

Zero hour in Damascus

What role can the international community play in Syria's new beginning?

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The unexpectedly rapid advance of the rebel groups and the collapse of Bashar al-Assad's rule mark a historic turning point for Syria, a country worn down by almost 14 years of war. These developments will have huge repercussions for both the regional and international order. The international community should now offer generous reconstruction aid and allow the Syrian actors themselves to decide about their future.

Over the past week and a half, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) under the leadership of Abu Mohammed Al-Jolani and a number of allied rebel groups managed to make quick gains. They took Aleppo, the country's commercial hub, followed by Hama and finally Homs and the capital, Damascus, in quick succession. One of the reasons they managed to do so was because

allied rebel groups marched on Damascus from southern Syria. Many HTS fighters come from the south of the country themselves and were relocated to Idlib mainly in 2016 under 'reconciliation agreements'.

Assad's allies to date – Russia, Iran and Lebanese Hezbollah – are weakened and/or tied up in other conflicts and abandoned him. His demoralised army withdrew, in many cases without a fight. On the morning of 8 December 2024, President Assad fled into exile in Russia; Syria's Prime Minister announced his support for an orderly transfer of power.

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The victorious rebels are controversial due to their Islamist past. HTS has ruled Idlib, a rebel province in north-west Syria, since 2017 and established functioning state structures and services there. However, it has repeatedly been accused of human rights violations and corruption. HTS leader Al-Jolani fought for al-Qaida in Iraq and came to public attention as the leader of the al-Qaida-affiliated Syrian al-Nusra Front. He is now increasingly using his birth name, Ahmed al-Sharaa, and is distancing himself from his jihadist past. That does not make him a puppet of the West, however. For the first time in the Syrian conflict, the country now has a leader who seems to be accepted both by armed militia groups and by many peaceful protestors. This could facilitate an orderly transition. The victorious rebels have promised protection for religious minorities and ordered that the existent administrative structures should be retained for the time being. Nevertheless, many Alawites, Christians and Kurds are afraid of losing their rights and have mixed feelings about the change of power.

Particularly for Kurds these fears are not unfounded: In the shadow of the triumphant march southwards by HTS, the Syrian National Army (SNA), which is affiliated to HTS but loyal to Turkey, is putting pressure on the Kurds in northern Syria. Massive human rights violations and forced displacements are taking place

there; fighting is continuing. International actors should therefore bring their influence to bear on neighbouring states such as Turkey, but also Israel, to ensure that they respect Syria's sovereignty.

In particular, however, international actors should provide humanitarian aid for the suffering population as quickly as possible. They should offer support to the emerging transitional government in rebuilding the country, which is severely shaken by the war economy. It is important that this support benefits all Syrian provinces and Syrians of all denominations and ethnic groups. It is also vital to ensure that no power vacuum emerges that ISIS or other actors might exploit. Not only the civil war but also the proxy war in Syria must end.

Germany, which still enjoys a relatively good reputation in Syria, could offer to act as a mediator between the different population groups and former warring factions so that they can build trust through a cooperative and transparent process in order to negotiate a new Syrian social contract. Building on initiatives such as the Council of the Syrian Charter, which has been meeting in Germany regularly since 2017, a more inclusive order could be established in the interest of all Syrians. This can succeed if the donor organisations support the reconstruction of infrastructure and the health and education systems and the country the prospect of being reintegrated into the international community, including the lifting of sanctions. Germany can also make a valuable contribution to setting up a truth and reconciliation commission to address (war) crimes committed by the Assad regime and to establishing an independent judiciary. It could do so by drawing for example on its experience with coming to terms with its Stasi past (East Germany's secret police agency) or its pioneering role in court cases against Syrian war criminals abroad.

In view of US President-elect Trump's likely cuts to the development budget, Germany and Europe have an important role to play. The spirit of optimism and euphoria among Syrians at home and abroad offers a great opportunity for a new beginning in Syria. This opportunity should not be wasted and the West should not abandon Syria yet again.