



Spotlight on Syria (Following the Toppling of the Syrian Regime)

December 9 – 16 , 2024

Highlights

- ▶ The new transitional government in Syria, headed by Mohammad al-Bashir, began its activities after the transfer of powers from the last government of the al-Assad regime. Among its first decisions were the deployment of police forces in major cities and the prohibition of smoking and drinking alcohol.
- ▶ Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) leader Ahmad al-Shara continued to make conciliatory statements. He announced the dismantling of the security forces and the closure of prisons and emphasized the end of the Iranian presence in the country.
- ▶ The Turkish-backed rebel forces completed the takeover of Deir ez-Zor in eastern Syria from the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). The Kurds expressed concern about the attacks against them and called for a meeting of all political forces in the country to formulate a unified vision.
- ▶ The IDF continued to operate against strategic weapons stockpiles and military infrastructure of the Syrian army throughout Syria and within the buffer zone in the Golan Heights. Ahmad al-Shara stressed that Israel's actions could lead to escalation and that Syria has no intention of entering a new war.
- ▶ Hezbollah secretary-general Naim Qassem expressed hope that the new regime in Damascus would not promote normalization with Israel and would continue to view it as an enemy.
- ▶ The US Secretary of State confirmed that the United States has maintained ties with HTS despite its designation as a terrorist organization. Russia has started reducing its forces in Syria and is seeking to secure an agreement to maintain its two major military bases in the country.

Activity of the new revolutionary government

Activity of the new transitional government

- ▶ On December 11, 2024, the first meeting of Syria's new interim government, headed by Mohammad al-Bashir, was held. The new government is scheduled to serve until March 1, 2025. The meeting was attended by the ministers of the "Salvation Government," which managed the rebel enclave in Idlib, and the ministers of the outgoing government of Bashar al-Assad's

regime. During the meeting, they discussed the transfer of governmental powers in an orderly manner (al-Jazeera, December 11, 2024).¹

► In a statement issued by the new government at the end of the meeting, it was stated that it is focusing on regulating the activities of the official institutions and ensuring the needs of the citizens, in addition to stabilizing the basic services in the city of Aleppo. It was also noted that the government is examining the redesign of state television and that it is developing a new strategic vision for the media to express the “real aspirations” of the Syrians (Shabakat Akhbar al-Ma’arik Telegram channel, December 11, 2024).

► Al-Bashir noted that the transition between the governments is expected to proceed smoothly since some ministries are parallel between the “Salvation Government” that operated in Idlib and the Assad government. This means that each minister will continue in their previous role, but this time with responsibility over their areas of operation throughout Syria. Regarding ministries that existed in the previous government but had no equivalent in the Idlib government, heads of directorates in Idlib who dealt with the relevant fields will be appointed (al-Jazeera, December 11, 2024).



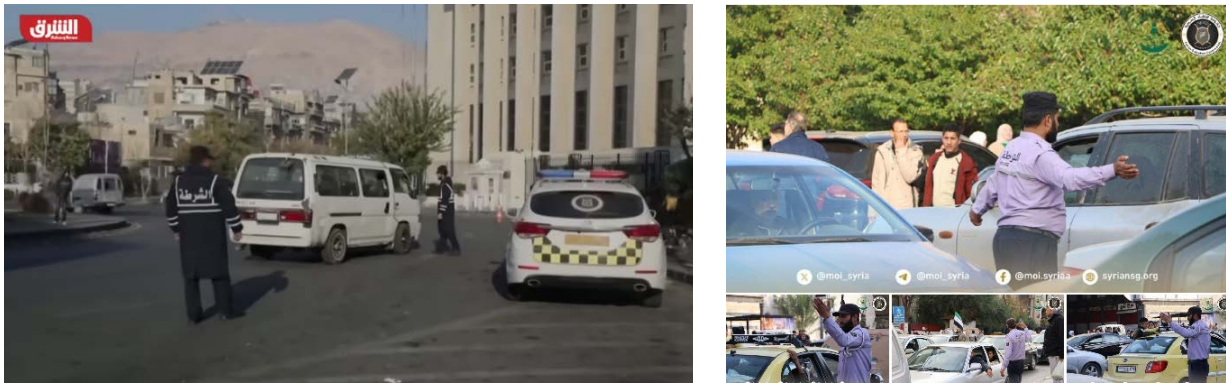
Syrian Interim Prime Minister Mohammad al-Bashir (al-Jazeera, December 11, 2024)

► It was reported that the meetings of HTS leader Ahmad al-Shara (Abu Mohammad al-Julani) with various groups, including those in the Quneitra and as-Suwayda regions, aimed “to establish the Ministry of Defense and incorporate all factions” (al-Jazeera, December 11, 2024). At the same time, it was reported that al-Shara met with the Military Operations Department and the Southern Operations Room, which was established last week and brings together

¹ Interim Prime Minister Mohammad al-Bashir, 41, is a resident of Idlib Province, holds a degree in electrical and electronic engineering from the University of Aleppo and a degree in Sharia and law from the University of Idlib. In February 2024, he was appointed head the Idlib “Salvation Government” after previously serving as minister of Growth and Humanitarian Affairs (CNN in Arabic, December 10, 2024; al-Jazeera, December 9, 2024).

various Syrian groups and Druze tribes in the as-Suwayda and Quneitra regions. In a statement summarizing the meeting, it was said that “it is an important step toward achieving stability and security in the region and an important step toward unifying the efforts of the revolutionary forces under a centralized leadership.” According to the statement, they also discussed setting priorities “for work in the next phase across various fields,” strengthening mechanisms and means of coordination and cooperation among all actors in the region, and steps to improve security “and preserve the homeland’s gains” (Syria TV, December 11, 2024).

► According to “two sources close to the revolutionaries in Syria,” the leadership ordered its fighters to withdraw from the cities, replacing them with internal security forces affiliated with HTS (Reuters, December 10, 2024).



Police forces in the streets of Damascus (Telegram channel of the Ministry of the Interior of the rebel government and al-Sharq TV, December 9, 2024)

► The new government has imposed a ban on smoking, in line with radical Islamic principles. Residents caught smoking were beaten by the new police force (al-Arabiya, December 14, 2024). At the same time, a ban on the sale and consumption of alcohol was enacted. Among other things, bottles of alcohol were smashed at the duty-free shop in Damascus Airport (Asharq al-Awsat, December 15, 2024).



Smokers beaten by the new police force (al-Arabiya, December 14, 2024)

► Baha al-Din Sharm, minister of transport in Syria's transitional government, said efforts are underway to reopen the country's airports and border crossings with neighboring countries. According to him, Aleppo Airport is already ready, and its opening date will be announced in the coming days, along with Damascus Airport (al-Watan, December 13, 2024).

► The Political Affairs Directorate of the interim government announced that eight countries – Egypt, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Jordan, Bahrain, Oman, and Italy – had resumed the activity of their embassies in Syria. In addition, Qatar and Turkey promised to reopen their embassies in Damascus (RT in Arabic, December 12, 2024).



Map of the division in Syria, as of December 11, 2024. Green: Areas controlled by HTS-led revolutionaries; Yellow: Areas controlled by the Syrian Democratic Forces (Shabakat Akhbar al-Ma'arik Telegram channel, December 11, 2024)

Statements by Ahmad al-Shara

► This past week, **HTS leader Ahmad al-Shara (Abu Mohammad al-Julani)**, who is considered the most powerful man in the new Syrian government, continued to present a united and conciliatory front inside Syria and vis-à-vis the international community. The following are some of his most prominent statements:

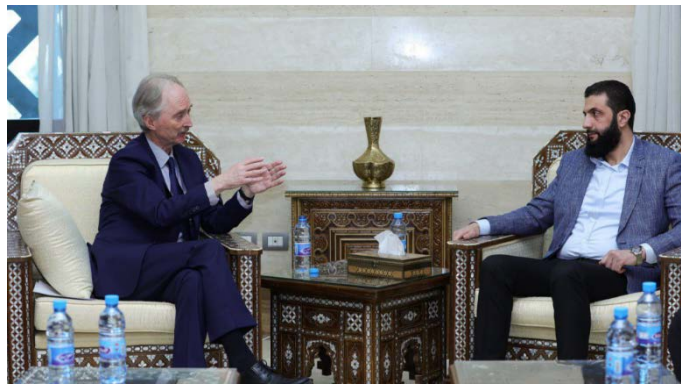
- ◆ He promised that the Syrian security forces would be dismantled and that the prisons would be closed after the release of thousands of prisoners held by the Assad regime, some of them for many years. He also stressed that they were closely monitoring the chemical weapons depots in Syria and were working with international organizations to secure them (Reuters, December 12, 2024).



Ahmad al-Shara (al-Araby, December 12, 2024)

- ◆ He made it clear that they would not hesitate to hold criminals, murderers, and security officers involved in the torture of the Syrian people accountable. He noted that they would pursue them everywhere and demand their extradition from the countries to which they fled. He also said that the government would offer a reward for information on senior military and security officers involved in crimes (Telegram channel of the Directorate of Military Operations of the rebels, December 10, 2024).
- ◆ **He declared that the revolutionaries had succeeded in ending the Iranian presence in the country after Syria had become a platform for implementing Iranian agendas, which posed a great danger to Syria, the countries of the region, and the Gulf.** However, he stressed that they had no enmity with the Iranian people, but with the regime that had harmed Syria (Syria TV, December 14, 2024).
- ◆ He stressed that the Kurds are part of the Syrian nation and will receive their rights. According to him, they were exposed to oppression like other residents of Syria, but with the elimination of the regime, the oppression was removed, and in the next Syria, the Kurds will play a fundamental role (Telegram, December 14, 2024).
- ◆ He accused the deposed Syrian president, Bashar al-Assad, of ordering the Syrian bank to print banknotes without financial backing, thus exacerbating the country's economic crisis. He also pledged to end the production of Captagon in Syria, claiming that the Assad regime had turned the country into a “factory for the drug's production” (Syria TV, December 14, 2024).
- ▶ On December 15, 2024, al-Shara met with the UN envoy to Syria, Geir Pedersen. He noted that in view of the overthrow of the Assad regime and the political changes in Syria, the UN Security

Council Resolution 2254 of 2015, which set out a road map for ending the civil war and holding elections, should be reconsidered. According to al-Shara, a safe environment must be created for the return of refugees to the country, and all these steps must be implemented cautiously and not hastily, under the supervision of expert teams (HTS's leadership official Telegram channel, December 15, 2024). Pedersen stressed the need for a comprehensive and credible political transition in Damascus, based on the principles of Resolution 2254. He said the UN intends to provide all possible assistance to the Syrian people (UN website, December 15, 2024).



**The meeting between al-Julani and Pedersen
(General Command – Syria Telegram channel, December 15, 2024)**

The Kurds

► On December 11, 2024, the Turkish-backed rebel forces completed their takeover of the Deir ez-Zor area in eastern Syria, after the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), the Kurdish militia operating with the support of the United States, took over the area with the fall of the Assad regime (Deir ez-Zor24 X account, December 11, 2024). In addition, the pro-Turkish rebels took over Manbij, in the northeastern periphery of Aleppo, from the Kurds (December 10, 2024).



Children in Deir ez-Zor cheering the rebel forces (Deir ez-Zor24 X account, December 11, 2024)

► Mazloum Abdi, the commander of the Kurdish SDF, warned that the vacuum created by the fall of the Assad regime had led to attacks against the militia forces, and therefore they were forced to stop fighting ISIS. He called on the United States to exert additional political pressure

to stop these attacks. He added that the political administration of the autonomous region in northern Syria should be represented in the new government and that the SDF must take part in the country's army. He also expressed concern that Turkey would push the new regime in Damascus to serve Turkish interests (The Wall Street Journal, December 13, 2024).

► On December 16, 2024, the SDF issued a statement stressing the need to preserve Syria's unity and sovereignty. They called for an emergency meeting to be held in which all the political forces in Syria would participate to formulate a common vision for the transitional phase (Ayn al-Furat News Agency, December 16, 2024).

IDF Activity

► On December 10, 2024, the IDF Spokesperson published details of Operation Arrow of Bashan, which attacked strategic weapons stockpiles throughout Syria and the Syrian army's military capabilities to prevent them from falling into the hands of terrorist elements after the fall of the Assad regime. Among other things, more than 350 airstrikes were carried out in 48 hours against more than 300 targets, including military airports, air defense batteries, production sites and warehouses of weapons, and other military and security infrastructure. In addition, Israeli navy ships destroyed 15 Syrian navy vessels and weapons, including sea-to-sea missiles, in the ports of al-Bayda and Latakia (IDF Spokesperson, December 10, 2024).

► An officer who served in the Syrian Air Force noted that three of the most important squadrons of the force had been destroyed, along with Russian planes, and that Syria had lost 70% of its planes. According to the officer, within 24 hours, 17 military sites were attacked, half of them in the Damascus area, and six main military bases (Baghdad Today, December 10, 2024).



Right: Buildings attacked at the Barzah Scientific Research Center, northeast of Damascus (al-Mujaz al-Rusi, December 10, 2024). Left: The remains of Syrian naval sea-to-sea missile ships in the port of Latakia (al-Hadath, December 10, 2024)

▶ According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, in the week since the fall of the Assad regime, Israel has carried out at least 473 airstrikes in Syrian territory. It was reported that the most intense round of attacks in 12 years was carried out on December 15, 2024, with 18 attacks against military targets along the Syrian coast, including in the Tartus area. In addition, Israeli aircraft reportedly attacked radar installations at the Deir ez-Zor military airbase in eastern Syria (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, December 16, 2024).



**Explosion from the attacks attributed to Israel in Tartus
(an-Nahar X account, December 16, 2024)**

▶ IDF forces continued to deploy at strategic positions in the buffer zone in Syrian territory and along the border in the Golan Heights. They located weapons, including anti-tank missiles, weapons, vests, ammunition, and other military equipment (IDF Spokesperson, December 13, 2024). In addition, IDF forces contacted the heads of villages in the Syrian Golan and asked them to collect the weapons from the residents. No unusual incidents were recorded (Israeli media, December 15, 2024).

The new Syrian regime's attitude toward Israel

▶ On December 14, 2024, Ahmad al-Shara addressed for the first time the Israeli attacks in Syria. He noted that “Israeli excuses have weakened and do not justify its recent transgressions” and that Israel has “clearly crossed” the lines of confrontation in Syria, which could lead to unjustified escalation. However, he stressed that Syria is tired of wars and that at this stage it is interested in reconstruction and stability rather than conflicts that could lead to further destruction. He called on the international community to intervene in the issue of the “Israeli escalation” and put an end to it (Syria TV, December 14, 2024).

▶ According to reports, Syria's ambassador to the UN, Qusay al-Dahhak, who shifted his allegiance to the new regime in Damascus, submitted a letter of protest to the UN Security Council on behalf of the transitional government in Syria, condemning Israel's airstrikes and

the violation of the 1974 separation agreement in the Golan Heights (Asharq al-Awsat, December 15, 2024).

Hezbollah and Lebanon

Hezbollah's response to IDF activity in Syria

► Hezbollah secretary-general Naim Qassem expressed hope that the new regime in Syria would choose cooperation with Lebanon and that all parties in Syria would participate in shaping the new regime. **He also expressed hope that the new regime would see Israel as an “enemy” and would not take steps toward normalization.** Qassem admitted that due to the fall of the Assad regime, Hezbollah had lost its military supply route, but added that the “resistance” was flexible and that if the new regime did not allow the transfer of weapons, other ways would have to be found (al-Manar, December 14, 2024).

► Hezbollah issued a statement condemning the Israeli attacks on Syrian territory. The statement said that the “ongoing crimes of the enemy” are a “blatant violation of Syrian sovereignty.” Hezbollah also warned of “the consequences of these crimes” and called on the world in general and the Arab world in particular to take a stand and exert pressure to stop the attacks. The statement stressed that Hezbollah supports Syria and that “the unity of the country must be preserved” (Telegram channel of the Hezbollah combat media wing, December 9, 2024).

► Hezbollah MP Hassan Fadlallah said that the organization was not a party to the events in Syria, especially since the Syrian army had decided not to fight, and Hezbollah “does not fight for others.” He added that they were following the developments and that they would judge the new regime by its actions and not by its statements (Janoubia, December 15, 2024).

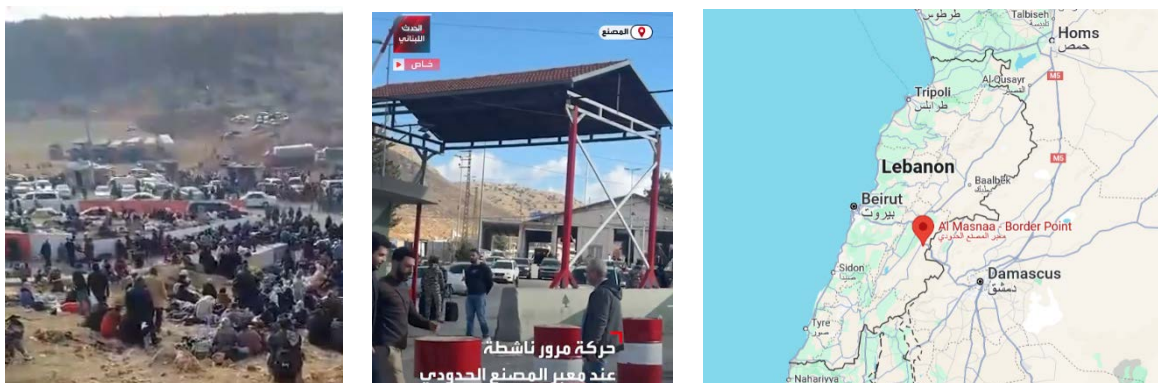
► He also referred to the recent events in Syria, saying that “everything that is happening there will not weaken us.” He added that “we are not in a hurry to judge things, we will examine how they will progress” and that “we know how to defend our country and how to deal with challenges” (al-Ahed, December 9, 2024).

The situation on the Syrian-Lebanese border

► It was reported that dozens, possibly even hundreds, of Syrian army soldiers—primarily from the 4th Division commanded by Maher al-Assad, the brother of the ousted Syrian president—fled to Lebanon through illegal crossings in the northern Bekaa Valley. Hezbollah reportedly provided them with shelter (Lebanon Files, December 10, 2024).

► Lebanese Interior Minister Bassam Mawlawi announced the tightening of security measures at the al-Masna crossing on the border with Syria, stressing that the illegal crossings on the border are closed and under the control of the Lebanese army. He claimed that security personnel who served in the former Syrian regime did not enter Lebanon and stressed that anyone who entered Lebanon illegally from Syria would be deported back. He estimated that after the situation in Syria stabilized, there would be a growing exodus of Syrians from Lebanon. He stressed that “the illegal crossings are closed and are in the hands of the Lebanese army” (al-Nashra, December 10, 2024). In this context, Lebanon’s General Security Directorate said that it would not allow the movement of people wanted by the international or local legal system (al-Nashra, December 11, 2024).

► On December 13, 2024, it was reported that during the previous six days, about 7,000 people had entered Lebanon from Syria through the al-Masna crossing. It was noted that those entering Lebanon met the conditions of Lebanese General Security: Lebanon is a transit station for them only, and they hold a ticket to another country, or they have a foreign passport, or their stay in Lebanon is legal (al-Arabiya, December 13, 2024).



The al-Masna border crossing: Right: Map (Google Maps). In the center: the crossing (al-Hadath al-Lubnani, December 13, 2024). Left: Civilians crowding near the crossing (Athabat Network X account, December 11, 2024)

► The Syrian rebels announced that they had uncovered a network of huge underground tunnels under the al-Qalamoun Mountains bordering Syria and Lebanon, which was allegedly used by Iran and Hezbollah to smuggle weapons into Lebanon. Footage from the tunnels showed trucks, a bulldozer, and batteries for firing surface-to-surface missiles placed on trucks (al-Hadath al-Suri, December 12, 2024).



A truck and a bulldozer in an Iranian and Hezbollah tunnel in the Qalamoun Mountains (al-Hadath al-Suri, December 12, 2024)

International reactions

► On December 14, 2024, a meeting was held in Jordan on Syria, with the participation of the foreign ministers of the United States, the European Union, Jordan, Turkey, France, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, Lebanon, Iraq, Egypt, and Bahrain, and the UN envoy to Syria. The concluding statement said the participants called for a hopeful, secure, and peaceful future in Syria, and stressed the need to protect the rights of women and minorities and prevent the resurgence of terrorist elements. The participants also noted that the political transition process in Syria must be led by the Syrians themselves and that the result must be an inclusive, non-community, representative government (US State Department website, December 14, 2024).

United States

► US Secretary of State Antony Blinken confirmed that the US administration had contacted HTS and other entities in Syria. According to him, the purpose of the contact was to convey messages about the principles expected from the new regime, as well as to assist in the search for American journalist Austin Tice, who has been missing in Syria since 2012 (US State Department website, December 14, 2024). It should be noted that HTS is designated as a terrorist organization by the United States and that there is a \$10 million reward for the capture of Ahmad al-Shara.

Russia

► Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov said that his country had held direct contact with the political committee of HTS. According to Bogdanov, Russia aspires to

maintain its military bases in Syria to fight international terrorism (Reuters, December 12, 2024).

►“Four Syrian sources” said that Russia is withdrawing its forces from the frontlines in northern Syria and the coastal mountain range but is not leaving its two main bases in Tartus and Hmeymim. A “Syrian security source” noted that at least one Russian transport plane took off from the Hmeymim base to Libya. Additionally, a “senior officer in the Syrian army” who is in contact with the Russian army said that Russia’s goal is to reorganize based on developments on the ground. A “senior rebel official in Syria” emphasized that the presence of Russian forces and their previous agreements with the Assad regime are not up for discussion, adding that the matter will be subject to future negotiations and that “the Syrian people will have the final say” (Reuters, December 14, 2024).

►An HTS “official” said that in recent days, Russia had evacuated at least 400 soldiers from the Damascus area in coordination with the organization. “A source who negotiated the withdrawal” on the Syrian side added that the Russians left Damascus in a convoy by land to the Hmeymim base, from where they flew the soldiers back to Russia (Financial Times, December 16, 2024).

Iran

►Iran’s ambassador to Syria, Hossein Akbari, said that “the current groups in Syria lack experience in governance” and that they are dealing with some real problems, including the US presence in the country and the SDF. He added that Israel seeks a “fictional victory” and aims to destroy all of Syria’s military capabilities and that the Syrian people will never go along with the policy of the “occupying entity.” According to Akbari, the Iranian embassy in Damascus will soon resume its operations, following assurances that its security will be maintained (al-Alam, December 15, 2024).

Turkey

►Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan stressed that his country will not allow anyone to divide Syrian lands and turn them into areas of conflict and bloodshed again. He warned that any person or entity that tries to attack Syria will find the Syrian people against it, stressing that Turkey will stand by the Syrian people. He said Turkey had made great sacrifices until the situation in Syria was successful. He also reported that Turkey would open its border crossing with Syria to allow the safe return of the Syrian refugees it hosts who wish to return to their country (al-Jazeera, December 10, 2024).

► Turkish Defense Minister Yaşar Güler said that Turkey's goal is to preserve Syria's territorial integrity. He said the new Syrian government should be given a chance to govern, and Turkey would be willing to provide military training if requested. Güler noted that Turkey had made it clear to the US that Turkey's priority was the elimination of the US-backed Kurdish SDF (Reuters, December 15, 2024).

European Union

► EU Foreign Minister Kaja Kallas said sanctions on Syria would remain in place until the new government guaranteed the protection of minorities and women's rights within a unified government. She noted that Syria's interim leaders have shown positive signals, but these are insufficient. Kallas emphasized that the leaders would be judged by their actions, not words, and by the direction they take in the coming weeks (Reuters, December 15, 2024).