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The scramble for Syria: Regional powers jostle for influence

Assad's fall has left regional powers – Turkiye, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE – racing to redefine their roles in Syria, competing to win favor with the interim government, reviving old rivalries, and reckoning with the unintended consequences of their own past interventions that led to Syria's destruction.

The Syrian situation remains shrouded in ambiguity. Despite efforts by the rebel-led interim leaders to seek a fresh start focused on 'zeroing problems,' embracing inclusivity, and delaying decisions on critical issues, the arrangement of Syria's future that is shaped by Turkish-Qatari sponsors and US allies faces daunting challenges.

The stakes are high, as this pivotal phase will determine the country's future governance and alliances. Against this backdrop, how do key regional players interpret these transformations, and what positions are they likely to adopt?

The rapid fall of Syrian governorates to armed factions led by Ahmad al-Sharaa (commonly known as Abu Mohammad al-Julani), who has rebranded himself from a terrorist figure to a modernist leader, caught the region by surprise. The de facto leader's recent declaration that "Organizing elections may take four years; any valid elections will require a comprehensive population census" adds to the uncertainty surrounding the political system set to replace decades of authoritarian rule.

States emerging from a 13-year estrangement with former president Bashar al-Assad had not anticipated his abrupt departure. Initially, their instinctive response was to support Syria's unity under its existing leadership. However, the shock of 8 December reverberated beyond Syria's borders, compelling regional powers to reassess their positions.

Rethinking GCC and Arab reconciliation

The sudden overthrow of the Syrian government raised critical questions: Had the Persian Gulf and Arab states rushed their reconciliation with Assad? The ‘opposition’s’ capture of Damascus and Assad’s subsequent flight to Moscow exposed the fragility of their strategy. Gulf states, particularly Saudi Arabia and the UAE, quickly pivoted to engage with the new leadership. Hours after the government’s fall, Saudi Arabia issued a statement that it was “monitoring the rapid developments in the brotherly country of Syria and expressing its satisfaction with the positive steps taken to ensure the safety of the Syrian people, prevent bloodshed, and preserve Syria’s state institutions and resources.”

Just days before the rebel takeover, the UAE’s President Mohamed bin Zayed al-Nahyan said in a phone conversation with his then-Syrian counterpart that his country “stands with the Syrian state and supports it in combating terrorism, extending its sovereignty, unifying its territories, and achieving stability.”

The day after the fall of Damascus, Abu Dhabi reiterated its support for Syria’s unity and integrity but also “called on all Syrian parties to prioritize wisdom during this critical juncture in Syria’s history, in a manner that fulfills the aspirations and ambitions of all segments of the Syrian population.”

Egypt, undoubtedly experiencing a ripple effect with great intensity, stressed the importance of unity, prioritizing a comprehensive political process to achieve stability and consensus.

Coinciding with their geopolitical realignment, the media in the regional countries underwent a notable shift in its narrative of events. Initially, it echoed the Syrian government’s perspective, adopting its terminology by referring to the armed groups as ‘terrorists.’ Over time, however, this language evolved; the media began describing these groups as the ‘armed opposition.’ Eventually, the fall of the Syrian government was framed as the ‘long-awaited fall of the government.’

Regional concerns for Syria’s future

The unfolding events have spurred critical concerns: What form of government will emerge in Syria? What will happen to factions with a history of extremism? How will minorities and former government loyalists manage?

For Riyadh, Damascus’s collapse was a blow to its geopolitical calculus, leaving the kingdom scrambling to redefine its approach – yet it also presents an irresistible opportunity to undermine further the Axis of Resistance led by rivaling Iran. It swiftly dispatched a delegation to meet with the new leadership under Sharaa, signaling a pragmatic shift.

The UAE, cautious of the opposition's Islamist inclinations, also approached the emerging administration to explore potential cooperation, while safeguarding against the strengthening of Turkish and Qatari influence.

Egypt, grappling with internal political fragility, avoided direct engagement, limiting its involvement to diplomatic overtures. Jordan, equally apprehensive about regional instability, convened an emergency meeting of the Arab Ministerial Contact Committee on Syria on 14 December.

Participants, including Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Lebanon, and Egypt, agreed on “Supporting the role of the UN envoy to Syria and requesting the UN Secretary-General to provide all necessary resources to begin working on establishing a UN mission to assist Syria in supporting and overseeing the transitional process, and to aid the Syrian people in achieving a political process led by Syrians in accordance with Resolution 2254.”

Competing agendas

Hadi Qubaisi, director of the Union Center for Research and Development, highlights divergent regional priorities, telling *The Cradle*:

“Saudi Arabia is trying to have a role in Syria because it had a role in the Syrian war and has Wahhabi influence, the influence of sheikhs, extremist forces, and some military forces. Therefore it seeks to obtain a share of the Turkish success, so that Turkiye does not monopolize the entire Syrian opportunity. It also wants to be a partner in arranging the Syrian situation on the economic and political level, so that this achievement and this Syrian environment do not become a platform for raising problems that affect Saudi Arabia, especially in Jordan.”

As for the UAE, Qubaisi believes that it “views what happened as a Turkish and Qatari achievement, and considers that this achievement should not continue and tends to weaken and sabotage it. And because it has influence in the Kurdish regions and did not have influence among the opposition during the previous war, it will try to make the construction of this new structure more difficult and complicated.”

The researcher and political writer adds that Egypt “sees this climate, which wears an Islamic garb to a large extent formally, as an influential factor on the Brotherhood, especially since it is going through a state of great weakness on the economic and internal political levels, and fears the spread of a behavioral infection from Syria to Egypt.”

Stability and self-interest

Who will ultimately shape Syria's future? While the internal dynamics of a fragmented social fabric and conflicting political allegiances will play a central role, external interventions

remain a significant factor. Supportive states like Turkiye and Qatar will use their influence carefully, while others, including Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Jordan, will weigh their involvement to protect their strategic interests.

However, Qubaisi argues that Sharaa's leadership, thus far marked by pragmatism, aims to neutralize potential conflicts with foreign powers by fostering balanced relationships. The clashing agendas of northern (Turkiye and Qatar) and southern (Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Jordan) coalitions may lead to intensified competition on Syrian soil, potentially entangling Kurdish factions in broader geopolitical rivalries.

Several key factors will determine Syria's future direction and the stability of West Asia. First, the satisfaction of regional powers with their respective positions, influence, and gains in the new political system will play a critical role. Each state will assess whether its strategic interests are being adequately addressed and if it can maintain its foothold in the evolving order.

Second, the level of confidence that these states have in Syria's long-term stability will heavily influence their engagement. Any signs of prolonged unrest or governance failure could prompt external actors to reconsider their involvement or escalate their interventions.

Finally, the degree to which cooperation among key regional players – Turkiye, Qatar, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE – aligns with their shared interest in maintaining regional security will be decisive. If these Sunni-majority countries can find common ground and view Syria's stability as mutually beneficial, the chances of a peaceful transition and rebuilding process will significantly improve.

While Ankara and Doha celebrate the demise of the Syrian Arab Republic as a political triumph, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Egypt remain wary of the potential resurgence of Islamist movements within their own borders.

Islamist movements – many of which these same countries previously armed or supported, either directly or indirectly, as part of their geopolitical strategies during the Syrian conflict – may now represent a case of chickens coming home to roost or the unintended consequences of blowback.

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