



By: *Sharmila Devi*

Syria's transition towards stability on knife-edge ahead of elections



Syria has been overshadowed internationally by the recent carnage in Gaza, but it remains a focus for Israel and other outside players, often in ways that do not bode well for the country.

Syria remains deeply fragile, and its political transition is on a “knife-edge” amid sectarian tensions following 13 years of civil war, **says** the UN.

Stability is further threatened by Israel’s announcement this week that its forces will remain in Syria near Mount Hermon after Damascus accused it of illegally seizing more territory in a military operation on 25 August.

Within Syria, minority grievances appear far from being addressed. Syria’s limited elections **scheduled** for 15-20 September look to be further restricted after the government announced this week that elections will be suspended in three Druze and Kurdish areas.

Calls by minority groups for justice and accountability are only likely to grow louder as opposition groups organise to represent their grievances. Ahmed Al-Sharaa, Syria’s president, faces a delicate balancing act if he is to move his country out of the ruins of war.

Seeking political support to end Syria’s isolation

Syria desperately needs investment, reconstruction, and reconciliation, given that only \$414 million out of \$3.2 billion needed for the UN’s Syrian humanitarian response plan for 2025 has been **funded** so far.

Internationally, Al-Sharaa has had some successes. Earlier this month, Damascus **signed** 12 investment agreements worth \$14 billion, including a \$4 billion deal with Qatar’s UCC Holding to build a new airport and a \$2 billion deal with the United Arab Emirates to establish a subway in Damascus.

The first Syrian leader since 1967 to address the UN General Assembly in New York

Al-Sharaa will become the first Syrian leader since 1967 to address the UN General Assembly in New York next month, and he is likely to seek further political support to end Syria’s isolation and to deepen his legitimacy.

Returning to large-scale infrastructure damage

In July, **fighting** between government-backed Sunni militias and Druze armed groups in Suwayda province killed hundreds and drove more than 190,000 people out of their homes.

Across the country, more than 800,000 people have left camps for displaced people but are returning to large-scale infrastructure damage and an absence of basic services, such as education and electricity.

“Millions of refugees and internally displaced people can now return to their original homes” - Jan Egeland, NRC’s secretary general

Disputes over home ownership amid competition over resources are leading to local conflicts, says the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC). “Millions of refugees and internally displaced people can now return to their original homes, but they cannot and will not if there is no support to rebuild homes, schools, clinics, or water and electricity supplies,” **said** Jan Egeland, NRC’s secretary general.

During the violence in Suwayda, Israel launched air strikes to prevent what it claimed was the mass government slaughter of Druze.

There was also violence in March between Sunni militias and members of the Alawite

community - accused of propping up the former Assad dictatorship - that left more than 1,400 people dead.

Another power grab

Rights violations against minority communities could lead to the reinstatement of US sanctions, warns Karam Shaar, a Syrian economist. "The economic relief following sanctions removal is now clearly conditional on Damascus demonstrating respect for human rights, especially the protection of vulnerable and marginalised groups," he **told** local media, as reported by The Syrian Observer online news service.

Critics point to yet another power grab by Al-Sharaa. On 20 August, he **issued** a decree granting himself the right to appoint one-third of the parliament's 210 members — the remainder being selected by appointed electoral colleges.

Al-Sharaa dissolved the existing parliament in January, and in March he approved an interim constitution outlining a five-year political transition.



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But many civil society activists are frustrated and want the draft constitution to allow for the formation of political parties and other measures to implement greater dialogue.

However, Al-Sharaa is surrounded by former militiamen whose commitment to democracy appears shaky at best, and the elections appear unlikely to deepen minority confidence in the government.

Navigating between outside powers

Meanwhile, the country has still to navigate between outside powers which have their own agendas. Israel, for example, has set itself up as the protector of the Druze and the Kurds as it continues to counter any renewed Iranian influence in Syria.

Turkey is still countering Kurdish autonomy in northern Syria, as it fears any spillover of Kurdish nationalism while it aims to reinforce disarmament of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) within its borders.

Another big issue yet to be resolved is more than 40,000 people still stuck in the Al-Hol and Al-Roj camps in north-east Syria housing Islamic State suspects and their families. Iraq has invited countries that have nationals at Al-Hol camp to attend a conference in New York next month to discuss how to return the detainees.

Syria urgently needs an inclusive and transparent political transition - Geir Pedersen

The camps are administered by the Kurdish-led Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, the civilian wing of the Syrian Democratic Forces. But in reality IS controls much of daily life in Al-Hol, considered the most dangerous refugee camp in the world.

The detainees have never been brought before a court. In addition, more than 9,000

detainees with alleged IS affiliation from more than 50 countries are still being held. In the camps, there is routine violence, sexual violence and widespread disease, while a lack of basic necessities is “life-threatening,” **according** to the UN.

Syria urgently needs an inclusive and transparent political transition, Geir Pedersen, UN special envoy for Syria, told the Security Council on 21 August. “Syrians need to feel that this transition is not a series of ad hoc arrangements and isolated institutions, but a clear and comprehensive path,” he **said**.

The next few weeks may be crucial for Syria if it is to embark on this path.