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## **The New Struggle for Syria: Sunni Power Competition in the Post-Asad Era**

Ido Yahel

In his seminal work *The Struggle for Syria*, Patrick Seale portrayed Syria as more than just a sovereign state. To Seale, it was a critical arena—a geopolitical crossroads, whose chronic internal instability rendered it vulnerable to external manipulation. Syria's fate, he argued, was shaped less by domestic politics than by the broader contest between competing Arab and global forces seeking to impose their vision of regional order. During the Cold War, this meant a triangulation between Arab nationalism, Western-backed conservatism, and communist encroachment. Pan-Arabist dreams, Hashemite ambitions, and superpower strategies collided in Damascus, making Syria both a prize and a battleground.

Today, more than half a century later, Syria has re-emerged as the very stage of contestation Seale chronicled, though the actors and ideological divisions have evolved. Following the unexpected fall of Bashar al-Asad in December 2024, and the rise of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), the Islamist group that had long controlled Idlib and northern parts of Syria, a new struggle for Syria has begun. It is not a struggle between East and West, or between Arab nationalism and Western imperialism. Rather, it is a fierce rivalry within the Sunni Middle East: between a reactionary, interventionist camp led by Turkey and Qatar, and a conservative, status quo-oriented bloc centered around Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Jordan. At stake is the shape of Syria's future political order, its regional alignment, and the ideological tone of Sunni politics across the Middle East.

In the shadow of this Sunni rivalry stands Iran, currently in a waiting position. It is the major loser of the Syrian upheaval, as the new regime in Damascus is openly hostile toward it. Nevertheless, Tehran is expected to exploit every opportunity—be it the continued Israeli military presence in southern Syria or the new government's treatment of Alawite and Druze communities—to reassert its influence in the post-Asad order.

While other regional and international actors—including France, Israel, and Russia—continue to vie for influence in Syria, this article focuses specifically on the emerging intra-Sunni Arab contest. This rivalry, more than any other dynamic in the post-Asad landscape, is likely to shape the trajectory of

Syria's reintegration into the regional order and the ideological balance within Sunni politics more broadly.

## Turkey

In the wake of Bashar al-Asad's removal and the meteoric rise of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, Turkey has moved swiftly to fill the security vacuum in Syria—and to advance its three interlocking strategic objectives. First, Turkey long aimed to cultivate a Sunni-Islamist client state in Syria—one aligned with Ankara's Justice and Development Party (AKP)-led vision of a neo-Ottoman sphere.<sup>1</sup> Second, Ankara is determined to sever the ties between the Turkish Kurds and the U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), pushing Kurdish fighters away from Turkey's frontier and undermining any bid for Kurdish autonomy.<sup>2</sup> Third, Turkey seeks to repatriate some three million Syrian refugees—both to relieve domestic social pressures and to consolidate its influence by resettling loyal populations in strategically chosen areas.<sup>3</sup>

Ankara's plans, first reported in early 2025, call for the establishment of at least two—and by some accounts up to seven—new military bases deep inside Syrian territory.<sup>4</sup> These installations will serve as training grounds for a reconstituted Syrian military, with Turkish advisors overseeing the formation of ground forces, an air arm (including pilot training), and the deployment of 50 F-16 fighters on Turkish soil until Damascus can field its own squadrons.<sup>5</sup> Ankara has also proposed a formal defense pact with the new Syrian government, pledging to come to its aid in the event of any “sudden threat.”<sup>6</sup> In addition, Ankara has quietly negotiated control of Syria's Tiyas (T4) air base, dispatched military delegations to Damascus, and begun integrating Turkish-backed militias into a unified Syrian army. Figures such as Omar Jaftashi—a former HTS operative turned Turkish intelligence liaison—now hold key commands, providing Ankara's leverage over Syria's rebuilt military and internal security institutions.<sup>7</sup>

## Qatar: The Banker of the Revolution

Qatar, long a regional ally of Turkey and a champion of Islamist movements, has adopted a parallel strategy in post-Asad Syria. Its reengagement with Damascus was swift and symbolic. Doha reopened its embassy in December 2024 and dispatched its foreign minister to meet with Syria's new leadership within weeks. Emir Sheikh Tamim was also the first head of state to visit Damascus in the post-Asad era.<sup>8</sup>

Financial aid followed rapidly. Qatar pledged \$29 million per month in public sector salary support, funded a major humanitarian convoy, and reportedly co-financed Syria's debt repayments to the

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<sup>1</sup> Marwa Maziad, Jake Sotiriadis, “[Turkey's Dangerous New Exports: Pan-Islamist, Neo-Ottoman Visions and Regional Instability](#),” Middle East Institute, April 21, 2020.

<sup>2</sup> Rabia İclal Turan, “[US Should Address Türkiye's 'Legitimate' Concerns about PKK in Syria: Former Defense Official](#),” *Anadolu Ajansı*, February 13, 2025.

<sup>3</sup> Yaakov Lappin, “[Turkey's Involvement and Entrenchment in Syria – Goals and Implications](#),” Alma Research and Education Center, January 2, 2025.

<sup>4</sup> Gili Cohen, “[Ahead of Talks with Israel: Turkey Wants to Establish 7 Bases in Syria](#) [Hebrew],” *Kan 11*, May 8, 2025.

<sup>5</sup> Ahmad Sharawi, “[Turkey Increasing Military Assistance to Syria](#),” *The Long War Journal*, March 27, 2025.

<sup>6</sup> Amichai Stein, “[Western Intelligence Source to 'Post': Turkey Aims to Activate the Syrian T4 Air Base](#),” *The Jerusalem Post*, April 1, 2025.

<sup>7</sup> Ahmad Sharawi, “[Turkey Increasing Military Assistance to Syria](#),” *The Long War Journal*, March 27, 2025.

<sup>8</sup> Rahaf Aldoughli, “[Syria Needs Security – Can Al-Sharaa Build a United Army to Provide It?](#),” *Chatham House*, March 10, 2025.

World Bank in coordination with Saudi Arabia.<sup>9</sup> It also provided over \$60 million in gas subsidies to power the energy-starved Deir Ali plant.<sup>10</sup> These gestures were not merely humanitarian. They were calculated investments aimed at securing long-term influence in post-Asad Syria.

Qatar's ideological affinity with the new regime is also important. Though HTS's Islamist credentials worry some international observers, Doha sees the new Syrian leadership as a natural partner for promoting its vision of activist Sunni governance. By embedding itself early in reconstruction and governance processes, Qatar hopes to counterbalance the conservative influence of Riyadh and Abu Dhabi and ensure Syria's alignment with the Islamist-leaning Sunni axis.<sup>11</sup>

### **The Conservative Bloc: Managing Change, Preventing Chaos**

In contrast to the Turkish-Qatari approach, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Jordan have opted for cautious engagement, driven by the imperatives of order, counterterrorism, and the containment of rival regional agendas. These states were initially surprised by the rapid collapse of the Asad regime but moved quickly to shape the political transition.

Saudi Arabia, in particular, recalibrated its Syria policy with urgency. Riyadh welcomed the new government and sought to lead Arab engagement. In January 2025, it hosted a donor conference for Syria's reconstruction, promoted Arab League initiatives, and encouraged the lifting of some Western sanctions.<sup>12</sup> The Saudi foreign minister's visit to Damascus, followed by reciprocal trips by Syrian officials, further underscored a willingness to cooperate—an approach heavily emphasized in pro-Saudi media outlets.<sup>13</sup>

Saudi Arabia's motives are pragmatic. It wants to prevent the reconstitution of Iranian-backed militias, reduce the appeal of Islamist political models, and restore Syrian sovereignty within a conservative Arab framework. To this end, Riyadh has deployed religious diplomacy, tribal outreach, and targeted investment to expand its influence—often in silent competition with Qatar's more high-profile financial support.<sup>14</sup>

Saudi Arabia is also striving to position itself as the central venue for addressing key questions related to the Syrian issue. For example, the March agreement to demarcate the border between Syria and Lebanon—reached after a period of violent clashes between the two countries—was signed in Jeddah.<sup>15</sup> Additionally, U.S. President Trump's announcement regarding the lifting of U.S. sanctions on Syria was made during his May visit to Riyadh.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> "Qatar Will Provide \$29 Million per Month for Three Months, with the Possibility of Extension, to Syria [Arabic]," *al-Ghad*, May 8, 2025.

<sup>10</sup> "[Qatar Provides Reliable Natural Gas Supplies to Syria, Critical for Improving Electricity Supply](#)," UNDP, March 17, 2025.

<sup>11</sup> "[Qatari Efforts to Arrange a Transitional Phase in Syria](#) [Arabic]," *Arabi 21*, December 9, 2024.

<sup>12</sup> Patrick Wintour, "[Ministers from 17 Countries Meet for Saudi Talks on Speeding Aid to Damascus](#)," *The Guardian*, January 12, 2025.

<sup>13</sup> Majid Rafizadeh, "[Syria's New Path: Strengthening ties with Saudi Arabia for a Stable Future](#)," *al-Arabiya*, February 5, 2025.

<sup>14</sup> Hesham Alghannam, "[Syria Becomes a Front Line in Protecting Saudi Security](#)," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, March 26, 2025.

<sup>15</sup> "[Border Security Agreement Signed between Syria, Lebanon in Saudi Arabia](#)," *al-Arabiya*, March 28, 2025.

<sup>16</sup> Betsy Klein, "[Trump Announces Plan to Lift Punishing Sanctions on Syria](#)," *CNN*, May 14, 2025.

The UAE's approach has been similarly strategic, albeit shaped by distinct concerns. Having invested diplomatically in rehabilitating the Asad regime since 2018, Abu Dhabi was initially disoriented by its sudden collapse. Yet it quickly adapted, welcoming Syrian President Ahmad al-Sharaa on a state visit and initiating security and economic cooperation.<sup>17</sup> The UAE's concerns center on containing political Islam, limiting Iran's reach, and projecting Emirati power as a stabilizing force in the Levant. Abu Dhabi has also taken on a unique role as a backchannel mediator, especially in Israeli-Syrian dialogues.<sup>18</sup> By facilitating discreet security talks and pushing for U.S. sanctions relief,<sup>19</sup> the UAE is trying to position itself as a quiet but indispensable player in Syria's reintegration into regional frameworks.

Jordan, meanwhile, has focused on its immediate borderlands, as well as finding a durable solution to the large population of Syrian refugees currently residing in the kingdom, which continues to strain Jordan's economy and infrastructure. Concerned about renewed instability and Islamist momentum spilling across its frontiers, Amman has emphasized security cooperation with Damascus—particularly around narcotics trafficking, which has surged in recent years with Syria's transformation into a major hub for Captagon smuggling. Jordanian authorities have repeatedly intercepted large drug shipments originating from southern Syria, prompting military raids and coordinated cross-border operations. Alongside counterterrorism efforts, this focus on stemming the narcotics trade has become central to Amman's security agenda.<sup>20</sup> At the same time, Jordan has increased trade ties and reestablished key transportation links, seeking to benefit economically from Syria's reconstruction while containing potential threats.<sup>21</sup>

### Seale's Thesis Revisited

The current Sunni rivalry over Syria constitutes a new chapter in what Patrick Seale described as a perpetual geopolitical contest over the country's fate. Though the Cold War has long ended, and the age of pan-Arabist blocs has faded, Seale's fundamental insight holds true: Syria remains a crucible in which regional visions clash, a space too important—and too fragile—to be left alone.

This new struggle, like the old one, is as much about identity as it is about power. It will determine whether the post-Asad Levant moves toward a pragmatic, development-oriented Sunni order anchored in Arab institutions—or whether it is drawn into a more ideological, interventionist project shaped by neo-Ottomanism and Sunni Islamism.

Seale concluded *The Struggle for Syria* by noting that the country would remain a vital arena for regional contestation, its fate shaped by the interplay of internal fragility and external ambition. The same is true today. As Syria redefines itself after Asad, its future—once again—will be decided not

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<sup>17</sup> Giorgio Cafiero, "[UAE may Need al-Sharaa as Much as he Needs It. Here's Why](#)," *Responsible Statecraft*, April 16, 2025.

<sup>18</sup> Timour Azhari and Suleiman Al-Khalidi, "[Exclusive: UAE Mediating Secret Talks between Israel and Syria, Sources Say](#)," *Reuters*, May 7, 2025.

<sup>19</sup> Giorgio Cafiero, "[UAE may Need al-Sharaa as Much as he Needs It. Here's Why](#)," *Responsible Statecraft*, April 16, 2025.

<sup>20</sup> Ofir Winter, "[A Pivotal Player: Jordan and the New Syria](#)," *INSS Insight No. 1931*, January 12, 2025; Merissa Khurma, "[Syria in Transition and Implications for Jordan](#)," *Wilson Center*, January 6, 2025.

<sup>21</sup> "[Jordan: New Decisions Regarding the Entry and Exit of Syrians from the Kingdom](#) [Arabic]," *Sky News*, April 29, 2025; "[The value of Jordanian Exports to Syria Increased Fivefold During the First Two Months of 2025](#) [Arabic]," *al-Bosala*, May 7, 2025.

solely in Damascus, but in Riyadh, Ankara, Doha, Abu Dhabi, and Amman. The struggle for Syria is not over. It has only entered a new phase.

*Dr. Ido Yahel is a postdoctoral fellow at the Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies (MDC).*

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