

ORION FORUM

Saudi Arabia's Stance on the New Syria

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On December 8, 2024, within 13 days, Syrian opposition militias entered Damascus from Idlib, a city in northwestern Syria bordering Turkey, with the political and moral support of the Turks, and with the escape of the ousted Syrian President Bashar al-Assad to Russia, they were able to destroy the Assad regime after 53 years.

The capture of Damascus by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) forces has left neighboring countries, the region, and the international community skeptical about the formation of a stable and inclusive government. The HTS, which until 2016 had close ties to the terrorist group Al-Qaeda, is considered a radical Sunni Islamist group that has been designated as a terrorist group by some countries and the United Nations.

This analysis aims to explain the relations of Saudi Arabia, as a leading country in the Muslim and Arab world, with the new Syrian government, and analyze Riyadh's policies ranging from "desire" to "hesitation" to cooperate with the new Syrian authorities.

The cautious but realistic approach

Saudi Arabia, as a conservative regime and ally of the US, has consistently responded negatively to regime change and popular uprisings, rejecting and opposing them. Riyadh, along with the rulers of the Al Nahyan dynasty in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), is aware of the dangers of regime change and the rise to power of radical Islamist forces such as the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamists who believe in political Islam.

For this reason, Saudi Arabia views the developments in Syria with suspicion and will adopt a cautious approach because it is not aware of the future domestic and foreign developments of the Syrian leaders and their Islamist tendencies. On the other hand, Saudi officials cannot

determine whether they can restore their territorial integrity, which is now in [conflict](#) with the autonomous Kurds supported by the US. However, there are many reasons why Saudi officials may still be interested in some new developments in Syria. Such as Iran's withdrawal from Syria and the long-standing desire of the new HTS authorities to continue this process.

The reality on the ground in Syria and the developments of regime change have made it clear to Saudi Arabia that it must come to terms with the realities of changing power centers and actively participate in securing its interests and guiding developments within Syria in its favor. It does not want a repeat of the events of Iraq and Yemen.

In Iraq, after the fall of Saddam Hussein, Riyadh left the stage empty, resulting in Iranian influence in the internal developments. In fact, Saudi Arabia had no embassy for about 30 years, and in 2019, 16 years after the fall of Saddam, it [decided](#) to open a consulate in Baghdad and provide a \$1 billion aid package. In Yemen, the Saudis [pursued](#) a policy of ignoring the conflict between 2012 and 2015 until the Iranian-backed Houthi movement seized northern Yemen and entered the war against other groups.

For this reason, after the fall of Bashar al-Assad, Saudi Arabia [hosted](#) a meeting of foreign ministers from key countries influential in Syria. Syrian Foreign Minister Asad al-Shaibani and Syrian interim President Ahmed al-Sharaa [began](#) their first trips from Riyadh. Saudi Arabia's Al-Arabiya TV channel [outdid](#) Qatar's Al-Jazeera in an interview with Al-Sharaa. In the interview, he expressed his desire for Saudi Arabia to play an economic role in Syria. At the 2025 World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, al-Shaibani [cited](#) Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 as an inspiration for rebuilding Syria after the grueling civil war.

Overall, the developments in Syria have presented Saudi Arabia with a perspective of increasing threats, and Saudi Arabia's overall policy towards the new Syria has been aligned with the following objectives: establishing security and stability, uniting the Syrian territory, and peacefully resolving the Kurdish independence issue, forming an inclusive transitional national government, reducing the influence of Turkey, and Qatar, and permanently withdrawing Iran, ensuring that Syria does not become a platform for Islamist activity and a place to export the Islamic model, the return of 3 million Syrian refugees in the kingdom and a permanent solution to the smuggling of Captagon from Syria to Saudi Arabia, which is the most

widely [consumed](#) drug among young people between the ages of [12 and 22](#) in all Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries.

Syria, the core of geostrategic changes

The developments of the past 1.5 years, both in terms of regime change in Syria and from a regional and international perspective after October 7, have given Syria a new face that has not gone unnoticed by Saudi officials. By remaining at the heart of the developments in Syria, Riyadh is trying to keep the pulse of these changes and present itself as an influential figure in international politics.

After the fall of the Baathist regime in Syria, Israel carried out about 480 [airstrikes](#) on Syria, [destroying](#) between 70 and 80 of the Syrian army's military and defense capabilities. Tel Aviv also occupied the U.N.-supervised Golan Heights, and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu [promised](#) to double the number of 20,000 settlers living in 30 Israeli settlements in the Golan Heights.

After October 7 and Lebanon's defeat in the confrontation with Israel, the destruction of [60% of Gaza's sites](#), and the weakness of Hamas after the [killing](#) of about a third of its forces, and the resulting decline in Iran's influence and power in these areas, Syria became the main core of geostrategic changes in the Levant region. Following the developments in the Gaza war, the Levant became the main core of the [new order](#) in the region claimed by Israel. These changes clearly showed Saudi Arabia the need for intervention and presence in Syria.

Riyadh considers the Levant's geographical proximity to the Persian Gulf, active Saudi diplomacy, gaining international prestige in the relations of the global community, and interacting with the new structure of power and influence in the Levant essential in an effort to [prevent](#) Israel's expansionist policies and Turkey's neo-Ottoman dreams for a hegemonic role in the Middle East, and is trying to deepen its influence in the new developments in Syria.

In a parallel move, Saudi Arabia, in addition to being sensitive to the quality of Israel's influence in the Levant region, is also sensitive to the influence of Qatar, Turkey, and Iran in Syria.

Qatar has been a backer of Islamist forces since 2011 and is known for its support for the ouster of former Tunisian and Egyptian presidents Zine El Abidine Ben Ali and Hosni Mubarak. Given Doha's active diplomacy and powerful regional mediation role, Riyadh is not happy with Doha's diplomatic maneuvering in Syria. Qatar's Emir, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani, became the first head of state to visit Syria on January 30. Earlier in January, natural gas-rich Qatar had [promised](#) to export 200 megawatts of electricity to Syria, with a gradual increase.

Turkey was also the sole supporter of HTS before the takeover of Damascus. No government is currently as popular with the anti-Assad forces as Turkey, and it is seen as the [main winner](#) in the Syrian developments. Turkey's immediate concerns, such as border security and the return of Syrian refugees, may not always [align](#) with Saudi Arabia's economic and prestige approach. These differences, if not carefully managed, could create tensions that could undermine sustainable cooperation in the evolving context of the new Syria.

If Arab capitals of the Persian Gulf [perceive](#) the new Syrian government as a client state of Turkey or an Islamist regime committed to exporting the revolution, the kingdom can view Ankara's role in post-Assad Syria with skepticism. In such a situation, Saudi Arabia may seek to work with other Arab states to bring Syria back into the Arab region and away from Turkey's orbit of influence - similar to how some GCC countries made a great deal of effort to separate Assad's Syria from Iran.

The developments in Syria are a reality that has left Riyadh skeptical about Damascus's contribution to the region's future stability. The clarity of Saudi Arabia's stance towards the new rulers of Damascus will [depend](#) on their ability to manage the transition period while adhering to Saudi demands. It will also depend on the nature of the Saudi-Turkish-Iranian-Qatar relations. However, what is most evident is Saudi Arabia's commitment to a strong presence in Syria and to applying the lessons learned in Yemen and Iraq.

*image credit: Sana.sy

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