

Syria in Transition

SiT

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Welcome to Syria in Transition (SiT), a monthly delve into policy-relevant developments concerning the Syrian conflict. Crafted by practitioners with a decade-long experience in the field, SiT offers informed perspectives tailored for diplomats and decision makers. SiT goes straight to the point and shuns unnecessary verbiage – just as we would prefer as avid readers ourselves.

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The New Umayyads

Syria's leader is turning nostalgia into strategy

Almost everyone who knows Syria's transitional president, Ahmad Sharaa, agrees on one point: he has long been obsessed by the notion of creating a Sunni entity (*kayan sunni*).

This notion is not new. In Iraq Sunnis have long called for such an entity in the form of a federal region as a way of escaping the grip of the Shia-led government in Baghdad. Sharaa appropriated this concept while in Idlib, stating in a televised meeting with Salvation Government ministers in July 2022 that the goal of the revolution was no longer just to end tyranny and oppression but "to create a Sunni entity." Unlike Iraq, Syria has a clear Sunni majority, and, in light of perceived historic oppression of Sunnis by the Alawite-dominated Assad regimes, Sharaa's obsession with turning Syria into a bastion of Sunni power is not without popular support.

There is one principal problem: the 25 per cent of Syria that is not Sunni (or Arab). Alawites, Kurds, Druze, Christians, Turkmans, Circassians and Ismailis would be unlikely to accept being bit-players in a state whose identity, strategic posture, and socio-economic interests ran counter to theirs. A solution, from Sharaa's perspective, could be a form of soft federalism – a loosely decentralised arrangement that accommodated minority demands while allowing the Sunni core to assert political and ideological dominance.

Umayyadism

While official talk of the *kayan sunni* remains muted due to its politically charged connotations, a more

palatable alternative has been offered to the Syrian public: “Umayyadism.” Promoted by Sharaa’s close advisers and amplified by loyal social media influencers, this nostalgic concept draws on the legacy of the early Islamic Umayyad caliphate as a vision of national revival, prosperity, and restored grandeur.

During its 89-year reign, the Umayyad dynasty ruled an empire stretching from North Africa to the Caucasus and Central Asia, with Damascus as its imperial capital. It later established itself in Spain where it ruled from Cordoba for 275 years. A worldly and pragmatic dynasty, the Umayyads adapted and refined Byzantine models of political administration and were generally tolerant of Jews and Christians. But the symbolism runs deeper: the Umayyads were historic adversaries of the Shia. Their second caliph was responsible for the killing of the Prophet’s grandson, Hussein, and their policies heavily discriminated against Persians. In resurrecting the Umayyads, Sharaa’s circle invokes not only imperial grandeur but also a pointed reminder of Sunni supremacy over Persia and Shia Islam.

Pro-government media personality Musa al-Omar (685,000 followers on X) posted on his socials on 19 February a video of Sharaa riding a horse to a song whose opening line was: “*The Umayyads are of golden lineage / their name sent fear in Persian kings / books cannot praise them enough.*”

When Sharaa visited King Abdullah II in Jordan on 26 February, “The Umayyads meet the Hashemites” was the main tag line of HTS-run social media accounts. At the transitional government’s inaugural ceremony on 29 March, the culture minister (and poet) Mohammed Yassin Saleh ended his speech with these lines that he composed especially for the occasion:

*We have abstained from joys for ages
And broken our fast with the dish of dignity
So record, O time of victory, record
Damascus is ours until the Day of Judgment.*

Sharaa is not unique in invoking the legacy of the Umayyads. Hafiz Assad was said to be an admirer of Muawiya bin Abu Sufyan – the dynasty’s founder – and the secular Syrian Social Nationalist Party (SSNP) regards him as a Syrian hero. In the hands of Sunni Islamists, however, Umayyadism takes on a more chauvinistic association. Critics argue that it projects a fusion of Salafist and Arab nationalist narratives which, while reinforcing Sunni group solidari-

ty (*asabiya*), simultaneously deepen sectarian divides and further hinder the already tenuous path toward national reconciliation.

Critics have also begun to see in Umayyadism a by-word for the *kayan sunni* project. Sharaa may have calculated that his best chance at holding power in the short to medium term is to dominate a smaller, Sunni-majority territory rather than governing a unified but pluralistic Syria requiring power-sharing concessions to minorities. Since (as it was under the Umayyads) power-sharing and democracy are anathema, establishing a Sunni region stretching from Damascus to Homs, Hama, Idlib, and parts of Deir Ezzor that he would rule as a modern-day emir would be far more appealing. The non-Sunni regions of Syria could enjoy a form of soft federalism until such time as they could be re-absorbed (or most likely re-conquered) by Damascus. This would be a result not so much of limited ambition but of a pragmatic accommodation with local and geopolitical realities.

Spheres of influence

Although the civil war has largely wound down, the conflict over Syria’s future is far from settled. Regional and international powers remain deeply invested in preserving their spheres of influence. The United States and Israel, for instance, are intent on maintaining the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces’ control over the resource-rich northeast. In the southwest, the Druze community harbours autonomous ambitions backed by Israel, while on the coast, the Alawite population looks increasingly to Russia for protection. Meanwhile, Turkey – a strong supporter of the Sharaa government – has its sights set on Aleppo, home to the majority of Syria’s Turkmen population.

Sharaa is under no illusions. He cannot hope to satisfy the competing interests of all these actors and still govern a unified Syria without contest. His approach, therefore, has been one of less for more. He has chosen to consolidate his power base among Sunni Arabs by deploying Umayyadism as an ideological weapon and by positioning himself as their indispensable Lord Protector. The brutal suppression of the coastal revolt in March, though widely condemned abroad, boosted his standing among many Sunni constituencies. At the same time, he has allowed political bargaining and decentralised arrangements to take shape, indicating that he would tolerate a patchwork future for Syria if it helps preserve his own central authority.

This pragmatic strategy is most visible in the northeast. Sharaa appears relatively indifferent to fully re-integrating the Kurdish-held territories into the central state. His 10 March agreement with SDF commander Mazloum Abdi was framed as a major political win for Damascus, but in reality, it marked a significant breakthrough for the Kurds. It was the first time the Syrian state had officially acknowledged Kurdish cultural and administrative rights – an implicit green light for continued Kurdish autonomy. Though the agreement stipulates eventual integration of the SDF into the national army, this is likely to be a slow, negotiated process. In the meantime, the Autonomous Administration continues to function with *de facto* independence.

Aleppo presents another example of calculated ambiguity. The city suffers from chronic neglect in public services and infrastructure. Popular frustration is mounting, with some residents calling for alternatives to the current HTS governance. The evident prioritisation of Damascus over Aleppo suggests that Sharaa may not see the northern city as a core component of his *kayan sunni*. Instead, he may be reserving Aleppo as a strategic bargaining chip in his dealings with Turkey, potentially trading influence there for Ankara's tacit acceptance of his uncontested rule elsewhere.

Sharaa's subdued reaction to Israeli strikes and incursions suggests that he may see the south of Syria as dispensable – at least for the time being. His *laissez-faire* attitude to local warlords like Ahmad al-Awda in Daraa, or Fahim Issa and Saif Bulad in the north, suggests a strategy of security decentralisation. Rather than unifying the fragmented Syrian armed factions, Damascus seems comfortable with multiple centres of semi-independent military power, perhaps setting a precedent that ultimately justifies a similar arrangement in Kurdish-populated regions in the northeast and the in Druze-majority Suweida in the southwest – effectively sanctioning soft federalism.

Useful nostalgia

If this new Umayyad vision holds, Syria's immediate to mid-term future may not lie in reunification, but in a patchwork of decentralised entities tethered to a centralised Sunni-led authority in Damascus. Such a model offers Sharaa the best of both worlds: leadership over the historic heartland of Syria, with enough ideological coherence to galvanise significant popular support; and with sufficient flexibility to avoid the currently impossible task of stitching together

a country fractured by sectarianism, warlordism, and foreign meddling. The long-term viability of this arrangement is, however, questionable. The more he leans into Umayyadism to define his rule, the more he risks alienating the very communities whose cooperation is essential for national stability.

For now, however, the strategy appears to be holding. Western capitals, focused elsewhere, show little appetite for further regime change, while regional actors seem content with Iran having been evicted from Syria and a spheres of influence approach that protects their respective bottom lines. In this climate, Sharaa's selective centralism – wrapped in the language of revivalist nostalgia – may prove shrewd. But the danger lies in mistaking tactical success for strategic vision. A governing ideology that draws legitimacy from early middle age empire building ultimately may prove brittle when confronted with the pluralistic demands of 21st-century governance.

For Syria, the question remains whether the long-term future will be built through democratic accommodation or incremental conquest. If Sharaa's record is any indication, the latter seems the more probable path. His preference for calibrated force, ideological mobilisation, strategic ambiguity, and the long game suggests a leader more inclined to expand authority piece by piece than to share it.

The sanctions illusion

How a flawed discourse can be fixed

Since Bashar Assad's fall last December, think tanks and other advocacy groups have echoed the same catch-22 mantra on sanctions: the West maintains them as leverage to push transitional President Ahmad Sharaa toward a liberal transition, yet those same sanctions hinder economic recovery, preventing meaningful progress on transition. In other words, Assad's ouster created a brief window of opportunity, but continued economic strangulation risks shutting that window before any real transition can take hold. This narrative, however, deflects from the deeper realities of Syria's ongoing conflict and risks obstructing the kind of comprehensive political process the country truly needs.

Phased approaches

When Assad fled to Moscow and Ahmad Sharaa took over the Presidential Palace on 8 December 2024, the question of sanctions surfaced immediately. Sharaa, like Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), remains designated as a terrorist by the UN Security Council. In the following days, the US and UK announced that it was too early to consider de-listing. Both Democratic and Republican senators agreed that the way forward was a phased approach through waivers and general licenses intended to incentivise Sharaa's adherence to certain conditions. On 14 December then Secretary of State Antony Blinken outlined these expectations: respect for minority and women's rights, an inclusive and representative government, zero tolerance for terrorist groups, and the dismantling of remaining chemical weapons stockpiles. This list was nearly identical to the conditions the Trump administration set for Syrian Foreign Minister Shaibani at the Brussels Conference on 18 March 2025 and reiterated after the transitional government was appointed on 31 March.

The EU followed suit. On 15 December EU foreign policy chief Kaja Kallas announced that sanctions would remain until Syria's new rulers ensured minority protections, women's rights, and a unified government rejecting religious extremism. Germany's "Eight-Point Plan for Syria," published a day later, reinforced these principles, demanding a genuinely inclusive dialogue leading to democratic elections. Other EU member

states backed this line, as did Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, who told the European Parliament on 18 December that the EU must use its leverage in Syria to push for an inclusive political process that restored power to the Syrian people.

Goodwill extended

At its core, the West's position reiterated the principles of UNSCR 2254. Sharaa said all the right things about a peaceful and inclusive future for Syria that the West wanted to hear, but he was unequivocal in rejecting foreign-imposed conditionality. When the BBC confronted him on 18 December with Western skepticism about his commitment to governance reforms and human rights, Sharaa called for an end to sanctions but emphasised that:

"What matters to me most is that the Syrian people believe me. We promised the Syrian people that we would liberate them from this criminal regime and we did that. This is what matters to me first and last. I don't very much care about what is said about us abroad. I am not obligated to prove to the world that we work seriously to achieve the interests of our people in Syria."

Sharaa made it clear that he wouldn't beg for sanctions relief, nor conform to a Western-imposed checklist. UNSCR is of course not merely a "wish list". It is a resolution that is binding under international law. The very notion of legal obligations has been severely undermined, however, by the West's own selective approach to international law – most notably its passive and active support for the flagrant violations in Gaza. Sharaa underlined his stance when he rebuffed UN Special Envoy Geir Pedersen's overtures, dismissing the UN's past efforts as fruitless. European diplomats nevertheless continued their diplomatic circuit, issuing repeated calls for inclusivity while engaging in extensive travel and photo ops. Sharaa's government, meanwhile, maintained its reassuring rhetoric.

On 6 January the US issued General License 24, granting limited sanctions relief. The EU followed with similar measures, and the UK introduced further exemptions on 6 March. These concessions came despite a growing list of actions by the Sharaa government that contradicted the principles outlined in UNSCR 2254. The caretaker government, intended to be limited in scope, overstepped its mandate early on by appointing foreign fighters to senior military positions and taking decisions far beyond a transitional framework. The

National Dialogue lacked the meaningful and inclusive participation envisioned in the Geneva Communiqué. The Constitutional Declaration did not emerge from a broad-based consultation, and it served primarily to entrench Sharaa's largely unchecked authority for the next five years. The caretaker government's expiration date of 1 March was quietly ignored; and on 30 March, a new cabinet was appointed – dominated by HTS figures and overseen by a newly created body: the General Secretariat for Political Affairs. Headed by Shaibani, the Secretariat has been given sweeping authority to interfere in ministerial affairs at its own discretion. Meanwhile, the coastal massacres have shattered optimism in Western capitals that sectarian mass violence was a thing of the past.

Despite these developments (which diplomats in conversations with Syria in Transition described as "deeply troubling") European governments have continued to support Sharaa. They've pledged humanitarian and development assistance and maintained political engagement; but planning for broader or permanent sanctions relief is notably absent. A key reason is their wait-and-see approach toward the Trump administration. Developments in June will be crucial, as they will include the confirmation of Joel Rayburn as Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs (and likely Syria point man) and also the extension or the cancellation of General License 24.

Post-conflict make believe

To enable a process of reciprocal concessions, critics continue to call on the West to define clear, incremental benchmarks for lifting sanctions. This mirrors earlier debates when Assad was around. Such arguments, however, ignore realities. The core principles of UNSCR 2254 are straightforward. If Sharaa's government was genuinely committed to an inclusive transition, Western foreign ministries would not need to elaborate further roadmaps to attract engagement: the doors would already be wide open. Besides serious doubts about whether this commitment exists, however, is an absence of conditions that would make such a process viable. A truly inclusive transition requires more than just superficial reforms. It needs a unified and pacified country, or at the very least, a structured political process designed to achieve that.

Syria, however, remains deeply fragmented and remains in the throes of conflict. The *de facto* division that occurred during years of war persists, and Sharaa's power is precarious – upheld by fragile deals

with regime holdovers, warlords, and military factions that have no interest in surrendering their fiefdoms. The Syrian Democratic Forces' rejection of both the Constitutional Declaration and the transitional government is just one manifestation of this broader instability. Other fault lines include the Druze insistence on relative autonomy for their area in the south, the likelihood of prolonged insurgency along the coast, the enduring presence of Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (SNA) strongholds in the north, and the ever-looming threat of an Islamic State resurgence. On top of all that, foreign powers continue to seek to retain their stakes in Syria through the client relationships they have cultivated over the years. In this reality, 'inclusive governance' and 'transitional justice' can be little more than empty slogans.

The Israel factor

Israel looms large in this situation. Regardless of assurances from Damascus, Tel Aviv is unlikely to tolerate an Islamist-led government with jihadist pedigree on its doorstep. Normalising Sharaa through any sanctions relief would amount to a vote of confidence that Israel and its Western allies are unwilling to provide – and that would influence the intra-Syrian conflict decisively in favour of Sharaa. The recent US decision to downgrade the diplomatic visas of Syrian UN-accredited staff is a clear signal that while the West may not explicitly oppose Sharaa, it certainly won't endorse him.

Sanctions were initially intended to block the rehabilitation of Assad. The same logic applies now to Sharaa – especially as long as Israel continues to veto his normalisation. One circulating idea that might alter Israel's calculus is that Trump could negotiate a deal in which Syria accepted to take in Palestinians from Gaza. Such a move, however, would place European and regional actors in an impossible position, requiring them to abandon long-held positions on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and disregard international law once and for all.

Need for a process

The broader context here is one of transition – not just for Syria, but for the entire Middle East. The Trump administration, despite its unpredictability, is likely to pursue a regional architecture based on its traditional major allies, Israel, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Egypt, that excludes Iran and seeks to pressure Russia and China. Within that landscape, and with the intra-Syrian conflict ongoing, sanctions relief must be seen for

what it is: a political step that legitimises the ruling Islamist elites of post-Assad Syria and an endorsement of the regional order into which the new Syria is being integrated. Advocacy groups may continue to call for decoupling humanitarian needs from political considerations, but – as was the case with Assad – they conveniently ignore that such a decision would empower Sharaa, whose autocratic tendencies are evident in what remains an ongoing and internationalised civil war.

At the same time, the continued enforcement of sanctions implies a responsibility: those imposing them must invest seriously in the diplomatic architecture required for a comprehensive political solution and meaningful transition. That means creating a credible and realistic international process – whether through a reformed UN, a regional mechanism, or something entirely new. Without a serious political initiative grounded in the complex reality of Syria's ongoing conflict and the region's transformation, the West's justification for maintaining sanctions looks dangerously thin. The choice is clear: either give up on leverage and lift sanctions unilaterally (and live with the consequences), or create a serious process to have them lifted that involves all the major relevant players.

Made in Tel Aviv

Trump's Syria playbook isn't American

Since the earliest days of the Syrian conflict, the guiding principles of US policy have remained remarkably consistent across administrations – from Obama to Trump, through Biden, and now once again under Trump. None have genuinely prioritised Syria's sovereignty, stability, or democratic transition. Instead, Washington has remained fixated on a narrow set of strategic objectives that closely mirror those of Israel: dismantling Syria's chemical weapons program, fighting and containing ISIS, curbing Iranian and Hezbollah influence, locating missing US nationals, and paying lip service to the protection of minorities. With the exception of the missing Americans – a concern driven more by domestic electoral politics and the lure of easy foreign policy wins – these priorities reflect the security doctrine of Tel Aviv far more than any independent American policy.

Now, the Trump administration may appoint officials with greater Middle East expertise. But this is no guarantee of more principled or more effective engagement. On the contrary, greater expertise may simply mean a more polished alignment with Israeli preferences. Sources who spoke to *Syria in Transition* on condition of anonymity say that Trump told Netanyahu that he could take "as much Syrian territory as he wanted," a statement that underscores how thoroughly US diplomacy has been absorbed into the maximalist objectives of Israel's current leadership.

It is no longer far-fetched to imagine Washington demanding that Sharaa recognise Israel's annexation of the Golan Heights – or even accept the definition of Israel as a "Jewish state" – as a precondition for limited sanctions relief. What may begin as a request for technical waivers could quickly escalate into a requirement for formal normalisation. These once unthinkable positions now sit comfortably within the evolution of US foreign policy: from pragmatic disengagement to active obstruction of any political process not tailored to Israel's ultra-Zionist agenda.

Among the more cynical proposals floated in the Trump-Netanyahu think bubble is said to be the resettlement of Palestinian from Gaza in Syria. Even more

plausible, and politically explosive, is the looming push to bring Syria into the Abraham Accords. Sharaa would most likely consider normalising ties with Israel if he believed it would de-list him, help secure his hold on power, and aid in lifting US sanctions. But unlike the UAE, Bahrain, Morocco, or Sudan, Sharaa faces a uniquely inconvenient obstacle: Israeli occupation of Syrian land. The Golan is not a footnote; it is a core question of sovereignty. Sharaa cannot simply accept open-ended Israeli occupation without devastating his already fragile domestic legitimacy. To make it domestically palatable, he would have to stage a performance of negotiation.

Ironically, the only potential silver lining lies in the chaos of Trump's broader foreign policy. His willingness to fundamentally question the US security relationship with Europe, combined with his erratic economic warfare, have already forced European and Arab states to rethink their strategic dependencies on the US. What Trump described as "liberation day" for the US could, in the long run, become liberation day for Europe and regional actors long shackled to American policy in the Middle East. Painful as the process may be, the breakdown of transatlantic consensus could finally allow Europeans and Arabs to reclaim foreign policy agency. Free from the weight of imposed loyalties, they might finally chart a path rooted in local interests and grounded in organic political realities. That's to say: something other than what is exclusively good for Israel.

Damascus re-born

The Syrian capital is embracing its newfound identity

When Abu Alaa, a prominent Damascene businessman, urged his opposition friends to accept reality – "The regime has won; just come back home and let's get the sanctions lifted" – few anticipated the dramatic reversal about to unfold. Indeed, the initial news of opposition forces advancing on Aleppo late last November barely registered on local WhatsApp chats.

Abu Ahmed, a cautious Damascene textile trader, quickly brushed aside the news: "Just another Turkish manoeuvre to squeeze concessions from Russia, followed by the usual retreat and losses."

Yet when opposition forces did seize Aleppo, locals' anxieties persisted. "These aren't statesmen," grumbled another businessman, "just Islamists soon to fight each other, as always."

On December 7, however, Damascus saw a rare display of urgency. Merchants abruptly shuttered shops, became glued to TVs and phones, and frantically reconnected with long-lost revolutionary friends and family from the north. Their economy had suffered years of sanctions, extortionate levies, and pitiful salaries. Any change was welcome.

Damascus's spontaneous jubilation upon liberation by HTS-led forces surprised everyone, even the locals. Joyful mobs stormed security headquarters and congregated triumphantly in Umayyad Square, rifles blazing skyward. Predictably, chaos quickly followed as uncontrolled rebels, opportunistic criminals freshly freed from jails, and former regime men who had shed their uniforms looted at will.

Yet order swiftly returned with the entry of HTS's brigades. Damascenes discovered an unlikely hero in Abu Mohammad al-Jolani, seen less as a foreign invader than as a returning son from a well-to-do Damascene neighbourhood. Stoically shrugging off the looting of his goods from the duty free market, one merchant declared: "We'll recover quickly – the real prize is freedom."

The morning after liberation, years of pent-up grief burst forth. Thousands of Damascene mothers opened mourning houses for their children who had been killed or disappeared during the preceding 14 years. Mosques proudly displayed martyrs' names, and hosted gatherings that were openly protected by the new authorities.

On liberation's first Friday, crowds packed the Great Umayyad Mosque and later staged a victory rally at Umayyad Square. Days later, Ahmed Sharaa (as he was now known) and Turkey's intelligence chief visited, and were warmly embraced by enthusiastic crowds. The giant Umayyad sword sculpture quickly became the icon of the newfound freedom.

Most Damascenes saw all uniformed arrivals as being "from HTS", conveniently overlooking the diversity of the factions that actually took the city. Liberation day was widely viewed less as the culmination of a 14-year struggle than a swift, 11-day blitzkrieg – something quietly corrected only weeks later by now-President Sharaa in his "victory speech" – though HTS happily absorbed the glory.

Damascenes initially appreciated their northern liberators' resemblance to local conservative Sunni society but bristled at some HTS members' attempts to impose ultra-conservative religious strictures. A local cleric neatly summed up a widespread sentiment: "We Damascenes favour moderation. This isn't Kandahar. Extremism will never settle comfortably here."

An early priority for HTS was winning religious legitimacy. Sharaa dispatched his envoy to Sheikh Naim Arqasousi, Damascus's most influential but Assad regime-friendly scholar. Shortly thereafter, Sharaa himself convened Damascus's diverse religious leadership, notably honouring Sheikh Osama al-Rifai, who was later appointed as the new Grand Mufti. This respectful inclusivity did much to reassure the wary capital.

A minority of Damascenes associated with the former regime began openly to insult Assadist symbols while cautiously keeping communication lines open with old contacts, just in case of a reversal. The academic and intellectual elite used to the old ways spread its undermining narratives, while carefully infiltrating educational and cultural institutions in hope of regaining some influence.

As the new regime cemented its position, Assad loyalists swiftly turned coats, quietly branding their new masters "uncivilised" while ostentatiously flying the new flag. One Damascene lawyer remarked drily: "They used to flatter Assad shamelessly. Now they flatter Sharaa shamelessly. Some habits never change. They're just looking for a new master."

In the wake of liberation, Alawite enclaves in the capital stirred briefly, encouraged by pro-Iran provocateurs. Yet thousands of Damascenes peacefully confronted Mezze's Alawite neighbourhood, appealing for calm: "Hand over your guns. It's time to become citizens, not settlers" was their message.

The Damascene business class meanwhile faced new challenges from the savvy, Idlib-based entrepreneurs who secured early deals with the incoming regime. The appointment of northerners as heads of chambers of commerce and industry and the flooding of Damascus' markets with Turkish-made goods have not gone down well. One wary businessman lamented: "We waited years for normality, but now we're threatened by the newcomers. It feels like we're trading one set of cliques for another."

Revolutionary activists, too, felt marginalised, sidelined both by yesterday's foes and today's allies. Many resented locals' unquestioning support for Sharaa and their seeming indifference to democracy and liberal values. Yet ordinary Damascenes often regarded these returning activists sceptically, accusing them of having "missed the war" while sipping cappuccinos in Istanbul.

Ultimately, most Damascenes understood power's age-old calculus: any stable Syrian authority requires Damascus's tacit support. Sharaa, evidently grasping this, deployed the historical legacy of the Umayyads, projecting Syria anew as a restored heartland of Arabism and Sunni Islam. After decades of Assadist and Iranian influence that saw the city import "alien" cultures, most locals eagerly embraced this unabashed identity. "We're finally reclaiming our dignity after decades," reflected one dentist. "It's time Damascus regained its rightful place in Syria and the world."

The Peacemakers is a satirical novel by Malik al-Abdeh and Lars Hauch about a fictional peace NGO founded by ex-UN diplomat Gerald Baynes. With grand plans before he retires and writes his memoirs, Gerald takes on an assignment that changes the trajectory of the Syria conflict. Any similarities to real persons or events are, of course, purely coincidental.

The novel will be serialised in *Syria in Transition*. To read more visit www.syriaintransition.com/peacemakers

Part I

1.8 The Situation Room

It was at 1 am when Abu Faisal received a message from one of his spotters over the radio: "They're coming."

He was sitting in the passenger seat of his favorite white Toyota Hilux, parked at the edge of a dirt road in southern Aleppo, 100yds or so from the M5 highway, accompanied by three of his bodyguards. It was a clear and chilly December night. From the front lines in the north, the distant thunder of artillery fire could be heard, but the southern front was eerily quiet. Abu Faisal radioed his commanders: "Get ready, be fast, and don't miss a thing."

A kilometer away, a pair of headlights flashed twice. A Hilux with a mounted spotlight flashed twice in response.

"If someone decides to bomb this party, it'll happen now. Get us a few hundred meters away from here," Abu Faisal told his driver, who started the car and – with headlights off – made for a large rock formation where he parked hidden from view.

Meanwhile, at the Peacemakers' office in Geneva, nerves were frayed. Gerald paced up and down the conference room. "And you're sure the connection is stable, Sophie?" he asked.

"Positive. Abu Faisal is online," she confirmed.

The conference room had been transformed into an operations centre – or rather, Pieter had turned it into one. A black leather armchair sat at the head of the table, reserved for Gerald. Four laptops were arranged neatly on the table.

"I still don't understand where this leather chair suddenly came from or who these old laptops belong to," Lisa mused. "And why are we drinking coffee from these awful paper cups? We have perfectly good porcelain mugs in the kitchen."

Sophie took a sip from her cup. "That was Pieter. He's trying to recreate the situation room from the Bin Laden operation."

"That's a lie!" Pieter protested, dressed in beige chinos, a white polo shirt, and a dark navy jacket.

"So you're not trying to cosplay Obama?"

"And I suppose it wouldn't be a problem if I put a few plates of snacks on the table? I made fresh cupcakes," Lisa added.

"No cupcakes. That would be ridiculous!" Pieter snapped.

"You're ridiculous!" Sophie countered.

"Quiet, both of you," Sherin cut in. "We've got word from Abu Faisal: the humanitarian convoy has arrived. His men are inspecting the delivery and will wave it through once cleared."

"Thank God," Gerald sighed and sank into the leather chair. Sherin patted his shoulder. "It's looking good. Just need to get this over the finish line. Anything on social media, Sophie?"

"Nothing yet. Joanne Bertram tweeted five minutes ago but that was just about UN Special Envoy Barakat. Apparently his visa to the States was denied because he got a restraining order for stalking some US official. I also checked some chat groups: no chatter."

"Brilliant," replied Sherin. She had negotiated the details of this first trial humanitarian convoy to Aleppo. She and Haider Al-Kheir, the presidential adviser to Assad, had agreed on 10 fuel trucks and 10 lorries carrying food supplies, with a full media blackout. This had

been a key demand from Abu Faisal, who feared that his credibility among other commanders in the Northern Alliance would suffer if he was seen making deals with the other side and undermining the Aleppo siege.

The fuel and food supplies came from UN warehouses in Damascus and were delivered in UN trucks, and overseen by Assad cronies working for the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC).

It had been three weeks since Sherin and Gerald had met Haider Al-Kheir in Beirut, and initially, they had worried the UN wouldn't greenlight the delivery in time. That concern turned out to be unfounded. When Sherin called the UN office in Damascus to explain the situation, the UN coordinator for Syria cut her off before she could even finish and immediately approved it. Sherin's attempt to ask about due diligence procedures was drowned out by what distinctly sounded like a series of champagne corks popping in the background.

Abu Faisal, however, was not in a celebratory mood yet. The clock read 1:10 am, and the convoy had stopped for inspection.

"We have an additional fifteen trucks at the end of the convoy. No UN labels. That's correct?" one of his lieutenants radioed in.

"That's right, no need to open them – just hurry," Abu Faisal responded.

"We have a situation," another of his lieutenants (also a cousin) reported. "Three cars approaching from the dirt road to the northeast. They're flying black flags"

"I can imagine who that is... on my way," Abu Faisal replied.

A few minutes later, he reached a crossroads near the convoy where his men had set up a makeshift checkpoint. Another one of his cousins, smoking a joint, greeted him.

"Look at the sky, it's beautiful," he mused. "Almost ironic: the lights in our beloved Syria go out because of power cuts from the war, and suddenly you see the stars like never before. How bittersweet." He took another puff.

"Are we doing poetry slam now? Stay sharp.. and put out that damn joint"

"It's the Knights of Sharia!" his cousin said, pointing into the darkness. "Great. Head-banging Islamists is all we need."

Three of Abu Faisal's men shone their flashlights, revealing five bearded men in thobes, AK-47s slung over their shoulders.

"Assalamu alaikum wa rahmatullahi wa barakatuh," the leader with an especially long beard called out.

"Good to see you, Abu Aysha," Abu Faisal replied, raising an eyebrow. "To what do we owe the pleasure?"

"We come on urgent business. We have heard troubling reports that your fighters are not attending our weekly Quran memorisation classes," Abu Aysha said, wagging a finger.

"That is, without a doubt, a completely reasonable concern to raise in the middle of nowhere in the middle of the night," Abu Faisal said with an ironic nod.

"We have also been told that members of your Syrian Liberation Army are using drugs," Abu Aysha added with a stern face.

"That would indeed be a scandal, and I will investigate these accusations with the utmost diligence," Abu Faisal said, continuing to nod, even as he caught a glimpse of glowing embers in the darkness from his men down the road. The five men seemed oblivious to the dismissive tone in Abu Faisal's voice and remained standing there, silent and unmoving. After about twenty awkward seconds, Abu Faisal spoke again:

"Well, would an envelope with \$10,000 temporarily ease your concerns?"

"God willing, that could settle the matter for now. If there were three envelopes, however, it would help to cover our travel expenses for the Antalya conference. That would allow us to support the position of the heroic Syrian Liberation Army and its God-fearing leader in what is likely to be a very competitive election process for the position of Supreme Leader."

"How considerate. I'll see what I can do," Abu Faisal said, rolling his eyes internally.

The Sharia Knights' insincere lectures were the last thing he needed. But he did need their silence – and, more importantly, the support of the Islamists at the upcoming Antalya conference. Half the world's intelligence agencies would be gathering to meet the Northern Alliance warlords, and the conference was widely regarded as the place where the Supreme Leader of the Syrian Revolution would be decided.

Two minutes later, in the Peacemakers' makeshift Situation Room in Geneva, Abu Faisal's chat window blinked: "Convoy is heading to Aleppo. It's done."

Gerald jumped from his chair. "Mission accomplished!" he cheered, pulling his phone from his pocket to share the good news with Jason Doll. "Can't wait for Adil Shah to hear this... I'll get us champagne!" he called out, sprinting toward the kitchen.

Across the Atlantic, Jason Doll sat in his office, casually browsing for Brunello Cucinelli puffer jackets for his upcoming skiing holiday in Aspen. Just as Gerald's message popped up on his phone, the office door opened. A sharp-looking man in a black suit placed a sheet of paper on his desk.

"NSA interception of a call in the southern Aleppo countryside, 45 minutes ago, sir."

Jason Doll read the transcript:

CLASSIFIED INTERCEPT – NSA SIGNALS INTELLIGENCE

Date/Time: 12/17/2014 – 00:55:11 (EST -07:00)

Intercept ID: #74381-AZ

Participants:

- **HAIDER AL-KHEIR**, Adviser to President Bashar Assad
- **KHALID RASHDAN**, aka Abu Faisal, Commander, Syrian Liberation Army

TRANSCRIPT (verbatim):

AL-KHEIR: Your boys better not pull any hinky shit like last time. No 'missing trucks,' got it?

RASHDAN: If there are any missing trucks, it's because of your greedy pricks. My guys are well-trained.

AL-KHEIR: Yeah, yeah. Look, we've got a good thing going here. A humanitarian corridor that doubles as a smuggling route. Best part? Who's gonna find out? This Gerald guy – he's a real useful idiot. Let's keep it that way.

RASHDAN: You know, when the revolution triumphs, I'm going to enjoy stringing you up by your balls.

[Call terminated by AL-KHEIR.]

END TRANSCRIPT