

# Israel, not 'liberators' of Damascus, will decide Syria's fate



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**O P I N I O N**

*There has been a flurry of "What next for Syria?" articles in the wake of Bashar al-Assad's hurried exit from Syria and the takeover of much of the country by Al-Qaeda's rebranded local forces. Western governments and media have been quick to celebrate the success of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), even though the group is designated a terrorist organization in the United States, Britain, and much of Europe.*

*Back in 2013, the US even placed a £10 million bounty on its leader, Abu Mohammad al-Jolani, for his involvement with Al-Qaeda and Islamic State (ISIS) and for carrying out a series of brutal attacks on civilians. Once upon a time, he might have expected to end up in an orange jumpsuit in the notorious, off-the-grid detention and torture facility run by the Americans at Guantanamo Bay. Now, he is positioning himself as Syria's heir apparent, seemingly with Washington's blessing.*

*Surprisingly, before either HTS or al-Jolani can be tested in their new roles overseeing Syria, the West is hurrying to rehabilitate them. The US and UK are both moving to overturn HTS's status as a proscribed organization.*

*To put the extraordinary speed of this absolution in perspective, recall that Nelson Mandela, feted internationally for helping to liberate South Africa from apartheid rule, was removed from Washington's terrorist watch list only in 2008 — 18 years after his release from prison. Similarly, western media are helping al-Jolani to rebrand himself as a statesman-in-the-making, airbrushing his past atrocities, by transitioning from using his nom de guerre to his birth name, Ahmed al-Sharaa.*

## Piling on pressure

Stories of prisoners being freed from Assad's dungeons and of families pouring onto the streets in celebration have helped to drive an upbeat news agenda and obscure a more likely dismal future for newly "liberated" Syria — as the US, UK, Israel, Turkey, and Persian Gulf states jostle for a share of the pie. Syria's status looks sealed as a permanently failed state. Israel's bombing raids — destroying hundreds of critical infrastructure sites across Syria — are designed precisely towards that end. Within days, the Israeli military was boasting it had destroyed 80 percent of Syria's military installations. More have gone since.

Israel has prioritized instead targeting Syria's already beleaguered military — its planes, naval ships, radars, anti-aircraft batteries, and missile stockpiles — to strip the country of any offensive or defensive capability. Any hope of Syria maintaining a semblance of sovereignty is crumbling before our eyes. These latest strikes come on top of years of Western efforts to undermine Syria's integrity and economy. The US military controls Syria's oil and wheat production areas, plundering these key resources with the help of a Kurdish minority. More generally, the West has imposed punitive sanctions on Syria's economy. It was precisely these pressures that hollowed out Assad's gov-

ernment and led to its collapse. Now, Israel is piling on more pressure to make sure any newcomer faces an even harder task. Maps of post-Assad Syria, like those during the latter part of his beleaguered presidency, are a patchwork of different colors, with Turkey and its local allies seizing territory in the north, the Kurds clinging on to the east, US forces in the south, and the Israeli military encroaching from the west. This is the proper context for answering the question of what comes next.



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Al-Jolani understands only too well the options ahead of him. Perhaps not surprisingly, he appears far keener to become a Syrian Mahmoud Abbas than a Syrian Yahya Sinwar, the Hamas leader killed by Israel in October. Given his clean-cut military makeover, al-Jolani may imagine that he can eventually upgrade himself to the Syrian equivalent of the US-backed leader of Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelensky.

term, the targeted population would understand that, given the severity of the punishment, any future resistance to Israel should be avoided at all costs. Back in 2007, four years before the uprising in Syria erupted, a leading articulator of the neocon agenda, Caroline Glick, a columnist for the Jerusalem Post, set out Syria's imminent fate. She explained that any central authority in Damascus had to be destroyed. The reasoning: "Centralized governments throughout the Arab world are the primary fulminators of Arab hatred of Israel." She added: "How well would Syria contend with the IDF [Israeli military] if it were simultaneously trying to put down a popular rebellion?" Or, better still, Syria could be turned into another failed state like Libya after Muammar Gaddafi's ousting and killing in 2011 with the help of NATO. Libya has been run by warlords ever since. Notably, both Syria and Libya — along with Iraq, Somalia, Sudan, Lebanon, and Iran — were on a hit list drawn up in Washington in the immediate aftermath of 9/11 by US officials close to Israel. All but Iran are now failed or failing states.

## Security contractor

The other possible outcome is that Syria becomes a larger version of the West Bank. In that scenario, HTS and al-Jolani are able to convince the US and Europe that they are so supine, so ready to do whatever they are told, that Israel has nothing to fear from them. Their rule would be modeled on that of Mahmoud Abbas, leader of the much-reviled Palestinian Authority in the West Bank. His powers are little greater than those of the head of a municipal council, overseeing schools and collecting the rubbish. His security forces are lightly armed — effectively a police force — used for internal repression and incapable of challenging Israel's illegal occupation. Abbas has described as "sacred" his service to Israel in preventing Palestinians from resisting their decades-long oppression. The Palestinian Authority's active collusion was on show again at the weekend when its security forces killed a resistance leader in Jenin wanted by Israel. Al-Jolani could similarly be cultivated as a security contractor. Largely thanks to Israel, Syria

On Monday last week, Israel unleashed 16 strikes on Tartus, a strategically important port where Russia has a naval fleet. The blasts were so powerful, they registered 3.5 on the Richter scale. During Assad's rule, Israel chiefly rationalized its attacks on Syria — coordinating them with Russian forces supporting Damascus — as necessary to prevent the flow of weapons overland from Iran to its Lebanese ally, Hezbollah. But that is not the goal currently. HTS's Sunni fighters have vowed to keep Iran and Hezbollah — the Shia "Axis of Resistance" against Israel — out of Syrian territory.

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## Two possible fates

Syria is now the plaything of a

power plays. Beginning in 2013, Israel ran a covert program to arm and fund at least 12 different rebel factions, according to a 2018 article in Foreign Policy magazine. In this regard, Syria's fate is being modeled on that of the Palestinians. There may be a choice, but it will come in no more than two flavors. Syria can become the West Bank, or it can become Gaza. So far, the indications are that Israel is gunning for the Gaza option. Washington and Europe appear to prefer the West Bank route, which is why they have been focusing on the rehabili-

and the neocons. It draws on lessons Israel believes it learnt in both Gaza and Lebanon. Israeli generals spoke of returning Gaza "to the Stone Age" long before they were in a position to realize that goal with the current genocide there. Those same generals first tested their ideas on a more limited scale in Lebanon, pummeling the country's infrastructure under the so-called "Dahiya" doctrine. Israel believed such indiscriminate wrecking sprees offered a double benefit. Overwhelming destruction forced the local population to concentrate on basic survival rather than organize resistance. And in the longer



Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu (C) stands on the Syrian side of Mount Hermon on December 17, 2024, after the Zionist regime's army violated the 1974 armistice agreement between Syria and Israel. IDF