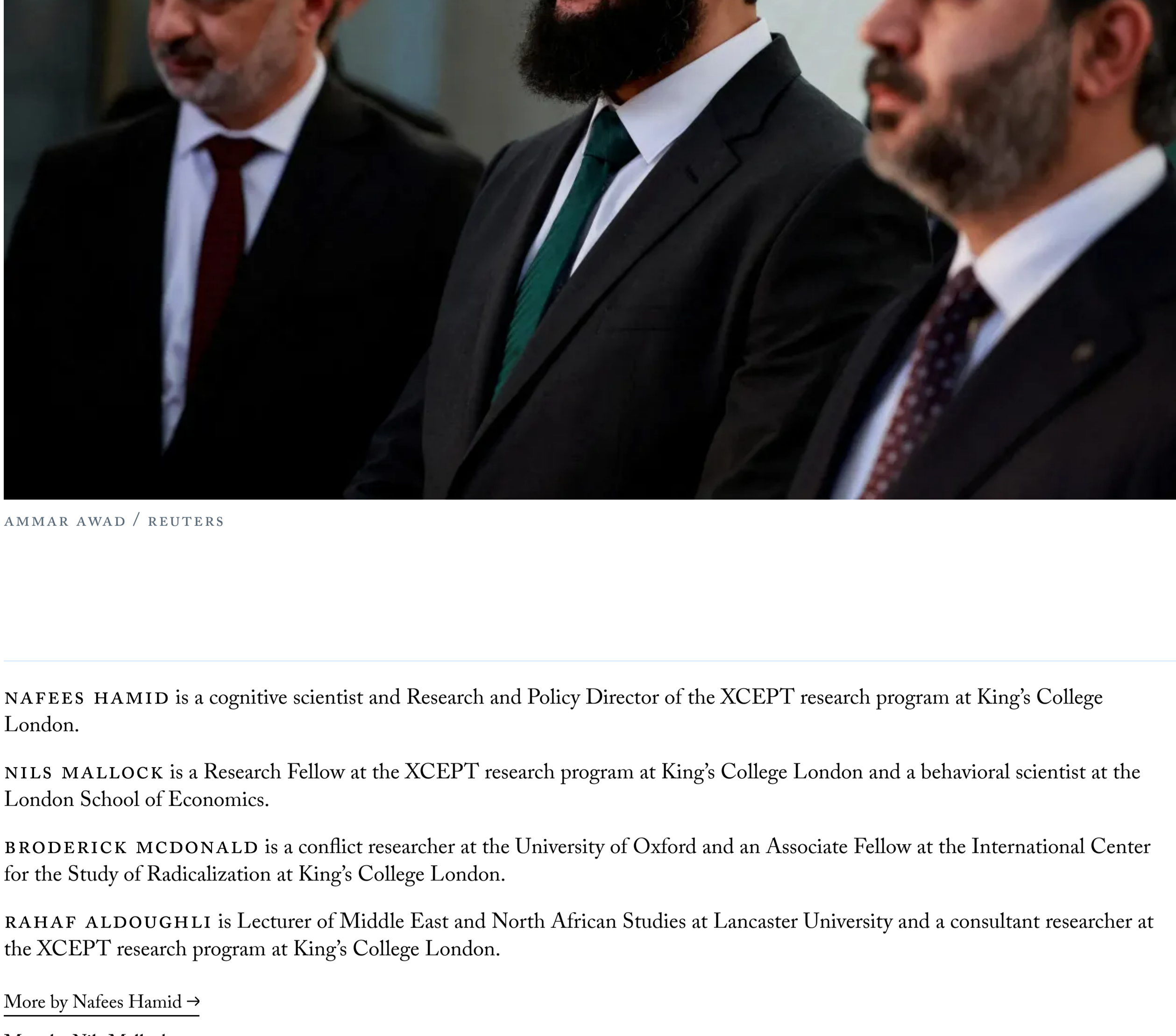


The Right Way to Engage With Syria's New Rulers

Economic Aid Can Undermine Rebel Leaders

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In December 2024, a handful of rebel groups led by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham ousted the brutal dictatorship that had ruled Syria for five decades and set up an interim administration. Now, foreign countries are trying to steer Syria's new de facto leaders toward an inclusive government free of sectarian reprisals and away from extreme forms of Islamism. The head of HTS and the president of Syria's transitional government, Ahmed al-Shara, who previously went by the name Abu Mohammad al-Julani, has publicly endorsed this vision. But many observers remain skeptical of his promises to share power because HTS began as an affiliate of al Qaeda and is designated by many Western governments as a terrorist organization.

Helping Syria break its cycle of violence and repression will require understanding how members of HTS and other rebels perceive the conflict and what motivates them. We have surveyed and interviewed hundreds of former and active rebel fighters in Syria, including members of HTS, in the months leading up to the offensive that ousted Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad and in the wake of his toppling. Our findings suggest that for outside actors attempting to influence rebel groups, some diplomatic tools might backfire. In particular, when foreign governments offer traditional economic incentives to these groups, it can inadvertently undercut the legitimacy of more pragmatic leaders. Instead of influencing Damascus through investments or trade deals, foreign countries that want to see a secure and inclusive Syria would be better off leveraging symbolic diplomatic gestures and providing unconditional humanitarian aid. Without outside help or with the wrong kind of foreign aid, Syria will be more likely to slide back into civil war or come under the thumb of another despot.

MY ENEMY'S ENEMY

Assad was toppled by a loose coalition of three organizations that have a history of fighting one another: HTS; the Syrian National Army (SNA), a militia backed by Turkey; and Southern Operations Room (SOR), a band of fighters from the south of the country. Unlike HTS, the other two groups are not considered to be terrorist organizations by Western governments and are more nationalist than Islamist. HTS was the largest and most organized group in the offensive against Assad, but fighters from the SNA and SOR played critical roles and even reached the outskirts of Damascus before HTS did.

Many observers doubt that the new administration, led by HTS, will be representative of all armed actors in Syria, let alone Syria's broader society. Although Shara and some leaders from the SNA and SOR announced their intention to dissolve their existing military formations to build a new national army, it remains to be seen whether Shara will meaningfully share power. He has already staffed several key positions in the new national military with loyalists from HTS and closely allied groups. One SNA fighter predicted that Shara would "consolidate power within three months." It also unclear how long Shara will hold onto his position as the president of Syria. In December, he announced that it may take up to four years to organize new elections.

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HTS is not the only potential source of trouble. Turkey's overt support for factions within the SNA presents another major obstacle to forming a united government. Turkey has long sought to expand its regional influence, use Syrian fighters to do its bidding, and prevent the establishment of an autonomous Kurdish region in Syria. Turkey fosters factionalism by paying SNA salaries and providing the group with military equipment. In January, Turkey touted its influence over the SNA by announcing a raise for some of its members. Parts of the SNA are loath to formally dissolve and join a new national military because it would mean relinquishing some of their autonomy, submitting to their rivals in HTS, and forgoing higher and more reliable salaries paid by Turkey.

SINGLE-ISSUE VOTERS

With Syria's future up in the air, many foreign leaders are rushing to shape the country's new administration. Typically, governments use tools including sanctions, foreign aid, and trade deals to influence one another. Such incentives assume that all the players involved are rational actors who weigh costs and benefits to optimize their self-interest. But such tools can backfire when offered to what might be called "devoted actors": people who are willing to fight and die for what they consider sacred values. And according to our surveys and interviews, 94 percent of Syrian rebels, including those who took part in the offensive for Damascus, considered the goal of liberating Syria from Assad to be a sacred value.

A sacred value need not be religious. Although most rebels in our sample reported being religious, religiosity was not, by and large, statistically predictive of their willingness to suffer to achieve their goal. The most devoted actors—that is, the most self-sacrificial and violent fighters—were those who felt politically victimized and believed they could achieve their aims collectively. In short, those who were highly morally aggrieved and believed that fighting could right the injustices they have faced were most willing to kill or die for their cause.

The singular pursuit of ousting Assad led many fighters, especially those who fought for organizations without terrorist designations, to change groups often, joining whichever one they thought was the most effective against the regime. Many even moved between Islamist and secular armed groups. Their commitment to their political ideology was often secondary to the sacred goal of liberating Syria from Assad. In interviews, members of the SNA expressed a willingness to collaborate with other groups to achieve their main goal. One SNA member described the partnership between the group and HTS as a "temporary strategic alliance," adding that once Assad was toppled, he would not forget "how many of us [Shara] has killed." Another SNA fighter said, in late 2023, "I will not fight HTS now, but I will after Assad falls," underscoring the fragility of Syria's current coalition and the extent to which the rebels will subordinate their grievances in the pursuit of their sacred value. Both before and after Assad's ouster, there have been frequent clashes between the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces, a group that controls the largely autonomous region of northeastern Syria, and the Turkish-backed SNA factions. Continued fighting between the two groups threatens prospects for a united Syria, and Shara has failed to persuade the SDF to join the new national army.

STREET CRED

Now that Assad has fallen, ideological differences among the fighters will come back to the fore. Their diverging political aims and history of infighting could lead to another round of civil war. To avoid this, the rebels must rally around a new sacred value: the formation of a fair and stable government. Foreign leaders are eager to support such an aim—but how they go about it can make the difference between lasting peace and continued misery. When governments want to influence one another, they lean on economic incentives, such as promises of foreign aid, trade deals, or major investments. But using these traditional tools could undermine the credibility of leaders in Syria, as our research has shown.

Devoted actors don't usually give up their sacred values for material goods. In fact, many Syrian rebels left groups because they felt their leaders had been corrupted, often by external powers. This was particularly true among SNA members, who thought some of their leaders had been bought off by Turkey. They questioned, for example, why SNA fighters had been dispatched to fight in Libya alongside militias that Turkey backed. Leaders who lose their credibility lose their authority. According to our surveys, the number one reason rebels abandoned their fight was because they felt their leaders had lost their moral integrity.

Foreign governments must be careful to not be seen as corrupting or buying off Syrian leaders. Those who are perceived as taking foreign perks will lose their ability to shape Syria's future. In our research, it was foreign fighters and hard-liners—the people who make up HTS's most battle-tested units—who were most likely to condition their commitment to their leaders on perceived moral integrity. The rebels most likely to reject a leader on suspicion of corruption also tended to be the best trained and most willing to die for their cause.

Many Syrian rebels left groups because they felt their leaders had been corrupted.

actors are presented with symbolic but meaningful concessions, they become less likely to support violence and more willing to make compromises, as shown in a 2007 study of Israelis and Palestinians by the researchers Jeremy Ginges, Scott Atran, Douglas Medin, and Khalil Shikaki.

If foreign governments are keen to influence Syria's rebels, they would be better off proposing symbolic but meaningful concessions, such as opening embassies in Damascus, sending official delegations to Syria, and discreetly sharing intelligence. The United States, for its part, has already shared intelligence with HTS about a planned attack by the Islamic State, or ISIS, and canceled a \$10 million bounty on Shara's head. When devoted

Naturally, foreign countries should be cautious in rewarding the HTS-led government. They should hold off on symbolic gestures until the new administration makes progress toward inclusive governance, such as by protecting minorities. They should, however, immediately offer unconditional humanitarian aid to alleviate the feelings of the Syrian people. Our research shows that people who endure hunger or lack shelter are left with feelings of injustice, a strong motivator for taking up arms. Making sure Syrians have their basic needs met is both the right thing to do and a way to help end a cycle of violence. In the long term, Syria will need tens of billions of dollars to rebuild. Foreign governments can promote stability in Syria by involving a cross-section of local community members in reconstruction efforts to avoid unintentionally stoking divisiveness and instead promote a shared cultural identity.

Misinformation is rife in Syria, and after five decades of despotic rule, Syrians have little trust in their institutions. Assad loyalists, Iran, and ISIS have tried to spoil reconciliation and reconstruction by staging attacks and spreading propaganda that portrays the new government as beholden to malign foreign interests. Other countries must not play into this perception. Instead, no-strings-attached humanitarian aid and symbolic concessions can help Syrians replace Assad with a better system.

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