

# Syria comes in from the cold



By **M.K. Bhadrakumar**  
Former Indian ambassador

## OPINION

With great prescience, late Henry Kissinger had once said, “You can’t make war in the Middle East without Egypt, and you can’t make peace without Syria.” The adage remains true even today. Syria has been an astute practitioner of diplomacy in its statecraft, which was not surprising given its origin as a modern state out of the debris of the Ottoman Empire, its geography, plural society, and tough neighbourhood. Suffice to say, there is nothing surprising that US President Donald Trump sees immense potential in Syria’s interim president Ahmed al-Sharaa as an interlocutor, while resetting his compass for a New Middle East. Trump’s seemingly blasé attitude came out in a social media post on November 10, when he wrote that he and Sharaa “discussed all the intricacies of PEACE in the Middle East, of which he is a major advocate.” Trump is a rare Western leader who closely follows Russia’s footfalls with a healthy respect. He couldn’t have missed the quiet confidence with which President Vladimir Putin is restructuring Russia’s interactions with Damascus — and is even exploring a reformed Moscow-Damascus-Tehran triangle as a pillar of regional stability. In fact, immediately after Sharaa’s meeting with Putin in the Kremlin in October, Alexander Lavrentyev, presidential envoy to the Middle East, visited Tehran

to discuss regional security, Syria’s territorial integrity, and further coordination with the Russian delegation. Russia’s Ambassador to Tehran Alexei Dedov also disclosed that Russia and Iran hold regular consultations on the Syrian issue and hold “similar positions on key aspects of resolving the crisis”. Be that as it may, the Russian-Syrian mutual confidence is reaching a point that Damascus seeks patrols of the southern provinces by Russian military police, which could limit Israeli activity in the border areas. Russia has reportedly conducted its first patrol since the change of power — near Qamishli in northeast Syria, which Turkey regards as its sphere of influence. However, trust the US security establishment to pressure al-Sharaa over his contacts with Russia. After all, the CIA holds the copyright of al-Sharaa’s incubation in the Iraqi jail for 5 years and eventual transformation as an Islamist who got rid of the clutches of the Islamic State and al-Qaeda. Inevitably, the US will exploit al-Sharaa’s keenness to foster closer relations with Washington, which is crucial for the lifting of sanctions that opens the pathway for foreign investment and Syria’s reconstruction (which the World Bank estimates will cost \$216 billion). Al-Sharaa’s induction into the US-led counter-terrorist coalition fighting ISIS and al-Qaeda remnants in Syria burnishes his image in the international community. That said, wouldn’t al-Sharaa know about the US’s controversial record vis-à-vis ISIS and al-Qaeda as its geopolitical tools? Most certainly, yes. Such pragmatism becomes al-

Sharaa’s trademark, which Moscow understood all along. Al-Sharaa’s younger brother, Maher al-Sharaa, studied in Russia, graduated from the Burdenko Voronezh State Medical University in 2000, and subsequently worked in Voronezh for many years as an obstetrician-gynaecologist. He is married to a Russian national, Tatiana Zakirova, whose family is reported to have business interests and connections within the Russian government, further cementing Maher’s ties to Moscow. Maher today holds the key position as secretary-general of the presidency in Damascus, coordinating directly with the president, drafting decrees, overseeing the implementation of executive decisions, facilitating communication between state institutions, etc. — all in all, playing a strategic role. However, this is only a part of the story of Russia’s remarkable rebound over the past 10 months since Assad’s fall. If Russia has been, is, and will be a significant presence in Syria, it is for a variety of reasons — not only geopolitical. What prompts al-Sharaa to engage with Russia are principally three considerations: first, the pull of the Soviet Union’s huge contributions to Syria’s economy and infrastructure, especially in areas like the health sector. Russia has a tradition of never interfering in Syria’s internal affairs even while engaged deeply, which is a touchstone for al-Sharaa. Second, Russia has an excellent record as a provider of security. Syrian Defence Minister Murhaf Abu Qasra has visited Moscow thrice during the past four months, the last time as recently as on October 28, just a week before al-Sharaa’s



Syria’s President Ahmed al-Sharaa (c) waves as he enters the White House in Washington, the US, on November 10, 2025.  
● JACQUELYN MARTIN/AP

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Russian armored vehicles conduct a patrol on the Qamishli-Derik road in northeastern Syria on October 1, 2025.  
● NORTH PRESS

scheduled meeting with Trump in the White House. While receiving the minister, Russia’s Defence Minister Andrey Belousov noted, “The fact that we are here again, at the negotiating table, demonstrates that contacts between our political leaders and contacts between our military ministries are truly meaningful, fruitful, and have great potential.” Al-Sharra is in ISIS’s crosshairs, and even otherwise, Syria’s security situation is precarious. An estimated 2000 ISIS fighters are still operating in Syria, and government forces also have a preponderant share of hardcore Islamist cadres who won’t easily reconcile. Besides, the sectarian divides threaten national unity. The Kurds, in particular, are resisting integration. Curiously, this is one area where Moscow can help, given its long-standing links with Kurdish groups. Then, there is the threat from Israel’s “land grab”. Trump’s priority is to normalise Syria’s relations with Israel, get Damascus to accept Israel’s occupation of the Golan Heights, and get al-Sharaa into the Abraham Accords. Prima facie, this is all a bit too much for al-Sharaa to accept. Clearly, continued Russian military presence serves a useful purpose for Damascus. Third, al-Sharaa seeks to diversify Syria’s external relations. He hopes to reclaim Syria’s legacy of non-alignment and strategic autonomy. Slowly but steadily, China is also engaging with al-Sharaa. The Chinese embassy in Damascus remained open throughout recent instability, while Beijing adopted a cautious, “risk management” approach primarily driven by security concerns and a desire to protect its interests. The topmost priority for Beijing is the prominent role of fighters from the Turkistan Islamic Party within the new Syrian security and defence structures, composed mainly of ethnic Uyghurs from Xinjiang. China refrained from the UN Security Council vote that lifted some terror-related sanctions on al-Sharaa, and instead abstained, citing its concerns. But China is engaging bilaterally with al-Sharaa’s government to protect its interests and keep channels open. The Chinese ambassador to Damascus has held meetings with al-Sharaa and Foreign Minister Asaad al-Shaibani, where the Syrian side expressed a desire for “strategic partnership” and China’s support for reconstruction. Beijing seems to accept that al-Sharaa has discarded his jihadi pedigree. The Xinhua stated in a dispatch last week: “Al-Sharaa once joined al-Qaeda and was wanted by the US as a terrorist with a bounty of \$10 million on his head, but severed his ties with the terrorist organisation years ago and led the rebel forces that toppled then Syrian president Bashar al-Assad in December 2024.” No doubt, the regime change in Damascus was a significant blow to Iran’s regional strategy. Iranian military commanders and personnel, including Quds Force members, were quickly evacuated from Syria as rebel forces advanced on Damascus. All Iranian military bases have since been abandoned. But there are signs lately of Tehran exploring informal, pragmatic relations with the al-Sharaa government. Al-Sharaa once described the victory over Assad as an “end of the Iranian project,” but those were words spoken in the heat of the moment. The litmus test is whether Iran is attempting to destabilise the al-Sharaa government. Here, the answer is a definitive no. Against such a complex backdrop, the US intentions remain extremely ambivalent. Al-Sharaa’s bid to cement his alignment with the US is buffeted by strong headwinds ranging from Israel’s territorial ambitions in southern Syria and its strategy to keep Syria weak and divided to the Kurdish challenge in the north, and a spluttering economy.

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