



# Spotlight on Syria (Following the Fall of the Assad Regime)

December 23 , 2024 – 1 January, 2025

## Overview<sup>1</sup>

- ▶The new leadership in Syria is consolidating its rule: it was agreed that all armed organizations would be dismantled and subordinated to the new Ministry of Defense, and a defense minister and general intelligence chief were appointed. Senior military ranks were awarded to commanders from Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham and other organizations which had contributed to the overthrow of the Assad regime, including foreign jihadist fighters.
- ▶Syria's de facto leader, Ahmed al-Sharaa (Abu Muhammad al-Julani), met with foreign delegations which arrived in Damascus. He said presidential elections would be held in four years and reiterated his position that Syria would not pose a threat to any country.
- ▶Violent clashes erupted between the new regime's security forces and Alawite residents over allegations that an Islamic extremist group had set fire to a shrine. The Damascus government pointed to Iran as instigating the riots with the objective of creating chaos in Syria.
- ▶According to reports, IDF forces continued operating in villages within the buffer zone in the Golan Heights, and five people were injured by gunfire during a demonstration. The new governor of Damascus said Syria did not seek to be an enemy of Israel.
- ▶The editor of the Hezbollah-affiliated Lebanese daily newspaper admitted that Syria was no longer part of the struggle against Israel and was not expected to express solidarity with "the resistance."<sup>2</sup>
- ▶Reports indicated that Hamas was attempting to establish ties with the new Syrian regime and was preparing for a visit to Damascus.
- ▶The United States and France attacked ISIS targets in Syria.

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<sup>1</sup> Click <https://www.terrorism-info.org.il/en> to subscribe and receive the ITIC's daily updates as well as its other publications.

<sup>2</sup> Iran, Syria, Hezbollah, the Palestinian terrorist organizations, the Shi'ite Houthis in Yemen and the pro-Iranian militias in Iraq, the "resistance" partners seeking the destruction of the State of Israel.

## Activities of the New Revolutionary Government

### Reorganizing the security forces

► On December 24, 2024, Syria's de facto leader, Ahmed al-Sharaa, met with representatives of the armed organizations in Syria which had collaborated with Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham to overthrow the Assad regime. It was agreed that all the armed organizations in Syria would be dismantled and united under the Ministry of Defense (Telegram channel of the General Command – Syria, December 24, 2024).



**Al-Sharaa meets with the heads of the armed organizations (Syrian General Command Headquarters Telegram channel, December 24, 2024).**

► The new administration also announced new security leadership appointments:

- ◆ Murhaf Abu Qasra was appointed defense minister in the interim government. He previously served as the military commander of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (Telegram channel of the General Command -- Syria, December 31, 2024).
- ◆ Anas Khattab was appointed head of the General Intelligence Directorate. A close associate of al-Sharaa, he was one of the founders of Jabhat al-Nusra, al-Qaeda's branch in Syria, from which Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham evolved (Telegram channel of the General Command – Syria, December 26, 2024). In his first statement he announced that all security branches of the previous regime would be dismantled and restructured to better serve the population. He said the previous security branches had failed to fulfill their role in maintaining security and ensuring the safety of the population (Telegram channel of the General Command – Syria, December 28, 2024).



**Right: Murhaf Abu Qasra. Left: Anas Khattab (Telegram channel of the General Command – Syria, December 28 and 31, 2024).**

◆ The Ministry of Defense announced the promotion of officers, one facet of "developing the Syrian army and armed forces and modernizing them." The highest rank, Liwaa, was awarded to the new defense minister, Abu Qasra, and the new chief of staff, Ali Nour al-Din, who also held senior command roles in Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham. The rank of office was also awarded to senior figures from Islamist organizations which had collaborated with Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, such as Muhammad Diyaa Saleh Tahan, the commander of the Liberation Army, and Ahmed Issa al-Sheikh, the commander of Suqour al-Sham (Falcons of the Levant), Foreign jihadist fighters who served in Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham were also promoted, including the Jordanian Abdel Rahman Hussein al-Khatib, the Turk Ömer Muhammed Ciftçi, and Abd al-Aziz Daud Khudaberdi, a member of the Uyghur minority in China (Syria TV, December 2024; Facebook page of Ayman Abdullah, December 30, 2024).

▶ "Syrian sources" reported that al-Sharaa met with senior officials of the pro-Turkish Syrian National Army, part of the coordination efforts carried out by the new military-security establishment with all rebel organizations. Al-Sharaa granted officer ranks to individuals from various factions as part of their subordination to the new regime (al-Jazeera and Arabi21, December 29, 2024).

### **First woman appointed to an important position**

▶ The new administration in Syria announced the appointment of Maysaa Sabrine as the governor of the central bank, making her the first woman to hold a senior position in the revolutionary government and the first woman in this role since the establishment of the central bank. Sabrine, with over 15 years of experience in finance and banking, has served as deputy governor of the central bank since 2018 (al-Arabiya, December 30, 2024).

## International activity

►Al-Sharaa, de facto leader of Syria, held meetings with senior officials who arrived in Damascus to discuss relations and cooperation between the new regime and their respective countries. He met with Jordanian Foreign Minister Ayman Safadi; Qatar's Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Mohammed al-Khulaifi; Libya's Minister of State for Communication and Political Affairs Walid Ammar al-Lafi; Ukrainian Foreign Minister Andrii Sybiha, who offered assistance in uncovering evidence of Assad regime crimes, Iraqi General Intelligence Chief Hamid al-Shatri; Kuwaiti Foreign Minister Abdullah Ali al-Yahya; and the secretary general of the Gulf Cooperation Council, Jassem Mohammed al-Budaiwi (Telegram channel of the General Command – Syria, December 23, 2024 – January 1, 2025).

►Syrian Foreign Minister Asaad Hassan al-Shibani participated in al-Sharaa's meetings with the foreign delegations. He also conducted held phone calls with foreign ministers in the Arab world, including Iraq, Lebanon, Bahrain, the UAE, Egypt, Oman and Afghanistan, and met with the European Union envoy to Syria, Michael Unmacht (X account of the Syrian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, December 23, 2024 – January 1, 2025). Al-Shibani promised to restore Syria's position as a central regional and international actor, saying that the new Syria would serve as a hub for creativity, innovation and leadership, with all its components contributing to this vision (SANA, December 25, 2024).



**Right: Al-Sharaa meets with the delegation from Qatar (Qatari foreign ministry X account, December 23, 2024). Left: Al-Sharaa and the Ukrainian foreign minister (Telegram channel of the General Command – Syria, December 30, 2024).**

►The American embassy in Syria announced that senior American officials had met with representatives of the authorities in Damascus and noted the need to continue fighting ISIS and prevent Iran from regaining influence in Syria. According to reports, they also discussed the need to protect American citizens in Syria, Syria's representation and the implementation of a comprehensive political process (American Embassy in Syria X account, December 31, 2024).

## Interview with al-Sharaa

►Ahmed al-Sharaa, de facto leader of Syria, gave an interview in which he discussed the key issues facing the new government, including consolidating political leadership, relations with sects and communities within Syria, and international relations (al-Hadath, December 29, 2024):

- ◆ **Elections and constitutional framework:** Presidential elections will most likely take place only in four years, as many early political stages need to be completed. He said the National Dialogue Conference would decide on the dissolution of the Syrian parliament and constitution.
- ◆ **Dismantling armed organizations:** He promised that Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham would be dismantled, along with other armed organizations in Syria.
- ◆ **Relations with the Kurds:** The leadership was negotiating with the Syrian Democratic Forces to resolve the crisis with pro-Turkish forces in northeastern Syria. He said the Kurds would be an integral component of Syria and that the Syrian Ministry of Defense would also include Kurdish forces within its ranks. He added that Syria would not allow PKK attacks to be launched from its territory.
- ◆ **Relations with world countries:** He promised that Syria would not harass other countries and they aspired to balanced relations with all countries. He praised Saudi Arabia, noting its central role in Syria's future. He said Syria had strategic relations with Russia and he did not want Russia to leave Syria in a manner unbecoming their relationship. He also expressed hope that the Trump administration would lift the sanctions imposed on Syria.
- ◆ **Relations with Iran:** He accused Iran of turning Syria into a Captagon drug production hub and stated that exporting the Islamic Revolution caused sectarian conflicts, wars and corruption throughout the region. He said Iran's 40-year-long project had collapsed in Syria in just 11 days, and said they wanted Iran to respect Syria's internal affairs. He said he hoped Iran would reconsider its regional involvement.

## Relations with Christians

►Ahmed al-Sharaa met with a delegation representing the Christian community in Syria (Telegram channel of the General Command – Syria, December 31, 2024).

►Following a series of Christmas trees' being torched during the holiday season, concerns arose within Syria and abroad regarding the new regime's attitude toward Christians. In response,

the new administration quickly deployed security personnel to celebration venues to prevent similar incidents (SANA, December 25, 2024).

## Internal Syrian Events

### Clashes between Alawites and the new administration

► This past week, clashes and protests by Alawites occurred in several locations across the country, including Tartus, Latakia, Aleppo and Homs. Reportedly protesters took to the streets following allegations that Islamic extremists associated with the new regime had burned the tomb of Sheikh al-Hussein bin Hamdan al-Khusaibi, the Alawite spiritual leader, located in northern Aleppo, and killed the five guards at the site (al-Jazeera and Daraa Net, December 25–29, 2024).

► In response to the protests, the new regime's security forces launched extensive operations against individuals associated with the previous regime, resulting in violent clashes and numerous casualties on both sides. According to reports, 14 members of the new regime's Interior Ministry were killed and 10 injured in Tartus during a "coordinated ambush by supporters of the former regime in the area" (al-Arabiya, December 26, 2024). According to other reports, forces of the new regime opened fire on protesters in Homs and imposed a nighttime curfew on the city. Reinforcements from the General Security Directorate and Operations Directorate, including elite fighters from Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham wearing red headbands, were brought in from Idlib and deployed across the country in Homs, Aleppo, Hama, Damascus and coastal cities (SANA, December 25, 2024).

► The Syrian regime accused Iran of involvement in the sectarian clashes. Foreign Minister Asaad Hassan al-Shibani warned Iran against spreading chaos in Syria (al-Shibani's X account, December 25, 2024). In response, Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi told the Arab League that Iran sought "stability and calm while preventing chaos and unrest in Syria." He claimed Iran aimed to preserve Syria's territorial unity, protect its sacred sites, prevent foreign intervention and counter Israel's dangerous expansionist policies, forcing it to withdraw from "the occupied territories" (Abbas Araghchi's X account, December 27, 2024).

## IDF Activity in Syria

► On December 25, 2024, dozens of villagers from Sweisah, on the outskirts of Quneitra, protested against "Israeli occupation forces," claiming that they had entered the village (Daraa24, December 25, 2024). Reports indicated that at least five civilians had been injured, one seriously, after Israeli forces opened fire to disperse the protest (Syrian Observatory for Human

Rights, December 25, 2024). Al-Jazeera claimed that shots were also fired at its journalists (al-Jazeera, December 25, 2024).

►According to reports, IDF forces withdrew from the villages of Jamla, al-Shajarah, Beit Irah, Koayiah, Ma'rbah and Seida in the western countryside of Daraa after entering the villages and searching houses (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, December 26, 2024). It was also reported that military forces accompanied by tanks entered the city of al-Baath in the Quneitra governorate and advanced toward several government buildings. The report claimed that soldiers ordered workers to leave the buildings and did not allow them to return (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, December 30, 2024).

►On December 29, 2024, there were reports of an explosion which had killed more than 20 people in a building near the Adra industrial area, close to the Dumayr military airfield and the city of al-Qutayfah, one of the Syrian army's logistical strongholds near Damascus. According to claims, the explosion was the result of an Israeli attack (Levant24 Agency, al-Watan and the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, December 29, 2024).

►Maher Marwan, the new governor of Damascus, said Israel's concerns about the new Syrian government were understandable due to "certain factions." He said the Israeli attacks were a result of Israel's fear, which he described as "natural," adding that Syria had no issues with Israel. He added that the new government did not want to engage in actions that threaten the security of Israel or any other country, they sought peace and could not be enemies of Israel or any other entity (NPR Radio, December 27, 2024). Marwan's remarks sparked criticism in Syria, leading him to issue a clarification stating that Syria desired internal peace and that he did not intend to suggest a peace agreement with Israel (Syrian daily al-Watan, December 27, 2024).

## Relations with Hezbollah and Lebanon

### Hezbollah

►Ibrahim al-Amin, editor of the Hezbollah-affiliated Lebanese daily al-Akhbar, claimed that the new leadership in Syria did not have a clear perspective regarding its relations with the region, including its stance toward Israel. According to al-Amin, Syria had left the "contact circle" of the Arab-Israeli conflict and was not expected to attempt to establish relations with Israel, nor to express anti-Israel positions or solid solidarity with "the resistance." He added that Israel was not sufficiently deterred and might attack Lebanon through Syria, and it remained unclear how the Syrian regime would act if Israel used Syria "to threaten others" (al-Akhbar, December 24, 2024).

►In another article, al-Amin noted that the people who met with al-Sharaa and other senior officials in Syria understood that the new regime's priorities focused on creating a military framework that would voluntarily enlist those considered allies of Turkey alongside other groups willing to cooperate with the regime. They also wanted to establish an institutional framework to facilitate reconstruction, accompanied by a financial support plan involving Turkey, Gulf States and Western countries. According to al-Amin, al-Sharaa does not wish to engage in unnecessary wars and, therefore, does not agree with Turkey's desire to defeat Kurdish forces (al-Akhbar, December 27, 2024).

## Lebanon

►Two "security sources" reported that about 30 former intelligence officers and officers from the former 4th Division, who served under the Assad regime, were arrested by Lebanese police. "Three legal sources in Lebanon" noted that authorities in Beirut had received an official notice from Interpol calling for the arrest of former Syrian intelligence officer Jamil Hassan, accused in the United States of war crimes under the Assad regime, if he was found on Lebanese soil. Najib Mikati, prime minister of the Lebanese interim government, stated that the country was committed to cooperating with Interpol regarding Jamil Hassan's arrest (Reuters, December 24, 2024).

►The Lebanese army announced that "unidentified gunmen" had fired at a patrol in the Wadi al-Aswad area outside the town of Yanta-Rashaya on the border with Syria. According to the army, the soldiers returned fire and one soldier was injured during the clash. The Lebanese army said military units deployed along the sector had taken strict security measures (Lebanese army X account, December 26, 2024).

►According to reports, Shams Duraid Rifaat al-Assad, granddaughter of Rifaat al-Assad, brother of former Syrian President Hafez al-Assad, and her mother Rasha Khazem were arrested with forged passports while attempting to leave the country from Beirut International Airport. A "Lebanese legal source" stated that the two would stand trial for using forged official documents, an offense carrying a maximum penalty of three years in prison. However, Rifaat al-Assad and his son Duraid left the country legally, as they were not wanted for investigation (al-Sharq al-Awsat, December 30, 2024). Following the incident, the new Syrian government suspended operations at the Syrian embassy in Lebanon, alleging that the passports had been forged at the diplomatic mission (al-Jadeed, December 30, 2024).

## Relations with the Palestinians

### Hamas

► Given the new regime's reservations about Hamas because of its participation in the "resistance axis"<sup>3</sup> led by Iran and its ties with the previous Syrian regime, Hamas was attempting to establish contact with the new leadership. Reports indicate that Hamas was secretly working to organize a delegation to visit Damascus to congratulate the Syrian people and the new leadership, discuss the consequences of the revolution and meet with Ahmed al-Sharaa. It was also reported that relations between Hamas and the new Syrian government had "started to progress," and the movement was awaiting a green light for the visit (al-Ra'i al-Youm, December 26, 2024).

### Regime activity against the Palestinian terrorist organizations

► According to reports, 20 operatives from the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine – General Command, the Palestinian organization most closely aligned with the Assad regime, were arrested. The detainees were accused of involvement in crimes against the Syrian people and were transferred to a prison in Hama. It was also reported that the new regime had seized the headquarters of the organization as well as those of the Palestinian organizations al-Sa'iqa and Fatah al-Intifada in Damascus (al-Araby al-Jadeed, December 28, 2024).

### The Confrontation between Turkey and the Kurds

► The head of the media division of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), Farhad Shami, said they were ready to join the new Syrian army, but the matter required discussion. He said they were prepared for any war but were also open to the diplomatic option (Sky News Arabic, December 24, 2024).

► Turkey's president, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, said Turkey intended to continue military operations against "terrorists" in Syria "without harming civilians." He vowed to "eliminate" the People's Defense Units (YPG), affiliated with the Syrian Democratic Forces, and stated that he would not allow it to pose a threat to the region (Anadolu Agency, December 24, 2024).

► On December 25, 2024, the Turkish army announced that it had killed 21 Kurdish fighters in northern Syria and Iraq. The statement claimed that 20 members of the Kurdistan Workers'

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<sup>3</sup> Iran, Syria, Hezbollah, the Palestinian terrorist organizations, the Shi'ite Houthis in Yemen and the pro-Iranian militias in Iraq, the "resistance axis" seeking the destruction of the State of Israel.

Party (PKK) and the People's Defense Units were killed in northern Syria, while one was killed in northern Iraq (Reuters, December 25, 2024).

►Clashes were reported in the eastern outskirts of Aleppo and north of al-Hasakah between Kurdish forces and pro-Turkish armed groups operating under the Dawn of Freedom operations room. According to "Kurdish sources," at least 15 fighters from the factions were killed (SDF Press, December 30, 2024).

## Anti-ISIS Activity in Syria

►The United States Central Command (CENTCOM) announced that two ISIS operatives had been killed and another injured in a targeted airstrike in Deir ez-Zor province, in an area previously controlled by the Assad regime and Russian forces. According to the statement, the terrorists were attacked while transporting a truck loaded with weapons, which was also destroyed in the strike (CENTCOM X account, December 24, 2024).

►Sébastien Lecornu, French Minister for the Armed Forces, said the French Air Force had attacked ISIS targets in Syrian territory. According to reports, fighter jets and drones bombed two ISIS military targets in central Syria, first such operation since the fall of the Assad regime (Le Monde, December 31, 2024).