

SUPPORTING POST-WAR SYRIA

How the EU can learn from the Iraqi experience

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Executive Summary



The European Union has always played a pivotal role in supporting the MENA Region through different tools and mechanisms, encompassing multifold realms, such as human rights enforcement, trade and economic policy as well as aid and stabilization programs. Particularly after the inception of the so-called 'Arab Spring', the European Union has concerted its efforts in supporting a peaceful and democratic transition of many Arab States that experienced the overthrow of their despotic rulers.¹

After the ousting of the Al-Assad government in December 2024, an unprecedented and unique opportunity to engage in the post-war transition and democratization process unfolded. However, many experts fear that the prevalence of a fragmented opposition, 14 years of economic stagnation and war as well as the Islamist past of HTS-leader Al-Shar'a might turn Syria into a second Iraq.² In this regard, the question of how Europe can effectively support the creation of a democratic and stable Syria by learning from the Iraqi experience will be explored in this written contribution.

¹ Bodenstein, Thilo & Furness, Mark (2023): European aid to the MENA region after the Arab uprisings: A window of opportunity missed, Working Paper 2023/48, United Nations University, under: <https://www.wider.unu.edu/sites/default/files/Publications/Working-paper/PDF/wp2023-48-European-aid-MENA-region-after-Arab-uprisings.pdf>, page 1-4.

² Barnes-Dacey, Julien (2024): The fall of Assad: Europeans have an opportunity to help forge a new Syria, in: European Council on Foreign Relations, under: <https://ecfr.eu/article/the-fall-of-assad-europeans-have-an-opportunity-to-help-forge-a-new-syria/>.

Introduction

After the brutal dictatorship of the Al-Assad family, which had been marked by severe human rights violations and economic mismanagement, having pushed Syria into international isolation, came to a sudden end on December 8th, 2024, HTS-leader (Hayat Tahrir Ash-Sham) Ahmad Al-Shar'a, formerly known under his nom de guerre Abu Mohammed Al-Jolani, rose to power.³ In fact, the abrupt abolishment of the Al-Assad regime subsequently resulted in profound changes of Europe's previous relations with Syria, which back then, had been characterised by the imposition of economic sanctions and the suspension of prior agreements as well as diplomatic relations.⁴

Following Al-Shar'a's ascension to power, spearheading the HTS-led transitional government, the European Union re-established ties with Syria, for the sake of directly supporting a looming stabilisation and democratization process. In this sense, the European Union embarked on numerous pivotal steps, including the lifting of economic sanctions, the enactment of bilateral country visits and the announcement of providing financial aid.⁵

While the EU had enunciated its willingness to assist the incumbent government in its democratic transition, further developments and policy making processes that sought to form an inclusive government and establish representative state institutions, are meticulously scrutinized. In fact, the perpetration of the Coastal Massacres in March 2025, which subsequently precipitated the sanctioning of three Turkish-backed militias, namely the Hamza Division, the Sultan Sulaiman Shah Brigade and the Sultan Murad Division, including their commanders Mohammed Hussein Al-Jassim and Seyf Bouland Abu Bakr, further reinforced the EU's skepticism towards Al-Shar'a, given his troubled past as an Al-Qai'da member in Iraq.⁶ In this regard, HTS-led initiatives and political decisions were particularly monitored in regards to their inclusion of women as well as Syria's various ethnic and religious groups, such as during the launching of the National Dialogue Meeting in February 25, 2025, which had sought to lay the foundations for the draft of a new constitution and was widely disapproved for its apparent lack of inclusion and transparency.⁷

Moreover, the composition of Syria's current interim government had also been the subject of debate and speculations regarding a peaceful transition. In this sense, particularly Western governments have reiterated the need for the creation of a government that stipulates the inclusion of all ethnic and religious minorities, while particularly ensuring the representation of women.⁸ In fact, the current transitional government features Hind Kabawat, a Syrian Christian politician, activist and researcher as the only woman in the position of Minister of Social Affairs and Labor, in addition to the Druze Minister of Agriculture Amjad Badr, the Alawite Yaroub Badr, serving as the country's current Minister of Transport and the Kurdish Minister of Education Muhammad Abdulrahman Turko.⁹

³Al-Jazeera (2024): What happened in Syria? How did Al-Assad fall, in: Al-Jazeera, under: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/12/8/what-happened-in-syria-has-al-assad-really-fallen>.

⁴Soler, Paula (2025): EU lifts sweeping energy, transport sanctions on Syria, in: Europe News, under: <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2025/02/24/eu-lifts-sweeping-energy-transport-sanctions-on-syria>.

⁵Council of the European Union (2025): Syria: EU adopts legal acts to lift economic sanctions on Syria, enacting recent political agreement, Press Release, under: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2025/05/28/syria-eu-adopts-legal-acts-to-lift-economic-sanctions-on-syria-enacting-recent-political-agreement/>.

⁶Rudaw (2025): EU sanctions key SNA leaders for human rights abuses, in: Rudaw, under: <https://www.rudaw.net/english/middleeast/syria/280520252>.

However, while political assessments and analysis of current developments in Syria continue to revolve around ethnic and sectarian representation as well as the introduction of potential quotas in political institutions, the country has recently displayed numerous incidents of interreligious tensions and skirmishes, reminiscent of the Iraqi experience in 2003.¹⁰

In this regard, the question of how the European Union can embark on an effective approach towards Syria by grasping future opportunities of engagement and learning from previous missteps in the Iraqi context remains ubiquitous, while also serving as an illuminating example of how to properly deal with post-war states in the MENA Region and support their peaceful transition.

Research Approach & Results

The above-mentioned research question is analyzed through a comparative approach. In this regard, parallels will be drawn to the Iraqi experience following the fall of Saddam Hussein's dictatorship and the subsequent US-occupation in 2003. In fact, the aftermath of this violent regime change precipitated a brutal phase of sectarian violence between the Sunni and predominant Shia population, also known as 'Taifiya' in Arabic. In order to contain ethno-religious tensions and skirmishes and ensure a solid and equal representation of all of Iraq's preponderant ethnic and sectarian groups, a quota-stipulating political system, known as 'Muhasasa' was subsequently established and continues to remain a pivotal pillar in Iraqi politics.¹¹

However, over the course of the country's rugged political trajectory, this ethno-religious quota system effectively evolved into a corrupt and elitist system, exploited by Iraq's dominant parties, which subsequently resulted in the Iraqi people jointly demanding its immediate abolishment in the wake of the 2019 'Tishreen' revolution. Given its nationwide reverberation and overwhelming youth involvement, who unequivocally emphasized the unity of the Iraqi people beyond ethno-sectarian schism, the Tishreen movement is nowadays considered to constitute one of the most pivotal political events in contemporary Iraq.¹² In fact, in addition to its inherent unique character, the outbreak of the Tishreen protest movement particularly served as an illustration of the country's ingrained political issues, most notably the sectarianism of political parties and factions, which contributed to the exploitation of the 'Muhasasa System'. In the case of Iraq, explicit ethno-religious quotas and politics have therefore resulted in the entrenchment of sectarian divisions, an increased marginalisation of minority groups and a promotion of nepotism and clientelism, thus further fueling political instability.

⁷ Albam, Omar & Schaer, Cathrin (2025): Syria's 'National Dialogue': A show or real transformation?, in: Deutsche Welle, under: <https://www.dw.com/en/syrias-national-dialogue-just-for-show-or-genuine-transformation/a-71758356>.

⁸ General Secretariat of the Council Delegations (2025): Council Conclusions on Syria, under: https://www.parlament.gv.at/dokument/XXVIII/EU/25761/imfname_11490536.pdf.

⁹ Lister, Charles (2025): Assessing Syria's Transitional Government: Significant change, as HTS cedes control of a majority of Syria's cabinet, in: Syria Weekly, under: <https://www.syriaweekly.com/p/assessing-syrias-transitional-government>.

¹⁰ Bernd, Lidia (2025): A Dangerous Echo of Iraq's Past: Syria's minorities in a post-Assad Era, in: Georgetown Security Studies Review, under: <https://georgetownsecuritystudiesreview.org/2025/04/28/a-dangerous-echo-of-iraqs-past-syrias-minorities-in-a-post-assad-era/>.

¹¹ Dodge, Toby (2019) Muhasasa Ta'ifiya and its others: Domination and Contestation in Iraq's political field, in: POMEPS Studies 35: Religion, Violence, and the State in Iraq, under: https://pomeps.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/POMEPS_Studies_35.1.pdf, page 38.

In this regard, the Iraqi experience exemplifies to which extent ethno-religious ascriptions are tied to political and ideological convictions and creeds, which had resulted in decades of identity-based politics and a high politicization of ethnic and religious identities. When drawing a comparison to the current situation in Syria, a similarly looming trajectory can be discerned, given the years of dictatorship that presented itself as secular but in reality, used to be an Alawite-dominated system. In fact, this development became particularly evident during the most recent waves of ethnic and sectarian-based violence, most notably, the bomb attack in the Greek Orthodox Mar Elias Church in Damascus' Dweila neighbourhood,¹³ as well as the latest clashes in the Southern Druze-dominated area of As-Suwayda.¹⁴

Thus, a prioritisation of ethno-religious quotas and political representation through seat allocations and ministerial appointments bears the risk of undermining the creation a cohesive national identity, while propelling the marginalisation of minority groups and fueling corruption and clientelism, particularly in a highly-politicised and politically fragile environment, characterised by internal fragmentation and power-vying actors. In fact, the United Nations Development Program has published numerous studies and statistics on Syria's current economic crisis, with 90% of the population unable to afford essential goods and commodities, thus, living beyond the poverty line.¹⁵ In this regard, it must be acknowledged that Syria is currently undergoing a political transition phase, marked by economic stagnation, years of societal penury and war crimes, precipitating many to flee the country as well as the prevalence of belligerent militias, which emerged in the wake of the opposition's division and subsequent ramification.

Therefore, the Syrian scene exhibits numerous deeply ingrained issues, preponderantly unfolding and becoming conspicuous in violent clashes and skirmishes between the country's various ethnic and religious groups. In this sense, it can be ascertained that a failure of properly addressing current grievances in the Syrian State will inevitably result in a further fragmentation along ethnic and religious lines, thus fostering the destabilization of the country, which will manifest itself in sectarian tensions and violent encounters, while incrementally impeding Syria's political transition.

Policy Implications & Recommendations

Based on the research findings and concluded results, it can be discerned that a genuine support in Syria's current transition phase needs to be based on the perception and the cognisance of Syria as a post-war State, currently undergoing an interim phase, that has to surmount multiple stages in order to finally result in the democratisation and long-term stabilisation of the country.

¹² Dodge, Toby (2019) Muhasasa Ta'ifiya and its others: Domination and Contestation in Iraq's political field, in: POMEPS Studies 35: Religion, Violence, and the State in Iraq, under: https://pomeps.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/POMEPS_Studies_35.1.pdf, page 42-43.

¹³ Gritten, David (2025): Suicide bombing at Damascus church kills 25, Syrian authorities say, in: BBC, under: <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c307n9p43z9o>.

¹⁴ Al-Khalidi, Suleiman (2025): More than 30 killed in sectarian clashes in Syria's Sweida, interior ministry says, in: Reuters, under: <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/least-15-killed-sectarian-clashes-syrias-sweida-witnesses-medics-2025-07-13/>.

¹⁵ UNDP (2025): The impact of the conflict in Syria: A devastated economy, pervasive poverty and a challenging road ahead to social and economic recovery, in: Relief Web, under: <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/impact-conflict-syria-devastated-economy-pervasive-poverty-and-challenging-road-ahead-social-and-economic-recovery-enar>, page 8.

While the political representation of Syria's various ethnic and religious groups in governmental and state-led institutions remains a pivotal aspect of good governance, it has to be taken into consideration that a mere prioritization on ethno-religious quotas bears the peril of further triggering sectarian divisions and sowing discord among the country's various groups.

In this regard, the sole establishment of ethno-religious quotas in all political and governmental institutions does not constitute an effective tool for preventing the outbreak of sectarian violence or ensuring the proper representation of all minorities. In highly politicized environments, such as in Iraq and in Syria, ethno-religious quotas might even have a contrary effect, thus, leading to the enforcement of identity-based politics that erode broader national interests and thus, undermine societal cohesion and unification. Therefore, a genuine inclusion and representation of all societal strata and minority groups has to be ensured and incrementally enforced in accordance with the country's pace in fostering political stability and economic prosperity. In this regard, external stakeholders, such as the European Union, as a pivotal provider of humanitarian aid, can play a significant role in supporting post-war Syria by learning from the Iraqi experience in the aftermath of 2003.

In fact, instead of preponderantly putting its emphasis on the governmental reflection of Syria's diverse ethno-religious political landscape, the European Union shall rather focus on supporting the country's economic development and local grassroots initiatives that seek to induce profound change and amelioration from within the society. In this regard, the lifting of all economic sanctions already constitutes a significant step that indicated the European Union's willingness to engage in Syria's peaceful post-war transition, however, current political assessments, such as for example the number of HTS functionaries in the interim government shall be conceived in terms of Syria's political circle of confidants and potential ministers being still narrow during the transitional phase. Moreover, the current political environment in Syria bears the potential of further fuelling instability and sectarian divisions, when entrenched issues, such as the dire economic situation, one of the most pressing and basic needs of the Syrian people, are not properly tackled and prioritised. This neglect will subsequently turn any efforts and attempts to ensure religious and ethnic representation in the political sphere into exploitable tools for propelling identity-based politics and the marginalisation and discrimination of minority groups.

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