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Syria

Where is Ahmad al-Chareh's Syria heading?

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On 1 February, Jean Batou spoke at length with Joseph Daher, who had just returned from a third trip to Syria since the fall of the brutal regime of Bashar al-Assad in December 2024. Daher provides an update on the worrying developments under Ahmad al-Chareh's new government. He also highlights the opportunities opening up for working people and social movements, provided they prove capable of resisting sectarianism and ethnic discrimination. He believes that time is running short and that a race against the clock is under way between the new ruling classes — eager to enrich themselves and consolidate an authoritarian order, with the backing of reactionary regional forces (the Gulf petro-monarchies, Turkey, Israel) and international powers (above all, Donald Trump's United States) — and the democratic and social aspirations of the peoples of Syria.

Ahmad al-Chareh (formerly known by his nom de guerre Abu Mohammed al-Julani) is the leader of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) who became Syria's interim president following the fall of the Assad regime in December 2024. A former jihadist who fought with al-Qaeda in Iraq before founding the Syrian branch Jabhat al-Nusra in 2011, he has sought to rebrand himself as a pragmatic statesman, but his government's authoritarian consolidation of power, neoliberal economic policies and instrumentalisation of sectarianism have drawn sharp criticism from democratic and progressive forces within Syria.

Jean Batou: You have just returned from a lengthy stay in Syria. What developments in the domestic situation have struck you most since your recent trips to the country? What significant testimony were you able to gather?

Joseph Daher: This is my third stay since the fall of the Assad regime in December 2024. Each time, I try to visit different regions of the country and not remain solely in the capital, Damascus.

Syria is experiencing a contradictory situation. It faces numerous challenges at the political, economic and social levels. For instance, the country's reconstruction — which is still not the subject of any plan from the central state — is developing through individual initiatives or local communities. The destruction has been massive across the entire country, affecting both residential buildings and infrastructure.

Moreover, despite the lifting of a large proportion of the sanctions, the socio-economic situation remains catastrophic, further amplified by the austerity policies of the new ruling classes. More than half of all Syrians remain displaced either within the country or abroad. Over 90 per cent of the population lives below the poverty line, and 17 million people — three quarters of the population — require humanitarian aid. The vast majority of Syrians survive thanks to remittances from their families and relatives abroad, estimated at over 4 billion US dollars (approximately EUR 3.8 billion) per year.

Sectarian and ethnic fragmentation has, in many respects, been reinforced by the authoritarian, exclusionary and violent policies of the new government that followed the fall of the Assad regime. At the same time, a number of civil society organisations and local initiatives are attempting to counter these dynamics, working towards social solidarity against hateful discourse and practices and sectarian tensions.

A new political space is emerging

JB: You paint a difficult, not to say very bleak, picture of the state of the country, but are social and political openings

not conceivable after the fall of the monstrous regime of Bashar al-Assad?

JD: Yes, the situation is far from ideal, but at the same time, a new political life is emerging. It is now possible to discuss politics, including criticising those in power, to organise conferences, sit-ins and demonstrations, and to form new political groups (even though no law on the creation of political parties has yet been enacted). There is also a free press and local popular initiatives covering varied and diverse themes, seeking to bring together different sectors of society. This does not mean that there are no obstacles to these initiatives, or indeed outright repression.

There is, however, a political space with greater freedom of action and expression, albeit one with serious obstacles. It can nonetheless be occupied, and it must be, wherever possible.

The picture is therefore nuanced.

JB: What is your assessment of the nature of the current regime, led by Ahmad al-Chareh, who previously headed Hayat Tahrir al-Sham [1] (HTS), a group formerly linked to al-Qaeda in Syria, since he took power over a year ago? To what extent has his pragmatism initially led him to accommodate the aspirations of the peoples of Syria to break with the brutal dictatorship of Bashar al-Assad?

JD: Although his group has evolved politically and ideologically, abandoning its transnational jihadist objectives to become an actor seeking to operate within the Syrian national framework, this does not mean that Ahmad al-Chareh and HTS support a democratic society or promote equality and social justice.

Far from responding to popular aspirations, since the overthrow of the former Syrian regime, the political transition has served as an opportunity for the authorities in power — dominated by Ahmad al-Chareh and HTS — to consolidate their grip on political and economic institutions, rather than ensuring an inclusive democratic process aimed at reconstruction founded on social justice. [2]

To this end, the HTS-led authorities have developed a strategy based on three principal elements: 1. new regional and international alliances within the framework of neoliberal policies; 2. control over state, security and economic institutions; and 3. the instrumentalisation of sectarianism.

NEW REGIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL ALLIANCES WITHIN THE FRAMEWORK OF NEOLIBERAL POLICIES

JB: Can you explain how Ahmad al-Chareh's Syria is seeking to exploit the international context to its advantage, and how regional and international powers have responded to his efforts?

JD: Since coming to power on 8 December 2024, the new Syrian government has sought to position Syria within a geopolitical alliance led by the United States, including regional states such as Turkey and Qatar — both historically close to HTS — and Saudi Arabia.

It is no coincidence that Ahmad al-Chareh made his first trip as interim president to Saudi Arabia, in February 2025, where he met Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS). Riyadh has been a key player in accelerating the regional and international recognition and acceptance of the new Syrian government.

The recognition of the new Syrian authorities by international and regional powers was followed by numerous symbolic events aimed at strengthening the legitimacy of the Syrian government. The most notable was undoubtedly

the address delivered by Ahmad al-Chareh before the United Nations General Assembly in New York, in September 2025 — a first after nearly sixty years' absence. The last participation of a Syrian president at the UN General Assembly dated back to 1967, before the 50 years of rule by the Assad dynasty. [3]

Furthermore, the Syrian interim president, al-Chareh, was received at the White House in mid-November 2025 by President Donald Trump — a first for a Syrian head of state. Trump hailed al-Chareh as a "strong leader" and expressed his confidence in him, promising to do everything possible for Syria's success. At the end of December 2025, the United States permanently lifted sanctions against the country by repealing the so-called Caesar Act. [4] The green light given by the United States for the offensive against territories controlled by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) [5], dominated by the Kurdish PYD [6], is another example of Washington's support for the new Syrian authorities (see below).

Syria's geopolitical realignment and the new government's quest for international legitimisation are accompanied by an effort towards normalisation with Israel. Since coming to power, interim president al-Chareh has publicly reiterated on several occasions that his regime does not constitute a threat to Israel. Indeed, the Syrian president has declared that Syria shares "common enemies" with the Israeli state (Iran and Hezbollah). Damascus did not condemn the massive Israeli strikes of June 2025 against Iran, considering any weakening of the Islamic Republic (and of Hezbollah in Lebanon) as positive.

A new series of talks, sponsored by the United States, took place in January 2026 in Paris over two days. At the conclusion of these discussions, the United States, Israel and Syria issued a joint statement reaffirming the commitment of Damascus and Tel Aviv to establish permanent security arrangements and to set up "a joint mechanism — a special communication cell — to facilitate immediate and ongoing coordination in matters of intelligence sharing, military de-escalation, diplomatic dialogue and commercial opportunities under the supervision of the United States".

This geopolitical realignment aims not only to establish the external legitimacy of the new Syrian government but also to attract foreign direct investment (FDI). The political-economic orientation of the new authorities favours a neoliberal economic model, driven by commercial dynamics and characterised by investments geared towards short-term profits at the expense of the productive sectors of the economy. [7]

This is broadly reflected in the nature of the investment pledges made to Syria. The Damascus authorities prioritise attracting capital into sectors such as tourism, property and financial services — generally profitable in the short term — rather than encouraging FDI in productive sectors such as manufacturing and agriculture. The whole approach forms part of a government economic strategy aimed above all at consolidating its political position, relegating the genuine recovery of the country to a secondary concern.

STATE, SECURITY AND ECONOMIC INSTITUTIONS UNDER THE CONTROL OF THE GOVERNMENT

JB: Can you elaborate on the new regime's strategy to control the state apparatus, particularly its security branch, but also sections of the national economy for the exclusive benefit of the new ruling circles?

JD: Building on the external legitimisation of its power by regional and international powers, the new authorities — dominated by the interim president Ahmad al-Chareh, his close family and key figures from HTS — have consolidated their grip on the principal political, economic and social levers. They now dominate the key posts in state institutions, the army and the security services.

Similarly, key positions in the transitional government are held by figures close to the interim president: Asaad

al-Shibani and Abu Qasra have retained their respective posts as Minister of Foreign Affairs and Minister of Defence, whilst Anas Khattab was appointed Minister of the Interior in the transitional government established at the end of March 2025.

These figures all held key positions within the HTS power structure in Idlib [8] before the overthrow of the Syrian regime in December 2024. HTS rule in Idlib since 2017 was characterised by a concentration of power at the political, military and economic levels, combined with policies of both co-optation and repression of rivals and enemies.

Furthermore, parallel institutions have been established by the new authorities, such as the Syrian National Security Council, headed by al-Chareh himself and composed of his close associates (Minister of Foreign Affairs, Minister of Defence, Minister of the Interior and Director of General Intelligence). Similarly, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs created, at the end of March, the General Secretariat for Political Affairs, tasked with overseeing domestic political activities, formulating general political guidelines and managing the assets of the dissolved Baath Party. [9] In addition, in mid-April, Ahmad al-Chareh's brother, Maher al-Chareh, was appointed Secretary General of the Presidency, tasked with managing the presidential administration and serving as liaison between it and the organs of state.

In economic affairs and the management of business elites, Hazem al-Chareh, the president's brother, has gradually established himself as a significant figure. He accompanied the president on his first foreign visits, to Saudi Arabia and Turkey, and was officially appointed vice-president of the Syrian Supreme Council for Economic Development. A Reuters investigation also shows that Hazem al-Chareh, alongside other members of a small committee, is directing a strategy to reshape the Syrian economy by orchestrating the discreet acquisition of businesses owned by figures close to the former Assad regime. According to this investigation, the committee has taken control of assets worth more than 1.6 billion US dollars (approximately EUR 1.5 billion) belonging to capitalists and companies formerly affiliated with the old regime.

Hazem al-Chareh is emerging as the architect of a mechanism designed to manage relations with local business circles, attract Syrian investors based abroad, and oversee the funds and development mechanisms created by the interim president.

The new government's domination also operates through informal networks composed of "administrative sheikhs" and secret committees within ministries and state institutions, managing essential sectors — from security and finance to foreign policy and internal administration — without any bureaucratic obstacles or with minimal intervention from the state apparatus. In these circumstances, official institutional channels are frequently bypassed, and real power is exercised by a small informal network of individuals enjoying considerable autonomy and confidentiality.

Finally, the establishment of new institutions and a body of economic legislation has aroused concerns among the population regarding the growing centralisation of power in President al-Chareh's hands — a phenomenon perceived as conducive to financial opacity and the growth of clientelist practices. Reinforcing this tendency, responsibilities previously held by ministries have been transferred to the presidency, concentrating decision-making power in the hands of the head of state and his close associates.

Beyond state institutions, the new HTS-dominated authorities have also sought to extend their domination into the economic and social sphere. The restructuring of the country's chambers of commerce and industry provides a concrete example: the majority of members have been replaced by persons appointed by the new government. Furthermore, the authorities have brought in new regime figures to lead trade unions and professional associations, without any elections having taken place to designate these new leaders. These practices of appointment from above rather than election from below are directly continuous with the former Assad regime. In response, criticism and protests have emerged — from lawyers, for instance, who launched a petition demanding free union elections after

the new authorities appointed a non-elected union council.

THE INSTRUMENTALISATION OF SECTARIANISM

JB: How does the new regime exploit the exacerbation of sectarianism and the exclusion of national minorities to divide the Syrian population and attempt to weaken its resistance to the rise of a new authoritarianism and a class politics serving the wealthy allies of the government?

JD: Finally, to consolidate its power over society, HTS relies on sectarianism as a tool of domination and control. Whilst the sectarian violence unleashed in March against Alawite [\[10\]](#) civilians was initially provoked by remnants of the Assad regime who organised coordinated attacks against members of the security services and civilians, the regime's response targeted all Alawites in a logic of sectarian hatred and vengeance. In April and May 2025, armed groups linked to or supporting the authorities also launched attacks against the Druze [\[11\]](#) population, before the massacres committed in Suwayda in mid-July 2025. [\[12\]](#)

The responsibility for the massacres committed in March and July, the incessant murders and abductions of Alawite civilians in coastal areas, and the continued siege of Suwayda governorate lies primarily with the new Syrian authorities. They failed to prevent them, and some of their militias were directly involved in these atrocities. The upper echelons of the state were aware of these persecutions and approved them, as reported by Reuters and Human Rights Watch. Moreover, the HTS-dominated authorities created the political conditions that made them possible. [\[13\]](#)

Indeed, human rights violations against Alawite individuals and populations, including abductions and assassinations, have increased since the beginning of the year. Some of them, such as the Fahil massacre at the end of December 2024 and the Arzah massacre at the beginning of February 2025, resembled dress rehearsals before the coastal massacres. Similarly, sectarian attacks against Druze populations in Damascus and in the south, in Suwayda, took place before the mid-July 2025 massacres.

Sectarianism is fundamentally a tool for consolidating power and dividing society. It serves to divert the attention of working people from socio-economic and political questions by designating particular groups — defined by their religious community or ethnic affiliation — as responsible for the country's problems and as a security threat, thereby justifying repressive and discriminatory policies against them.

Moreover, sectarianism acts as a powerful mechanism of social control, shaping the course of class struggle by fostering the dependence of working people on their communal leaders. As a consequence, they find themselves deprived of their own capacity for political action and come to be defined — and to manifest themselves politically — through the prism of their sectarian identity. In this regard, the new authorities are following in the footsteps of the former Assad regime, continuing to use sectarian policies and practices as a means of governance, control and social division.

JB: To what extent does the establishment of new institutions reflect both this policy of "divide and rule" and the establishment of an authoritarian central power?

JD: From this perspective, the new government deprives the population of any inclusive democratic process. This has been reflected in various initiatives, conferences and committees supposedly intended to help define the country's next steps. Among these, the Syrian National Dialogue Conference, held on 25 February, was widely criticised for its lack of preparation, representativeness and seriousness, given the limited time allocated to its sessions. The interim constitution, signed by the interim Syrian president, was also sharply criticised by various

political and social actors, both for the lack of transparency in the selection criteria of its drafting committee and for its content.

Furthermore, whilst the interim constitution formally proclaims the separation of powers, this is hampered by the extent of the powers conferred upon the presidency. Another example is the supposed "elections" for the People's Assembly in October, which also drew widespread criticism. The method and process adopted for selecting members of the future parliament lacked transparency and inclusiveness, thus favouring actors close to the new rulers.

Moreover, the interim president, Ahmad al-Chareh, will appoint one third of the members of parliament, whilst the remaining two thirds were selected by "regional sub-committees", themselves designated by the Higher Committee for the Election of the People's Assembly, whose members were chosen by the presidency. Not to mention that twenty-one seats were left vacant for the time being — those allocated to the governorates of Hassakeh and Raqqa in the north-east, with a Kurdish majority, and Suwayda in the south, with a Druze majority — which were outside the control of the central state at the time of the "elections".

THE AUTHORITIES IN POWER HAVE TAKEN MEASURES TO STRENGTHEN THEIR CONTROL OVER SOCIETY, INCLUDING BY ATTEMPTING TO REDUCE DEMOCRATIC RIGHTS

JB: On the ground, what concrete forms does this policy of restricting democratic rights — or indeed outright violations of the rights of individuals and communities — take?

JD: During the latest offensives against the SDF by armed factions linked to the new Damascus government, numerous human rights violations were recorded against both civilians and Kurdish soldiers, accompanied by hateful practices and discourse.

More broadly, the authorities in power have taken measures to strengthen their control over society, including by attempting to reduce democratic rights. In recent months, they have not hesitated to impose restrictions on the organisation of political meetings. Whilst these measures were initially mainly informal, they are progressively being formalised. For example, in November, the Syrian Ministry of Tourism issued a circular requesting that tourist establishments refrain from hosting any event or conference of a political character without prior approval from the General Secretariat for Political Affairs.

This means that the General Secretariat for Political Affairs — created by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs only after the fall of Assad — now has extensive powers, including that of monitoring political activities.

In certain cases, events have been purely and simply cancelled, including sessions organised by civil society on themes such as women's rights, peace or social cohesion in certain regions.

Whilst the local and international press certainly enjoys greater freedom of action in Syria since the fall of Assad, cases of harassment against researchers and journalists have nevertheless been reported.

VIOLENCE AGAINST SECTARIAN AND ETHNIC MINORITIES HAS INCREASED SOCIAL FRAGMENTATION

JB: The new Syrian regime emerged from an Arab Salafist and jihadist matrix, even though it has broken with it. It is now endeavouring to reconstruct a centralised state. Thus, as it grows stronger, it is more or less violently challenging the relative autonomy of Kurdish communities, and it has launched attacks against other minorities such as the Alawites and the Druze. Could such an attitude lead to a new civil war, as suggested by the current clashes

with the predominantly Kurdish forces in the north-east of the country?

JD: In many respects, the fall of the despotic Assad regime has not put an end to the worsening of sectarian, territorial and socio-economic fault lines.

Following the massacres against Alawite and Druze populations, together with the tensions and the latest offensives against the SDF, the fragmentation of society has further increased. I do not believe we are necessarily heading towards a civil war — even though violence unfortunately remains ongoing and could continue in the future — but rather towards a form of authoritarianism depriving broad sectors of society of any political participation, particularly ethnic and religious minorities. The Damascus government is prepared to recognise certain cultural rights, mainly symbolic, but nothing that would challenge its monopoly on power, excluding any political participation from below.

At the same time, the danger of social fragmentation is serious. There are now many debates, particularly on social media, about Syrian identity, minorities, social cohesion and so on. These debates are necessary, but they often lead to an exacerbation of sectarian and ethnic tensions rather than the search for inclusive and democratic solutions. It is worth noting that debates within the country, within local popular initiatives and civil society, are often more constructive on these questions than those introduced from outside or on social media.

JB: Can you return to the violence against Druze populations, particularly in the Suwayda region, and also to the attempts by the Israeli state to profit from it?

JD: The refusal of any form of political decentralisation and, above all, the violence and massacres against the Druze by armed groups linked to the government have pushed large sections of this population, in the southern governorate of Suwayda, to express their desire for separation from Syria. This has strengthened those elements within the Druze community who have been working for years towards a rapprochement with Israel. They have been increasingly accepted in Suwayda and have become practically dominant in many respects, at least on the local public stage. [\[14\]](#)

Before the fall of the former regime and in the first months that followed, pro-Israeli groups were still a minority in Suwayda, and a large portion of the population rejected any rapprochement with Tel Aviv. Many local groups had demonstrated on several occasions against the genocide in Gaza, and the Suwayda region has a long history of solidarity with Palestine. But this changed completely with last July's massacres. The attempts by pro-Israeli groups to win over sectors of the population, which had largely failed in the past, accelerated. The popularity of Israel — or rather the idea of seeking the aid of the Israeli state — has become increasingly present and significant within Suwayda governorate.

During the military offensive by armed forces from Damascus, Israel intervened militarily to supposedly protect the Druze populations. It is clear that the Israeli apartheid state is instrumentalising these sectarian divisions for its own political purposes, in order to obtain further concessions from the Damascus government. The day Tel Aviv has obtained all the guarantees it desires from the Syrian government, it will abandon Suwayda governorate to its fate.

Suwayda governorate is now managed by an autonomous authority dominated by Sheikh Hikmat Hajari, who has not hesitated to repress dissenting voices, including through assassinations. Democratic and progressive voices within the governorate's civil society are nevertheless beginning to speak out against Hajari's policies and his alliance with Israel, whilst remaining critical of the central government in Damascus and denouncing the massacres committed by its armed forces last July.

JB: How have the Alawite population and their religious leaders reacted to the discrimination and violence they are suffering, encouraged or indeed ordered by the central authorities? More broadly, what are the consequences of

these policies by the new regime on the targeted minorities and their elites, particularly religious ones?

JD: As amongst the Druze, within sections of the Alawite community, criticism and demonstrations against the violence suffered by this population since the fall of Assad have multiplied, particularly towards the end of 2025. These demonstrations demanded security — in particular against the incessant murders and abductions (notably of women) — and a measure of federalism. They denounced the arbitrary and disproportionate dismissals suffered by the Alawite population in public administrations, as well as the relentless rise in prices.

In support of these demands, Ghazal Ghazal, president of the Alawite Islamic Council in Syria and the diaspora, called for a boycott of the celebrations marking the fall of the former regime and urged Alawites to remain at home during a "general strike" from 8 to 12 December, to protest against the "new oppressive regime".

In both cases — for the Druze as for the Alawites — one notes the growing popularity of religious figures who are very far from representing progressive and democratic perspectives. This results from two principal dynamics:

- Firstly, the violence and atrocities committed by the central Damascus authorities against these populations, accompanied by hateful sectarian practices and discourse — and, more broadly, their exclusionary and authoritarian policies.
- The absence of democratic and progressive organisations sufficiently large and rooted on the ground to capture these popular frustrations and translate them not simply as demands from religious minorities, but as democratic and social demands. Indeed, political decentralisation, democracy and political participation, social justice, equality and security are not concerns solely of minorities but of the entire Syrian population.

The emergence of these figures reflects, in many respects, the failure to build mass movements in favour of a democratic, social and inclusive Syria.

A SHARED COMMON IDENTITY REQUIRES THE DEVELOPMENT OF AN ALTERNATIVE POLITICAL PROJECT, ROOTED IN THE WORKING CLASSES OF ALL ETHNICITIES AND RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES, CARRYING CLEAR DEMOCRATIC AND SOCIAL ASPIRATIONS

JB: How can one defend an inclusive democracy based on social justice in such a poisoned context? Can the popular movement rise to such challenges by transcending sectarian or ethnic divisions?

JD: The role of democrats and progressives in such a context is to attempt to build a democratic, inclusive and progressive popular movement capable of providing a national political response to the fears of all Syrians. Failing this, the fragmentation of the country will worsen. Criticism of — and even opposition to — sectarian leaderships of the Hajari and Ghazal type, in Suwayda and on the Syrian coast respectively, must not, however, prevent Syria's democrats and progressives from defending the Druze and Alawite populations and a number of their legitimate demands.

It is our duty to defend a political perspective and horizon that enables us to regain the trust of the population of Suwayda, of the coast (amongst the Alawite communities), and also of the Kurdish populations, in order to build together a democratic and inclusive project for all Syrians. The question of national identity is always a social construction, linked to a political project. Consequently, rebuilding a common identity shared by all Syrians requires the development of a viable alternative political project, rooted in the working classes of all ethnicities and religious communities, carrying clear democratic and inclusive aspirations.

WOMEN SHOULD "NOT OVERSTEP THE PRIORITIES OF THEIR DIVINE NATURE" AND RECOGNISE "THEIR EDUCATIONAL ROLE WITHIN THE FAMILY" (AISHA AL-DIBS, MINISTER FOR WOMEN'S AFFAIRS)

JB: What is the attitude of the new regime towards women's rights? Does the image of "modern Islamism" that it is trying to project on the international stage match the actual practice regarding the political and social rights of Syrian women?

JD: From the moment they came to power, several HTS officials made statements and took decisions confirming their reactionary ideology.

HTS officials have made statements concerning the role of women in society, notably regarding their aptitude to work in certain sectors. During an interview on 16 December 2024, Obeida Arnaout, a HTS member and spokesperson for the political affairs of the Military Operations Command (MOC), declared that women's roles "must correspond to their capabilities. For example, if we say that a woman should be Minister of Defence, is that in keeping with her nature and her biological constitution? Without any doubt, no."

A few days later, Aisha al-Dibs, the Syrian Minister for Women's Affairs and the sole woman in the first transitional government (December 2024–March 2025), responded to a question concerning the place afforded to feminist organisations in the country: if "the actions of these organisations support the model we are going to build, then they will be welcome". She added: "I will not open the way for those who do not share my point of view." She continued the interview by developing a reactionary vision of women's role in society, exhorting them to "not overstep the priorities of their divine nature" and to recognise "their educational role within the family".

In the transitional government since March 2025, there is only one woman minister, and women hold only 5 per cent of the seats so far allocated in the People's Assembly (parliament).

Several decisions tend to restrict women's rights and reinforce conservative dynamics within society. Campaigns and local initiatives are developing — often originating from groups close to or in support of the new authorities — in favour of wearing the veil or the niqab, frequently accompanied by discourse stigmatising those who refuse, or in favour of separation between women and men in certain institutions or in public transport, even though no decision has been taken in this regard at the national level.

In January 2026, the decision by local authorities in the Syrian governorate of Latakia to ban female government employees from wearing make-up provoked strong indignation. Many activists denounced this decision as an infringement of individual freedoms and an attempt to restrict women's rights.

In response, the media directorate declared that this measure "was not intended to restrict or infringe upon freedoms" but rather to "regulate professional presentation and avoid excesses, so as to strike a balance between individual freedom, the requirements of a formal working environment and the public image of institutions". This clarification did not calm the criticism and instead sparked a heated controversy.

Last summer, in the same governorate, the Latakia authorities published instructions for foreign visitors, inviting them to wear "modest" clothing on beaches and at swimming pools — a measure widely perceived as targeting women. In response to criticism, the governorate declared that it was not imposing any specific garment and that its instructions were in keeping with those of other countries in the region.

More seriously, there have been numerous cases of abductions of Alawite women and, to a lesser extent, Druze

women. This has created a strong sense of insecurity amongst women in these communities, but also more broadly within society. From February to July 2025, Amnesty International received credible reports concerning at least 36 abductions of Alawite women and girls, aged between 3 and 40, in the governorates of Latakia, Tartous, Homs and Hama, by unidentified individuals. In all but one of these documented cases, the police and security forces failed to conduct an effective investigation into the fate of the victims or their possible whereabouts.

This situation has led, in certain sectors — particularly amongst Alawite and Druze women — to a tendency to limit their movements and even at times to withdraw from the labour market for fear of harassment or abduction, affecting their participation in public and economic life. Likewise, women who worked in state institutions — where they had a strong presence — have also suffered from austerity policies and dismissals by the new ruling classes. It should be noted that women's participation in the labour market had increased considerably during the war years, from 2011 to 2024, particularly within public institutions. This was partly the result of the shortage of men in Syrian society due to the conflict and emigration. One may fear that this presence is now being called into question by the political orientation of the new government.

It is not enough to make vague declarations about tolerance or respect for women's rights. The principal issue is to recognise their rights as full citizens participating in the country's future. More broadly, officials of the new authorities — affiliated with HTS and their allies in power — have expressed on several occasions their preference for Islamic governance and the application of sharia. Sheikh Oussama al-Rifai, the new Grand Mufti of Syria, for example, declared in January 2026 that sharia is above all else, in a recent speech concerning future legal and constitutional battles.

At the same time, virtually every measure or statement against women's rights has systematically provoked criticism and opposition, particularly from women's and feminist organisations.

THE 30 JANUARY AGREEMENT BETWEEN THE DAMASCUS GOVERNMENT AND THE SYRIAN DEMOCRATIC FORCES IS POSITIVE INSOFAR AS IT ALLOWS THE CESSATION, AT LEAST TEMPORARILY, OF ATTACKS AND THREATS AGAINST KURDISH POPULATIONS

JB: What is your analysis of the agreement reached between the Syrian government and the SDF on 30 January? What is the future for Kurdish rights in Syria?

JD: Following the ceasefire concluded on 20 January 2025 between the Syrian Transitional Government (STG) and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), a new agreement was announced on 30 January. This agreement provides for a ceasefire and the gradual military and administrative integration of the SDF within state institutions. It includes the withdrawal of military forces from contact points and the deployment of Ministry of the Interior security forces in the cities of Hassakeh and Qamishli, marking the beginning of security force integration in the region. [\[15\]](#)

The agreement also provides for the creation of a military division composed of three SDF brigades, as well as a brigade from the forces of Kobané (Aïn al-Arab), attached to a division in Aleppo governorate. The military and security integration of the SDF will be carried out on a case-by-case basis within each brigade, with the state exercising full control over all civilian institutions, as well as border crossings and entry points. The institutions of Kobané will be progressively integrated into Syrian state institutions, whilst retaining their civilian personnel. The agreement includes provisions concerning the civil and educational rights of the Kurdish community and guarantees the return of displaced persons to their regions of origin.

This agreement is positive insofar as it allows the cessation, at least temporarily, of attacks and threats against Kurdish populations. It follows weeks of fighting which saw government armed forces seize control of the

predominantly Kurdish districts of Sheikh Maqsoud and Ashrafiyeh in Aleppo, causing the forced displacement of tens of thousands of civilians. This culminated in the seizure by government forces of large portions of the governorates of Deir ez-Zor and Raqqa, following the withdrawal of the SDF.

JB: Under what domestic and international conditions did the offensive of the new Syrian government against Kurdish communities unfold — both in Aleppo and in the zones controlled by the SDF?

JD: The military offensive by the Damascus authorities in Aleppo, as well as in other SDF-controlled zones, came after the expiry of the 31 December 2025 deadline set by the 10 March 2025 agreement. Sponsored by Washington, this agreement between interim Syrian president Ahmad al-Chareh and Mazloum Abdi, head of the SDF, aimed to integrate the civilian and military branches of the SDF into the state. However, the political impasse persisted.

Moreover, the military escalation developed only two days after a meeting between the Syrian authorities and the SDF, attended by American military personnel. It is clear that, whilst negotiations were under way, the Syrian authorities were devising a plan to launch first a military operation in Aleppo, then to extend it to other SDF-controlled zones. They mobilised various Arab tribes — in contact with al-Chareh for some time — in Deir ez-Zor and Raqqa in order to prepare a general offensive against the SDF.

All of this was done with Turkey's support and Washington's green light. [\[16\]](#)

At the same time, the situation in the notorious al-Hol camp in Hassakeh [\[17\]](#) — which houses families and affiliates of the Islamic State (IS) — is causing genuine alarm, with reports of hundreds of its members escaping. The camp is now under the control of the Syrian authorities, whilst the United States has transferred approximately 7,000 prisoners to Iraq.

Whilst the United States (and France) were officially working to de-escalate tensions between the two parties — despite Washington's longstanding partnership with the SDF in the fight against the Islamic State — Washington exerted no significant pressure to end the Syrian government's military actions.

In reality, the United States has become an important supporter of the new authorities, as evidenced by the multiple meetings between Trump and al-Chareh, as well as the lifting of the Caesar sanctions in December 2025. For its part, Ankara has pressured the SDF to dissolve and integrate into the Syrian army. Turkey considers this group to be an offshoot of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which it classifies as a terrorist organisation. Turkish officials have repeatedly reiterated, since the beginning of the Syrian government's military offensive, their willingness to fight Syrian Kurdish forces alongside the Syrian army.

Since the fall of the Assad regime, Turkey has become one of the most important regional actors in Syria, particularly in the north of the country. By supporting the Syrian authorities dominated by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), Ankara has consolidated their influence over the country.

Besides the pressure for the return of Syrian refugees and the desire to profit from economic opportunities offered by reconstruction, Turkey's principal objective is to thwart Kurdish aspirations for autonomy — perceived as a threat to national security — and to dismantle the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) [\[18\]](#).

JB: The rapid advance of the Damascus forces is obviously explained by the new international context — Washington's green light, Turkish support — but does it not also stem from certain errors committed by the SDF, particularly with regard to the Arab populations of the regions under their control?

JD: In just a few days, the Syrian authorities conquered two thirds of the territories controlled by the SDF. Beyond the immediate geostrategic aspects, this rapid advance also highlights the limitations of the AANES political project amongst non-Kurdish populations, particularly Arabs. Over the years, sections of the Arab population have protested against discrimination, targeted "security" practices, the imprisonment of activists and civilians — particularly young men — and the absence of genuine representation within AANES institutions.

Rather than developing strategies to obtain the consent of Arab working people in the zones under their control and genuinely involving them in the management of AANES institutions, the SDF leadership collaborated with tribal chiefs to manage local populations. Yet these tribal chiefs are known for switching allegiance depending on the most powerful political actors of the moment and for defending their own material interests. As the balance of forces shifted in favour of Damascus, the tribal chiefs followed suit.

Furthermore, the SDF leadership's misplaced confidence in the continuation of American support, and its lack of interest in building broader and deeper political alliances with democratic and progressive forces across the country, weakened the sustainability of its political project. Turkey also bombed areas of Qamishli during the offensive of Damascus forces, and it is widely acknowledged that Ankara provided significant logistical assistance to Damascus during the latest military operations.

THERE ARE NUMEROUS SIGNS OF RACISM AND HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS BY GOVERNMENT FORCES AND THEIR AFFILIATED ARMED GROUPS

JB: To what extent does this recent offensive against the Kurds form part of the centralising and racist ambitions of the al-Chareh regime, including through its resort to indiscriminate violence?

JD: Indeed, the recent military offensive by government armed forces must be understood as part of the ongoing attempt by Syria's current ruling elites to centralise power and reject any more inclusive path for the country's future. This has been the case since the fall of Assad.

Furthermore, the ruling authorities and their supporters have promoted aggressive discourse against the Kurds and the SDF. There are numerous signs of racism and human rights violations by government forces and their affiliated armed groups.

For example, the Syrian Minister of Religious Affairs (Awqaf), Mohammad Abu al-Khayr Shukri, published a religious directive calling on mosques throughout the country to celebrate what he described as the "conquests and victories" of Damascus-aligned forces in eastern Syria, and to pray for the success of the soldiers of the Syrian Arab Army.

Moreover, the fact that he specifically encouraged the mention of verse 6 of Surah Al-Anfal (The Spoils of War) from the Quran suggests an intention to reference the Anfal campaign conducted in 1988 by Saddam Hussein against the Kurds in what is now Iraqi Kurdistan [19] — a campaign marked by chemical bombardments, mass killings and large-scale destruction. Despite this particularly alarming context, regional and international leaders have continued to support the Syrian authorities in power, legitimising and reinforcing their domination over the country.

Consequently, despite al-Chareh's granting of linguistic, cultural and citizenship rights to Syria's Kurdish population — which have yet to be concretised through a concrete legislative and legal process — as well as official posts within the state, which have not yet been created, legitimate fears persist.

JB: You consider that the 30 January agreement between Damascus and the SDF was broadly positive, yet it is far

from resolving all the problems. Could you indicate on what points it remains problematic?

JD: Numerous questions remain unresolved in the implementation of the 30 January agreement, notably regarding the integration of civilian employees and the form that the four Kurdish brigades under the direction of the Ministry of Defence will take. Similarly, the text "remains vague on the crucial questions" of administrative and security decentralisation. More broadly, genuine political participation remains hypothetical, whether for the Kurds or other sectors of the Syrian population.

Whilst the absolute priority for progressive and democratic forces in Syria is to end the bloodshed, to enable the safe return of displaced civilians and to combat hate speech and sectarian practices in the country, many unknowns remain regarding the ongoing transition and the political participation of the population in the new government.

The future of Syria is at stake. Indeed, the new authorities have shown that their plans do not constitute a clean break with the authoritarian practices of the former regime.

No plan for democratic and inclusive political representation, nor for power-sharing, is currently being proposed by Damascus. All Syrians aspiring to democracy, social justice and equality should be alarmed by these dynamics and fight against them with all their strength. The Kurdish question is entirely part of these dynamics.

DESPITE THE INCREASE IN THE MINIMUM WAGE SINCE THE END OF JULY (TO 68 US DOLLARS PER MONTH), THE MAJORITY OF THE POPULATION, WHETHER EMPLOYED BY THE STATE OR THE PRIVATE SECTOR, CANNOT MEET ITS NEEDS ON ITS INCOME

JB: The savage capitalist and increasingly authoritarian policies of the new regime are meeting resistance from sections of the population confronted with an unbearable rise in the prices of essential goods and services, and shocked by the privileges accorded to the capitalist circles close to the government. To what extent are they reconnecting with the democratic and social demands of the 2011 revolution?

JD: The country's growing socio-economic difficulties are provoking increasing criticism from the Syrian population of the government's policies. Apart from their desire to accumulate capital in major luxury property projects, the authorities in power have presented no policy and no plan for reconstruction. And the population is clearly not satisfied.

A number of demonstrations have taken place — for instance against property projects, such as that of the company Al-Omran Real Estate Development Co. (owned by a Syrian businessman), based in Kuwait.

The "Victory Boulevard" urban development project in Homs was the target of demonstrations during which protesters carried banners reading: "No boulevard, no displacements." A comparison was even drawn with "Dream House", an urban redevelopment plan devised under Bashar al-Assad. This organised action led the company to announce that it would cancel the part of its project that crossed the contested neighbourhood.

In education, teachers went on strike for several weeks and demonstrated outside government buildings in Aleppo and Idlib, under the slogan "The movement continues until our demands are met." They are demanding permanent employment, the rapid reinstatement of those dismissed, and salary increases commensurate with the soaring cost of living. As the issue remained unresolved, new mobilisations erupted in early February.

Strikes have also been organised by minibus drivers in Damascus, as well as by workers at the private company

Madar Aluminium, who are demanding better working and living conditions.

In December 2025, employees of the port of Tartous organised a picket outside the governorate building to protest against their transfer — of which they were informed via WhatsApp and without any prior notification — to remote locations at the border crossings of Jarablus and al-Bukamal in the eastern governorates.

At the beginning of January, a demonstration was also organised to protest against the reconciliation agreement between the Syrian authorities and Mohammad Hamsho, a prominent businessman from the Assad regime era, very close to the former dictator's family, guilty of having financed militias and of having profited from the war economy to enrich himself further.

Moreover, in the face of a massive increase in electricity tariffs, numerous citizens across the country expressed their anger, and demonstrations were organised in cities such as Damascus and Homs in January, demanding the annulment of this decision. [20] The rise in electricity prices was the largest in the country's modern history. Household costs rose from an average of 10,000 to 50,000 Syrian pounds (approximately 0.85 to 4 US dollars, or EUR 0.80 to EUR 3.80) to peaks of 600,000 to more than 2 million pounds (50 to 169 US dollars, or EUR 47 to EUR 160). Some families even saw their bills reach 5 to 6 million pounds (423 to 508 US dollars, or EUR 400 to EUR 480).

The new tariffs have also dealt a severe blow to key sectors, particularly manufacturing and agriculture, which were already facing rising production costs.

Despite the increase in the minimum wage since the end of July (to 68 US dollars per month, approximately EUR 64), the majority of the population — whether employed by the state or the private sector — cannot meet its needs on its income. The average cost of living for a family of five in Damascus was estimated at approximately 11.6 million Syrian pounds (983 US dollars, approximately EUR 930) at the end of December 2025, according to the newspaper *Qasioun*.

Government officials justified the decision to raise electricity prices by the significant improvement in power supply across most of the country, even though in some rural and marginalised regions it remains irregular. Furthermore, in line with the arguments of the IMF and the World Bank, government representatives assert that this increase serves to correct price distortions and guarantee the continuity of service, given that the electricity sector costs approximately 1 billion US dollars (approximately EUR 950 million) per year in the state budget.

The population now fears that electricity prices will continue to rise owing to the liberalisation of the sector. These concerns are exacerbated by the fact that the government has concluded an agreement with a group of foreign companies, led by the Qatari company UCC Holding, for the construction of eight gas and solar power stations in Syria, for a total value of 7 billion US dollars (approximately EUR 6.6 billion).

The rise in prices benefits these large foreign companies within the framework of a reinforced privatisation process.

In early February, new social mobilisations took place. Teachers in the cities of Tartous and Latakia, for instance, protested against their transfer — without any prior notification — to locations far from their places of residence, whilst employees at the port of Latakia mobilised to denounce their dismissals. Moreover, in Quneitra governorate in the south of the country, employees of the agricultural research centre organised a rally to protest against 65 dismissals without prior notice and to demand the annulment of this decision. In Aleppo, a demonstration was also held, organised by street vendors against the decision of local authorities to ban their activities — in other words, to eliminate their selling points in the street.

ONE OF THE ESSENTIAL TASKS WILL BE TO TACKLE SECTARIAN AND ETHNIC DIVISIONS IN ORDER TO OVERCOME THE DIVISIONS WITHIN SOCIETY. THIS CHALLENGE MUST BE MET SO THAT THE WORKING CLASSES OF THE COUNTRY, IN ALL THEIR DIVERSITY, CAN WALK THE PATH OF THEIR EMANCIPATION

JB: What is the current potential for the development of a political alternative that rejects sectarian or ethnic divisions in order to defend a programme of democracy and social justice across the country? Are the forces that support such an orientation subject to particular repression by the new regime?

JD: The forces rooted in a popular movement of social and democratic inspiration are limited, and everything must be rebuilt.

The vast majority of the democratic organisations and social forces behind the Syrian popular uprising of March 2011 [21] were repressed with unprecedented violence — first and foremost by the former Syrian regime, but also by various armed Islamist fundamentalist organisations. The same was true of the alternative local political institutions established by the protesters, such as the coordination committees and local councils that provided services to the population.

Some civil society groups and networks did remain active during this period, but operated covertly in areas under the control of the former regime for fear of repression. In the north-west, in the decade before the fall of the Assad regime, a network of NGOs developed with very varied political orientations. But they generally had a different dynamic from that of the early uprising. In the north-east, there were political organisations and civil society bodies, but the great majority were dominated by the PYD, or rather subordinated to it. Actors who were too critical of the AANES were repressed or obstacles were placed in the way of their activities.

Other experiences of struggle developed in the country, even if they were of lesser intensity.

Following the fall of the Assad regime, new local popular initiatives and civil society organisations appeared and developed — very often NGOs, but not exclusively — yet everything still remains to be done.

What is needed today is to build a democratic and progressive bloc capable of organising itself, of taking root amongst working people and of clearly opposing the new government in power. This will take time, particularly after 50 years of barbarous dictatorship and 14 years of violent war. The objective of this bloc must be to combine the struggles against autocracy, exploitation and all forms of oppression, whilst demanding democracy, equality, support for Kurdish self-determination and women's liberation, in order to build solidarity amongst the exploited and oppressed people of the country.

To advance these demands, this progressive bloc must promote the creation and reconstruction of popular organisations, from trade unions to feminist organisations. This will require collaboration between democratic and progressive forces across the whole of society.

Furthermore, one of the essential tasks will be to tackle sectarian and ethnic divisions in order to overcome the divisions within society and develop solidarity between populations. This challenge has been posed since the beginning of the Syrian revolution in 2011 and must be progressively met so that the working classes of the country, in all their diversity, can walk resolutely on the path of their emancipation.

In conclusion, the struggle for a democratic and progressive society cannot rest upon any trust in the current HTS authorities, in their governance or their management of the transition, but upon the construction of an independent

counter-power, bringing together democratic and progressive networks in the struggle for the demands of working people.

Decision-making power is today entirely in the hands of interim President Ahmad al-Chareh and HTS. This process is supported by the great majority of regional and international powers. More broadly, they share a common objective: to (re)impose a form of authoritarian stability in Syria and in the region. This does not, of course, mean unity amongst the regional and imperial powers. Each has its own interests, often antagonistic, but all have everything to fear from the destabilisation of the Middle East and North Africa.

The hope for a better future rests entirely upon the capacity of Syrians to develop and coordinate struggles from the grassroots. Currently, the power and control of the new HTS-dominated authorities over society are not yet complete, as their human and military capacities do not allow them to fully govern the entire country, even though they are increasingly consolidating. There therefore remains room for manoeuvre to organise, which it is essential to exploit. Today, this possibility exists, but time is pressing and working people must seize it to raise their heads and give meaning to all the sacrifices made to defend the original aspirations of the 2011 Revolution: democracy, social justice and equality.

1 February 2026

Translated from [marx21-<https://marx21.ch/ou-va-la-syrie-dahmad-al-chareh>] for [ESSF](#) by Adam Novak;

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[1] Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS, Organisation for the Liberation of the Levant) is a Syrian armed Islamist group that evolved from Jabhat al-Nusra, which was originally the Syrian branch of al-Qaeda. HTS formally severed its ties with al-Qaeda in 2016 and subsequently consolidated control over the Idlib governorate in north-western Syria.

[2] See Joseph Daher, "Why Syria needs better governance...and a new kind of opposition", Europe Solidaire Sans Frontières. Available at: <http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article77361>

[3] The Assad family ruled Syria from the coup of Hafez al-Assad in 1970 until the fall of his son Bashar al-Assad in December 2024.

[4] The Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act, enacted in 2019, imposed sweeping sanctions on the Syrian government and its supporters, targeting individuals and entities involved in the conflict. It was named after the pseudonym of a Syrian military defector who smuggled out thousands of photographs documenting the systematic torture and killing of detainees by the Assad regime.

[5] The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) are a multi-ethnic armed coalition in north-eastern Syria, dominated by the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG), the armed wing of the Democratic Union Party (PYD). They served as the main ground force allied with the US-led coalition against the Islamic State.

[6] The Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat (PYD, Democratic Union Party) is the principal Kurdish political party in Syria. It is ideologically linked to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which Turkey, the EU and the United States classify as a terrorist organisation.

[7] See Joseph Daher, "The progressive economic strategy for Syria", Europe Solidaire Sans Frontières. Available at:

<http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article73000>

[8] Idlib is a governorate in north-western Syria that has been under the de facto control of HTS since 2017, serving as the group's political and military base before it led the offensive that toppled the Assad regime.

[9] The Baath Party (Hizb al-Ba'th al-'Arabi al-Ishtiraki, Arab Socialist Baath Party) was the ruling party of Syria from 1963 until the fall of the Assad regime in December 2024. It served as the institutional backbone of authoritarian rule under both Hafez and Bashar al-Assad.

[10] Alawites are an esoteric religious minority in Syria, an offshoot of Shia Islam, comprising approximately 10 to 12 per cent of the population. They are concentrated along the coastal regions of Latakia and Tartous. The Assad family belonged to this community, and the identification of the Alawite population with the regime has made them targets of sectarian reprisals since its fall.

[11] The Druze are an ethno-religious minority present in Syria, Lebanon and Israel, practising a faith that originated in the 11th century as an offshoot of Ismaili Islam. In Syria, they are concentrated mainly in the southern governorate of Suwayda.

[12] See Joseph Daher, "Syria: No hope for transitional justice if sectarianism is the doctrine of the new Syrian state", Europe Solidaire Sans Frontières. Available at: <http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article74338>

[13] See "The ruling factions use violence as leverage in the 'New Syria'", Europe Solidaire Sans Frontières. Available at: <http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article75742>

[14] See Joseph Daher, "Syria: Suwayda Under Fire – The Consolidation of Power and Sectarianism", Europe Solidaire Sans Frontières. Available at: <http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article75794>

[15] See "Syria: On the Recent Agreement Between Damascus and the Kurdish Administration", Europe Solidaire Sans Frontières. Available at: <http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article77967>

[16] See Gilbert Achcar, "On the emerging 'new order' in the Middle East – Israel refrained from intervening in Syria to avoid irritating Trump", Europe Solidaire Sans Frontières. Available at: <http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article77942>

[17] Al-Hol is a large displacement camp in north-eastern Syria that housed tens of thousands of people, including families and affiliates of the Islamic State (IS). Managed under SDF authority since 2019, it has been widely described as a major security concern due to IS radicalisation within the camp.

[18] The Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES), also known as Rojava, is the de facto self-governing entity established by Kurdish-led forces in 2012 in north-eastern Syria. It operates with a model of democratic confederalism inspired by the ideas of PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan.

[19] The Anfal campaign (1986–1989) was a genocidal military operation conducted by the Iraqi Ba'athist regime of Saddam Hussein against the Kurdish population of northern Iraq. It included chemical weapons attacks — most notoriously the gas attack on Halabja in March 1988 — mass executions and the destruction of thousands of villages, resulting in an estimated 50,000 to 182,000 deaths.

[20] See Joseph Daher, "Syria new electricity tariffs are cruel neoliberal shock therapy", Europe Solidaire Sans Frontières. Available at: <http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article77939>

[21] The Syrian uprising began in March 2011 as part of the broader Arab Spring wave of protests. What started as peaceful demonstrations calling for democratic reform and an end to corruption was met with brutal repression by the Assad regime, eventually escalating into a multi-front armed conflict.