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Syria

Syria: Fishing in Troubled Waters

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Israel has accustomed us to fishing in troubled waters. The Zionist state has long been interested in sowing discord and fanning its flames in striving to redraw the map of the Middle East in its image, so that the logic of sectarian and ethnic fragmentation prevails over the logic of citizenship and shared loyalty to a state that merges sectarian and ethnic groups into a single melting pot while preserving their rights. Inspired by the Roman Empire's famous principle of "divide and conquer", Israel has sought, since its inception, to exploit the differences it found in its immediate and distant surroundings, playing sectarian minorities against the regional Sunni majority and ethnic minorities against the Arab majority: Druze, Christians, Kurds, and others – even Shiites during the time of the Shah of Iran, before that country became a hotbed of anti-Israel hostility and contributed in turn to fuelling Shiite sectarianism in neighbouring Arab countries in an effort to expand its regional influence.

From this perspective, the Zionist state's behaviour in Syria since the collapse of the Assad regime is neither surprising nor unusual; it is rather entirely natural. Israel exploited that collapse to destroy the bulk of the military means possessed by the ousted regime, radically weakening Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) in its quest to replace the former regime by extending its control over the greater part of Syrian territory. Israel took advantage of the power vacuum to extend its control beyond the borders of its occupation of the Golan Heights, as established after the 1973 war. This was done for two transparent purposes: one being to strengthen its strategic position over southern Lebanon, and the other to facilitate its penetration into Syrian territory towards Druze-majority areas.

The recent confrontations opposed the HTS regime and jihadist groups under its umbrella, on the one hand, and armed Druzes protecting their community and safeguarding it from the tutelage of a government that fails to respect their rights, on the other. They had previously managed to impose the same on the former regime itself, despite its claim to protect minorities, and they are now even keener to uphold this self-protection in the face of a new regime whose armed forces include extremist Sunni groups hostile to the country's various minorities. Indeed, the HTS regime has so far failed to convince the rest of Syria's population, including a large segment of Sunni Arab Syrians, of its sincere intention to establish a civil, democratic, non-sectarian regime that is inclusive of all components of the Syrian people and respects their specificities.

Here lies the crux of the matter: Zionist fishing in troubled waters requires, first and foremost, muddying the waters. Don't blame the Kurds, who suffered terribly from Arab chauvinistic Baathist persecution for decades before seizing the opportunity of the civil war to impose their autonomy in their areas of concentration in the northeast. Don't blame either the Alawites, who were subjected to a hideous sectarian massacre last March, in which men wearing HTS uniforms participated and in which approximately 1,700 civilians were killed. Likewise, don't blame the Druze, who were subjected to a sectarian attack under the pretext of a fabricated video attributed to a sheikh from their sect, which could only fool those blinded by preconceived sectarian hatred.

The blame lies primarily with those who attributed the collapse of the Assad regime exclusively to themselves, whereas Israel played a greater role in creating the conditions for its downfall through the decisive blow it dealt to Iran's ability to shore it up, whether through Lebanon's Hezbollah or by sending forces from Iran and Iraq. HTS should have modestly acknowledged the limitations of its own forces, which are quite weaker than those of the Kurdish forces in the northeast, and far too weak to allow it to extend its control over all the Arab regions that were controlled by the ousted regime with the assistance of Russia and Iran.

Instead, Ahmad al-Sharaa got euphoric about replacing Bashar al-Assad in his presidential palace (he even began to increasingly look like a bearded version of the deposed president). He acted as if he could dominate all of Syria, first

appointing the HTS government that ruled Idlib as the government of all Syria, then forming a new government under HTS hegemony, in which the “representation” of the Syrian people is limited to a symbolic minimum that convinced no one (the worst of which was having a single and only woman to represent the female majority of the Syrian population and its Christian minority). He promised a constitutional process marred by the same flaws, and implied that Syria would not hold elections for four years.

Instead of all this, which is completely contrary to what Syria needs, the only path that could lead to the country’s reunification should have been pursued. As indicated from the outset (see “How to Rebuild the Syrian State?”, 17 December 2024 – in Arabic, not translated), it is the path of calling for a comprehensive conference in which all political, sectarian, and ethnic components of the Syrian people are represented, and in which women are represented in conformity with their proportion of the population. This conference would then establish an interim government in which these components participate, paving the way for the election of a constitutional council within a period not exceeding one year. The council would then draft a new constitution for submission to a popular referendum, with a two-thirds majority required for it to enter into force. These are the only conditions that can cleanse Syria’s waters and reassure the various components of its population. What the HTS regime has done so far, however, is dangerously muddying the waters, opening the way for various regional adepts of fishing in troubled waters, foremost among them the Zionist state.

[Gilbert Achcar's blog](#) 6 May 2025

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