa in Jerusalem, the Prophet's mosque in Medina, and the Kaaba in Mecca. See: “[Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham \(HTS\) Islamist Militants In Damascus Declare: We Will Enter Al-Aqsa Mosque In Jerusalem, The Prophet's Mosque In Medina, And The Kaaba In Mecca, Just Like We Entered The Umayyad Mosque In Damascus](#),” *Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI)*, December 8, 2024.

<sup>17</sup> See: Aaron Zelin, “[The Patient Efforts Behind Hayat Tahrir al-Sham's Success in Aleppo](#),” *Warontherocks.com*, December 3, 2024; Also, Thomas Pierret, “Syrian Islamists: From Syria to the Umma, and Back,” in *Syria: Borders, Boundaries, and the State* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), edited by Matthieu Cimino, pp. 221-242; Charles Lister, “The Syria Effect: Al Qaeda Fractures,” *The Hudson Institute, Current Trends in Islamist Ideology* 25 (2020), pp.49-168.

<sup>18</sup> “[Turkey to build 200,000 homes for 1M Syrians to resettle voluntarily: Erdoğan](#),” *Daily Sabah*, May 10, 2022. It is worth noting that Qatar has played an important role in supporting Turkey's patronage of the Syrian rebels. See: Haitham El-Zobaidi, “[Qatar's Syrian endgame](#),” *Arab Weekly*, December 4, 2024. Qatar may also be a source of funding for repatriating Syrian refugees from Turkey to Syria, see: “[Turkiye to repatriate Syrians with Qatari-backed housing project](#),” *Daily Sabah*, May 25, 2023.

<sup>19</sup> On December 9, Erdoğan announced Turkey would open the Yayladagi border gate to refugees seeking to return home to Syria. The border crossing had been closed since 2013. See: Ece Toksabay and Tuvan Gumrukcu, “[Turkey to open border gate for safe return of Syrians, Erdogan says](#),” *Reuters*, December 9, 2024.

<sup>20</sup> Press Release, “[Our wish is for our neighbor Syria to rapidly attain peace and security](#),” Directorate of Communications – Turkiye, December 7, 2024.



Russia was a key backer of the Asad regime. Its air power became an instrument of terror, allowing the Asad to decimate the civilian population supporting the Syrian opposition. Politically, Russia provided important support that made it difficult for the U.N. special envoys for Syria to force a political transition on the Asad regime during the “Constitutional Committee” negotiations that included 45 delegates representing the regime, the opposition, and civil society in Syria.<sup>21</sup> Russia also facilitated the Astana process, which included Turkey and Iran, and was hosted by Kazakhstan. It worked in parallel to the U.N. Constitutional Committee and held twenty-one rounds of talks between 2017 and 2023. It was legitimized by the U.N. special envoys, who claimed it supported the official constitutional committee track, but the special envoys had little choice but to accept the competing format, over which they had no influence. In practice, the Astana process provided a forum for Russia to manage the competing interests of Turkey and Iran in Syria. Now that Russia and Iran have largely withdrawn their forces from Syria, Turkey will feel less constrained in pursuing its interests in Syria.

Iran reportedly invested \$50 billion dollars in financial support for the Asad regime during the past 13 years.<sup>22</sup> Qasem Soleimani of Iran’s Qods Force, along with Hasan Nasrallah of Hizballah, played critical roles in providing Asad’s Syrian Arab Army with the ground forces it needed to defeat the opposition between 2015 and 2019.<sup>23</sup> Soleimani was assassinated by the United States in January 2020, and Israel killed Nasrallah in October 2024, during its war with Hizballah. Iran’s forces in Syria were degraded by regular Israeli air strikes throughout 2024, as Israel sought to break the “unity of fronts” between Iran and its military partners in Syria, Lebanon, and Gaza. Israel also aimed to destroy Iran’s land bridge, connecting Tehran to Lebanon through western Iraq and eastern Syria. Iran used this overland route to deliver precision missiles and other advanced weapons to Hizballah in Lebanon and Syria.<sup>24</sup> Iran also invested considerable resources in demographically re-engineering Syria’s geography, attempting to dilute the Sunni population and increase the number of Shi’is in strategically important areas bordering Lebanon. Iran systematically exported its revolutionary Shi’i identity to Syria by financing social, cultural, and paramilitary institutions based on the Islamic Republic’s model.<sup>25</sup> Israel’s war in Lebanon in October 2024 decimated Hizballah’s ranks and deprived the Asad regime of valuable Hizballah manpower, leaving it vulnerable to the HTS-led offensive that toppled the

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<sup>21</sup> This process was mandated by 2015 U.N. Security Council Resolution 2254. See [here](#).

<sup>22</sup> “[Syria Owes \\$50 Billion to Iran, Leaked Document Reveals](#),” *Iran International*, May 12, 2023.

<sup>23</sup> Shimon Shapira, “[Iranian Involvement in Syria and Lebanon](#),” *Bustan: MEBR* 15: 1 (2024), 41-63.

<sup>24</sup> “[Naim Qassem admits that ‘the resistance’ has lost its Syria supply route](#) [Arabic],” *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, December 14, 2024.

<sup>25</sup> Ido Yahel, “[Iran in Syria: From Expansion to Entrenchment](#),” The Moshe Dayan Center (MDC), *Tel Aviv Notes*, June 17, 2021.

regime. Iran appears to have withdrawn its forces from eastern and central Syria, retreating across the border into Iraq for now.<sup>26</sup>

Israel fought its “campaign between the wars” against Iran in Syria for more than a decade.<sup>27</sup> Following the defeat of the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq in 2018 and 2019, Israel’s military operations targeting Iran in Syria and beyond escalated in line with increased Iranian efforts to expand its military presence in Syria between 2019 and October 2023. Israel also provided humanitarian assistance to civilians in southern Syria during the war in what became known in Israel as “Operation Good Neighbor” between 2013 and 2018.<sup>28</sup> The operation reflected Israel’s *de facto* policy of nonintervention in the civil war component of the Syrian conflict. More recently, the blows Israel’s military and intelligence operations against Hizballah and Iran in Lebanon and Syria in September and October 2024, left the Asad regime vulnerable to rebel forces.<sup>29</sup> Since the fall of the Asad regime, Israel has seized Mount Hermon (*Jabal al-Shaykh*) in Syria. Command of the highest peak in Syria provides Israel with the ability to more effectively monitor and respond to missile and drone attacks originating from Syrian and Lebanese territory. Israel also carried out a wide-ranging series of airstrikes in Syria to destroy much of the regime’s remaining air force, naval, and army hardware, including any unconventional weapons facilities.<sup>30</sup> When asked about Israel on December 11, Jolani is reported to have said that Syria “isn’t ready to enter wars and has no intentions to enter wars in the future. On the contrary the source of concern was the presence of Iran and Hizballah.”<sup>31</sup>

U.S. President-elect Trump issued a blunt statement about Syria on Saturday, December 6. He made it clear he wanted the United States to stay out of the conflict in Syria. During Trump’s first term, on December 19, 2018, he decided to withdraw all 2,000 U.S. troops from Syria, leading Secretary of Defense James Mattis and Special Envoy Brett McGurk to resign.<sup>32</sup> Trump’s decision followed an unscripted impromptu phone conversation between Trump and Turkey’s President Erdoğan. However, despite the U.S.’s 2019 troop reductions in Syria, today the United States maintains approximately 900 troops in Syria

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<sup>26</sup> Farnaz Fassihi, “[The Syrian Upheaval Has Iranian Leaders Reeling, Too](#),” *The New York Times*, December 13, 2024.

<sup>27</sup> Gadi Eisenkot and Gabi Siboni, “[Campaign Between Wars](#),” PolicyWatch 3174, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy (WINEP), September 4, 2019; Ofer Shelah and Carmit Valensi, “[The Campaign Between the Wars at a Crossroads – CBW, 2013-2023](#),” Memorandum 227, INSS, November 2023.

<sup>28</sup> Eyal Zisser, ““Operation Good Neighbor”—Israel and the Rise and Fall of the ‘Southern Syria Region’ (SSR),” *Israel Studies* 26:1 (2021), 1-23.

<sup>29</sup> Ronen Bergman, “[What is happening in Syria represents the thin line between success and failure](#) [Hebrew],” *Ynet*, December 9, 2024.

<sup>30</sup> Carrie Keller-Lynn and Dov Lieber, “[Israeli Strikes Hit Syria’s Navy, Military Arsenal](#),” *The Wall Street Journal*, December 10, 2024; Emmanuel Fabian, “[In a historic campaign across Syria, IDF says it destroyed 80% of Assad regime’s military](#),” *Times of Israel*, December 10, 2024.

<sup>31</sup> Hassan I. Hassan, [Post](#), X.com, December 11, 10:35am.

<sup>32</sup> Brett McGurk, “[Hard Truths in Syria](#),” *Foreign Affairs*, April 16, 2019.

as part of a counterterrorism, anti-Islamic State mandate. The U.S. Department of Defense provided \$398 million in 2024 to support this mission, with \$156 million earmarked for the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in 2024 and \$148 million budgeted for 2025.<sup>33</sup> Mike Waltz, Trump's incoming National Security Advisor (NSA), was a member of the U.S. Congress's Kurdish Caucus. Turkey's surrogate forces in Syria, the SNA, have already begun assaults on Manbij and Kobani. It seems reasonable to guess that Erdoğan will again try and convince Trump to withdraw American support for the SDF. The relationship between Trump and Erdoğan may also determine if the U.S. continues to fight the Islamic State in Syria "by, with, and through" the SDF.<sup>34</sup> The SDF also administers and guards the 27 prison facilities and two detention camps in Syria that hold the 10,000 captured Islamic State fighters and 60,000 members of their families.<sup>35</sup> In other words, there is concern that if the United States withdraws its support for the SDF, and Turkey finishes dismantling Kurdish control over eastern Syria, it could open the door to an Islamic State comeback in Syria.<sup>36</sup>

### ***Conclusion***

On Sunday, December 7, Abu Mohammad al-Jolani (Ahmed al-Shar'a) delivered a victory speech to Syria at the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus, which was built in the eighth century by the Umayyad Caliph al-Walid bin 'Abd al-Malik. The mosque had been built on the site of the Christian Cathedral of St. John and the pagan Temple of Jupiter before it. This 1,300-year-old Sunni landmark had been in Iranian hands during Syria's long years of civil war. Jolani's brief remarks (less than 3 minutes) condemned Iran's "greed" and its support for Asad's sectarianism in Syria.

Jolani wants to reunite Syria and end foreign (Iranian) domination. But modern Syria does not have a strong track-record of unity. Before the 54-year Asad era, Syria was plagued by instability and domestic upheaval. And foreign influence and interference were features of its domestic politics.

Turkey, Jolani's patron and sponsor, has outmaneuvered Russia and Iran, who were weakened and distracted by the wars with Ukraine and Israel. Turkey claims it seeks to ensure "Syria's territorial integrity" and its "long-term transformation into a democratic,

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<sup>33</sup> "[Syria and U.S. Policy](#)," U.S. Congressional Research Service (CRS), July 15, 2024.

<sup>34</sup> See: Morgan Kaplan, "[Thinking Critically about 'By, With, Through' in Syria, Iraq, and Beyond](#)," *Lawfare*, January 20, 2019; Aaron Stein, *The US War Against ISIS: How American and its Allies Defeated the Caliphate* (London: Bloomsbury, 2022), pp. 3 and 63-68.

<sup>35</sup> See footnote 130 in "[Containing a Resilient ISIS in Central and North-eastern Syria](#)," Middle East Report No. 236, Crisis Group, July 18, 2022. See, also: Karen M. Sudkamp, Howard J. Shatz, Shelly Culbertson, Douglas C. Ligor, "[Prisoner's Dilemma: Policy Options to Address Circumstances of ISIS Prisoners in Northeastern Syria](#)," RAND, August 9, 2023.

<sup>36</sup> Aaron Zelin, "[Remaining, Waiting \(Again\) for Expansion: The Islamic State's Operations in Iraq and Syria](#)," Hudson Institute, December 5, 2024.



unitary state, far from any ambitions of occupation,”<sup>37</sup> but it occupies large chunks of Syrian territory in the north and its military is working to roll-back Kurdish control over eastern Syria. One could forgive an oversimplified and mistaken reading of this past week’s events as Syria trading Iran’s Shi‘i patronage for Turkey’s Sunni patronage. The reality, of course, is far more complex.

The Asad era in Syria has passed, and the Syrian opposition has prevailed. But the unresolved conflicts of the multidimensional Syrian war continue. The struggle for Syria is not yet over.

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<sup>37</sup> Ihsan Aktas, “[How Syria’s opposition groups achieved democratic maturity](#),” *Daily Sabah*, December 7, 2024.