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Opinion – Britain’s Role in Syria’s Stabilisation

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HAMIT EKINCI, SEP 15 2025

As Syria’s post-Assad transition falters and old patterns of authoritarianism resurface in Damascus, Britain faces a critical policy crossroads. Should it continue to pin its hopes on fragile and incapable central authority, or seize the chance to back genuinely inclusive, locally-driven models of governance in the country’s embattled reality? The answer will shape not only Syria’s future, but the credibility of Western diplomacy across the Middle East. Britain was among the first Western governments to extend recognition to the Ahmed al-Sharaa-led order in Damascus, anticipating that early engagement might open the door to a more inclusive and stable form of governance. Yet, several months on, the outlook remains deeply uncertain. The Sharaa administration has failed to consolidate authority across Syria or distance itself from the exclusionary and kleptocratic practices of its predecessors. Violent clashes and human rights violations in Sweida, along with reports of mass killings along the Alawite coast, underscore persistent shortcomings in asserting control and fostering reconciliation. Sharaa appears to be repeating many of Assad’s old habits, concentrating economic power in the hands of family members and shadowy associates under the guise of restructuring. In this context, international actors projecting influence in Syria are increasingly compelled to engage with the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES), which has proven itself a credible force for stability. Britain must acknowledge these evolving realities and deepen its engagement with capable local actors if it hopes to pursue an effective and forward-looking Syria policy.

Relations between the Sharaa administration and the AANES remain extremely tense due to Damascus’s insistence on the complete dismantling of both the AANES and the Syrian Democratic Forces. While the AANES has demonstrated notable administrative stability and continues to manage much of Syria’s oil and agricultural production, even as ISIS remnants threaten the region, it remains politically isolated. Turkish influence remains a persistent obstacle: Ankara has consistently portrayed the AANES as a fundamental security threat, lobbying both international actors and Damascus to block its formal inclusion in any future settlement. This has led to sustained diplomatic marginalisation, despite the AANES’s key role in ensuring governance and stability. Damascus, for instance, withdrew from the Paris talks with the AANES under Turkish pressure.

However, Ankara’s capacity to dictate outcomes is increasingly constrained. Despite its longstanding preference for a highly centralised Syrian state, Turkey now faces serious limitations in light of its own evolving security environment. Notably, the recent peace overtures between Ankara and the PKK have begun to undercut the traditional rationale for excluding the AANES on security grounds. This shift, while still unfolding, complicates Turkish efforts to rally international support for a hardline approach to Syria’s internal settlement.

Meanwhile, Israel’s increasing securitisation of the Syrian file adds another layer of complexity. Driven by concerns over border security and Syria’s fragmentation, Israeli policy has increasingly favoured pre-emptive measures and a security-first approach. These dynamics have narrowed the possibilities for an over-centralized order in Syria. In this context, the UK’s engagement has remained cautious. While British diplomats maintain lines of communication with both Damascus and the AANES, tangible progress towards an inclusive settlement remains elusive, with Damascus still unrealistically demanding the dismantling of the AANES in favour of renewed centralisation. Although the UK made efforts to re-establish diplomatic ties and offer credibility to Damascus, the Sharaa government’s inability to reopen its London embassy highlights a persistent lack of capacity, even as it retains much of the Assad-era foreign ministry apparatus. This failure has cast doubt on Damascus’s readiness to engage internationally, despite renewed engagement from London.

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Recent developments point to a meaningful shift in the American approach towards both the AANES and the Damascus government. A detailed Pentagon assessment presented to Congress in August 2025 highlighted ongoing fragility and fragmentation within the Sharaa-led transitional government, noting that alliances underpinning the “New Syrian Army” remain loose and reliant on factions with histories of extremism, while “dissolved” groups continue to influence Damascus. The appointment of controversial commanders and the persistence of sanctioned individuals in positions of authority have further deepened concerns in Washington, making any move to ease sanctions and legitimise the Damascus government politically risky.

Against this backdrop, the report pointed to the strengthening of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in the northeast, noting that the SDF and its administrative framework have achieved a level of autonomy and institutional coherence unmatched elsewhere in Syria. In a significant policy shift, US Special Envoy Tom Barrack who known for being close to Turkish position in Syria recently clarified that the YPG and SDF are no longer affiliated with the PKK, signalling Washington's recognition of the AANES as more than a tactical security partner. Instead, the US now views the AANES as a capable and legitimate local actor—one whose continued stability serves both American and regional interests amid ongoing volatility in the Eastern Mediterranean.

Britain's capacity for constructive post-conflict engagement places it in a unique position as Syria navigates a difficult transition from decades of authoritarian rule. Drawing on its hard-won experience mediating divided societies—from the Good Friday Agreement in Northern Ireland to its support for the Kurdistan Regional Government in Iraq—Britain is well positioned to facilitate a more inclusive and sustainable Syrian settlement. However, this requires moving beyond the initial diplomatic embrace of the Sharaa government and recognising that enduring stability depends on the meaningful inclusion of the AANES and other minority voices demanding decentralisation.

Recent visits by UK delegations to North and East Syria suggest that policymakers are beginning to acknowledge the realities on the ground. These low-key but significant visits reflect an understanding that long-term stabilisation cannot happen without engaging the people and institutions already delivering local governance. That momentum must not be allowed to fade. Syria's security situation remains fragile. Escalations in the coastal region and Sweida show how quickly violence can return. Communities already devastated by ISIS and civil war Kurds, Druze, Christians and others still live under the threat of renewed sectarian violence, while the Damascus government remains unwilling to embrace diversity. Lasting peace requires a settlement that is inclusive, decentralised and underpinned by credible international guarantees.

This is where Britain can play a decisive role. The UK has the capacity to act as a stabilising force and help shape a settlement that reflects Syria's complex social fabric, not just the remnants of authoritarian rule. Supporting constitutional reform, regional participation, and decentralised governance would allow communities to rebuild with dignity not fear or dependency. Engaging with the AANES must be part of this formula. The old argument that engagement risks legitimising the PKK is now obsolete. In a major shift, Abdullah Öcalan, the imprisoned founder of the PKK, has publicly called for the organisation to lay down arms and disband. While the full consequences of this statement are still unfolding, it fundamentally alters the diplomatic equation. The rationale for keeping the AANES at arm's length no longer holds.

The August 2025 Hasakah conference marked a pivotal turn in Syria's postwar evolution, gathering minority leaders from across the Alawite, Druze, and Kurdish communities to openly debate Syria's constitutional future. This rare moment of inter-communal dialogue went beyond rhetorical calls for decentralization; participants proposed concrete frameworks for regional power-sharing and equitable resource management, directly responding to the failures of central authority. The conference catalysed new grassroots initiatives, including the establishment of an Alawite council advocating for federalism in the coastal provinces and renewed demands for local autonomy in Sweida. Unlike externally imposed formulas, these efforts have emerged organically in response to real conditions on the ground, offering a blueprint for coexistence tailored to Syria's fractured reality. Such locally rooted developments present a rare opportunity for Western governments: by lending support to these inclusive, homegrown experiments in governance, Britain and its allies can help lay the groundwork for a durable settlement and a more resilient Syrian state rather than repeating Ba'ath style.

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Moreover, the AANES has consistently expressed its commitment to international law, non-secessionism, and constructive regional integration. It has signalled its readiness to be part of a future Syrian security framework — not as a challenger to state sovereignty, but as a guarantor of local stability and counterterrorism. That offer deserves a serious and structured diplomatic response. Syria remains central to the geopolitics of the Eastern Mediterranean and the wider Levant. Its trajectory will shape energy routes, refugee flows and security partnerships for years to come. Global Britain, with its enduring ties to the Middle East, cannot afford to remain on the sidelines. This is not only a moral imperative — it is a strategic necessity.

About the author:

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