

# Syria's political history and Syria-Iran relations in the context of the Arab Spring (2011-2023)

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## ABSTRACT

This study examines Syria-Iran relations during the Syrian Civil War within a theoretically grounded analytical framework, focusing specifically on their military, economic, and cultural dimensions. Moving beyond a simple narrative of events, the article argues that the trajectory of bilateral relations is shaped not only by wartime conditions but also by the long-standing structural characteristics of the modern Syrian state. The Syrian Civil War is therefore conceptualized as a critical juncture that both reveals and reconfigures the underlying patterns of Syria-Iran relations. Despite the authoritarian nature of both regimes, the study demonstrates that their foreign policy behavior is institutionalized, adaptable, and strategically pragmatic. Accordingly, the military, political, and infrastructural support provided to Syria during the war extends beyond centralized state structures, indicating the existence of a complex, multi-actor and multi-channel network. Methodologically, the study adopts a neorealist framework that highlights alliance formation, balance of power dynamics, and regime security as key explanatory variables. The analysis adopts a regional perspective focusing on interstate relations, while incorporating a macro-level global outlook through geopolitical positioning and employs a qualitative content analysis method. The findings contribute to the literature by highlighting the interaction between structural constraints and actor agency in shaping alliance behavior, providing a more nuanced analysis of multilayered cooperation during protracted warfare.

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## Introduction

The recorded history of Syria dates back to at least the Umayyad Caliphate (661-750), one of the most powerful Arab empires of the medieval period. However, Arab nationalism has played a decisive role in shaping modern Syria. In world history, the French Revolution of 1789 is widely regarded as one of the earliest and most significant victories of nationalism over the monarchy. While nationalism became the dominant political force in Europe during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, its influence extended beyond the continent and played a crucial role in shaping the modern Middle East during and after World War I. The primary aim of this article is to examine the political structure of modern Syria and its multidimensional relations with Iran during the Civil War (Alsaleh, 2021).

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Syria is not only a key state in the region but also a geopolitical battleground in the Middle Eastern system. The geopolitical position and future of countries in the region, particularly Syria, are shaped by political structures, international crises, and regional aspirations. Therefore, Syria should be analyzed at the systemic level. As one of the central actors in the development of Arab nationalism and pan-Arabism, Syria emerged as a centralized and ideologically institutionalized state, influenced to some extent by Islamist and leftist political movements. The survival of the Syrian regime during the Civil War has been largely facilitated by the structural foundations established in the formation of the modern Syrian state, as well as sustained military, political, and economic support from Russia and Iran.

This study first examines the historical processes that led to the emergence of modern Syria. It then evaluates the country's social, demographic, economic, and political characteristics. Finally, it analyzes Syria-Iran relations after 2002. The Civil War, which has persisted for over a decade, has significantly reshaped both Syria and the broader region. In response, Syria and its allies have developed a highly coordinated system of cooperation to preserve the existing order. This study further aims to assess the potential transformations in Syria's political structure in the event of a regime change.

Recurring crises have consistently tested the cyclical dynamics and resilience of bilateral ties. This study analyzes political pragmatism within authoritarian alliances, arguing that Syria's political structure and internal vulnerabilities have shaped its bilateral relations since 2011. It examines the country's institutional framework, key actors, and processes underpinning these relationships.

Despite the presence of strong alliance systems, Syria's institutional structures, actors, and political processes have failed to secure broad societal loyalty to the Assad regime. The regime's fragility stems from deepening internal divisions that undermine its capacity to maintain stability. The Syrian Civil War, further intensified by the involvement of multiple regional actors, has contributed to the fragmentation of the nation-state structure. Methodologically, this study is grounded in a neorealist analytical framework, with particular emphasis on foreign policy behavior and alliance formation. From this perspective, Syria-Iran relations are conceptualized as a hard power-based alliance driven by strategic imperatives, regime security concerns, and the structural constraints of the regional balance of power.

In the modern Middle East, alliance formation and geopolitical structuring have been central to both regional and global power struggles.<sup>1</sup> To ensure its security, the Syrian regime has forged a strategic alliance with Iran and Russia. Since the 1980s, it has balanced ideology and pragmatism in its foreign policy, as demonstrated during the First and Second Gulf Wars. Its primary objectives have been to preserve territorial integrity, regain the Golan Heights, and maintain a balance of power to ensure the regime's survival. In response to the US expansive power strategy of the United States aimed at sustaining global dominance, Iran has pursued geopolitical objectives focused on building regional and transregional alliance networks. Owing to its mountainous geography and strategic depth, Iran has developed a sustainable security strategy based on energy resources and regional alliances.

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<sup>1</sup> Since 8 December 2024, the process of regime change in Syria has begun. The construction of a new Syria can be seen as a long-term and uncertain transformation shaped by the dynamics of the civil war and regional power competition.

In Syria, nation-building, Baathism, and Arab nationalism are key determinants of foreign policy preferences. Within this framework, Syria's relations with Iran can be understood as operating at the intersection of rational calculations of national interest and the imperatives of regime security, ideological alignment, and regional threat perceptions, which together reflect both normative and pragmatic considerations of the Syrian leadership. Accordingly, patterns of cooperation and periodic divergences between the two states should be analyzed as products of a multilayered causal relationship shaped by the interaction of rational, normative, and pragmatic dimensions under changing conditions. This form of alignment has, in turn, contributed to the resilience and longevity of the Syrian regime despite its authoritarian character and structural vulnerabilities. Methodologically, this study also applies qualitative content analysis to systematically examine policy documents and secondary literature to identify recurring themes and interpretive patterns underlying Syria-Iran relations.

## **Conceptual framework: Neorealist foreign policy and alliance system**

During the Cold War, the United States classified Syria as a state outside the global liberal order, a designation later extended to Iran following the 1979 Islamic Revolution. After the 2003 invasion of Iraq and the gradual erosion of the unipolar world order, debates surrounding the structure and resilience of the liberal international system intensified. Rather than the emergence of a coherent alternative global order, new configurations have developed in which authoritarian states have formed pragmatic alliances based on shared strategic interests rather than ideology. The Syria-Iran partnership exemplifies this pattern, representing a hard-power-oriented alliance grounded in mutual security concerns and regional strategy.

Within the context of the Syrian Civil War, the country's trajectory has been increasingly shaped by hard power geopolitics. From a neorealist perspective, alliance formation is primarily driven by threat perception and the dynamics of the balance-of-power. Confronted with the anarchic nature of the international system and intensifying great power competition, states pursue balancing strategies (Walt, 1990). According to Waltz, defensive realism is based on the pursuit of sufficient power, a heightened sense of threat, and the search for a balance of power. The emergence of war is often attributed to structural issues, such as misperceptions and the security dilemma. This approach suggests that states assume that "sufficient power equals security" to maximize their security (Walt, 1990). In contrast, offensive neorealism, as advanced by John Mearsheimer, posits that states are driven to maximize their relative power to secure survival under anarchic conditions. Within this framework, states tend to pursue expansionist and aggressive policies whenever opportunities arise (Mearsheimer, 2001). Although neorealism makes significant contributions to the explanation of state behavior, it often adopts a static and reductionist framework. Especially since the 2000s, systemic transformations in the Middle East have made alliance relationships more prominent in the survival strategies of the region's states. This demonstrates that the foreign policy behavior of countries in the region is shaped by the interaction of dynamic elements, such as power distribution, flexible alliance networks, regional competition, and regime security.

Alliances, continually reshaped by global competition and recurring political crises, increasingly reflect pragmatic and realist survival strategies. In this framework, Syria-Iran

relations have evolved significantly since 2011, largely driven by Iran's efforts to expand its geopolitical influence in the Middle East. This dynamic illustrates how regional powers utilize alliance formation to consolidate their strategic depth and navigate shifting power configurations (Conley, n.d.). As noted in the literature, "the rise of autocratic alliances is not a monolithic phenomenon; these partnerships often contain internal contradictions and competing interests" (Irwin, 2025).

The Syria-Iran relationship deepened toward the end of the Cold War, shaped by the security dilemmas faced by both states within an international environment that was increasingly defined by unipolarity and liberal norms. In the post-Cold War period, the hierarchical and anarchic features of the international system were partially moderated by the diffusion of liberal values and institutions in the West. Nevertheless, geopolitical and security alliances remain central to authoritarian states. The Syria-Iran relationship can be interpreted through the concept of the alliance-security dilemma, which highlights two key challenges: First, alliances operate under the structural pressure of dominant powers. Second, interdependence among allies generates concerns about abandonment.

Such alliances, formed in response to perceived threats, inherently contain tension and contradictions. Smaller allies may face the risk of overcommitment, potentially undermining their national interests. Conversely, closely aligning with dominant powers may expose them to additional security vulnerabilities (Akçam, 2023, p. 9). In International Relations, orthodox theories of alliance formation emphasize the balance of power and systemic structure. From this perspective, alliances among authoritarian states can be understood as balancing behavior in the face of external threats (Walt, 1985).

Following the outbreak of the Syrian Civil War in 2011, the alliance between Syria and Iran became increasingly asymmetrical, producing a more complex and, at times, paradoxical structure. Syria, facing both internal and external security challenges, was compelled to coordinate closely with Iran, which limited its strategic autonomy. This reflects the security-autonomy trade-off inherent in alliance politics. Iran, for its part, has grounded its involvement in Syria in core state interests such as security and regime survival. This approach has resulted in a more assertive and risk-tolerant strategy. Simultaneously, alliance behavior remains shaped by expectations derived from past interactions, as "both parties must draw on past behavior to predict or explain future behavior" (Gharayagh-Zandi, 2024).

Historically, the relationship between Iran and Syria has developed on a relatively stable foundation. Iran officially recognized Syria in 1953, shortly after the latter gained independence from France. The nationalist wave that followed World War I strengthened anticolonial solidarity, particularly among Arab states. After the 1979 revolution, Iran redefined its political discourse around anti-imperialism and political Islam, especially during the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988). Despite their clear ideological differences, the two states succeeded in forming a durable strategic partnership.

Analyzing Syria-Iran relations through the lens of security and national interests highlights the central role of military cooperation, often interpreted as a response to shifting regional dynamics. However, the relationship extends beyond security considerations, encompassing economic and cultural dimensions (Risseuw, 2018). Over time, this multidimensional interaction has reinforced the depth and resilience of alliances.

Syria has consistently sought external partners to strengthen its position in the regional balance of power. The alliance with Iran represents the most significant outcome of this

strategy to date. Following the 1970 coup in Syria and the 1979 revolution in Iran, both states faced containment policies shaped by the strategic priorities of the United States and Israel. These policies were closely linked to broader regional concerns, including control over energy resources, the strategic configuration of the Middle East and the security of Israel. The U.S. intervention in Iraq further transformed the regional order and redefined its strategic environment.

The Syria–Iran alliance was initially consolidated during the Iran–Iraq War, when Syria, unlike many Arab states, supported Iran. Iran, in turn, backed Syria’s claims regarding the Golan Heights. Since then, the relationship has evolved in response to major regional developments, including the Iranian nuclear issue and the Syrian Civil War, which followed the Arab Spring. Although Syria’s secular, Arab nationalist, and socialist political structure differs significantly from Iran’s theocratic system, both regimes have demonstrated limited openness to ideological transformation. The Syrian regime, centered on the Assad leadership and its networks, cannot be reduced solely to a sectarian identity (Van Dam, 2000, pp. 129–131). Similarly, despite internal political distinctions, Iran’s foreign policy has shown high continuity. Consequently, cooperation between the two states has been primarily driven by regime security and structural political considerations.

## **Syria as the weaker ally: Historical background and political structure**

The Syrian territories, which remained under the suzerainty of the Ottoman Empire until the First World War, came under the rule of the Syrian Arab Kingdom in 1918. This short-lived political entity (October 1918–November 1920) was established under the leadership of Faisal I, the son of the Sharif of Mecca, and was ideologically aligned with Arab nationalism.

The strategic partnership between Syria and Iran should not be understood solely as a temporary military alignment; rather, it can also be interpreted as a response to the colonial legacy shaped by the Sykes–Picot Agreement and Balfour Declaration. The territorial fragmentation that followed these arrangements significantly influenced Syria’s foreign policy orientation. In particular, the obstruction by Western powers of aspirations for a unified “Greater Syria” (Bilad al-Sham) contributed to the emergence of a revisionist and irredentist dimension within Syrian nationalism.

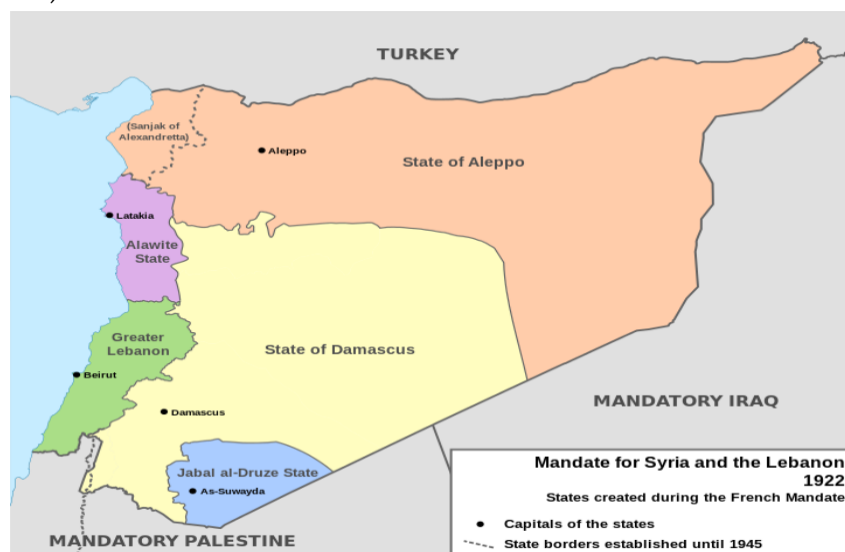
The Sykes–Picot Agreement divided historical Syria into several political entities – Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, and Palestine – thereby reinforcing external influence over the region. Furthermore, the establishment of Israel in the Palestinian territories following the Balfour Declaration had a lasting impact on Syria’s national identity. In the 1920s, King Faisal’s nationalist vision centered on uniting historical Syria under a monarchical framework. Subsequently, Arab nationalism and the Ba’ath regime in Syria derived much of their legitimacy from their opposition to foreign intervention and pursuit of pan-Arab unity (Ehteshami & Hinnebusch, 1997, pp. 154–155). In this regard, Arab nationalism functioned not merely as an ideological orientation but as a broader project of post-colonial state formation (Dawisha, 1980).

Following this period, Syria was placed under the French Mandate in 1921. The mandate system refers to a form of governance established under the authority of the League of Nations, whereby former Ottoman territories were administered by external

powers until they were deemed capable of self-rule. In practice, this system functioned as indirect colonial governance. On July 24, 1922, France was formally granted mandate authority over Syria and Lebanon under Article 22 of the League of Nations Covenant (June 28, 1919).

In 1926, the French Mandate authorities formally separated Lebanon from Syria and established it as a distinct political entity, thereby institutionalizing a new state structure in the mandate system. The Great Syrian Uprising marked a significant phase of resistance to French rule. France, which sought to establish a protectorate system within a colonial framework, faced opposition from nationalist groups, students, and various local communities. Repressive administrative practices in Jabal al-Druze, particularly during Captain Carbillet's tenure, alongside General Sarrail's centralizing policies, contributed to escalating unrest. The uprising soon spread to major urban centers such as Damascus, Aleppo, and Hama, thereby challenging the French justification of a "civilizing mission." Even limited attacks on Damascus raised concerns regarding the sustainability of French authority, eventually compelling France to negotiate with local actors and introduce limited administrative reforms (Ouahes, 2018). In 1936, an agreement between France and Syria envisaged Syrian independence within five years (Altuğ, 2008, pp. 72–74); however, the French rule continued until 1946.

During World War II, Syria came under the control of the Vichy regime, which collaborated with the Axis powers. In 1941, British and Free French forces took control of the territory. Between 1940 and 1948, the region encompassing Syria and Lebanon became an arena of covert rivalry between Britain and France, particularly regarding intelligence operations and decolonization strategies (Tellis, 2004). France maintained control through conventional colonial practices. Before and during the mandate period, the French authorities justified their presence by emphasizing the sectarian diversity of Syrian society. Many prominent Arab nationalist leaders were exiled to cities such as Amman and Cairo (Altuğ, 2008, p. 80). Between 1920 and 1946, governance in Syria was structured along ethnic and religious lines (Demirel, 2019, p. 7). The military, administrative institutions, and civil bureaucracy were organized accordingly. Moreover, France established a fragmented and polycentric administrative system by creating multiple sub-state entities across Syria and Lebanon (Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** French Mandate for Syria and The Lebanon in 1922

Source: Brilliant Maps (2023).

In the 1943 elections held under the mandate, Shukri al-Quwatli became Syria's first president. France withdrew from Syria in 1946, following the end of the French Mandate. Syria subsequently joined the United Nations as the Syrian Republic under a republican system of governance.

However, following independence, Syria failed to establish political or social stability. Instead, it has experienced a prolonged period of instability marked by successive military coups. These repeated interventions have led to significant transformations in the political regime and institutional structure. Consequently, Syria's parliamentary democracy proved to be short-lived. The failure of the democratic experience can be attributed to adverse internal and external conditions in the country. A key factor underlying this failure was the fragmented nature of political life, shaped by factionalism, sectarian divisions, and tribal loyalties organized around personal leadership rather than ideology. These dynamics have prevented the consolidation of a stable democratic system. Moreover, power struggles and conflicts of interest among competing elites intensified after the country gained independence. The interaction between regional geopolitical rivalries and domestic dissatisfaction has contributed to a persistent cycle of military coups (Şöhret, 2016, p. 48).

The struggle against French rule facilitated the formation of a nationalist bloc in Syria. However, following independence, power centers rooted in personal leadership and local social networks began to compete for authority. Figures such as Güçlü and Mardam founded the National Party, while political elites in Aleppo established the People's Party. As these divisions were rooted primarily in confessional and regional differences rather than ideological divergence, party formation did not contribute to deeper national integration (Sever, 2004, p. 200).

Shukri al-Quwatli, a graduate of the Istanbul Mekteb-i Mülkiye, lost power in a military coup in 1949. In the same year, Husni al-Zaim seized control and declared himself president, although his rule lasted only four months before a coup led by Sami al-Hinnawi overthrew it. Hinnawi's five-month rule ended with another coup led by Colonel Adib al-Shishakli. Al-Shishakli, who participated in the 1948 Arab-Israeli War and was affiliated with the Syrian Social Nationalist Party, established a military regime by banning all political parties, including the Syrian Communist Party, the Ba'ath Party, and the Muslim Brotherhood. This consolidation of power ultimately united the opposition forces against him, leading to his overthrow in 1954.

Following his return from exile in Egypt in 1955, Shukri al-Quwatli resumed presidency. His tenure coincided with the intensification of Cold War rivalries in the region and persistent domestic political instability. During this period, Syria increasingly emerged as a theater of strategic competition between the United States and the Soviet Union (Alsaleh, 2021).

On February 26, 1955, the United States sought to prevent rapprochement between Damascus and Cairo by issuing a diplomatic note to the Syrian government. It rejected Syria's attempt to establish a joint defense agreement with Egypt, while Syria, in turn, declined the U.S. proposals. Concurrently, Israeli attacks and the assassination of Syrian Deputy Chief of Staff Adnan al-Maliki pushed Syria further away from the U.S. sphere of influence (Primakov, 2010, p. 56).

The establishment of Israel in 1948 accelerated Arab nationalism. In response, the United States promoted the "Northern Tier" strategy, centered on Türkiye and Pakistan, beginning in 1953 as part of its containment policy toward the Soviet Union. In 1955,

Türkiye, Iraq, Iran, Pakistan, and the United Kingdom established the Baghdad Pact. Following Iraq's withdrawal in 1958, the alliance weakened and was later reorganized as the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO). Its primary objective was to contain Soviet influence and limit the spread of Arab nationalism in the region. The United States provided external military and political support to this framework (Savaş & İşler, 2020).

In 1958, Syria entered a political union with Egypt, forming the United Arab Republic. While the Soviet Union supported this development, the United States opposed it. In line with the Eisenhower Doctrine, which aimed to counter Soviet influence in the region, the United States requested that Türkiye establish a military presence along the Syrian border, a request with which the Menderes government complied. This rivalry accelerated Syria's alignment with the Soviet Union. The Israeli occupation of the strategically significant Golan Heights in 1967 further heightened Syria's security concerns and reinforced its Arab nationalist orientation (Hinnebusch, 2012, p. 88).

In 1961, Syria withdrew from the United Arab Republic following a military coup and reasserted its sovereignty (Kerr, 1971). In 1963, a Ba'athist military coup established a new regime. Internal struggles between civilian and military factions within the Ba'ath Party culminated in 1970, when Hafez al-Assad seized power in a bloodless coup. Assad consolidated an authoritarian system while maintaining Syria's traditional foreign policy orientation and strengthening ties with Egypt against Israel (Kerr, 2010).

In the late 1970s and the early 1980s, the Muslim Brotherhood intensified its opposition to the Assad regime, particularly in the cities of Aleppo and Hama. Influenced by Sayyid Qutb's ideas, the group carried out attacks, including a major assault on an artillery school in Aleppo. The regime responded with severe repression, contributing to the consolidation of authoritarian rule (Primakov, 2010).

Following the death of Hafez al-Assad in 2000, his son Bashar al-Assad assumed leadership. Syria's foreign relations initially improved, as reflected in its diplomatic engagement with Türkiye and the European Union. However, this relative stability ended with the outbreak of the Arab Spring in 2011 in Tunisia. Protests that began in the city of Daraa quickly spread nationwide and evolved into an armed conflict. Opposition groups were organized under structures such as the Syrian National Council, while external actors—including the United States, European states, and regional powers—became increasingly involved. The Arab League suspended Syria's membership and imposed economic sanctions.

The emergence of ISIS in 2014 further complicated the conflict, while groups such as the PYD and YPG, which were supported by the United States, gained territorial influence in northern Syria. The ongoing civil war, which is shaped by proxy dynamics and regional interventions, continues to destabilize the country. Key factors exacerbating Syria's geopolitical challenges include the loss of the Golan Heights in 1967, Israel's 1981 annexation claim, the withdrawal of Syrian forces from Lebanon following the assassination of Rafik Hariri, and sustained external involvement in Syria's internal conflict (Yazıcı, 2018).

## Syria's foreign policy and the allies

Following independence, Syria shaped its domestic and foreign policies within the ideological framework of Arab nationalism. The state sought to address the issue of arbitrarily drawn and politically fragile borders through pan-Arabism. In the post-1948

context, neither the establishment of a peace treaty with Israel nor the development of strategic relations with the U.S.-aligned Saudi Arabia was considered a viable policy option. Consequently, successive Syrian governments increasingly aligned themselves with Arab nationalism under Gamal Abdel Nasser's leadership. The mobilization of Syria's nationalist middle class further consolidated its political alignment with Cairo. Syria maintained cooperation with Egypt, which established a National Front government in 1956 on an anti-imperialist platform.

In parallel, Western support for conservative coup attempts in Syria – particularly under the Eisenhower Doctrine – as well as Iraqi pressure in 1957 aimed to contain the rise of Arab nationalism. The United States was also concerned about the perceived expansion of pro-communist tendencies in Syria and its growing ties with the Soviet Union. Within the context of external pressure and domestic polarization, Syrian political elites succeeded in forming the United Arab Republic with Egypt (Barymow, 2017). In Syrian foreign policy, the interaction between ideological commitments and pragmatic considerations constitutes a foundational element of Ba'athist ideology (Al-Bitar, 1960).

The 1963 coup that restored the Ba'ath Party marked the beginning of a renewed phase of political instability. Driven by the pursuit of revolutionary legitimacy, the Damascus leadership disregarded the unfavorable regional balance of power and consequently suffered defeat in the 1967 Arab-Israeli War (Hinnebusch, 2012, p. 99). The Yom Kippur War, which began on October 6, 1973, with coordinated Egyptian and Syrian military operations against Israel, represented a critical juncture in regional and global politics, particularly because of its implications for energy geopolitics. Israel was initially unprepared. Following extensive Soviet military support for Arab states, the U.S. President Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger initiated a large-scale airlift to sustain the Israeli military's capabilities. During the conflict, Arab oil-producing states imposed an embargo on Western countries that supported Israel. The subsequent diplomatic process, led by Kissinger's "shuttle diplomacy," culminated in an agreement in 1974 (Yergin, 2008).

Two major turning points significantly shaped the Syrian foreign policy in the 1970s. First, after 1970, Arab nationalism became institutionalized as a relatively stable pillar of the Syrian state policy. Second, pan-Arabism, previously the unifying ideological framework of Arab nationalism, gradually declined following the Egypt-Israel Peace Treaty signed on March 26, 1979. Since 1948, Israel has been the central issue sustaining Arab political mobilization, particularly among Egypt, Syria, and Iraq. The 1979 treaty made Egypt the first Arab state to formally recognize Israel and marked the beginning of the official normalization of relations between the two countries, including the lifting of restrictions on trade and travel. For Syria, this development represented both an ideological rupture and a significant shift in the regional geopolitics. In response, Arab states suspended Egypt's membership in the Arab League and relocated the organization's headquarters to Tunisia (Jillani, 1991).

Another important dimension of the Hafez al-Assad period was Syria's strategic engagement in Lebanon, which has been interpreted as part of a broader pan-Arab orientation and the establishment of a frontline buffer vis-à-vis Israel during the Lebanese Civil War that began in 1975. Syria intervened in accordance with this strategic rationale. Continuing this geopolitical legacy, Bashar al-Assad regarded Lebanon as a buffer zone against Israel and a critical component of regime security.

## The transformation of regional power balances and Syria's foreign policy (1980–2000)

Discussions regarding the failure of Arab nationalism to achieve political unity in Syria gained prominence in the 1980s. Arab nationalism was conceptually framed as a modern form of political organization that sought to construct a new social order through education, culture, and the arts. In this regard, nationalism functions as an integrative ideological project. One of its key intellectual architects, Sati' al-Husri, emphasized the importance of shared memory, language, and institutions as foundational elements in constructing the Arab nation (Cleveland, 2015). Similarly, Michel Aflaq defined Arab nationalism within the framework of pan-Arabism. For Aflaq, ideological coherence constituted a central principle of both domestic and foreign policy, although he also acknowledged the necessity of strategic pragmatism in foreign policy (Aflaq, 1975).

The Arab League, together with socialist reformism and nationalist ideologies, exerted a substantial political influence throughout the 1960s and the 1970s. However, from the 1980s onward, political fragmentation and identity-based cleavages became increasingly pronounced within Syrian politics. The 1982 Hama Massacre represented a critical turning point, marking both an ideological crisis and a significant decline in the regime's legitimacy. During this period, the United States classified Syria among seven states designated as sponsors of terrorism (alongside Iran, Iraq, Libya, Cuba, North Korea, and Sudan). Nevertheless, Washington adopted a strategy of "benign neglect" toward Syria (Tellis, 2004, p. 211).

The establishment and consolidation of the Amal Movement and Hezbollah in Lebanon during the Iran–Iraq War (1980–1988) within the framework of Syrian–Iranian cooperation illustrates the depth of their geopolitical alignment. The 1980s were characterized by efforts to reconstruct the regional balance of power amid the fragmentation of the Arab system and increasing Western intervention. The emergence of Shiite political mobilization in Lebanon, the institutionalization of Syrian–Iranian cooperation, and the militarization of Lebanese Shiite communities should be understood as the outcomes of this broader regional transformation. Musa al-Sadr initially organized the Movement of the Deprived (Amal). Syria regarded Amal as a relatively secular and reliable partner for safeguarding its interests in Lebanon, containing Palestinian factions, and maintaining a buffer zone against Israel. In parallel, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps of Iran provided training and organizational support to Shiite militias through its deployment in the Bekaa Valley, thereby contributing to the institutional foundations of Hezbollah. Although Syria perceived this development as partially inconsistent with its secular ideological orientation, it nonetheless supported Hezbollah's consolidation and Iran's regional influence as a counterbalance to the Israeli and Western presence in Lebanon (Ehteshami & Hinnebusch, 1997, pp. 154–155).

During the First Gulf War, Syria adopted a foreign policy grounded in regime security considerations and pragmatic calculations. Concerned about the destabilizing implications of Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, Damascus joined the U.S.-led international coalition. This decision reflected a broader strategy aimed at improving international legitimacy and strengthening diplomatic engagement, demonstrating a pragmatic orientation in Syria's foreign policy (Hinnebusch, 2003). However, from the 1990s onward, the international system became increasingly shaped by U.S. unipolar dominance, which intensified political

and military pressure on autonomous regional actors such as Syria, Iran, and Iraq. In this context, Syria's pragmatic foreign policy orientation was increasingly constrained by the imperative of preserving regime autonomy.

Following the September 11 attacks, Syria expressed political support for the United States but did not participate militarily in the invasion of Iraq. Damascus interpreted the U.S. intervention in Iraq as a source of regional instability and a direct threat to its regime security (Seale, 2007).

Although both Syria and Iraq formally embraced Arab nationalism, their rivalry dates back to the 1970s and persisted into the 2000s. Iraq perceived the Syrian-Iranian alignment as a threat to its regime's security and territorial stability. In this sense, Arab nationalism in both states failed to overcome intra-Arab competition for regional leadership. Owing to similar authoritarian governance structures, regime security concerns have played a decisive role in shaping both domestic politics and foreign policy orientations. Moreover, the sectarian compositions of Iraq and Syria influenced the internal political dynamics and external security perceptions of both states (Lynch, 2006).

According to Dawisha, the failure of Arab nationalism can be attributed to weak institutionalization, leader-centric political structures, fragmented social foundations, intra-regional power rivalries, and the structural transformation of the international system after 1990 (Dawisha, 2003).

## **Syria's foreign policy in the 2000s**

However, Syria's geopolitical environment has undergone a significant transformation under Bashar al-Assad's rule. The Syrian military intervention in Lebanon and its subsequent withdrawal in 2005 paradoxically strengthened Hezbollah's alignment with Syrian strategic interests, as the organization increasingly viewed its support for Damascus as essential to sustaining resistance against U.S. and Israeli policies (Salloukh, 2013).

Russia has emerged as Syria's principal external ally since the war began. Syrian-Russian relations were initially consolidated during the Cold War as a counterweight to the U.S.-Israel strategic alignment. Following the establishment of Israel in 1948, several Arab states, including Syria, engaged in armed conflict with the new state (Hook & Spanier, 2014, p. 119). Extensive U.S. military and political support for Israel contributed to the gradual alignment of these Arab states with the Soviet Union.

From 1957 onward, Syria began receiving regular arms supplies from the Soviet Union. The expansion of Soviet influence in Syria raised concerns in Türkiye, which closely aligned itself with the United States during the 1950s. In 1957, tensions between Ankara and Damascus escalated to the point of a near military confrontation. In Jordan, which played an influential role in regional political dynamics, disagreements emerged over relations with the Soviet Union and China after the 1956 Suez Crisis. After internal political disputes between King Hussein and Prime Minister Nabulsi, the government resigned, political parties were banned, and leftist military officers fled to Syria. Amid this regional polarization, Syria's pro-Soviet Defense Minister Khalid al-Azm visited Moscow in 1957 and signed a cooperation agreement. In the same year, a diplomatic crisis between Syria and the United States led to the expulsion of two American diplomats from Damascus (Şentürk, 2002, p. 99).

In 1971, Hafez al-Assad granted the Soviet Union access to Tartus' naval facility. This development marked a strategic deepening of bilateral relations, enabling Syria to expand its military partnership with a global superpower and allowing Moscow to secure a strategic foothold in the Mediterranean. Owing to the failure of Arab unity projects, the persistent Israeli threat, and sustained U.S. pressure, Syria remained firmly within the Soviet sphere of influence throughout the Cold War. During the 1980s, the Soviet Union continued to serve as Syria's primary arms supplier and provided extensive military training and institutional support to the Syrian armed forces (Arı, 2014, p. 137).

The outbreak of the Syrian Civil War marked a new phase in Syrian-Russian relations. Russia opposed UN Security Council sanctions against Syria and continued supplying military equipment to the Assad government. In 2015, it became directly militarily involved in this conflict. In December 2015, Human Rights Watch published an investigation titled *If the Dead Could Speak: Mass Killings and Torture in Syrian Detention Centers (The Caesar File)*, documenting testimonies and photographic evidence of detainee deaths in Syrian government facilities. The report alleged that some burial sites were identified using satellite imagery and geolocation analysis, including the courtyard of Military Hospital 601 in Mezze (Human Rights Watch, 2015).

The Syrian conflict is widely interpreted as a theater of ongoing global geopolitical competition, a condition that has persisted beyond the Cold War. In this context, both the United States and Russia remain deeply involved in the conflict as well as in diplomatic efforts toward its resolution. On February 26, 2016, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 2268, calling on all parties to cease hostilities and comply with the agreed framework supported by the United States and Russia. Although a ceasefire was implemented on February 27, 2016, hostilities resumed and escalated by July of the same year (Abboud, 2016).

### **Syria-Iran comprehensive cooperation: A range of items**

As Phillips (2016) emphasizes, the Arab Spring evolved into a systemic crisis in Syria, shaped by the interaction of regional and global power competition and domestic political dynamics. Within this context, the Syrian civil war transcended a conventional regime-opposition confrontation and developed into a complex proxy conflict involving multiple regional and international actors, producing enduring transformations in the geopolitical architecture of the Middle East. Phillips argues that this process constitutes a critical turning point in which regional power configurations were restructured, and external actors actively sought to expand or consolidate their respective spheres of influence.

Russia and Iran's involvement in the Syrian civil war is not limited to regime security or influence maximization; rather, it is closely linked to broader strategies aimed at preserving their regional geopolitical positions and sustaining their power projection capabilities. For Iran, Syria represents a pivotal component of its regional sphere of influence and the strategic "axis of resistance." For Russia, the intervention in Syria has served to consolidate its military presence in the Eastern Mediterranean and reassert its role in global power competition. Accordingly, these interventions should be understood as the products of both security imperatives and geopolitical strategies. In this regard, Ayman (2012) identifies the Syrian crisis as a critical case for understanding the transformation of Iran's foreign policy.

High-level diplomatic engagement between Iran and Syria during the conflict reflects both continuity and strategic adaptation. Mahmoud Ahmadinejad visited Syria on several occasions, including in 2010, and Ebrahim Raisi conducted official visits in 2022 and 2023 (Motamedi, 2023). These visits demonstrate Tehran's sustained commitment to preserving and deepening its strategic alliance with Damascus during and after the Syrian conflict. Iran's regional policy has been largely shaped by pragmatic strategic calculations. Although Tehran tacitly supported the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq – primarily to facilitate regime change in Baghdad and reduce regional pressure – it adopted a markedly different approach in Syria. In this case, Iran prioritized the survival of the Bashar al-Assad regime, viewing regime change as a direct threat to its regional strategic depth.

From a geopolitical perspective, Syria constitutes a core component of the nonstateional “axis of resistance,” which extends through Iraq to Lebanon. The Syrian civil war significantly intensified the involvement of regional and global actors, reshaping the alliance structures around the Assad government. At the peak of the conflict, approximately 80,000 Shiite militia fighters affiliated with Iran's Quds Force – the external operations wing of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) – were reportedly deployed in Syria. Iran established integrated command-and-control mechanisms and coordinated a transnational network of Iraqi, Lebanese, Afghan, and Syrian Shiite militias under the operational leadership of the Quds Force, reflecting its broader doctrine of proxy warfare and a layered regional influence (Uskowi, 2018).

During the civil war, several Iran-backed militias played a decisive role in sustaining the Assad regime. Among these, the Fatemiyoun Brigade (Liwa Fatemiyoun), composed primarily of Afghan Shiite fighters, emerged as a key force (Farzam & Sari, 2017, p. 280). Similarly, the Zaynabiyoun Brigade, composed of Pakistani Shiite fighters, operated under the Iranian command (Zahid, 2016). Additional prominent Iran-aligned groups include Hezbollah, Kata'ib Hezbollah, Harakat al-Nujaba, Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, and the Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas Brigade. Collectively, these formations constituted a transnational Shiite militia network that extended Iran's operational reach across the Syrian theater and reinforced its regional strategy.

Iran's military presence in Syria has also rendered its forces a direct target of Israeli airstrikes. Nevertheless, Iran has derived strategic advantages from the Assad government's continued survival, Hezbollah's logistical protection, and ISIS's territorial decline (Yolcu, 2016). For Tehran, preserving the Assad regime remains essential for sustaining its alliance network and maintaining regional influence. Thus, the Syrian civil war has evolved into a *de facto* arena of Russian-Iranian military cooperation, although the long-term strategic objectives of the two actors are not fully convergent. Iran regards Syria as an integral component of its contiguous sphere of influence extending toward Lebanon, whereas Russia, as a global power, prioritizes Mediterranean geopolitics and broader patterns of strategic competition in the Middle East. This divergence necessitates continuous coordination and strategic balancing among the allied actors.

Table 1 indicates a marked asymmetry in military capacity between Syria and Iran during 2010–2020. While Syria experienced a severe decline in conventional military capability and institutional cohesion, Iran maintained a comparatively stable military structure and defense expenditure capacity despite sustained international sanctions imposed on it.

**Table 1.** Military power capacities of Syria and Iran (SIPRI indicators, 2010–2020)

Indicator	Syria	Iran
Military expenditure trend (2010–2020)	Sharp decline after 2011 due to civil war collapse	Fluctuating under sanctions, relatively stable capacity
Military expenditure (approx.)	Pre-war ~4% of GDP; post-2011 data largely disrupted	~2–3% of GDP on average (SIPRI estimates)
Total military spending level	Severe contraction due to state breakdown	Medium-to-high regional spender
Armed forces structure	Fragmented, war-dependent, partially nonstate actors	Centralized state military + IRGC structure
Arms imports dependency	High reliance on external support (Russia, Iran)	Domestic production + selective imports
Strategic military capacity	Low conventional capacity; high asymmetrical warfare reliance	Regional power projection capacity (proxy networks)

Source: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (2024).

Russia's military involvement in Syria has been closely coordinated with the Syrian government and Iranian officials. In January 2015, Ali Akbar Velayati, foreign policy advisor to Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, met with Russian President Vladimir Putin and Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu in Moscow, delivering a letter from Khamenei. The meeting aimed to establish structured coordination in military operations, intelligence sharing, and allocation of operational responsibilities. This form of trilateral diplomatic engagement among Damascus, Tehran, and Moscow contributed to institutionalizing military-technical cooperation. Russia also agreed to coordinate aspects of its operational activities through Qasem Soleimani, the commander of IRGC Quds Force. The rapid territorial expansion of ISIS during this period heightened perceptions of regime vulnerability, accelerating trilateral military coordination (Grajewski, 2021).

Despite this cooperation, Russia has expressed reservations regarding the extensive autonomy and growing influence of Iranian-backed militias and other nonstate armed actors in Syria. Moscow has prioritized strengthening the operational capacity of the Syrian Arab Army, whereas Iran has pursued a parallel strategy aimed at consolidating its influence in Aleppo, Homs, Deir ez-Zor, and along the Lebanese border through a network of affiliated militias, including Iraqi, Afghan, Lebanese, and local forces. While Russia has remained relatively constrained in its response to U.S. and Israeli military actions, Iranian forces have been directly targeted by such operations. In this context, U.S. airstrikes against Iranian-linked positions in February 2021 highlighted these vulnerabilities. Deir ez-Zor, in particular, has emerged as a key arena of contestation among Syria–Iran, Russia, and U.S.–Israeli forces (Grajewski, 2021).

Iran has also supplied the Assad government with advanced defense systems, including radar and electronic warfare capabilities, such as the 15-Khordad air defense system. This system, reportedly integrated with Sayyad-3 missiles, is capable of detecting and engaging multiple aerial targets simultaneously, including aircraft and unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs). Israel's sustained military operations in Syria, coupled with its annexation of the Golan Heights, have significantly intensified Iran's security concerns in the Syrian theater. On July 9, 2020, Major General Mohammad Bagheri signed a comprehensive defense cooperation agreement with Syrian Defense Minister Ali Abdullah Ayyoub. The agreement sought to enhance air defense capabilities, deepen bilateral military

coordination, restrict the activities of foreign-backed militias operating outside the Syrian government’s control, and limit the influence of U.S.-aligned groups. It also addressed Türkiye’s military presence in Syria and emphasized diplomatic engagement between Ankara and Damascus as the preferred mechanism for managing regional security disputes (Middle East Political and Economic Institution, 2020).

### Economic and cultural relations

One of the most significant dimensions of Syrian–Iranian relations is economic cooperation. During the civil war, bilateral economic agreements gained increasing importance as part of broader efforts to sustain political and strategic alignments. In early 2004, the two countries signed a “strategic cooperation” agreement that included military cooperation. However, the scope and depth of post-war economic engagement have expanded considerably in subsequent years. For instance, on January 14, 2023, both sides agreed to eliminate tariffs on bilateral trade, thereby facilitating deeper economic integration. In addition, an agreement was reached allowing an Iranian bank to commence operations in Syria, further institutionalizing financial cooperation (The Times of Israel, 2023). Subsequently, on May 3, 2023, Syria and Iran signed another strategic cooperation agreement, including a memorandum of understanding in the oil sector. Both governments endorsed a long-term strategic framework aimed at expanding cooperation in energy production, particularly oil extraction and related infrastructure (Reuters, 2023).

Table 2 indicates that economic relations between Syria and Iran from 2011 to 2024 are characterized less by conventional trade dynamics and more by patterns shaped by sanctions, political imperatives and strategic necessity. The relatively limited trade volume (\$200–300 million) and Iran’s export level (\$237 million in 2022) reflect the combined impact of international sanctions and wartime economic contraction.

Iran has also sought to develop new railway corridors linking Iraq and Syria through its state-owned railway company to facilitate the transport of goods and passengers to the port of Latakia. These infrastructure initiatives have been particularly significant for Syria’s struggling economy. Amid severe macroeconomic instability, the Syrian pound depreciated by more than 400 percent against the U.S. dollar, while productive capacity declined sharply due to widespread electricity shortages. Under these conditions, Syria has increasingly relied on economic support from its allies, with Iran emerging as a central actor in post-conflict economic engagement and reconstruction.

**Table 2.** Syria–Iran economic relations (2011–2024)

Category	Data
Trade Volume	\$200–300 million (2020–2022)
Iran’s Exports	\$237 million (2022)
Energy Cooperation	Oil shipments, refinery support
Investments	Phosphate mines, agricultural lands
Telecommunications	3rd GSM license granted to Iran
Credit Lines	\$3–5 billion in loans
Reconstruction	Infrastructure and construction projects
Financial System	Limited due to sanctions

Source: The table was created by the author using data from the World Bank and Atlantic Council.

Table 3 shows that a comparative analysis of macroeconomic indicators between Syria and Iran over the 2010–2020 period reveals a pronounced structural asymmetry in terms of economic capacity, resilience, and developmental trajectories.

**Table 3.** Macroeconomic indicators of Syria and Iran (2010–2020)

Indicator	Syria	Iran
GDP (2010, USD)	61 billion	400–600 billion
GDP per capita (2010)	2,800–3,000 USD	4,000–6,000 USD
Economic trend (2010–2020)	Severe contraction due to civil war	Fluctuating growth under sanctions
GDP around 2020	20–25 billion USD	400+ billion USD
GDP per capita (2020)	1,000 USD	5,000 USD (approx.)
Structural economy	War economy / state collapse dynamics	Oil-dependent sanction economy

Source: World Bank (2024).

Despite the Civil War, cultural diplomacy, understood as a component of broader public diplomacy, has developed significantly in Syrian–Iranian relations. Iran’s ideological and religious orientation is particularly evident in these interactions. In 2023, the Iranian president visited the shrines of Sayyida Zaynab and Sayyida Ruqayya, which are regarded as sacred sites within Shiite Islam in Syria, as well as the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, dedicated to Syrian soldiers who lost their lives during the conflict. Iran and Syria have also signed several memoranda of understanding on cultural cooperation, including the exchange of artists, joint cultural production, and institutional collaboration between national libraries. Joint initiatives in the fields of visual arts and cinema have also been promoted. These activities have contributed to the gradual formation of shared sociocultural spaces. To institutionalize this cooperation, cultural diplomacy mechanisms and cultural attachés were established within the embassies of both countries (Islamic Republic News Agency, 2023).

Although Iran and Syria possess distinct ideological and religious traditions, it was initially expected that such differences would create tensions in cultural cooperation. Nevertheless, doctrinal divergences rooted in religious interpretations have been partially mitigated over time. In this context, Lebanese cleric Musa al-Sadr issued a fatwa in 1973, recognizing Alawites as part of the broader Shiite religious community. Accordingly, both ideological affinity and pragmatic considerations have jointly shaped the evolution of Syrian–Iranian cultural relations (The Guardian, 2016).

During the Arab Spring, identity-based and cultural differences became increasingly instrumental in ideological competition (Hashemi & Postel, 2017). The mobilization of cultural and sectarian narratives further intensified the conflict and expanded external powers’ capacity to exert influence over domestic dynamics.

## Conclusion

This study analyzes multiple interrelated factors and their interactions in shaping Syria’s national profile, foreign policy orientation, and relations with Iran. A change in any of these variables may generate cascading effects within the political system, indicating that Syrian geopolitics can be effectively examined using a systemic analytical framework. In the 1950s,

Arab nationalism in the region evolved into pan-Arabism, which became the dominant ideological paradigm. However, over more than a century of state formation, and particularly following over 13 years of civil war, Syria's national identity and state capacity have remained structurally constrained and have not fully consolidated.

This study contributes to the existing literature by examining Syrian-Iranian relations not merely as military cooperation but as a multidimensional and fluid framework encompassing military, economic, and cultural dimensions. Employing a neorealist perspective, this study interprets this relationship in terms of strategic necessity, regime security imperatives, and regional balance-of-power dynamics. Beyond existing scholarship, this study further highlights the decisive role of Syria's historical state formation and its ethnic and sectarian composition in shaping foreign policy behavior and alliance formation. Moreover, by situating alliance relations between authoritarian regimes within a framework of pragmatism and strategic adaptation, it offers an original perspective on the Syrian Civil War's transformative impact on the nation-state structure.

Situated within a broad historical context, this study demonstrates that competition, conflict, and cooperation have recurrently shaped Syria's political trajectory. Syrian-Iranian relations were significantly influenced by Cold War bipolarity and the rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union. In the post-Cold War era, Syria remained within Russia's strategic orbit, while the 2003 U.S.-led invasion of Iraq intensified the Assad regime's concerns regarding security and sovereignty. Following 2002, Iran gradually consolidated a strong foothold in Syria, a process that continued until 2011. The outbreak of protests in 2011 rapidly internationalized the conflict, drawing major regional and global powers into the Syrian arena and producing a profound security vacuum.

Iran's efforts to project ideological influence in Syria through cultural, religious, and political instruments have posed both opportunities and constraints for the bilateral relationship. While Iran established a durable presence through military deployment and logistical infrastructure, Syria's nationalist and secular state identity imposed structural limits on its ideological convergence. In this context, sustained Iranian influence also risked exacerbating sectarian sensitivities within Syrian society.

Institutional structures, political actors, and governance processes have largely failed to generate sustained loyalty to the Assad regime. Despite its extensive alliance networks, the survival of the Syrian state has been undermined by deepening internal fragmentation. The Syrian Civil War, involving multiple regional and international actors, has contributed to the erosion and partial disintegration of the traditional nation-state structure.

The Arab Spring fundamentally reshaped regional power configurations, alliance structures, and security strategies. During this period, the United States' capacity for military intervention increased, whereas its normative influence declined. The weakening of the Arab nationalist regimes in Syria and Iraq enhanced Israel's operational flexibility in the region. Iran-aligned proxy actors, such as Hezbollah and the Popular Mobilization Forces (Hashd al-Shaabi), have been subjected to targeted Israeli strikes at the leadership level. Similarly, Hamas and other Palestinian factions associated with Iran have experienced significant territorial and political loss. Although the regional balance of power has shifted in favor of the United States and Israel, the Middle East has simultaneously become more unstable.

In response to these shifting dynamics, Iran has increasingly reverted to traditional state-centric strategies in its security policies. Accordingly, its strategic orientation

prioritizes the expansion of nuclear capabilities, development of advanced missile systems, and integration of energy geopolitics into its broader security doctrine. Unlike Syria and Iraq, Iran possesses a long-standing tradition of statehood and institutional continuity, enabling it to employ a more diversified set of instruments to ensure regime survival and strategic resilience.

The geopolitical structure of the Middle East has undergone a significant transformation, rendering the region increasingly open to competition for power. Within this context, debates on pluralism, governance, and political identity have contributed to reshaping regional dynamics. Although this process has deepened amid crises and conflicts, it has simultaneously underscored the necessity of establishing mechanisms of compromise among regional actors.

The post-2024 political order emerging in Syria has initiated a transition and reconstruction process that redefines its relationship with Türkiye and other regional actors. The new Syrian political orientation may gradually shift from security-centered alliances to more flexible and multilateral diplomatic approaches. For Türkiye, this development foregrounds critical issues such as border security, the refugee crisis, and the restructuring of political and military arrangements in northern Syria. Türkiye's prospects for playing a more active role in Syria's reconstruction through economic, humanitarian, and diplomatic instruments appear to be increasing.

At the regional level, the Syrian administration is expected to reassess its long-standing security relationship with Iran and Russia. This development contributes to a broader reconfiguration of power balances in the Middle East and encourages Gulf states and Western actors to formulate new policy approaches toward Syria.

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No ethical approval was necessary for this study, as it did not involve human subjects, animal experiments, or any procedures requiring institutional review.