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Syria at a Crossroads: Navigating Nationalism, Foreign Fighters, and Regional Stakes

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On December 8, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) seized power in Syria, ending the decades-long regime of Bashar al-Assad. While this momentous event has brought jubilation to many Syrians, it has also raised critical questions about the nation's future. Syria's transition remains precarious, with challenges ranging from uniting its diverse society to addressing regional and global influences. The success of this fragile process will hinge on the careful navigation of Syrian Arab nationalism, integration of foreign fighters, and cooperation among international stakeholders.

The Rise of HTS and Golani's Gamble

Ahmad Al Shara, known as Golani, now faces the daunting task of leading a fractured nation. HTS, which has historically been viewed with skepticism due to its Salafi roots, has taken initial steps to assert political and security control, aiming to avoid a power vacuum. However, Golani's past complicates his efforts to gain legitimacy both domestically and internationally. His shift toward moderation risks alienating hardline factions within HTS, potentially sparking internal dissent. Additionally, Golani must avoid the "power poisoning" that has plagued many Middle Eastern leaders—a corruption of leadership that undermines governance and alienates key supporters.

Golani's leadership also faces external challenges. Syria's diverse population—including Sunni, Druze, Kurdish, Turkmen, and Christian communities—necessitates inclusive governance. Historically, Syrian nationalism has transcended sectarian divides, uniting citizens under a collective identity. Golani's ability to align HTS with this nationalist resurgence will be critical. Failure to embrace Syrian Arab nationalism risks alienating large segments of the population and undermining HTS's legitimacy.

Syrian Arab nationalism has long offered a sense of shared identity, helping Syrians resist external domination and assert sovereignty. Today, the resurgence of nationalist sentiment presents an opportunity to rebuild Syria as a unified nation-state. By prioritizing nationalism over narrow ideological agendas, HTS can foster inclusivity and legitimacy, both of which are critical to long-term stability.

The Foreign Fighter Challenge

Syria remains a battleground for foreign fighters, complicating efforts to stabilize the country. Key players include the Turkistan Islamic Party, Chechen-led factions, and Uzbek brigades, each with their own agendas and loyalties. These non-Syrian jihadist groups have long posed challenges to national sovereignty. Integrating these factions into a unified national framework is a monumental task. Their continued presence raises international concerns about extremism, threatening HTS's attempts to rebrand itself as a legitimate governing body.

Integrating foreign fighters will require disarmament, reintegration programs, and international cooperation. The ongoing presence of these groups also highlights broader geopolitical stakes in Syria. Regional and global powers—including Turkey, Russia, Iran, and the United States—continue to exert influence, each pursuing their own strategic goals. The fragmentation caused by these competing interests could derail Syria's fragile transition if not carefully managed.

Lessons from Lebanon: Avoiding Fragmentation

Lebanon's history provides a cautionary tale for Syria. The disintegration of the Lebanese army during its civil war (1975–1990) allowed militias like Hezbollah to rise, creating parallel power structures that persist to this day. Even after the Taif Agreement ended the civil war, sectarianism remained entrenched, preventing the emergence of a cohesive national identity.

For Syria, the lessons are clear. The HTS-led interim government must prioritize the integration of armed groups into a unified military under state control. Failure to do so risks the emergence of proxy forces and fragmented governance, mirroring Lebanon's enduring instability. A unifying constitution that reflects Syria's diverse social fabric will be essential to fostering national unity and avoiding the pitfalls of sectarianism.

Turkey's role in Syria

Turkey's positive influence on HTS and its leader Ahmed al-Shara is pivotal for achieving a sustainable peace process in Syria. For over 13 years, Turkey has hosted Syrian refugees and opposition groups, playing a significant role in shaping the political landscape through initiatives such as the Syrian National Coalition (SNC), the Syrian Interim Government, and the Free Syrian Army. This long-standing engagement underscores Turkey's deep understanding of the aspirations of the Syrian opposition, as well as the broader expectations of the Syrian populace, particularly regarding constitutional reforms and democratic elections.

Today, Syria requires a comprehensive restructuring across political, economic, social, and security domains. Managing this process effectively demands not only regional cooperation but also international legitimacy. Turkey's leadership, alongside the constructive involvement of other regional and global powers, is essential for drafting an inclusive constitution and establishing a governance model that represents Syria's diverse ethnic, religious, and sectarian groups.

However, Turkey's involvement is not without risks. Critics argue that Ankara's strategic interests could overshadow its commitment to an inclusive peace process. Balancing these interests while maintaining its role as a mediator will be crucial. From a Western perspective, addressing the global threat posed by ISIS—especially as its members, including Western nationals, remain detained in Syria—is also a pressing concern.

For Turkey, maintaining a coordinated approach with the United States and European Union is crucial to fostering an inclusive and lasting peace in Syria. However, the European Union's tendency to frame Syria's developments primarily through the lens of migration policy fails to capture the complexity and gravity of the situation. A holistic and cooperative strategy is needed to ensure sustainable progress.

Moving Forward

Syria's fragile transition requires a delicate balance of internal and external cooperation. Internally, HTS must focus on building robust state institutions that can withstand fragmentation. A constitution that ensures equal representation for all communities will be crucial. Externally, regional and global actors must align their efforts to support Syria's stability, setting aside conflicting agendas for the greater good.

Golani's leadership is at a crossroads. His ability to navigate nationalism, integrate foreign fighters, and manage international dynamics will determine whether Syria emerges from this period as a stable and sovereign nation or descends into further chaos. By learning from Lebanon's mistakes and embracing nationalism as a unifying force, Syria has the chance to forge a new path forward—one that prioritizes peace, inclusivity, and national identity over division and conflict.



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