

Opinion – Post-Assad Syria’s Cautionary Tale

Written by Hassan Jaber

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HASSAN JABER, MAR 14 2025

In the wake of Bashar al-Assad’s downfall in Syria, Western media and policymakers have rushed to celebrate what many see as the long-overdue collapse of a brutal authoritarian regime. Yet as history has shown in Libya and Iraq, the removal of a dictator does not guarantee peace. Reports have surfaced detailing mass killings of the Alawite community in Syria’s coastal provinces, serving as a grim reminder that regime change alone does not resolve deep-rooted sectarian divisions in the country. Instead, Syria now faces the prospect of yet another cycle of instability, raising questions about who benefits from this transition, and at what cost. These realities should not come as a surprise, considering the background of the leader now presiding over Syria. Abu Mohammad al-Jolani or Ahmed Al-Sharaa as he now calls himself, is former member of ISIS, Al-Qaeda, and the Al-Nusra Front, and leader of Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS). He was also, until recently, a globally wanted terrorist with a \$10 million reward set on him by the US state department.

Despite recent efforts to portray himself as a moderate rebel, al-Jolani’s lack of control over his fighters has allowed for mass atrocities. While al-Jolani’s attempts to rebrand himself as a pragmatic leader, his past affiliations raises questions about both his ability and willingness to rein in the jihadist elements within his ranks. Many of these fighters are foreign, including Uyghur militants from China’s Xinjiang region, and have long histories with transnational jihadist networks. Their continued presence and influence suggest that Syria may not be heading toward peace but rather toward another cycle of sectarian bloodshed.

The western media’s approach to Syria has been marked by an overly simplistic narrative: Assad’s brutality automatically means that his opposition has to be good. Rather than rush to celebrate, Western media and policymakers must exercise caution and nuance in their approach to Syria. While Assad’s authoritarian rule and human rights abuses have been widely condemned with heavy sanctions, it is reckless to assume that his fall equates to a better future for Syria. The assumption that any opposition force represents a step toward democracy ignores the country’s complex sectarian landscape, which has existed for hundreds of years. Syria is home to diverse religious and ethnic groups, including Alawites, Christians, Druze, and Kurds. These minorities have historically been wary of the Sunni Islamist movements, given the persecution they have faced.

The current wave of violence against these communities underscores the dangers of endorsing a leadership transition without critically examining its consequences. The mass celebrations and endorsement of Syria’s new leadership by Western politicians ignores these realities. In both Iraq and Libya the removal of authoritarian rulers led to prolonged instability, power vacuums, and, ultimately, the rise of extremist elements. Syria now risks following the same trajectory, particularly if minority groups continue to be targeted. Al-Jolani has vowed to punish the responsible forces, but without any guarantees of impartial judgment on his fellow fighters, justice for the victims and Syria’s path to freedom remains nowhere in sight.

The new president has said that Syria’s door is open, thus, independent humanitarian NGOs and organizations should investigate the role of the responsible in recent killings. Many of them have operated with impunity under different banners, shifting allegiances depending on strategic interests rather than ideological convictions. The ability of al-Jolani’s administration to exercise control over these elements is in serious doubt, and there is little reason to believe that Syria is transitioning toward stability under his leadership. Western governments must avoid making the mistake of legitimizing individuals like Al-Jolani without acknowledging their pasts and their present inability to curb

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extremist factions. Diplomatic recognition and support should be contingent upon demonstrable commitments to protecting Syria’s diverse population and curbing extremist influence.

The celebration of Assad’s fall was, at best, premature and, at worst, a dangerous endorsement of forces that may bring further suffering to Syria’s already devastated people. Humanitarian organizations must be allowed to investigate the claims of ethnic and religious cleansing, and any new government should be held accountable for ensuring the safety of all its citizens. The international community must resist the temptation to reduce Syria’s future to a binary choice between Assad’s brutality and Islamist insurgency. A more sustainable and just outcome requires vigilance, critical inquiry, and, above all, a commitment to protecting Syria’s vulnerable populations.

About the author:

Hassan Jaber is an independent researcher. Previously, he was a research Associate at the Department of Political Science and Law, Swedish Defense University. His interests lie in the international security and politics of East Asia and the MENA region.