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Syria: Transition and U.S. Policy

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Since the December 2024 collapse of the government of Bashar Al Asad, Syrians have pursued political and economic opportunities created by the end of the country's 12-year civil war. Internal tensions and external pressures pose obstacles to the country's transition. Transitional President Ahmed Al Sharaa led a group long designated by the U.S. government as a foreign terrorist organization and still designated as a specially designated global terrorist entity. He has renounced former ties to Al Qaeda and the Islamic State and met with President Donald Trump in the White House in November 2025. Interim authorities have outlined a five-year transitional constitutional framework after limited consultation with Syrian citizens. Indirect elections were held in October 2025 for a transitional legislative assembly; elections were not held in some areas of eastern Syria, which were then under the control of ethnic Kurdish-led forces, and areas southeast of the capital, Damascus, which remain under the control of members of the Druze religious minority. Turkish forces remain in parts of the north, while Israeli forces have moved into formerly demilitarized areas between Syria and Israel and into some Syrian territory near the frontier. Sectarian violence involving government forces, their backers, and members of minority communities has marred the transition, highlighting the interim government's limited capacity to ensure security and impose discipline on its forces. In this context, some observers have expressed skepticism about the transitional government's commitments to inclusivity and the protection of all members of Syria's diverse religious and ethnic fabric. Others have warned that domestic and foreign opponents of the transitional government may be exploiting communal tensions to advance their own agendas, and that fragmentation in Syria would threaten regional security.

The Trump Administration has outlined a policy of robust but conditional support for Syria's transitional government, pairing endorsement of its leaders' calls for the maintenance of Syria's unity and territorial integrity with insistence that they adopt a protective and inclusive approach toward all Syrian communities. The United States is supporting dialogue between the government and Kurdish forces and political figures that controlled areas of the northeast until government forces advanced in and reasserted control in January 2026. Some U.S. military forces remain deployed in northeast Syria, but U.S. forces withdrew from an outpost in southern Syria in February 2026 and unnamed U.S. officials told press outlets on February 18 that preparations for a full withdrawal of U.S. forces are underway and may be complete within two months. U.S. forces transferred more than 5,700 Islamic State prisoners formerly secured by U.S. partners in the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) to neighboring Iraq following the Syrian government's 2026 advance. The United States and European Union have extended broad sanctions relief to the interim government in a bid to encourage investment and prevent economic collapse and humanitarian pressures from derailing the transition. Announced changes to U.S. and international sanctions on Syria have created possibilities for more robust investment, trade, and economic growth, but Syrians are grappling with the negative effects of decades of misrule and sanctions amid the strife and destructive consequences of a decade-plus-long civil war.

Governance and security arrangements in northeast and southern Syria remain a central dilemma for transitional leaders and the minority communities in these areas. Neighboring countries, including Turkey and Israel, have security concerns about these regions and are acting inside Syria in pursuit of their preferred outcomes. Turkey opposes Syrian Kurds' aspirations for autonomy or decentralization, citing links between Kurdish elements of the SDF and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), a U.S.-designated Foreign Terrorist Organization. The PKK announced in early 2025 that it would dissolve and disarm. January 2026 SDF-government agreements set terms for the integration of some SDF fighters into special brigades. Israel has struck military targets across Syria since December 2024 to neutralize Syrian capabilities, enforce its desire to see Syria's three southern governorates remain a demilitarized zone, and in what it describes as a bid to protect the Syrian Druze minority community. Israel-Turkey tensions over Syria raise continuing risks of confrontation.

In Congress, many Members welcomed the fall of the Asad government and the setbacks it created for Iran and Russia. Members have debated U.S. policy toward the Syrian government, with some advocating for the elimination of remaining U.S. sanctions on Syria and others expressing concern about the intentions and actions of Syria's transitional leaders and advising a more gradual and conditional approach. President Donald Trump has acted to remove many Asad-era sanctions on Syria using authorities delegated to the President by Congress; President Trump also has revised other Syria-related sanctions mechanisms to preserve his ability to impose new sanctions based on future developments in Syria. Congress repealed the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act and has authorized funding for the continued provision of military assistance to U.S. partners, though the future of the U.S. military presence is uncertain. Legislative questions for Congress include whether and on what terms to authorize and appropriate funds for U.S. assistance and security operations in Syria; whether and to what extent to rescind, revise, or reenact laws providing for Syria-related sanctions; and how best to influence executive branch policies and shape the decisions of Syrian authorities, and U.S. partners and adversaries.

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Overview and Key Developments

The Al Asad (alt. Assad) family ruled Syria for more than 50 years; its fall in December 2024 marked a dramatic end to a more than 12-year-long conflict in Syria and the conclusion of decades of confrontation between the Syrian government and the United States. Conflict in Syria had displaced millions, killed hundreds of thousands, spurred military intervention by multiple countries, and fueled the rise of the Islamic State organization. The Asad government's hostility to Israel, attempts to dominate neighboring Lebanon, alignment with Russia, partnership with Iran, support for terrorist groups, and development and use of weapons of mass destruction had troubled U.S. policymakers for decades. Asad's removal was a setback for some U.S. adversaries, but left many unanswered questions about Syria's future.

The country's transition is proceeding under the direction of President Ahmed Al Sharaa, a former Al Qaeda member and leader of the now-disbanded Hayat Tahrir al Sham (HTS, see **Appendix**), the Islamist armed group whose late 2024 offensive drove former president Bashar Al Asad into exile. Having asserted a prerogative to set terms for a five-year transitional period with limited input from others, Sharaa and his partners have concentrated decisionmaking among themselves. Transitional authorities have focused on reconstituting national security forces, extending the state's remit to areas that initially were outside of transitional government control, achieving the removal of U.S. and international sanctions, and attracting investment to support Syria's recovery.

The United States and some other international actors have removed many Asad-era sanctions on Syria and some counterterrorism sanctions, creating opportunities for economic recovery and engagement. Nevertheless, terrorist threats from the Islamic State (IS, aka ISIS/ISIL) and others persist, intercommunal tensions are high, territorial control remains contested, and government capacity is limited. The World Bank estimates Syria's needed reconstruction costs at nearly \$216 billion. As of February 2026, UN agencies reported that 1.4 million Syrian refugees had returned to the country since December 2024, but more than 3.7 million remained in regional countries. Additionally, more than 6 million Syrians remained internally displaced as of January 2026.

Spasms of violence involving some minority populations have created a series of crises, killing and displacing civilians, and generating scrutiny of transitional leaders. These crises include incidents in Alawite majority areas of coastal western Syria in March 2025 and Druze majority areas of southern Syria in July 2025. In January 2026, the government forcefully reasserted control over several non-Kurdish majority areas that had long been secured by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), the Kurdish-led coalition that through 2025 served as the principal U.S. partner force against the Islamic State. U.S.-backed agreements established a ceasefire and set terms for the entry of government forces into Kurdish-majority areas and the integration of some wartime governing bodies and some SDF fighters into national units.

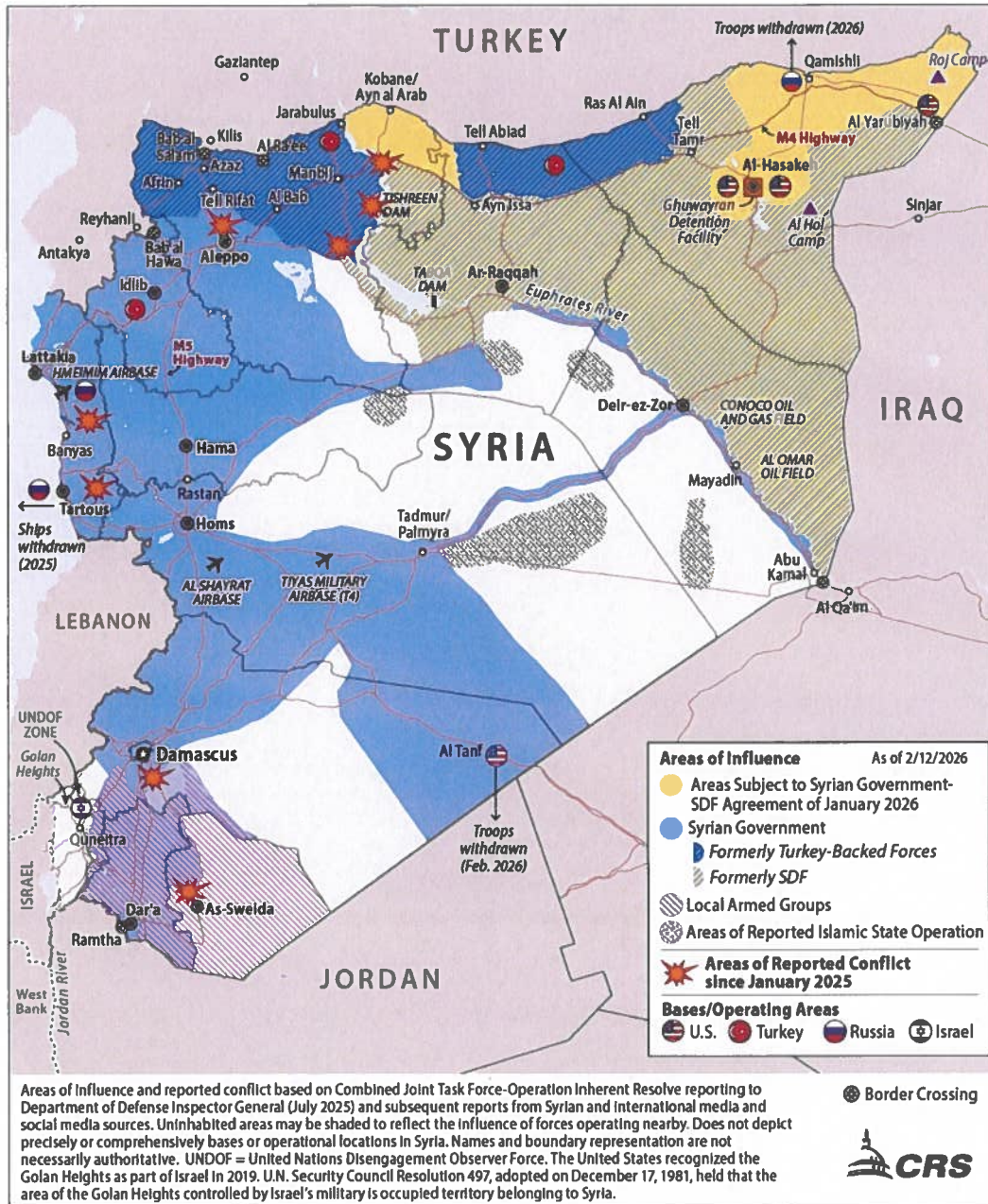
The Trump Administration has pursued a policy of conditional support for the transitional government, endorsing Syrian leaders' calls for territorial integrity and the extension of state authority, while insisting the new government protect all Syrian communities. President Trump has met with Ahmed Al Sharaa twice. On February 18, unnamed Administration officials reportedly said that the roughly 1,000 U.S. military personnel remaining in Syria are preparing to leave within two months as part of a "conditions-based" transition.¹ Unnamed Syrian sources said the timeline could be as little as one month.² The U.S. military has completed the transfer of more than 5,700 IS prisoners from Syria to Iraq and has withdrawn from two long-held outposts.

¹ Lara Seligman, "U.S. Is Withdrawing All Forces From Syria, Officials Say," *Wall Street Journal*, February 18, 2026.

² Agence France Presse (AFP), "US forces to complete withdrawal from Syria within a month: sources to AFP," February 23, 2026.

Specific plans for the remaining U.S. presence in northeast Syria and the potential for ongoing U.S.-Syria security cooperation are uncertain.

Figure 1. Syria: Areas of Influence



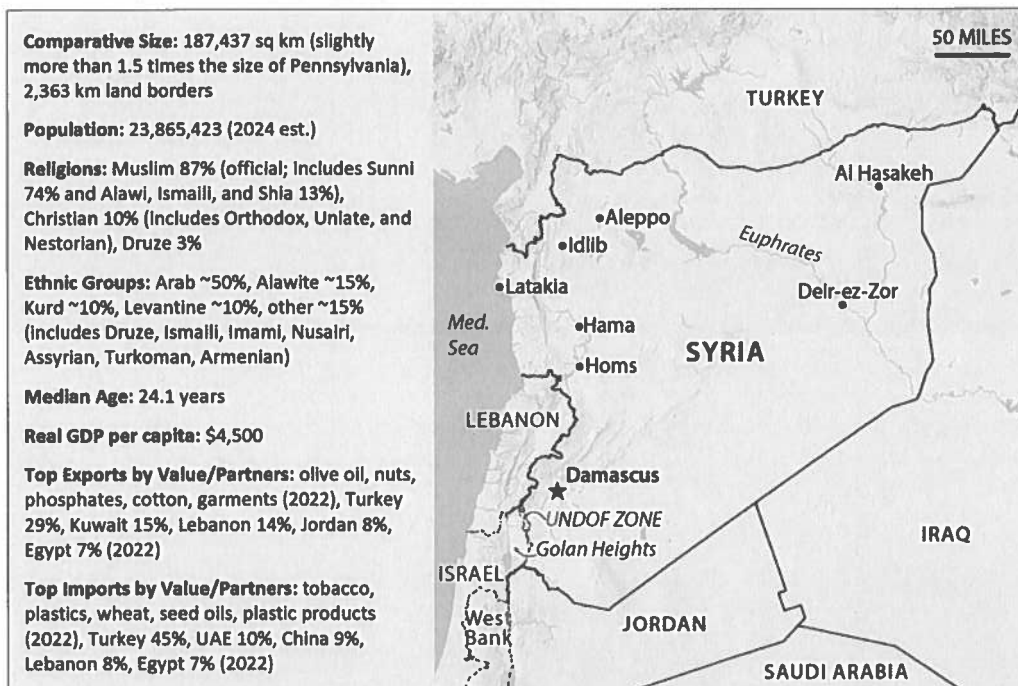
Source: CRS using Combined Joint Task Force-Operation Inherent Resolve (CJTF-OIR) reporting to Lead Inspector General, media and social media reporting, and Esri and U.S. State Department data. All areas of influence approximate and subject to change.

Syria: Profile and Contemporary History

The area that now comprises Syria was long ruled as part of the Ottoman Empire and was administered by France under a mandate of the League of Nations following the First World War. Its demographic diversity reflects its history over millennia as a regional crossroads and home to a variety of religious, ethnic, and linguistic communities. Contemporary Syria secured its independence as France's post-World War I mandate ended in the 1930s and 1940s; its early history as an independent state was marked by a series of Cold War-influenced coups and regional instability. The Baath (Renaissance) Party seized power in 1963. Wars with Israel in 1948, 1967, and 1973 ended in defeat and resulted in Israeli control of the Golan Heights region.

Former president Bashar al Asad's father—Hafiz al Asad—ruled the country from 1970 until his death in 2000. The Asad family are members of the minority Alawite sect (estimated 15% of the population), which has its roots in Shiite Islam. The Asads cultivated Alawites as a base of support. The government violently suppressed an armed uprising led by the Muslim Brotherhood in the early 1980s, killing thousands from the majority Sunni Muslim community. After taking office in 2000, Bashar Al Asad offered and then retracted the prospect of limited political reform, while privileging family members and other Alawite supporters and aligning his government with Iran and Russia and with nonstate actors such as Hamas and Hezbollah in a complex rivalry with the United States and its Arab and non-Arab allies (including Israel). Violence in northeast Syria in 2004 highlighted long-standing and unresolved tensions involving Syria's ethnic Kurdish minority. In 2011, Asad met local unrest with military force, sparking an insurgency that spread in 2012 and ignited more than a decade of conflict and foreign intervention.

Figure 2. Syria: At a Glance Map and Data



Source: CRS using Central Intelligence Agency *World Factbook* data, February 2025.

Notes: The United States recognized the Golan Heights as part of Israel in 2019. UN Security Council Resolution 497, adopted on December 17, 1981, held that the area of the Golan Heights controlled by Israel's military is occupied territory belonging to Syria.

Syria: Conflict Synopsis and U.S. Policy, 2011-2024

In March 2011, antigovernment protests broke out in Syria, in the midst of a wider trend of regional upheaval and challenges to decades of authoritarian rule. Violence escalated, and, in August 2011, President Barack Obama called on Syrian President Bashar al Asad to step down. Over time, the rising death toll from the conflict and the use of chemical weapons by the Asad government intensified pressure for the United States to assist the opposition. In 2013, Congress debated lethal and nonlethal assistance to vetted Syrian opposition groups, and authorized the latter. After President Obama said the United States viewed chemical weapons use as a red line, Congress debated, but did not authorize, the use of force after an August 2013 chemical weapons attack.

In 2014, the Obama Administration requested authority and funding from Congress to provide lethal support to vetted Syrians for select purposes. The original request sought authority to support vetted Syrians in "defending the Syrian people from attacks by the Syrian regime," but the subsequent advance of the Islamic State organization from Syria across Iraq refocused executive and legislative deliberations onto counterterrorism. Congress ultimately authorized a Department of Defense-led train and equip program for select Syrian forces to combat terrorist groups active in Syria, defend the United States and its partners from Syria-based terrorist threats, and "promote the conditions for a negotiated settlement to end the conflict in Syria."³

In September 2014, the United States began air strikes in Syria, with the stated goal of preventing the Islamic State from using Syria as a base for its operations in neighboring Iraq. In October 2014, the Defense Department established Combined Joint Task Force-Operation Inherent Resolve (CJTF-OIR) to serve as the military component of the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS, a multilateral civil and military coalition of dozens of countries.

In 2015, the United States deployed military forces to Syria to counter the Islamic State and train local partner forces. Coalition and U.S. gains in Syria against the Islamic State after 2015 came largely through the assistance of Syrian Kurdish-led partner forces, but neighboring Turkey's concerns about Kurdish forces in Syria emerged as a persistent challenge for U.S. policymakers.

In 2017, the United States began providing arms to the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), and the SDF, backed by U.S. forces, advanced on IS-held areas, seizing the IS stronghold of Raqqa in October 2017 and asserting control over the last IS-held areas of Syria's eastern Euphrates River valley in March 2019.

In 2018, the U.S. intelligence community assessed that the conflict had "decisively shifted in the Syrian regime's favor."⁴ Remaining armed opposition forces (including groups linked to Al Qaeda) and civilians actively opposed to Asad were pushed into a shrinking geographic space in and around Idlib province in northwestern Syria. Turkish military forces remained present in Idlib and other areas of northern Syria, limiting advances by pro-Asad forces and preventing further displacement of Syrians to Turkey.

In October 2019, after President Trump signaled that U.S. forces would withdraw from Syria, Turkey launched a cross-border military operation attempting to expel Syrian Kurdish U.S. partner forces from areas adjacent to the Turkish border. President Trump briefly imposed sanctions on Turkish officials and negotiated a ceasefire that was later complemented by a separate agreement reached between Turkey and Russia to establish patrolled security zones. While U.S.-led coalition and partner forces focused on defeating the Islamic State in northern and eastern Syria, support from Russian, Iranian, and Hezbollah forces enabled the Syrian government to retake many areas of the country formerly held by the opposition.

The United Nations (UN) sponsored peace talks in Geneva beginning in 2012, but the talks bore little fruit. Over time, military pressure on the Syrian government to make concessions to the opposition was reduced. By 2022, UN Special Envoy for Syria Geir Pedersen described the conflict as a "stalemate" with relatively fixed lines.⁵ In Idlib, Haya't Tahrir al Sham distanced itself from Al Qaeda and the Islamic State, establishing and controlling a Syrian Salvation Government, retraining fighters into more formidable and capable units, and periodically clashing with Turkey-backed groups in control of other areas of northern Syria.

In November 2024, HTS-led forces launched an offensive in response to escalating pro-Asad attacks, leading to the unexpected HTS capture of Aleppo and the cascading collapse of pro-Asad forces across western Syria. Some southern anti-Asad groups—demobilized under military pressure earlier in the conflict—remobilized as the regime collapsed. Asad fled to Russia on December 8, 2024, as HTS and southern armed groups entered Damascus.

³ For additional background, see CRS Report R46796, *Congress and the Middle East, 2011-2020: Selected Case Studies*, coordinated by Christopher M. Blanchard.

⁴ Office of the Director of National Intelligence, *Worldwide Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community: 2018*.

⁵ UN Security Council, "Amid Stalemate, Acute Suffering in Syria, Special Envoy Tells Security Council Political Solution 'Only Way Out,'" Meetings Coverage, SC/14807, February 25, 2022.

Political and Security Dynamics

On January 22, 2026, UN Assistant Secretary-General for the Middle East, Europe, the Americas, Asia and the Pacific Khaled Khiari told the UN Security Council that “much has been achieved in post-Al-Assad Syria” but warned that the country “remains extremely fragile after 14 years of devastating conflict.”⁶ Transitional authorities are adapting preexisting state institutions to the country’s postwar realities, incorporating personnel and procedures to keep ministries and agencies functioning and leveraging the powers of the transitional presidency to consolidate and reorganize others and to create new administrative and economic bodies. Measures to promote inclusion, transparency, consultation, and accountability have been enacted but have remained relatively narrow, as authorities consider the pros and cons of expeditious decisionmaking and political pragmatism under conditions where national unity is under strain.

Syria’s unresolved internal tensions, the interests of regional and international actors, and the transitional government’s limitations have presented serious challenges to the transition. According to UN officials, clashes during 2025 involving state forces, state-aligned armed groups, and some minority communities reportedly killed nearly 3,000 civilians and fighters and displaced more than 200,000 people. The violence increased global scrutiny of the interim authorities’ capabilities and intentions.

The following issues present the principal challenges to Syria’s stability and the success of its transition.

Political Transition and Consolidation of Authority

In January 2025, attendees at a “Victory Conference” of some anti-Asad armed groups appointed HTS leader Ahmed Hussein Al Sharaa (aka Abu Mohammed al Jawlani/Jolani/Golani, see **Appendix**), as Syria’s interim president. Under Al Sharaa’s leadership, authorities declared the dissolution of all military factions, political, and civil revolutionary bodies, including HTS, and called for their integration into state institutions. Many individuals appointed to initial interim national leadership positions were former HTS members or previously served in the HTS-backed Syrian Salvation Government that ruled rebel-held areas of northwest Syria. In conjunction with Sharaa’s selection as president, the authorities also rescinded Syria’s 2012 constitution and dissolved the former ruling Baath Party, the Asad-era legislature, and the former regime’s military and security forces. As of February 2026, the UN Panel of Experts on Al Qaeda and the Islamic State reported that a number of member states assessed that HTS “remained in transition and was being absorbed into the new Syrian military and governance structures.”⁷

After a series of governorate-level consultations and a National Dialogue conference in Damascus, interim authorities appointed members of a committee that drafted a five-year transitional constitutional declaration. In March 2025, President Sharaa signed the transitional constitutional declaration and named a new transitional cabinet (**Table 1**), expanding the government’s leadership to include members of some minority groups. The transitional constitution declaration recognizes individual rights, including freedom of belief and expression, and states a commitment to preserving the country’s territorial integrity, diversity, and social peace. The declaration vests most powers with the interim presidency and states that Arabic is the

⁶ UN Document S/PV.10094, UN Security Council meeting, January 22, 2026.

⁷ UN Document S/2026/44, *Thirty-seventh report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2734 (2024)*, February 4, 2026.

official language of the state and that Islamic law is the principal source of legislation.⁸ The Kurdish-led administration of northeastern Syria did not participate in the national dialogue and constitutional declaration drafting process and called for its reconsideration and a decentralized alternative.

Table 1. Syria: Selected Interim Authorities

As of February 12, 2026

President of the Syrian Arab Republic/Commander-in-Chief			
Ahmed Al Sharaa			
Minister of Foreign Affairs	Asaad Al Shaibani	Minister of Defense	Maj. Gen. Marhaf Abu Qasra
Minister of Interior	Anas Al Khattab	Minister of Finance	Mohammad Yusr Barniya
Minister of Economy	Mohammad Nidal Al Shaar	Minister of Justice	Mazhar Al Weiss
Minister of Energy	Mohammed Al Bashir	Minister of Public Works and Housing	Mustafa Abdulrazak
Minister of Transport	Yarob Badr	Minister of Agriculture	Amjad Badr
Minister of Health	Musaab Nazal Al Ali	Minister of Social Affairs and Labor	Hind Qabawat
Chief of the General Staff of the Army and Armed Forces	Ali Nouredine Al Nasan	Governor of the Central Bank of Syria	Abdulqader Husrieh
Chargé d'Affaires, A.I. Syrian Embassy to the United States	Mohammad Qanatari		

Source: CRS, compiled from Syrian and international media reports. Subject to change.

Note: According to a July 2025 UN report, "At least 9 out of 23 ministers are directly or indirectly linked to HTS, 4 of whom held military roles within the group." See UN Document S/2025/482, July 24, 2025.

In July 2025, then-UN Special Envoy for Syria Geir Pedersen told the UN Security Council that the political transition was "not yet fully inclusive" and he noted that "many Syrians express concern about centralized power, limited transparency, weak checks and balances, and insufficient means for genuine public consultations, participation, and scrutiny."⁹

The government held indirect elections in October for 119 of 210 seats in a transitional People's Assembly. Of those elected, six are women, one is Christian, three are Ismaili, three are Alawite, four are Kurds, and none are Druze. Twenty-one seats were not filled because of suspensions of the indirect voting process in areas of northeast Syria and Suweida (alt. Suwayda) governorate that were outside the government's control.¹⁰ Following the January 2026 reassertion of Syrian government control over areas of eastern Syria, authorities have said that Popular Assembly elections in those areas will be held when security conditions stabilize.¹¹ President Sharaa is to appoint the remaining 70 members of the Assembly. The indirect method of election and

⁸ Text of Syrian Interim Constitution as translated by SyriaReport.com; and Evan Ward, "Syria Has a New Temporary Constitution. Here Are the Highlights," *New York Times*, March 14, 2025.

⁹ UN Special Envoy for Syria Geir Pedersen Briefing to the UN Security Council, July 28, 2025.

¹⁰ Carlotta Gall, "Syria Chooses a Parliament of Revolutionaries," *New York Times*, October 6, 2025.

¹¹ On February 14, 2026, UN Deputy Special Envoy for Syria Claudio Cardone told the Security Council that "voting for four vacant seats in Raqqa governorate will take place in the coming weeks. Clarification is still pending on steps to fill a further 11 elected seats in Hasakah governorate and in the district of Ain-al-Arab, also known as Kobane." Deputy Special Envoy for Syria Claudio Cordone, Briefing to the Security Council, February 13, 2026.

geographic distribution of seats have drawn some attention from election experts.¹² According to UN Deputy Special Envoy Najat Rochdi, “the High Electoral Commission has publicly acknowledged the need to improve representation of communities.”¹³

Syria’s transitional constitutional declaration may be amended by presidential proposal approved by two-thirds of the Assembly. The president has yet to name members of the Supreme Constitutional Court created under the declaration. The transitional constitution declaration is to be replaced by a permanent constitution drafted by a still-to-be-named drafting committee.

Transitional Government Reasserts Control over Eastern Syria

In January 2026, the government forcefully reasserted control over areas of eastern Syria that until January 2026 were under the control of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). The diverse, resource-rich, and strategically located region has been the focal point of U.S. efforts to defeat the Islamic State group since 2015 and is critical to the security of Syria and of neighboring Turkey and Iraq. In March 2025, the SDF signed an agreement on integrating with national security forces by the end of 2025. In subsequent talks with national leaders, the SDF and AANES sought guarantees of constitutional rights amid threats from the Islamic State and concerns about sectarian violence. Turkey and the Syrian transitional government opposed autonomy for SDF-held areas, with Turkish concerns focused on SDF links to the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), a U.S.-designated terrorist group that is implementing plans to disband.¹⁴ As the end of 2025 deadline approached, progress on implementing the March 2025 integration agreement faltered, and clashes between the SDF and the government preceded the government’s advance on SDF-held areas.

Under the terms of agreements reached in January 2026 to end fighting between SDF and government forces, the government and local authorities in the northeast are proceeding with the implementation of “an understanding on a phased integration process for the military and administrative forces between the two sides.”¹⁵ Specifically, the agreements call for “the formation of a military brigade comprising three regiments from SDF forces” along with a regiment for forces in Kobani/Ayn al Arab under the authority of the Aleppo Governorate military command. The agreements also call for “the integration of self-administration [AANES] institutions within the Syrian state institutions, with the retention of civilian employees” and provide for “settling the civil and educational rights of the Kurdish community, and ensuring the return of the displaced to their areas.”

In conjunction with negotiations and fighting that preceded the January 2026 agreements, President Sharaa issued Presidential Decree 13 establishing Kurdish as a national language, providing for Kurdish language education, and invalidating laws that stripped citizenship from

¹² Patricia Karam, “Prospects for Syria’s Democratization Under Ahmed al-Sharaa,” Arab Center Washington DC, November 21, 2025.

¹³ UN Deputy Special Envoy for Syria Najat Rochdi Briefing to the UN Security Council, October 22, 2025.

¹⁴ In a July 2025 briefing, U.S. Ambassador to Turkey and Special Envoy for Syria Tom Barrack said, “SDF is YPG [Kurdish acronym for People’s Defense Units, a Syrian Kurdish militia]. YPG is a derivative of PKK.... But this is a huge thing in Türkiye, right. The PKK-Türkiye dilemma is really complicated. And YPG was a spinoff of PKK that we allied with to fight ISIS.” State Department, “Strengthening U.S.-Türkiye Relations and Advancing Relations with Syria,” July 11, 2025. In May 2025, a PKK congress decided to disband the PKK and end its armed struggle against the Turkish government, subject to various implementation steps. “Full text: PKK’s statement on disbanding decision,” *Bianet*, May 13, 2025; and Rebecca Lucas, “Disbanding the PKK: Political Engagement as the Key to Ending Insurgencies,” RAND, June 10, 2025.

¹⁵ Syrian Minister of Information Hamza Mustafa, Statement by the Syrian Government on the Ceasefire Agreement, X post, January 30, 2026, <https://x.com/HmzhMo/status/2017151630978781256>.

some Syrian Kurds. Enduring resolution of these and other long-standing Kurdish communal concerns about governance and resource sharing may require reconciling the varying demands of the politically diverse Syrian Kurdish community with the transitional government's insistence on precluding regional autonomy and identifying Syria as a primarily Arab state. Prior to the government-SDF confrontations, the population of eastern Syria had not been united in support of SDF goals: within SDF-held areas, urban and rural communities have expressed varying needs and concerns, while members of Arab, Turkmen, and Kurdish ethnic groups and members of Christian, Muslim, and secular communities have appeared to have divergent priorities.

Under the January agreements, the two sides have proceeded with the "withdrawal of military forces from points of contact" and the agreed entry of national government forces from the Ministry of Interior into the SDF-held cities of Al Hasakah and Qamishli. The agreements' call for the creation of new brigades may involve individualized vetting and changes to the command and composition of SDF units. The return of displaced persons under the agreements may include the return of Syrian Kurds to areas where property and other intercommunal disputes could erupt.

The United States and the Security of Northeast Syria

Since 2015, the U.S. military has operated in Syria and supported local partner forces to fight the Islamic State. Through 2025, the main U.S. partner in this effort has been the Syrian Democratic Forces, a coalition of armed groups whose leaders and strongest components are members of the People's Protection Units (YPG), a Syrian Kurdish nationalist militia with links to the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), a U.S.-designated Foreign Terrorist Organization.¹⁶ In 2017, the United States began overtly arming the YPG and other SDF elements, and by early 2019, YPG-led SDF forces backed by U.S. forces had succeeded in ending the Islamic State's control of territory north of the Euphrates River in Syria. SDF forces took control of thousands of captured IS fighters and secured camps for persons displaced from IS-held areas. The SDF partnered with an Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) to govern a de facto autonomous zone that included Kurdish-majority areas but later encompassed Arab-majority areas formerly held by the Islamic State.

The government of Turkey consistently objected to U.S. partnership with the YPG, characterizing the group and the wider SDF coalition as terrorists.¹⁷ In response to the YPG's consolidation of contiguous control over much of northern Syria's border areas by 2016, Turkey and allied Syrian militias conducted three significant military operations (in 2016, 2018, and 2019) that replaced YPG rule in some areas adjacent to Turkey with Turkish-backed Syrian forces. Turkey-Russia arrangements reached in 2019 and 2020 provided for an end to Turkish advances and joint patrols aimed at limiting the presence of the YPG and SDF in areas near the Turkish border.

As the Asad government collapsed in late 2024, Russian forces implementing Turkey-Russia agreements withdrew. SDF forces moved into areas that had been under pro-Asad forces' control, including the city of Deir-ez-Zor. In 2025, HTS forces and their local partners moved to assert authority in these areas, and SDF forces withdrew north of the Euphrates River. To the west, Turkey-backed Arab militia groups expelled YPG and SDF forces from some areas north and east of Aleppo, before a ceasefire was reached.

A March 2025 agreement between the SDF and the interim government created a framework for the possible future integration of security forces and administrative entities in the northeast with the national government, but implementation stalled over competing SDF and government demands. Ahmed Al Sharaa publicly rejected any future territorial division of Syria or the use of Syrian territory by any entity to threaten Syria's neighbors, insisting on the exclusive control of weapons by state security forces while stating his intent to resolve issues with the SDF through dialogue.¹⁸ SDF Commander and YPG leader Mazloum Abdi said the SDF was "not pursuing separatism" and envisioned itself "as an integral part of a unified Syrian army, as part of a broader political solution."¹⁹ The United States supported SDF-government talks, but impasses remained, and conflict erupted in December 2025.

¹⁶ In a July 2025 briefing, U.S. Ambassador to Turkey and Special Envoy for Syria Thomas Barrack said, "SDF is YPG And YPG was a spinoff of PKK that we allied with to fight ISIS." State Department, "Strengthening U.S.-Türkiye Relations and Advancing Relations with Syria," July 11, 2025.

¹⁷ See CRS Insight IN12473, *Turkey (Türkiye) in Syria: Key U.S. Policy Issues*, by Jim Zanotti and Clayton Thomas.

¹⁸ MEMRI Translation #11695, reviewed by CRS, Source - Al-Arabiya Network, December 29, 2024.

¹⁹ "'We want change to be the basis for a new phase in Syria' Mazloum Abdi," *Kurdistan24* (Iraq), January 28, 2025.

Threats from the Islamic State and Other Extremists Persist, Evolve

For the United States, SDF-government confrontation and the end of SDF control over large areas relevant to the fight against remaining Islamic State elements in Syria pose questions about the future of U.S. policy and military strategy. Immediate considerations have included managing the withdrawal of SDF control over some prisons and camps housing IS prisoners and associated persons. To prevent the escape of high-value IS prisoners, the U.S. military worked with Syrian and Iraqi authorities to transfer more than 5,700 IS prisoners to neighboring Iraq, where they are expected to continue to await trial or return to their countries of origin. The unmanaged end of SDF control over an IS prison at Al Shaddadi and the large camp for IS-associated families at Al Hol led to the escape of hundreds of prisoners and camp residents with suspected IS ties.²⁰ Syrian government authorities say they have recaptured most of the escaped IS prisoners, and they have closed the camp at Al Hol, transferring some of its former 20,000-plus residents to camps in northwest Syria and releasing or losing track of others.

U.S. officials and UN experts report that IS fighters, Al Qaeda-linked groups, and other extremists are exploiting security conditions in Syria to reinvigorate their ranks and infiltrate urban areas and the ranks of government forces. According to monitoring reports in July 2025 and February 2026 by the UN panel on Al Qaeda and the Islamic State, IS fighters acquired new weaponry as the former regime fell, “including anti-tank missiles, artillery, anti-aircraft systems and mortars, ... drones and related components.”²¹ These reports have estimated that of the “more than 5,000” foreign terrorist fighters assessed to remain in Syria, more than 3,500 are being integrated into new military units.²² According to UN member states cited in the report, IS fighters have “infiltrated newly formed security structures, particularly at the lower and mid-level ranks,” including by exploiting weak identification and insignia standards and the continuing semiautonomous operations of some integrated armed groups.²³ Extremist foreign fighters have been implicated in some instances of sectarian violence since early 2025.

Independent observers catalogued more than 100 attacks attributed to the Islamic State group in eastern and central Syria in 2025, including attacks on interim government forces and SDF forces.²⁴ Most of these attacks occurred in Deir-ez-Zor governorate in eastern Syria, but some occurred near Palmyra in central Syria and in remote areas patrolled by U.S. partner forces then based at Al Tanf in south-central Syria. While remote areas of central and eastern Syria have been a focal point of counter-IS operations, UN monitoring reports assess that the group has now “established networks across all Syrian governorates, embedding sleeper cells in urban centres, including Damascus” while continuing “to recruit hardline elements from dissolved factions.”²⁵

According to UN monitors, IS fighters consider President Ahmed Al Sharaa a “priority target.”²⁶ A May 2025 IS statement condemned President Sharaa as an apostate and called on foreign fighters and others disillusioned by the interim government’s policies to reconcile and integrate

²⁰ Jared Malsin, “A Giant ISIS Detention Facility Comes Apart in Syria’s Desert,” *Wall Street Journal*, February 17, 2026; and Carlotta Gall and Hussam Hammoud, “Power Shift in Syria Unfolds an Archipelago for ISIS Prisoners,” *New York Times*, February 18, 2026.

²¹ UN Document S/2025/482, *Thirty-sixth report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2734 (2024)*, July 24, 2025; and UN Document S/2026/44, *Thirty-seventh report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2734 (2024)*, February 4, 2026.

²² UN Documents S/2025/482 and S/2026/44, July 24, 2025, and February 4, 2026.

²³ UN Document S/2026/44, February 4, 2026.

²⁴ SOHR, “114 attacks since early 2025,” July 27, 2025; and UN Document S/2026/44, February 4, 2026.

²⁵ UN Document S/2026/44, February 4, 2026.

²⁶ UN Document S/2026/44, February 4, 2026.

with IS forces in rural areas.²⁷ After a February 2026 statement reiterating its condemnations of Sharaa and the transitional government, the Islamic State claimed a series of coordinated attacks in eastern Syria, including in Raqqa and Deir ez Zor.²⁸ According to UN monitors, in 2025, authorities claimed to have disrupted at least one Islamist-group-instigated coup attempt and “five assassination attempts were foiled against the President, the Minister of Interior and the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Expatriates.”²⁹ At least two of the assassination attempts have been attributed to Saraya Ansar Al Sunnah, a group “assessed as being a front for” the Islamic State that also claimed attacks on Syrian minorities throughout the year that undermined some groups’ confidence in transitional leaders.³⁰

Hurras al Din, an Al Qaeda-linked group, claimed to have dissolved, but UN monitors assess that it remains “active” with an “undiminished” commitment to Al Qaeda and up to 1,000 fighters organized in a “covert, decentralized structure with cells across all Syrian governorates,” including cells “pre-positioned” in southern Syria.³¹

Syria’s transitional government has formally joined the U.S.-led Global Coalition to Defeat the Islamic State and has conducted operations, including some joint operations with U.S. forces, against IS targets. U.S. raids in northern Syria in July and August 2025 reportedly killed individuals playing senior roles in IS operations in Syria.³² An Islamist extremist attack in December 2025 killed two U.S. servicemembers and a U.S. civilian translator engaged in counter-IS operations. U.S. forces responded to the December 2025 IS attack on U.S. personnel with a campaign of joint airstrikes with Jordan’s air force on a number of IS targets, and follow-on raids resulted in the death and capture of IS personnel.³³

Sectarian Violence Threatens Transition, Draws Intervention

Several instances of sectarian violence involving members of minority communities, Syrian security forces, nonstate armed groups, and armed vigilantes threatened Syria’s stability in 2025. Aggravating factors included the Syrian government’s imperfect command and control mechanisms, extremists’ presence in some security force units and other armed groups, the proliferation of arms among the population, and volatile, conflict-fueled communal tensions. Social media dynamics, misinformation, and foreign intervention have exacerbated conditions further. Transitional leaders’ rhetoric and some government actions have prioritized de-escalation and civilian protection, and the government has created bodies that have undertaken fact-finding investigations and are pursuing legal accountability for some perpetrators. The dynamics of integrating or demobilizing armed Islamist fighters and ensuring their respect for command and control and for the rights of civilians pose fundamental security and political challenges for Syrian authorities.

In monitoring the situation and engaging U.S. officials and Members of Congress, some observers have focused on the government’s failure to prevent violations against civilians,

²⁷ “ISIS and Rebel Offshoots Challenge the Al-Sharaa Administration’s Security Grip,” *Syria Report*, May 28, 2025.

²⁸ “ISIS Lashes Out at Syria’s Sharaa, Announces ‘New Phase of Operations,’” *Al Sharq Al Awsat*, February 23, 2026; and Reuters, “Islamic State kills four security personnel in Syria, state news agency says,” Reuters, February 23, 2026.

²⁹ UN Document S/2026/44, February 4, 2026.

³⁰ UN Document S/2026/44, February 4, 2026.

³¹ UN Document S/2026/44, February 4, 2026.

³² Reuters, “US forces conduct raid in northern Syria against ISIS targets, in second since Assad’s overthrow,” August 20, 2025.

³³ U.S. Central Command, “CENTCOM Forces Remove ISIS Operatives in Syria After Large-Scale Strike,” December 30, 2025.

including violations by government units or government-aligned actors. Others have noted attacks on government forces and civilians perpetrated by some minority community armed groups as contributing to cycles of violence. Complicating matters further, some members of Syria's Alawite, Kurdish, and Druze communities have called for decentralized rule and the preservation of local security forces in the wake of intercommunal violence. Some Druze have called for foreign intervention, including by Israel, to ensure their protection, and some Kurdish groups appealed to U.S. officials and Kurdish counterparts outside of Syria in the midst of SDF-government fighting in December 2025 and January 2026. Other members of these communities have rejected outside involvement and separatist rhetoric, while condemning government violations and failures. The Syrian transitional government has acknowledged shortcomings and pledged to protect all Syrians while implementing agreements reached with minority communities since March 2025.

Violence in Coastal Governorates

In March and April 2025, attacks by pro-Asad groups prompted a response by security forces that devolved into attacks on some Alawite communities by some state units, government-aligned groups, and vigilantes. A UN report issued in August 2025 detailed eyewitness accounts of house-to-house killings, beatings, and lootings targeting Alawites, including the abuse and summary execution of Alawite men by individuals wearing military clothing without insignia.³⁴ The report concluded that parallel hostilities were occurring between the interim government and pro-Asad armed groups at the time, and found that

there are reasonable grounds to believe that individual members of certain factions of the security forces of the interim government ... as well as private individuals participating in hostilities engaged in acts that amounted to violations and international humanitarian law, including acts that may amount to war crimes, as well as serious violations of international human rights law.

The report acknowledged measures by the interim government during and since the violence to prevent further violations and “found no evidence of a governmental policy or plan to carry out such attacks.” President Sharaa personally condemned the violence and vowed to hold those responsible accountable. In the wake of the violence in western coastal areas, the government said it would redouble its efforts to assert unified security command over armed groups and launched a fact-finding investigation that has delivered its report to the authorities.³⁵ The UN report stated that, when interviewed, residents of the coastal provinces were not aware of any actions by interim authorities to criminally investigate any individual incidents that took place during the violence. Authorities since have undertaken investigations and pursued court proceedings for individuals suspected of involvement in the violence, including some security force personnel. In November 2025, a court

Figure 3. Syria: Coastal Governorates



Source: CRS, using State Department and Esri data.

³⁴ Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, *Violations against civilians in Coastal and Western Central Syria in January - March 2025*, UN Document A/HRC/59/CRP.4, August 11, 2025.

³⁵ The body responsible is the National Inquiry and High-Level Committee to Maintain Civil Peace.

in Aleppo heard arguments from seven security force personnel and seven alleged Asad loyalists accused of involvement in the violence. Investigators have referred more than 560 individuals for prosecution in connection with the March-April incidents.

On December 26, an attack on an Alawite mosque in Homs killed and injured civilians; Saraya Ansar al Sunnah, an armed group founded by extremist former members of HTS, claimed responsibility. The group has claimed a series of arson, assassination, and bombing attacks targeting Alawite, Shia, and Christian communities since early 2025. Protests in Alawite areas of coastal and western Syria followed the Homs attack, with demonstrators calling for the protection of minority communities and some advancing calls for federalism. Syrian authorities blamed former regime members for shooting attacks during the protests that killed Interior Security Force (ISF) personnel and prompted the deployment of military forces and the imposition of a curfew. Media reporting has identified former Asad regime officers outside of Syria who are suspected of involvement in instigating sectarian violence and targeting government forces.³⁶

Violence in Southern Governorates

The extent of national authorities' control over armed groups and their commitment to civilian protection came under renewed scrutiny as sectarian violence involving members of Druze and Sunni Arab communities erupted in southern Syria in April, May, and July 2025. Strained relationships between Druze communities and their Sunni Arab neighbors flared south of Damascus in April and May after criminal incidents and false social media reports about religiously antagonistic statements led armed groups to mobilize. In July, latent tensions between Bedouin and Druze communities in and around the predominantly Druze city of Suweida spilled over into clashes that drew in tribal fighters, security forces, and Druze militia. The violence killed nearly 1,400 combatants and civilians, displaced an estimated more than 185,000 people, and prompted military intervention by Israel, including Israeli strikes on the Ministry of Defense headquarters in Damascus.³⁷ As of January 2026, the UN reported that "155,000 people who have been uprooted since July 2025 cannot return home owing to the fragile security situation."³⁸

The UN Human Rights Office cited credible reports of "widespread violations and abuses" attributed to "members of the security forces and individuals affiliated with the interim authorities, as well as other armed elements from the area, including Druze and Bedouins."³⁹ Secretary of State Marco Rubio called on the interim authorities to "hold accountable and bring to

Figure 4. Syria: Southern Governorates



Source: CRS, using State Department and Esri data.

³⁶ Erika Solomon et al., "Ousted and in Exile, Generals Secretly Plot Insurgency in Syria," *New York Times*, December 24, 2025.

³⁷ Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR), "Al-Suwayda bloodshed in seven days," July 23, 2025; UN Special Envoy for Syria Geir Pedersen, Briefings to the UN Security Council, July 28, 2025 and August 21, 2025; and UN Security Council, Statement by the President of the Security Council, UN Document S/PRST/2025/6, August 10, 2025.

³⁸ UN Document S/PV.10094, UN Security Council meeting, January 22, 2026.

³⁹ UN Human Rights Council, "Türk calls for immediate steps to ensure protection of people in Suweida and across Syria," July 18, 2025.

justice anyone guilty of atrocities including those in their own ranks.”⁴⁰ The interim government formed a committee to investigate the violence, and in September, a committee spokesman said an unspecified number of defense and interior security personnel “were detained by the interior and defense ministries to be transferred to the judiciary when the investigations are concluded to be publicly tried for the crimes they committed against Syrians.”⁴¹

A ceasefire has provided for the entry of Ministry of Interior forces into some areas of Suweida province in coordination with local Druze militia groups. Druze militias and community leaders have at times appeared to hold differing views on relations with national authorities and with Israel, with some advocating for de-escalation and cooperation and others expressing skepticism about the interim authorities’ intentions and welcoming foreign protection.⁴² In August 2025, leading Druze religious figures for the first time released consistent statements condemning sectarian attacks against the Druze, criticizing the interim authorities, and calling for humanitarian relief for Druze areas.⁴³ Following pro-independence protests by some in Suweida city, Druze leader Sheikh Hikmat Al Hijri announced the alignment of several Druze militia forces under a National Guard, and Hijri has called for Suweida to be treated as a separate region.⁴⁴

Since December 2025, intermittent resurgent violence involving Druze communities near Suweida has occurred, killing ISF personnel and local Druze fighters and civilians. In January 2026, UN Assistant Secretary-General Khaled Khiri “noted with concern the unresolved differences and escalating rhetoric in Suwayda Governorate.”⁴⁵ He said, “Sporadic armed clashes between Syrian forces and local groups and militia are concerning, as are the reported intra-Druze tensions, including detentions and assassinations, in areas of Suwayda outside of Government control.”

Syria and the United Nations Security Council

In August 2025, the UN Security Council called for “an inclusive, Syrian-led and Syrian-owned political process facilitated by the United Nations and based on key principles” in Security Council Resolution 2254 (2015).⁴⁶ These include “commitments to Syria’s unity, independence, territorial integrity, and non-sectarian character,” “credible, inclusive and non-sectarian governance,” and, eventually, “free and fair elections” under a new constitution.⁴⁷ In August 2025 and February 2026, the UN Security Council called on all states to respect Syria’s “sovereignty, independence, unity and territorial integrity” and “refrain from any action or interference that

⁴⁰ X post, Marco Rubio (@marcorubio), July 19, 2025, <https://x.com/marcorubio/status/1946736912854835380>.

⁴¹ Reuters, “Syria detains defense, interior ministry members suspected of Sweida violence,” September 3, 2025.

⁴² Druze leader Sheikh Hikmat Al Hijri (alt. Hajari) has been outspoken in his criticism of interim authorities and has endorsed protective foreign intervention. Other leaders, such as Sheikhs Yusuf Jarbou and Hammoud Al Hannawi, had advocated for engagement with interim authorities and refrained from endorsing intervention. See Syrian Arab News Agency, “Sheikh Yusuf Jarbou”, the spiritual leader of the Druze community: We stand by our state, refuse any foreign orientation,” July 15, 2025; Reuters, “Explainer: Who are the Druze and why does Israel say it is hitting Syria for their sake?” July 17, 2025; Cathrin Schaer, “What part did Druze leader al-Hijri play in Syria violence?” July 22, 2025.

⁴³ “Druze Sheikhs in Suwayda Unite in Opposition to Damascus,” *Enab Baladi*, August 9, 2025.

⁴⁴ “Suwayda, Southern Syria: Protests Demand Independence, Raise Israeli Flags,” *Enab Baladi*, August 17, 2025; “What Is the ‘National Guard’ Formed by Sheikh al-Hijri in Suwayda, Southern Syria?” *Enab Baladi*, August 24, 2025; and Khaled Yacoub Oweis, “Druze leader issues call for separation from Syria,” *The National*, August 26, 2025.

⁴⁵ UN Document S/PV.10094, UN Security Council meeting, January 22, 2026.

⁴⁶ UN Document S/PRST/2025/6, Statement by the President of the Security Council, August 10, 2025.

⁴⁷ UN Security Council Resolution 2254 (2015).

may further destabilize the country.”⁴⁸ UN Special Envoy for Syria Geir Pedersen of Norway retired in September 2025; Deputy Special Envoy Claudio Cordone of Italy is the acting UN head of mission for Syria.⁴⁹

Permanent members of the Security Council differed sharply over developments in Syria from 2011 through 2024. Differences in emphasis have persisted following Asad’s departure, though the Council continues to make common reference to the principles of Resolution 2254 and call for civilian protection, territorial unity, and inclusive governance.⁵⁰ The United States, United Kingdom, and France have engaged with interim authorities to support the transition and have supported conditional sanctions relief for Syrian state entities. Russia seeks to preserve its military basing access in Syria and has expressed concern about attacks on minorities, the presence and actions of foreign terrorist fighters, and Israeli military operations. The People’s Republic of China has echoed these latter concerns, while highlighting the presence in Syria of the East Turkestan Islamic Movement, an armed Islamist extremist group composed of ethnic Uighur and Central Asian fighters. Counterterrorism continues to provide some basis for Council consensus, but to date the Council has not revised its positions in the form of a new comprehensive resolution on Syria.

Russia and China blocked efforts in the Council to impose UN sanctions on the Syrian government and Syrian officials related to conduct during the 2011-2024 conflict, but the Council did impose targeted counterterrorism sanctions on some Syria-based groups and individuals, including HTS and Ahmed Al Sharaa. In a November 2025 vote, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 2799, a U.S.-sponsored resolution removing Sharaa and interim interior minister Anas Khattab from the UN’s Islamic State and Al Qaeda sanctions list. As of February 2026, HTS remained listed.

In a December 2024 interview, Sharaa expressed his hope that Syrians would not be unduly constrained by Asad-era UN resolutions and international sanctions, and he asserted Syrians’ collective responsibility for solving their issues internally, while also welcoming international support.⁵¹ Sharaa has argued that the transitional authorities are empowered to establish conditions allowing for the return of Syrian refugees and to define and implement a transition in line with the spirit of Resolution 2254.

Prior to his September 2025 resignation, former UN Special Envoy Pedersen acknowledged that Resolution 2254’s specific calls for UN-facilitated negotiations were “no longer relevant,” while reiterating Security Council statements emphasizing the importance of Syria’s sovereignty, independence, unity, and territorial integrity, and calling for an inclusive and Syrian-led and Syrian-owned political process.⁵² Deputy Special Envoy Cordone and other UN officials have continued to highlight the risks of renewed conflict posed by the unresolved status of northeast Syria and by tensions in southern Syria, and have called for negotiated solutions and an end to military intervention by outside actors.⁵³ In briefings to the Security Council since January 2026,

⁴⁸ UN Document S/PRST/2025/6, Statement by the President of the Security Council, August 10, 2025; and UN Document SC/16293, Security Council Press Statement on North-East Syria, February 12, 2026.

⁴⁹ See Office of the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Syria at <https://specialenvoysyria.unmissions.org/en>.

⁵⁰ See UN Security Council, 9960th meeting, July 17, 2025, UN Document S/PRST/2025/6, Statement by the President of the Security Council, August 10, 2025; and UN Document S/2025/801, Terms of reference: Security Council field mission to the Syrian Arab Republic in December 2025, December 10, 2025.

⁵¹ MEMRI Translation #11695, reviewed by CRS, Source - Al-Arabiya Network, December 29, 2024.

⁵² Office of the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Syria (UN OSES), “Near Verbatim Transcript of Press Conference by United Nations Special Envoy for Syria Mr. Geir O. Pedersen,” January 22, 2025; and UN Document SC/15943, “Security Council Press Statement on Situation in Syria,” December 17, 2024.

⁵³ UN Document S/PV.10094, UN Security Council meeting, January 22, 2026.

Deputy Special Envoy Cordone and UN Assistant Secretary-General Khaled Khiari have criticized Israeli incursions in southern Syria, reiterated the UN Secretary-General's call for the withdrawal of Israeli forces from areas entered after December 8, 2004, and have expressed support for Syrian-Israeli talks to identify mutually acceptable security arrangements.⁵⁴

Humanitarian Crises and Appeals for Assistance

UN agencies estimate that more than 6 million Syrians are internally displaced (of whom 1.2 million were in organized displacement sites as of December 2025).⁵⁵ According to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), as of February 12, 3.7 million Syrians were registered as refugees in regional countries.⁵⁶ UNHCR and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) report that more than 1.44 million Syrians have returned to Syria through neighboring countries since December 2024, and more than 1.94 million internally displaced Syrians have returned to their homes in the same period.⁵⁷ According to UN surveys, among the obstacles and challenges facing returnees are security concerns, inadequate infrastructure, and limited economic opportunity and financial liquidity in Syria, along with damage to personal property, lack of civil or legal documentation, family relocation, transportation costs, and debts incurred abroad.

UN agencies estimated in 2025 that 16.5 million Syrians were in need of some form of humanitarian or protection assistance, nearly half of whom were children.⁵⁸ In March 2025, UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator Tom Fletcher said humanitarian providers were being forced to make “brutal choices,” citing a trend of unmet appeals that caused reductions in the humanitarian response during 2024 “by more than half.”⁵⁹ The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) in 2025 described the negative effects of a what its officials described as a “catastrophic drop in funding,” reporting that health, education, protection, and food services were disrupted across Syria due to limited funding of 2025 appeals and funding cuts, including the termination of some U.S. aid programs.⁶⁰ In January 2026, UNOCHA reported that global donors had funded 36% of the 2025 UN appeal for \$3.2 billion, leading UN agencies and partners to prioritize monthly assistance for 3.4 million people out of 10.3 million identified as being in critical need.⁶¹ UN system planning and priorities for 2026 should be informed by multisector needs assessments completed in 2025.⁶²

⁵⁴ UN Document S/PV.10094, UN Security Council meeting, January 22, 2026; and Deputy Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Syria Claudio Cordone, Briefing to the Security Council, February 13, 2026.

⁵⁵ IOM, Population Mobility and Baseline Assessment: Syrian Arab Republic Round 12—January 2026; and UNHCR, Comprehensive Overview of IDPs and IDP Returns Dashboard, February 12, 2026.

⁵⁶ UNHCR, Operational Data Portal, Syria Refugee Response, <https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria>.

⁵⁷ UNHCR, Operational Data Portal, Syria Refugee Response, <https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria>; and IOM, Population Mobility and Baseline Assessment: Syrian Arab Republic Round 12—January 2026.

⁵⁸ UNOCHA, Humanitarian Response Priorities, Syrian Arab Republic, January–December 2025.

⁵⁹ UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator Tom Fletcher, Briefing to the UN Security Council, March 25, 2025. See <https://fts.unocha.org/plans/1175/summary>.

⁶⁰ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: Humanitarian Situation Report No. 6 (as of 27 May 2025), June 2, 2025; and UNOCHA Geneva Head Ramesh Rajasingham, Briefing to the UN Security Council, May 21, 2025.

⁶¹ Rajasingham, May 21, 2025; UNOCHA Director of Operations and Advocacy Edem Wosornu, Briefing to the UN Security Council, July 28, 2025; and UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator Tom Fletcher, Briefing to the UN Security Council, August 21, 2025.

⁶² UNOCHA, Humanitarian Response Priorities, Syrian Arab Republic, January–December 2025.

U.S. Interests and Initiatives

As of February 2026, developments in Syria's post-Asad transition and changes to security arrangements in northeast Syria may pose at least three sets of questions for the future of U.S. policy in the country:

- What is the future of the U.S. military presence and security assistance in Syria? Should U.S. forces stay or go? Should U.S. assistance continue? To whom and on what terms?
- Should the United States seek to shape the direction and outcomes of Syria's transition? If so, toward what objectives and with what means?
- How can the United States best respond to interventions in Syria by other actors that may jeopardize Syria's security and threaten U.S. interests?

The Trump Administration and Congress face these types questions in a context defined by the history of U.S.-Syrian relations, Syria's decade-plus-long conflict, and their assessment of Syria's post-Asad transition. For decades, U.S.-Syrian ties were strained and, since 1979, the United States has designated Syria as a State Sponsor of Terrorism. The former Syrian government's hostility to Israel, its attempts to dominate neighboring Lebanon, its alignment with Russia, its partnership with Iran, its support for terrorist groups, and its development and use of weapons of mass destruction all fueled tension between the United States and Syria until the fall of Asad's regime in late 2024. In post-Asad Syria, counterterrorism, nonproliferation, civilian protection, and regional security concerns endure and may inform future U.S. policy choices.

Congress and successive U.S. Administrations imposed and maintained a range of bilateral sanctions on Syria and targeted sanctions on entities and individuals (see "U.S. Sanctions and Syria" below). After the onset of the anti-Asad uprising in 2011 and the outbreak of conflict, the United States and European countries imposed additional, more punishing sanctions on the Syrian government and individuals and entities supporting it. The Trump Administration has pursued a policy of engagement and conditional support toward Syria's transitional government, removing many U.S. sanctions (and stating an intent to rescind Syria's state sponsor of terrorism designation).

The duration, severity, and effects of conflict in Syria have created some actual and potential threats for U.S., European, and regional security related to terrorism, weapons proliferation, the use of chemical weapons, military intervention, drug trafficking, and mass migration. In this context, successive Administrations and Congress have prioritized the following issues:

Counterterrorism. The former Syrian government's support for terrorism and the exploitation of Syrian territory by transnational terrorist groups to recruit, train, equip, raise funds, and plan attacks have been focal points for U.S. policymakers since before 2011. U.S. government reporting has described how Al Qaeda, the Islamic State, Hezbollah and other Iran-backed U.S.-designated terrorist groups, and the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) have used Syria to further their aims, some with the active support of the Asad government.⁶³ Syria-based members of terrorist organizations, including the Islamic State, have used Syria "to plot or inspire external terrorist operations."⁶⁴ U.S. and partner force operations ended the Islamic State's control of populated territories in Syria in March 2019, but remnants of the group have continued to operate from remote areas in central Syria and now reportedly have infiltrated urban areas across the

⁶³ See, for example, U.S. State Department, *Country Reports on Terrorism 2023: Syria*, November 2024; and annual threat assessments of the Director of National Intelligence, 2014-2024.

⁶⁴ U.S. State Department, *Country Reports on Terrorism 2023: Syria*, November 2024.

country. Through 2025, IS fighters attempted to break prisoners and family members out of U.S. partner-secured prisons and camps and attacked Syrian communities and U.S. partners.

Syria's transitional authorities have joined the Global Coalition to Defeat the Islamic State and, with reported intelligence support from the United States, have disrupted attempted IS attacks that could have exacerbated sectarian tensions in post-Asad Syria.⁶⁵

U.S., UN, and other international officials have expressed concern about the presence in Syria of foreign terrorist fighters and the integration into Syrian security forces of foreign individuals and fighters. The transitional government has appointed foreign nationals to leadership roles in its security structures, and, according to UN reporting, "many tactical-level individuals hold more extreme views" than government leaders.⁶⁶ Syrian authorities reportedly have argued that integrating anti-Asad fighters, including some foreign fighters, into national forces is preferable to dangers that might arise from their exclusion. U.S. Special Envoy for Syria Ambassador Tom Barrack reportedly said in June 2025 that the United States and Syria had reached "an understanding, with transparency" on the issue, after previous reports suggested U.S. urging of the transitional government to exclude foreign fighters.⁶⁷ The Syrian government and some individuals and entities active in Syria remain subject to U.S. and UN terrorism sanctions (see "U.S. Sanctions and Syria" below).

Foreign Military Access and Basing. Since 2011, the presence and operations in Syria of foreign military forces from Russia, Iran, Turkey, Israel, and the United States and its partners have reflected the differing priorities and goals of outside actors in the country. U.S. policymakers may consider whether or how the continued operations in Syria of U.S. and coalition forces, Turkish forces, Russian forces, and Israeli forces affect U.S. interests. U.S. officials also may monitor and seek to shape the policies of Syrian authorities toward these forces; Syria's interim leaders say they seek to establish normal diplomatic and security relationships with foreign countries—including their former Russian and Iranian adversaries—on the basis of mutual respect for sovereignty and noninterference. In a February 2025 interview, Ahmed Al Sharaa said "any military presence should be with the agreement of the host state."⁶⁸

Weapons of Mass Destruction. The Asad government's domestic use of chemical weapons against its armed opponents and civilians drew international condemnation and motivated U.S. military strikes in 2017 and 2018. In December 2024, the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) said "significant concerns persist regarding the accuracy and completeness" of the former government's declarations to the agency, "as well as the fate of substantial quantities of unaccounted-for chemical weapons."⁶⁹ Outstanding issues of concern reported to the OPCW Secretariat prior to Asad's ouster "involved large quantities of potentially undeclared or unverified chemical warfare agents and chemical munitions."⁷⁰

The interim authorities have informed the OPCW that they lack the information and expertise to definitively identify and declare all chemical-weapons-related locations and materials. According to the OPCW, "in addition to 26 declared chemical weapons-related locations, information available to the Secretariat indicates that over 100 additional locations may have been involved in activities related

⁶⁵ Warren P. Strobel, Ellen Nakashima, and Missy Ryan, "U.S. shared secret intelligence with Syria's new leaders," *Washington Post*, January 24, 2025.

⁶⁶ UN Document S/2025/482, *Thirty-sixth report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2734 (2024)*, July 24, 2025.

⁶⁷ "Exclusive - US gives nod to Syria to bring foreign jihadist ex-rebels into army," Reuters, June 2, 2025.

⁶⁸ Reuters, "Syria's Sharaa aims to restore US ties, no contacts yet with Trump administration," February 4, 2025.

⁶⁹ OPCW, "OPCW urges Syria to fulfil Chemical Weapons Convention obligations," December 12, 2024.

⁷⁰ OPCW, "Syria's caretaker Foreign Minister addresses OPCW's Executive Council," March 5, 2025.

to chemical weapons.”⁷¹ The OPCW Office of Special Missions, established in June 2025, coordinates and implements OPCW activities, and the OPCW reestablished a continuous presence in Syria in October 2025.

In March 2025, interim Foreign Minister Asaad Al Shaibani participated in an OPCW meeting and stated the interim government’s commitment “to destroy any remains of the chemical weapons programme developed under the Assad regime, to put an end to this painful legacy, to bring justice to victims, and to ensure that the compliance with international law is a solid one.”⁷² The OPCW since has deployed Declaration Assessment Team and Office of Special Missions personnel to Syria with the support of the interim government. The personnel have visited some declared and suspected chemical weapons program locations with Syrian government assistance and have reported their findings to the OPCW and Syrian authorities regularly.⁷³ The OPCW regularly requests that Syrian authorities keep it apprised of any information on sites, materials, personnel, or documents related to chemical weapons issues, and the government has provided documents and other information to OPCW teams.

As of January 2026, the OPCW estimated that additional donor country contributions of 16.8 million euros would be required to support its Syria-related activities through 2027.⁷⁴

Conventional Weapons and Regional Security. The influx of weapons to Syria and their wide distribution in-country since 2011 present enduring threats to Syria’s internal security and to the security of Syria’s neighbors. Criminal groups, extremist organizations, and nonstate armed groups, including some aligned with Iran and Turkey, have benefitted from the proliferation of small arms and military weapons during the conflict. In addition, unexploded ordnance, mines, and other explosive remnants of war pose risks to Syrian civilians and international actors across Syria. Transitional authorities’ ability and willingness to assert control over weapons stockpiles associated with the former government may be limited or vary in different areas. Israel has acted to destroy advanced conventional weapons and military air defense and air domain awareness systems across Syria since December 2024, citing potential risks to Israel’s security.⁷⁵

Drug Trafficking. The Asad government enabled and profited from the production and smuggling of drugs across the Middle East, especially the drug captagon.⁷⁶ Congress sought to limit the Asad government’s ability to profit from the captagon trade. In the 117th Congress, the Countering Assad’s Proliferation Trafficking and Garnering of Narcotics Act (H.R. 6265, also known as the CAPTAGON Act) was introduced by Representative French Hill in December 2021, passed by the House in September 2022, and incorporated into the FY2023 NDAA (Section 1238 of P.L. 117-263). It has required the development and submission to Congress of an

⁷¹ OPCW Executive Council, EC-110/DG.2, July 24, 2025.

⁷² OPCW Executive Council, Report by the Director-General Progress in the Elimination of the Syrian Chemical Weapons Programme, EC-110/DG.2, July 24, 2025.

⁷³ For related reporting, see OPCW Executive Council, Reports by the Director-General on Progress in the Elimination of the Syrian Chemical Weapons Programme, <https://www.opcw.org/media-centre/featured-topics/opcw-and-syria>. In January 2026, the OPCW reported that “Since March 2025, the Secretariat has visited 19 locations (4 declared and 15 suspected chemical weapons-related locations), conducted interviews with former chemical weapons experts, collected 10 samples, and obtained over 6,000 documents from the locations visited.” OPCW Executive Council, EC-111/DG.4, January 23, 2026.

⁷⁴ OPCW Executive Council, EC-111/DG.4, January 23, 2026.

⁷⁵ Emanuel Fabian, “In historic campaign across Syria, IDF says it destroyed 80% of Assad regime’s military,” *Times of Israel*, December 10, 2024.

⁷⁶ For more information, see, U.S. State Department Bureau for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, International Narcotics Control Strategy Report, 2024; and Caroline Rose and Matthew Zweig, “What Will Happen to Assad’s Secret Drug Empire?” *Foreign Policy*, January 16, 2025.

interagency plan to disrupt captagon trafficking and build regional counterdrug capacity. The transitional government has pledged to dismantle captagon production and smuggling networks and cooperate with regional countries to halt the flow of the drug across Syria's borders. Arrests of criminals, including drug traffickers, are being publicized by Syrian authorities. Criminal networks' loss of captagon trade revenues may add to economic pressures in some areas of Syria.

Human Rights and Syrian Minorities. The Asad government's use of military force to repress demonstrations led many Syrians, the United States, and other countries in 2011 to call for Asad's departure. The Asad government's subsequent use of torture, chemical weapons, and its mass execution of prisoners continue to drive Syrian and international calls for accountability. Transitional authorities have made statements calling for inclusive governance and respect for religious tolerance, and U.S. and other international officials have called on interim Syrian leaders to fulfill these commitments. U.S. officials have condemned attacks on minority communities, including by members of or forces associated with the interim government (see "Political and Security Dynamics" above). Some members of minority communities in northeast and southern Syria have expressed support for decentralized governance and remain skeptical of the transitional government's intentions.

The State Department in 2023 designated HTS as an entity of particular concern pursuant to the Frank R. Wolf International Religious Freedom Act (P.L. 114-281), and reported in 2025 that "armed terrorist groups, including Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, reportedly carried out arbitrary detentions and subjected some detainees to torture" during 2024.⁷⁷ The State Department's annual human rights report on conditions in Syria during 2024 cites UN Commission of Inquiry for Syria reporting and other human rights organizations' reporting alleging the involvement of SDF, HTS, and Turkey-backed Syrian National Army forces in a range of human rights abuses and violations. The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom recommended in its 2025 annual report that HTS be redesignated.

U.S. Diplomacy

Since President Donald Trump's May 2025 meeting in Saudi Arabia with Ahmed Al Sharaa, the United States has provided high-level engagement and substantial sanctions relief to the Syrian government, presenting these changes as a conditional opportunity for Syrians and transitional leaders to rebuild, reorganize, and demonstrate their intentions toward ethnic and religious minority groups, terrorist threats, and Syria's neighbors. The Trump Administration's engagement builds on initial contacts made and steps taken by the previous Administration in the wake of Asad's departure.⁷⁸ U.S. Ambassador to Turkey Tom Barrack serves as U.S. Special Envoy to Syria and has engaged regularly and directly with Syrian leaders and regional leaders in support of agreements to end intra-Syrian violence and reach mutually agreed security arrangements in areas subject to foreign intervention. President Sharaa visited the United States in November 2025 and met again with President Trump at the White House (**Figure 5**).

The United States suspended operations at the U.S. Embassy in Damascus in 2012; the Czech Republic serves as the U.S. protecting power in Syria. In May 2025, Ambassador Barrack and other officials raised the U.S. flag at the U.S. diplomatic residence in Damascus for the first time since 2012.⁷⁹ The Trump Administration has not publicly announced plans to return U.S. personnel to Syria on an enduring basis, and the FY2026 National Defense Authorization Act

⁷⁷ U.S. State Department, Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Syria, 2024, August 12, 2025.

⁷⁸ "US removes \$10M bounty on leader of rebel group now in charge of Syria," Voice of America, December 20, 2024.

⁷⁹ Timour Azhari, "US flag raised in Damascus, envoy says Syria-Israel peace is possible," Reuters, May 29, 2025.

requires the Administration to report on security conditions necessary for the reopening of a U.S. diplomatic mission in Damascus.

Figure 5. President Donald Trump Hosts President Ahmed Al Sharaa

November 10, 2025



Source: Presidency of the Syrian Arab Republic.

In March 2014, the State Department suspended the operations of the Syrian embassy in Washington, DC, and those of Syrian consulates in Michigan and Texas, and expelled Syrian staff. In conjunction with the visit of President Sharaa to Washington, DC, in November 2025, Syrian Foreign Minister Asaad Al Shaibani reported that Secretary of State Marco Rubio had transmitted an approval that “provides for the lifting of all previously imposed legal measures and restrictions against the Syrian Mission and the Embassy of the Syrian Arab Republic by the United States of America.”⁸⁰ According to a press report citing unnamed Syrian officials, Mohammad Qanatari has been appointed as Syria’s chargé d’affaires in Washington, DC.⁸¹

U.S. Military Operations in Syria

U.S. forces operated in Syria from 2014 through 2025 pursuant to the 2001 and 2002 Authorizations for Use of Military Force (AUMF). Congress repealed the 2002 AUMF in the FY2026 National Defense Authorization Act. U.S. operations in Syria as part of Operation Inherent Resolve (OIR) seek the enduring defeat of the Islamic State. Press reports suggest that approximately 1,000 U.S. military personnel remain in Syria and unnamed U.S. officials have said that U.S. forces are preparing to withdraw. U.S. forces withdrew from their outpost at Al Tanf in southern Syria and the Al Shaddadi outpost in eastern Syria in February 2026. Most U.S. forces in Syria have been deployed in northeast Syria in support of the SDF; ongoing changes to security control and responsibilities there between the SDF and government forces may face

⁸⁰ Syrian Foreign Minister Asaad Al Shaibani (@AsaadHShaibani) X post, November 10, 2025, <https://x.com/AsaadHShaibani/status/1988018696800096368>.

⁸¹ *Enab Baladi*, “Who is Mohammad Qanatari Syria’s chargé d’affaires in Washington?” January 28, 2026.

challenges, particularly as national forces move into SDF-held areas, border security mechanisms are established, and SDF forces are integrated under national command. Any resulting violence could disrupt the region's fragile stability. A U.S. agreement with neighboring Iraq provides for the continued presence in northern Iraq to conduct Syria-related counter-IS operations through September 2026. Prospects for the renewal or revision of this agreement remain uncertain as Iraq continues its government formation consultations following its November 2025 election.

Syria Train and Equip Program FY2025 Funding and FY2026 Legislation

The Syria Train and Equip program, authorized by Congress since 2014 and funded via the Counter-ISIS Train and Equip Fund (CTEF) defense appropriation, has sought to sustain the defeat of the Islamic State in Syria by enabling Syrian partner forces, primarily the SDF. In 2024, Congress appropriated \$147.9 million in FY2025 CTEF funds for Syria programs available through September 2026. The FY2026 National Defense Authorization Act extended authorities for U.S. train and equip programs in Syria through December 2026, and amends notice and wait procedures to require reporting to Congress on vetting arrangements for groups or individuals associated with Syria's transitional government. The act also requires reporting on IS detention facilities in Syria, U.S. force posture and activities in Syria, and security conditions necessary for the reopening of a U.S. diplomatic mission in Damascus.⁸²

The Trump Administration's FY2026 defense appropriations request sought nearly \$130 million for CTEF programs in Syria, including training and equipping, logistical support, stipends, repair, and sustainment investments to support primarily SDF-affiliated paramilitary, internal security, and detention personnel. The FY2026 defense appropriations act (Division A of P.L. 119-75) appropriates funds for Syria at the requested level available through FY2027 and rescinds \$50 million in FY2025 appropriations from the CTEF account.

The Administration has not publicly clarified how, if at all, its plans for the implementation of train and equip activities in Syria may change given changes to the roles and responsibilities of SDF and transitional government forces in northeastern Syria and the withdrawal of U.S. forces from southern Syria. As discussed above, the January 2026 SDF-Damascus agreement calls for the integration of some SDF personnel into units of the Syrian security forces, but specific plans for implementation, command, and vetting have not been announced. U.S.-supported Syrian Free Army forces in southern Syria continue to integrate with national forces. The FY2026 defense appropriations act includes a waiver authority to allow for the provision of assistance to vetted Syrian forces notwithstanding other provisions of law that restrict U.S. assistance and transactions with Syria because of Syria's designation as a state sponsor of terrorism.

U.S. Stabilization and Foreign Assistance

U.S. stabilization and foreign assistance programs in Syria have been curtailed following the Trump Administration's 2025 review of U.S. foreign assistance activities and implementation of agency reorganization plans and staff relocations. According to lead inspector general reporting to Congress, as of June 30, all USAID stabilization programming in Syria had been terminated.⁸³

⁸² The report accompanying the House-passed version of the act (H.Rept. 119-231) directed the Administration to provide a briefing to the House Committee on Armed Services "not later than February 15, 2026, on the progress, challenges, and outlook for potential U.S. defense partnership with the new Syrian government." Directive report language is not legally binding, but agencies generally have regarded it as a congressional mandate and responded accordingly.

⁸³ LIG-OIR, Report to the U.S. Congress, July 1–December 31, 2025, pp. 33-37.

Some State Department stabilization programs were continued, but may end to the extent that they have focused on support to local authorities in northeastern Syria that are implementing integration agreements with the national government.⁸⁴ USAID humanitarian assistance activities were paused in early 2025. Some were restarted under State Department management and others were terminated.⁸⁵ The Trump Administration has provided congressional committees of jurisdiction with updated lists of assistance programs in Syria that it has terminated and preserved.

The Trump Administration's FY2026 budget request for foreign assistance did not include a specific amount for Syria programs, but, consistent with the prior Administration's requests, sought authority notwithstanding other provisions of law to provide "non-lethal stabilization assistance for Syria, including for emergency medical and rescue response and chemical weapons investigations."⁸⁶ The National Security, Department of State, and Related Programs Appropriations Act, 2026 (Division F of P.L. 119-75) includes this language, and makes funds available for aid to ethnic and religious minorities in Syria.

Entry and Presence of Syrians in the United States

In December, President Trump announced his decision "to fully restrict and limit the entry of nationals" of Syria, including immigrants and nonimmigrants, saying the country "lacks an adequate central authority for issuing passports or civil documents and does not have appropriate screening and vetting measures."⁸⁷ The Trump Administration terminated the designation of Syria for Temporary Protected Status effective November 21, 2025.⁸⁸ More than 50,000 Syrian nationals had been admitted to the United States as refugees from FY2014 through FY2024.⁸⁹

Admission Criteria for U.S. Partners in Syria

From 2014 through 2025, U.S. operations against the Islamic State in Syria relied on partnership with substate forces. Members of Congress debated the eligibility of U.S. partners for admission into the United States in the case of attack by Turkish and/or Asad government forces. Several bills in the 116th Congress would have extended the Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) program to foreign nationals employed by the U.S. military in Syria, as well as their immediate families. The Syrian SIV programs proposed by these bills generally were modeled on the temporary SIV programs for Iraqis and Afghans who worked for or on behalf of the U.S. government. During the 117th Congress, Representatives Jason Crow and Michael Waltz reintroduced one such bill, the Syrian Partner Protection Act (H.R. 2838), which would have provided SIV status to a national of Syria or a stateless person who has habitually resided in Syria that had "partnered with, was employed by, or worked for or directly with the United States Government in Syria as an interpreter, translator, intelligence analyst, or in another sensitive and trusted capacity, on or after January 1, 2014, for an aggregate period of not less than 1 year."

⁸⁴ LIG-OIR, Report to the U.S. Congress, July 1–December 31, 2025, pp. 33-37.

⁸⁵ LIG-OIR, Reports to the U.S. Congress, April 1–June 30, 2025, pp. 31-33; and July 1–Dec. 31, 2025, pp. 33-37.

⁸⁶ U.S. Department of State, *FY2026 Congressional Budget Justification*, accessed June 2, 2025.

⁸⁷ The White House, Proclamations, *Restricting and Limiting the Entry of Foreign Nationals to Protect the Security of the United States*, December 16, 2025.

⁸⁸ Department of Homeland Security U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, "Termination of the Designation of Syria for Temporary Protected Status," 90 *Federal Register* 45398, September 22, 2025. Temporary Protected Status is a temporary immigration benefit granted to eligible nationals of a country designated by the Secretary for Temporary Protected Status under the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA), or to eligible aliens without nationality who last habitually resided in the designated country. During the designation period, Temporary Protected Status beneficiaries are eligible to remain in the United States, may not be removed, and are authorized to work and obtain an Employment Authorization Document (EAD) so long as they continue to meet the requirements of Temporary Protected Status.

⁸⁹ Additionally, approximately 250 or fewer Syrian nationals were affirmatively granted asylum in the United States in each of the fiscal years from 2021 to 2023. See U.S. Department of Homeland Security, Office of Homeland Security Statistics, *Refugees: 2024*, August 12, 2025; and *Asylees: 2023*, October 2, 2024.

U.S. Sanctions and Syria

From 1979 to 2024, the United States placed a broad array of sanctions on the government of Syria, Syrian entities and individuals, and third parties supporting certain Syrian government activities. The United States also imposed targeted sanctions on terrorist groups active in Syria and associated individuals. Successive Administrations and Congresses imposed and maintained these sanctions as a means of raising the costs to Syrian leaders of a number of policies they deemed hostile to U.S. national security, foreign policy, and economic interests. Specific sanctions actions were taken by different Administrations to address the Syrian government's support for terrorism, its trade in weapons of mass destruction and ballistic missile technologies, its interference in neighboring Lebanon, and its conduct during the country's 2011-2024 conflict.

Sanctions Relief and Remaining Authorities

In January 2025, the Biden Administration issued a general license to allow for certain transactions in Syria through July 6, 2025, to include transactions with the government of Syria, transactions related to noncommercial personal remittances, and transactions in support of the sale, supply, storage, or donation of energy, including petroleum, petroleum products, natural gas, and electricity. President Biden also issued Executive Order 14142, amending Executive Order 13894 (2019)⁹⁰ to remove specific references to the government of Turkey and preserving provisions allowing the potential imposition of financial and travel sanctions on individuals determined by the President to "threaten the peace, security, stability, or territorial integrity of Syria"; or be involved in "the commission of serious human rights abuse" related to Syria.

On May 13, 2025, President Trump said during a visit to Saudi Arabia that his Administration was "exploring normalizing relations with Syria's new government," and said he would "be ordering the cessation of sanctions against Syria in order to give them a chance at greatness."⁹¹ The Administration subsequently provided exemptive relief for sanctions on the Commercial Bank of Syria, issued a 180-day waiver of sanctions in the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act of 2019 ("Caesar Act," 22 U.S.C. §8791 note),⁹² and issued a general license (GL 25) that authorized certain transactions with Syria and designated individuals that would otherwise be prohibited under then-applicable sanctions regulations.⁹³

On June 30, 2025, President Trump issued Executive Order 14312, eliminating or waiving many Asad-era sanctions on the government of Syria, while amending Executive Order 13894 (2019) again to maintain sanctions on Asad-associated entities and refine mechanisms for possibly

⁹⁰ President Trump in 2019 issued Executive Order 13894, which declared a national emergency based on U.S. concerns about the actions of the Turkish military in Syria. In October 2024, President Biden renewed that national emergency declaration for one year. See 84 *Federal Register* 55851 and 89 *Federal Register* 82929.

⁹¹ Ben Hubbard, Jonathan Swan, and Erika Solomon, "Trump Says U.S. Will Lift Sanctions on Syria Under New Government," *New York Times*, May 14, 2025.

⁹² In 2019, Congress enacted the Caesar Act, requiring the President to impose sanctions on persons the President determines to have knowingly provided significant support or knowingly engaged in significant transactions with the government of Syria, entities it owns or controls, and its senior officials; certain military or mercenary forces; or to be subject to sanctions with respect to Syria under U.S. law; and those who knowingly sell or provide significant goods, services, technology or other support related to a number of economic sectors, including natural gas, petroleum, and "significant construction or engineering services" for the government of Syria. Congress extended the sunset of the Caesar Act through December 2029 in the FY2025 National Defense Authorization Act.

⁹³ FINCEN, "Exception to Prohibition Imposed by Section 311 of the USA PATRIOT Act against the Commercial Bank of Syria," May 23, 2025; U.S. State Department, "Providing Sanctions Relief for the Syrian People," May 23, 2025; OFAC, "General License No. 25, Authorizing Transactions Prohibited by the Syrian Sanctions Regulations or Involving Certain Blocked Persons," May 23, 2025.

imposing future sanctions on entities determined to be disrupting Syria's transition, violating human rights, or threatening Syria's stability or territorial integrity. The order directed the Secretary of State to "take all appropriate action" with respect to Syria's designation as a state sponsor of terrorism⁹⁴ and the designation of Jabhat Al Nusra/Hay'at Tahrir al Sham as a Foreign Terrorist Organization and a Specially Designated Global Terrorist entity. It also directed the Secretary of State to review President Sharaa's individual designation. On July 8, Secretary Rubio's determination revoking the FTO designation of HTS was published.⁹⁵

On August 26, the Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) published a final rule removing the Syrian Sanctions Regulations (31 C.F.R. Part 542) from the *Code of Federal Regulations*, consistent with Executive Order 14312. On September 25, OFAC published a final rule that changed the heading of the Syria-Related Sanctions Regulations (31 C.F.R. part 569) to the Promoting Accountability for Assad and Regional Stabilization Sanctions Regulations and amended the renamed regulations to implement Executive Orders 14142 (2025) and 14312 (2025).⁹⁶ OFAC stated that several relevant "statutes will be fully integrated into a more comprehensive set of regulations at a future date," including statutes providing for sanctions related to human rights, civilian protection, drug trafficking, and defense cooperation with Russia.

In November, the Trump Administration revoked Ahmed Al Sharaa's designation as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist under Executive Order 13224 (2001).⁹⁷ In a November vote, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 2799, a U.S.-sponsored resolution removing Sharaa and interim interior minister Anas Khattab from the UN's Islamic State and Al Qaeda sanctions list.

In December, Congress repealed the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act, which among other things had authorized the imposition of sanctions on third-party investors in sectors key to the Syrian government's recovery plans. In doing so, Congress required the executive branch to provide regular reports to Congress on conditions in Syria, including on the Syrian government's performance relative to counterterrorism, minority protection, regional security, governance, human rights, and counternarcotics benchmarks.

The Administration, to date, is reviewing but has not rescinded Syria's status as a state sponsor of terrorism. If the President or his designees act to further waive or permanently rescind the application of sanctions on Syria, such as Syria's State Sponsors of Terrorism designation, then specific notification and certification requirements to Congress under law may apply. In May 2025, the State Department announced that Secretary of State Rubio recertified Syria as a "not fully cooperating country" (NFCC) under section 40A of the Arms Export Control Act." The Government of Syria is consequently denied trade with the United States in defense articles and

⁹⁴ Designation as a state sponsor of acts of international terrorism under Section 6(j)(1)(A) of the Export Administration Act of 1979 or Section 1754(c) of the Export Control Reform Act of 2019 restricts export licensing for controlled goods and services; Section 620A(a) of the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961 prohibits most U.S. foreign aid, Peace Corps programs, nonemergency agricultural aid, and Export-Import Bank funding; and Section 40(d) of the Arms Export Control Act prohibits sales and transfers of arms and related goods and services. See 50 U.S.C. §4813(c), 22 U.S.C. §2371(a), and 22 U.S.C. §2780(d), respectively. Section 1768 of the Export Control Reform Act of 2019 continues designations made under Section 6(j) of the Export Administration Act of 1979, which Section 1766 of the Export Control Reform Act of 2019 repealed nearly entirely. This designation also deprives targeted governments of sovereign immunity under the Foreign Sovereign Immunities Act from lawsuits based on certain acts of terrorism. See 28 U.S.C. §1605a. Designation as a state sponsor of international terrorism has implications elsewhere in law, see CRS Report R43835, *State Sponsors of Acts of International Terrorism—Legislative Parameters: In Brief*.

⁹⁵ *Federal Register*, Public Notice 12762, July 8, 2025.

⁹⁶ 90 *Federal Register* 46056, September 25, 2025.

⁹⁷ State Department, "Revocation of the Designation of Muhammad al-Jawlani as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist," 90 *Federal Register* 55231, December 1, 2025.

defense services under Section 40A of the Arms Export Control Act.⁹⁸ Other terrorism, chemical and biological weapons and missile proliferation sanctions, human rights-related sanctions (addressing trafficking in persons and child soldiers), and drug trafficking (captagon) statutory sanctions also continue to apply.

The Administration has communicated explicitly and repeatedly that U.S. sanctions relief is conditional. For example, in May 2025 the Department of the Treasury said, “U.S. sanctions relief has been extended to the new Syrian government with the understanding that the country will not offer a safe haven for terrorist organizations and will ensure the security of its religious and ethnic minorities. The U.S. will continue monitoring Syria’s progress and developments on the ground.”⁹⁹ Accordingly, the Administration has preserved in amended executive orders the authority to impose new sanctions on individuals determined by the President to “threaten the peace, security, stability, or territorial integrity of Syria”; or be involved in “the commission of serious human rights abuse” related to Syria.¹⁰⁰ The Administration is revising regulations for statutory and executive order-based Syria sanctions and has said revisions “will be fully integrated into a more comprehensive set of regulations at a future date.”¹⁰¹

Taken together, these legislative and executive actions appear to reflect a current consensus that the United States should provide sanctions relief to Syria’s transitional government but remain vigilant regarding potential risks. Under the prevailing framework, the President may retain broad authority with regard to decisions concerning existing sanctions on Syria and Syria-based entities. Congress may consider whether or how to amend or rescind remaining statutory U.S. sanctions or to respond to the executive branch’s steps to rescind or impose new sanctions implemented pursuant to executive orders and designations.

U.S. Targeted Terrorism Sanctions

In May 2018, the executive branch added Hayat Tahrir al Sham as an alias of the Nusrah Front, which until July 2025 was designated as a Foreign Terrorist Organization under Section 219 of the Immigration and Nationality Act. As of February 2026, HTS remains a Specially Designated Global Terrorist (SDGT) entity under Executive Order 13224. The executive branch designated Sharaa as an SDGT pursuant to Executive Order 13224 in 2013 and rescinded that designation in November 2025 along with that of Interior Minister Anas Khattab. The executive branch retains authority to amend or rescind SDGT designations under current law.

U.S. Tariffs

In April 2025, President Trump increased tariffs on U.S. imports from all global trading partners.¹⁰² In July 2025, the President issued an executive order adjusting country-specific tariffs that set the tariff on Syria to 41%.¹⁰³ The February 20, 2026, U.S. Supreme Court ruling on tariffs

⁹⁸ 22 U.S.C. §2781. The Secretary of State makes this determination annually by May 15; Syria has been designated each year since the provision was first enacted in 1996. U.S. State Department, Tammy Bruce, Department Spokesperson, “Certification of Cuba as a Not Fully Cooperating Country,” May 13, 2025.

⁹⁹ U.S. Department of the Treasury, “Treasury Issues Immediate Sanctions Relief for Syria,” May 23, 2025.

¹⁰⁰ The Administration’s July 2025 amendment of Executive Order 13894 (2019) preserves a framework for the potential imposition of sanctions on actors in Syria for “(1) actions or policies that further threaten the peace, security, stability, or territorial integrity of Syria; or (2) the commission of serious human rights abuse.” 90 *Federal Register* 41505, August 26, 2025.

¹⁰¹ U.S. Department of the Treasury, Office of Foreign Assets Control, “Amendment to the Syria-Related Sanctions Regulations,” 90 *Federal Register* 46056, September 25, 2025.

¹⁰² See CRS Report R48549, *Presidential 2025 Tariff Actions: Timeline and Status*, by Keigh E. Hammond and William F. Burkhardt.

¹⁰³ The White House, *Further Modifying the Reciprocal Tariff Rates*, July 31, 2025.

imposed by President Trump under the International Emergency Economic Powers Act (IEEPA, 50 U.S.C. §§1701 et seq.) invalidated the April 2025 tariffs, and President Trump then declared new tariffs under a different statute, leaving Syria as of the date of this report with a 10% tariff on most exports to the United States.¹⁰⁴ In 2025, U.S. exports to Syria were valued at \$5.5 million and U.S. imports from Syria were valued at \$7.6 million.¹⁰⁵

Regional and International Initiatives and Interests

The nature, duration, and effects of the Syria crisis and the intervention of external actors have made the outcome of Syria's transition and the country's stability a matter of national security concern for some countries across the Middle East region and beyond. As of February 2026, notable statements and developments involving selected third parties include the following.

Israel. The fall of the Asad regime brought an end to 50 years of rule by antagonists of Israel who had facilitated the transfer of support from Iran to Israel's enemies in Lebanon and beyond. During Israel's wars against Hamas and Hezbollah following the attacks of October 7, 2023, Israel continued air strikes on Syrian territory; in September 2024, it conducted a special forces raid against Syrian missile factories.¹⁰⁶ Israel has conducted military strikes across Syria since Asad's ouster, targeting sites associated with Syrian weapons of mass destruction and defense research programs, conventional weapons, and air defense systems. Israel also has demanded that the Syrian transitional government demilitarize three southern provinces, a demand that some Syrians have publicly protested.

As the Asad regime collapsed on December 8, 2024, Israeli military forces entered the UN Disengagement Observation Force (UNDOF) buffer zone established by the 1974 Israel-Syria Disengagement Agreement. From 1974 until Asad's ouster, most international controversy regarding control over Israel-Syria border areas focused on Israel's 1981 annexation of areas of the Golan Heights it had captured in the 1967 Arab-Israeli war. The United States recognized these Israel-controlled areas of the Golan Heights as part of Israel in 2019.

Syria's transitional authorities report that they have communicated with UNDOF officials and expressed their willingness to return Syrian state forces to areas adjacent to the UNDOF zone provided that Israel removes its force from areas within and beyond the zone. In November 2025, President Ahmed Al Sharaa, whose family reportedly was displaced from the Golan region in 1967 and whose nom de guerre Abu Mohammed al Jolani/Jawlani/Golani during the insurgency reflected those origins, criticized what he described as Israel's "expansionist ambitions" and reiterated his government's view that "to reach a final agreement, Israel should withdraw to their pre-Dec. 8 (2024) borders."¹⁰⁷ Syrian authorities reportedly have said in a letter to the U.S. government "we will not allow Syria to become a source of threat to any party, including Israel."¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁴ The White House, "Fact Sheet: President Donald J. Trump Imposes a Temporary Import Duty to Address Fundamental International Payment Problems," February 20, 2026. See also CRS Legal Sidebar LSB11398, *Supreme Court Rules Against Tariffs Imposed Under the International Emergency Economic Powers Act (IEEPA)*, by Christopher T. Zirpoli.

¹⁰⁵ U.S. Census Bureau, "U.S. trade in goods with Syria," data accessed February 24, 2026.

¹⁰⁶ "Israeli military says commandos raided missile plant in Syria in September," Reuters, January 2, 2025.

¹⁰⁷ Susannah George and Tobi Raji, "Syrian president details plans to work with Americans he once fought," *Washington Post*, November 11, 2025.

¹⁰⁸ "Exclusive: Syria and Israel in direct talks focused on security, sources say," Reuters, May 27, 2025.

In a letter to the United Nations, Israel stated that it had taken “limited and temporary measures to counter any further threat to its citizens,” and that the (Israel Defense Forces) IDF have deployed temporarily in a few points and in a limited capacity east of Line A.”¹⁰⁹ In December 2024, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu told the press that Israel’s seizure of control over the UNDOF zone was a “temporary defensive position until a suitable arrangement is found.”¹¹⁰ Subsequent media reports suggest that the IDF has been constructing more long-term infrastructure in the UNDOF zone and beyond.¹¹¹ In January 2025, Israeli Defense Minister Israel Katz said that Israeli forces intend to remain “at the top of Mount Hermon and in the security zone indefinitely to protect Golan communities, the north and all Israeli citizens.”¹¹²

Further Israeli strikes followed sectarian violence in May and July, including strikes in Damascus on the Syrian Ministry of Defense headquarters and near facilities associated with the Syrian presidency. Israel has expressed a willingness to defend Druze communities—an offer Syrian Druze have differed over.¹¹³ In August 2025, Israeli strikes and a raid by troops killed Syrian soldiers near Kiswah.¹¹⁴ In November 2025, an Israeli raid and strike targeting armed Islamists near Beit Jinn, Syria, near the Golan Heights killed 13 Syrians according to Syrian officials.¹¹⁵

Since May, Israel and Syria have engaged in talks to ease tensions and exchange security information, including in U.S.-supported meetings following the July violence in southern Syria and Israel’s military intervention.¹¹⁶ Sharaa has not precluded future Israel-Syria ties, but current discussions reportedly focus on security arrangements in southern Syria.¹¹⁷ On January 6, 2026, the United States, Israel, and Syria announced plans to “establish a joint fusion mechanism—a dedicated communication cell—to facilitate immediate and ongoing coordination on their intelligence sharing, military de-escalation, diplomatic engagement, and commercial opportunities under the supervision of the United States.”¹¹⁸

The prospect of Turkish-Syrian military cooperation and the possible stationing in Syria of additional Turkish military forces—including air and air defense forces in central Syria—has emerged as a matter of concern for Israel’s government.¹¹⁹ Turkish and Israeli officials have taken

¹⁰⁹ UN Document S/2024/887, December 9, 2024.

¹¹⁰ Israeli Prime Minister’s Office, “PM Netanyahu’s Statement from the Golan Heights,” December 8, 2024.

¹¹¹ Loveday Morris, Zakaria Zakaria, and Meg Kelly, “Israel is building outposts in Syria, raising local fears of occupation,” *Washington Post*, February 2, 2025.

¹¹² “Syria urges IDF withdrawal from buffer zone in talks with UN observers,” AFP/Times of Israel, January 29, 2025.

¹¹³ More than 100,000 Druze live in the Golan Heights. Israeli Druze serve in the Israel Defense Forces and many have ties to the Druze community in Syria. During the July fighting, Israeli and Syrian Druze both crossed their respective borders to defend coreligionists. “Israeli military strikes near Syria’s presidential palace after warning over sectarian attacks,” Associated Press, May 2, 2025; and “Syrians in predominantly Druze city reject Israeli statements, affirm national unity,” *Arab News*, February 25, 2025.

¹¹⁴ Dov Lieber et al., “Israeli Troops Raid Site Deep Inside Syria, Damascus Says,” *Wall Street Journal*, August 29, 2025.

¹¹⁵ Reham Mourshed and Euan Ward, “Israeli Raid in Southern Syria Kills at Least 13, Syrian Officials Say,” *New York Times*, November 28, 2025.

¹¹⁶ “Syria has had indirect talks with Israel to calm situation, Syrian leader says,” Reuters, May 7, 2025; and Euan Ward and Gabby Sobelman, “After Deadly Clashes, Syria and Israel Hold Direct Talks,” *New York Times*, August 20, 2025.

¹¹⁷ “An interview with Ahmed al-Sharaa, Syria’s president,” *The Economist*, February 4, 2025; *France 24*, “Syria, Israel hold US-mediated talks in Paris on regional de-escalation,” August 20, 2025; Agence France Press, “Israel says in talks ‘right now’ on south Syria demilitarization,” August 28, 2025.

¹¹⁸ U.S. State Department, “Joint Statement on the Trilateral Meeting Between the Governments of the United States of America, the State of Israel, and the Syrian Arab Republic,” January 6, 2026.

¹¹⁹ “Israel, Turkey said to agree to prevent clashes in Syria, establish hotline,” *Times of Israel*, May 21, 2025.

deconfliction steps to reduce the continuing potential for military confrontation. In November, Russian and Syrian defense ministry personnel conducted a joint security survey in Quneitra Governorate, adjacent to the Israel-controlled Golan Heights.¹²⁰ A renewed Russian security presence in this region could forestall Israeli concerns about a possible Turkish military presence, but may pose other security questions for Israel, the United States, and U.S. partners.

Turkey. Turkey has emerged as perhaps the most influential international actor in Syria and offered security and economic assistance to the interim government; Turkish and Syrian officials have exchanged high level visits and Turkish military forces remain present in areas of northern Syria. Turkey's stated principal concerns in Syria appear to relate to the presence and activities of PKK members in areas that have been controlled by the U.S.-backed SDF. Turkey may also harbor a basic opposition to the integration of SDF personnel and Kurdish-led administrative figures into Syrian state bodies and have enduring concerns about future attempts by Syrian Kurds to seek greater autonomy.

Turkey has offered military training and support to Syria's interim authorities, and Sharaa and other interim leaders have adopted positions on the future of the SDF, its integration with national forces, and the political future of northeast Syria that appear to align with Turkish preferences. In August 2025, Turkey and Syria signed a "joint training consultancy memorandum of understanding [MOU]" as an apparent step toward a substantive military cooperation deal.¹²¹ Turkish officials reportedly anticipate strengthening Syria's regular army with arms and other forms of support in hopes of helping it establish long-term stability.¹²² While Turkish and Syrian officials apparently are discussing the potential deployment of Turkish troops to some Syrian bases, the MOU reportedly does not address that point.¹²³ Additionally, Turkey reportedly plans to avoid providing any weapons that could provoke Israel given existing tensions.¹²⁴

Closer Syrian-Turkish official ties and an expanded Turkish military presence in Syria may provide Turkey with greater regional influence, and could affect the perceptions and security calculations of Israel, Jordan, Iraq, and other Arab states.

UN agencies report that there were more than 2.3 million registered Syrian refugees in Turkey as of February 12, 2026.¹²⁵

Arab States. Syria's transitional authorities are actively pursuing engagement with Arab states, whose interests and motives may differ. For instance, Qatar may share Turkey's comfort with Sharaa's Islamist background, while Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, and the United Arab Emirates may harbor reservations. Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman Al Saud facilitated Sharaa's meeting in Saudi Arabia with President Trump and, via phone, with President Erdogan of Turkey, and the kingdom and the UAE have announced plans for large investments in Syria. Saudi Arabia and Qatar jointly paid Syria's outstanding debt to the World Bank to enable new lending, and they have provided months of joint support for Syrian public sector salaries since mid-2025. Iraq's government invited Sharaa to attend the May Arab Summit in Baghdad, but he declined amid some Iraqi groups' vocal opposition because of his past associations with Al Qaeda and the Islamic State group. Jordan and Syria have continued to exchange official visits and Jordan joined

¹²⁰ Lior Ben Ari, "Report in Syria: Russian military delegation toured Quneitra area," *Ynet News*, November 17, 2025.

¹²¹ Soylu, "Turkey-Syria defence deal covers training and weapons supply."

¹²² Ezgi Akin, "After inking military pact, Turkey to provide Syria with weapons, training," *Al-Monitor*, August 14, 2025.

¹²³ Soylu, "Turkey-Syria defence deal covers training and weapons supply."

¹²⁴ Akin, "After inking military pact, Turkey to provide Syria with weapons, training."

¹²⁵ UNHCR Operational Data Portal, Syria Refugee Response, <https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria>.

other Arab states and Turkey in rejecting Israel's July 2025 military strikes inside Syria in the context of intercommunal violence in the southern province of Suweida.¹²⁶

Iran. Syria's transitional government controls areas of Syria formerly used by Iran and Iran-backed armed groups to move weapons and personnel into and beyond Syria; Asad's ouster severed long-established and important links in the networks Iran has used to project regional power. Syrian authorities have reported interdicting some small arms shipments to Lebanon, but have not accused Iran or Iran-backed groups of violating Syrian sovereignty on a broad or recurring basis. This may not prove that Iran is not attempting to do so. In December 2024, Ahmed Al Sharaa expressed his hope that Iran and Syria could have normal relations, based on mutual respect for sovereignty and noninterference.¹²⁷

Syrian security bodies reportedly have disrupted attempted Islamic State attacks against the Sayyida Zeinab shrine in Damascus, the protection of which Iran and pro-Iran armed groups used as a predicate and recruiting tool for their presence in Syria. A group known as Syrian Islamic Resistance Front claims to have conducted attacks since December 2024 on Israeli forces in the Golan Heights region from Syria: its statements feature a logo similar to Iran-backed armed groups in Lebanon and Iraq.¹²⁸

Syria's transitional government, did not join other Arab states in condemning Israeli and U.S. military operations against Iran in June 2025. Press and social media reports suggest that Israeli aircraft transited Syrian airspace en route to and from Iran, with Israeli strikes against military equipment in Syria since December 2024 having eliminated Syria's already limited ability to control its airspace.

Russia. Russia was Asad's most important military supporter. The presence in Syria of Russian air, ground, and naval forces both bolstered Russia's regional power projection abilities and served as a bulwark for the Asad government. Russia's decision in late 2024 to limit its military intervention on Asad's behalf, and its rapid decision to engage with Syria's transitional authorities, illustrate the enduring nature of Russia's interests in Syria, with continued military access as a key Russian priority. Russian personnel and equipment remain at the Hmeimim air base and the Tartous Naval Facility.¹²⁹ Russian forces withdrew their presence at the Qamishli airport in northeast Syria in January 2026.¹³⁰

In a December 2024 interview, Sharaa described Syria's relationship with Russia as long established and strategic and said the interim government would work to establish a new strategic relationship with Russia based on respect for the sovereignty of the Syrian state. In April 2025, Sharaa confirmed he had requested the return by Russia of former Syrian president Asad, who has been granted asylum in Moscow.¹³¹

In July 2025, the Syrian Foreign Minister visited Moscow "to start a necessary discussion ... based on the lessons of the past, to formulate the future."¹³² The Syrian transitional government since has held several high-level exchanges with Russian counterparts, and President Sharaa

¹²⁶ Saudi Press Agency, "Saudi Arabia, Jordan, UAE, Bahrain, Turkiye, Iraq, Oman, Qatar, Kuwait, Lebanon and Egypt Support Syrian Sovereignty," July 18, 2025.

¹²⁷ MEMRI Translation #11695, reviewed by CRS, Source - Al-Arabiya Network, December 29, 2024.

¹²⁸ *Jerusalem Post*, "IDF opens fire on armed group in Syrian Golan, pro-Assad group claims responsibility," February 1, 2025.

¹²⁹ LIG-OIR, Report to the U.S. Congress, April 1, 2025–June 30, 2025, p. 26.

¹³⁰ Paul Iddon, "What Russia's Military Is Doing In This Strategic Syria Airport," *Forbes*, August 15, 2025.

¹³¹ Christina Goldbaum, "Syria's Jihadist-Turned-President Seeks New Allies," *New York Times*, April 23, 2025.

¹³² Reuters, "Russia's Putin meets Syrian FM in Moscow, Sharaa invited to Russia-Arab summit," July 31, 2025.

travelled to Moscow in October 2025 and January 2026 for meetings with Vladimir Putin. Russian defense officials have hosted Syria's Minister of Defense and General Intelligence Director for consultations on future cooperation.

Statements from Damascus and Moscow on these occasions have been relatively warm and have not signaled any significant rupture or downgrade in ties. Sharaa said he would honor past bilateral agreements with Russia, which may include 49-year lease access agreements signed in 2017 by the Asad government granting Russia access to the Hmeimim Air base in Latakia and the Material Technical Support Point naval facility at Tartus. Russian military transport flights to Hmeimim were observed to have resumed in October 2025.

Russia's role in arming and training Syrian military personnel for decades may suggest that Syrian interim authorities could look to Russia as one source of military equipment and support as they rebuild and rearm Syrian security forces. Russia's seat on the UN Security Council also gives it influence over international decisions related to Syria.

Legislation and Hearings in the 119th Congress

In the 119th Congress, legislative initiatives included a range of sanctions-related proposals prior to the repeal of the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act, along with

- H.R. 1327, which would direct the Secretary of Homeland Security to conduct a threat assessment of terrorist threats to the United States posed by individuals in Syria with an affiliation with a Foreign Terrorist Organization or a Specially Designated Global Terrorist entity;
- S.J.Res. 6, which would direct the President to remove U.S. Armed Forces from hostilities in or affecting Syria within 30 days of adoption and unless and until a declaration of war or specific authorization is enacted; and
- S. 3740, which was introduced in January 2026 as a deterrent to Syrian transitional government military operations against Kurdish forces, and would impose comprehensive sanctions on the Syrian transitional government and parties conducting transactions with it and redesignate HTS as an FTO.¹³³

The Senate Foreign Relations Committee held a full committee hearing (S. Hrg. 119-37) on February 13, 2025, entitled "After Assad: Navigating Syria Policy."

The House Foreign Affairs Committee Subcommittee on the Middle East and North Africa held a hearing on June 5, 2025, entitled "After Assad: The Future of Syria."

The Helsinki Commission held a hearing on February 3, 2026, entitled "Securing Syria's Transformation by Diminishing Russia's Influence."

The House Foreign Affairs Committee held a hearing on February 10, 2026, entitled "Syria at a Crossroads: U.S. Policy Challenges Post-Assad."

The House Financial Services Committee held a full committee markup on H.R. 4427, the Syria Sanctions Accountability Act of 2025, on July 22, 2025.

¹³³ See S. 3740 and Office of U.S. Senator Lindsey Graham, "Graham, Blumenthal Introduce Save The Kurds Act," January 29, 2026.

Outlook and Issues Before Congress

Syria's transitional authorities are asserting domestic and international legitimacy based on their leadership of the late 2024 military campaign that dislodged Bashar Al Asad and the acceptance to date by Syrians of the interim constitutional declaration and decisions they have taken. They are attempting to project an image of calm inevitability for their continuing leadership of the transition, amid sectarian violence, contested territorial control, and calls from Syrians and international observers for a more inclusive process and greater protection for minorities. As procedural steps in the transition continue, Syrian leaders face daunting challenges as they seek to reconstruct a functioning state apparatus that can protect Syrian sovereignty and citizens, rebuild national infrastructure, and establish a self-sustaining, productive economy.

Interim leaders' willingness to share power and the durability of the peace that generally has prevailed in Syria since mid-December 2024 may continue to be tested. Stressors may include decisions made regarding the political and security future of northeast Syria; the relative integration and participation in the transition of Druze communities in southern Syria; the protection of the rights of Syrian minorities and women; the possibility of renewed or expanded foreign military intervention; and the willingness of Syrians to uphold order in the face of severe humanitarian crises, economic deprivation, sectarian violence, and vigilantism.

Outside actors continue to approach Syria in pursuit of their discrete interests. Many regional countries have pledged support for the transition in Syria, but the compatibility of their goals and Syrians' willingness to embrace them are uncertain. Israeli military operations in Syria and the Golan Heights region, Israeli actions to protect Syrian minority groups, and Israeli government demands that Syria's government accept limits on Syrian security and military operations in southern Syria may lead to confrontation. The possibility of Turkish military intervention in the context of disputes over the future of the northeast remains present. Outside actors, including the United States, may weigh concerns about the resumption of conflict in Syria and the reemergence of transnational terrorist threats alongside goals of supporting and shaping the political transition, stabilization, and reconstruction efforts.

In this context, Congress and the Trump Administration may continue to reassess U.S. interests in Syria and debate approaches toward securing them relative to U.S. priorities elsewhere. U.S. policy toward Syria since 2011 has pursued parallel and at times competing interests and has featured a mix of evolving diplomatic, military, assistance, and sanctions efforts. Views in Congress and successive Administrations regarding how the United States should approach Syria policy have at times been divergent and have changed over time and in response to developments at home and abroad. Looking ahead, the 119th Congress may use its national security tools and authorities to examine and shape U.S. policies toward Syria's interim government, various Syrian groups, and regional and international parties active in Syria.

As it does so, Members may consider and debate several policy questions:

How should United States counterterrorism operations in Syria evolve?

Eliminating threats to the United States and U.S. national security interests posed by terrorist groups active in Syria has been a consistent goal of U.S. policy toward Syria since the Obama Administration. Through January 2026, the United States maintained a military presence in southern and northeastern Syria tasked with conducting operations against terrorist groups and supporting local partner forces in ensuring the enduring defeat of the Islamic State organization. This included the provision of support to partner forces that were conducting counter-IS operations, detaining thousands of IS fighters, and securing camps housing tens of thousands of individuals from formerly IS-controlled areas. Following the Syrian government's reassertion of

security control in eastern Syria in January 2026 and the transfer of IS prisoners to Iraq, the transitional government and its security forces are assuming responsibility for remaining counterterrorism functions, and unnamed U.S. officials have indicated that U.S. forces are preparing to withdraw.

Congress has provided authority and funding to the Department of Defense on an annual basis for related U.S. operations and assistance, and changes to U.S. posture and operations or the extension of new U.S. security assistance to transitional government security forces may prompt new legislative reconsideration, oversight, and debate. The FY2026 National Defense Authorization Act and FY2026 Defense Appropriations Act extended through December 2026 authorities for U.S. train and equip programs in Syria and provided funding available through September 2027.¹³⁴ In considering Administration initiatives in 2026, Congress may act independently of the Administration's requests, and congressional consideration of defense appropriations and authorizations for FY2027 may feature proposals for substantial revisions of U.S. policies and programs.

Possible questions Members may consider for oversight and legislative purposes include the following:

- What is the current nature of Syria-based terrorist threats? To what extent do groups active in Syria threaten the United States directly or indirectly? To what extent are U.S. interests and partners threatened?
- How capable is the Syrian government of independently combatting terrorist threats in Syria? On what timeline and with what assistance might the transitional government be more capable of providing security for Syria independently? What role are foreign terrorist fighters or other extremists playing in Syria's new security forces? What are the prospects for demobilization and disarmament of armed groups in Syria? What would such efforts entail?
- How might changes to the posture, presence, and operations of the U.S. military in Syria affect U.S. interests? Should Congress act to support or limit Administration actions to change the U.S. military presence or operations in Syria? Can U.S. operations from Turkey, Iraq, or Jordan adequately secure U.S. interests and how sustainable might the presence of U.S. forces in those countries be?
- How long and at what cost should the United States be prepared to combat terrorist threats in Syria? What contributions are others making to these efforts?
- How might the success or failure of the integration of former U.S. partner forces with Syrian government forces affect U.S. interests? Should the United States ensure the implementation of related agreements? If so, how? Should the United States enter into counterterrorism and defense cooperation agreements with Syria's transitional government? If so, on what terms?
- What consideration or protection, if any, does the United States owe members of Syrian partner forces that have supported U.S. counterterrorism objectives to date? What posture should the United States adopt with regard to the relationships between its Syrian partners and Syria's government? How might

¹³⁴ The act did not include a Senate-reported provision that would have required the Administration to certify the independent capabilities of U.S.-backed Syrian forces before reducing the number of U.S. troops in northeast Syria below 400.

any such obligations best be reconciled with the security concerns of U.S. allies and any broader U.S. reputational interests?

What type of relationship should the United States have with Syria's transitional government and other entities in post-Asad Syria?

The United States suspended diplomatic operations in Syria during the 2011-2024 conflict, but did not sever diplomatic relations or durably transfer recognition to any other Syrian entity. President Trump's engagement with President Sharaa and ongoing engagement with Syrian leaders by Secretary of State Rubio and Special Envoy for Syria Barrack reflect a de facto U.S. recognition of Syria's transitional authorities.

The Administration and Congress have rescinded many U.S. sanctions on the Syrian government and Syrian state entities that were imposed under the previous Syrian government, while maintaining targeted sanctions on Asad regime officials and maintaining a framework that would provide for the imposition of new sanctions on Syrian actors if deemed necessary. Uncertainty persists over the inclusivity of the transition and the Syrian government's approach to minority communities.

Possible questions Members may consider for oversight and legislative purposes include the following:

- When and on what terms, if any, should the U.S. government reestablish regular diplomatic relations with Syria's transitional government? What diplomatic presence should the United States and Syria have in each other's country, and what opportunities, risks, and costs might accompany the return of U.S. diplomatic personnel to Syria on a permanent basis? When and under what circumstances should the United States release any Syrian state funds blocked in the United States?
- When, how, and on what terms should the United States alter remaining sanctions on Syria, Syrian state entities, or individuals and groups in Syria, including U.S.-designated terrorist entities and individuals? What specific executive or legislative sanctions measures, if any, ought to be altered and how?
- Under what circumstances might sanctions be reimposed? For what purposes, on what terms, and with what potential effects?
- What measures can Congress directly affect and what measures are within the President's discretion?

Should the United States provide Syria-related foreign assistance and humanitarian assistance?

Through January 2025, the U.S. State Department and U.S. Agency for International Development provided a range of foreign assistance and security assistance in Syria, focused on areas outside the control of the Syrian government.¹³⁵ This included stabilization programs focused on essential services and local governance, civil society, support for democratic governance, education, demining, agriculture, support to independent media, community security, livelihoods, and economic growth. U.S. humanitarian assistance supported relief efforts for internally displaced persons in Syria, select Syrian communities, and Syrian refugees in regional countries. The Trump Administration's review of U.S. foreign assistance, the reorganization of executive branch entities responsible for implementing foreign assistance, and changes to the

¹³⁵ For a review of these programs see LIG-OIR, Report to the U.S. Congress, October 1, 2024–December 31, 2024, pp. 84-99.

U.S. military presence in Syria altered U.S. capabilities and programs. Some assistance programs have ended, some have changed, and some continue on previous terms.

Congress may inquire about the extent to which changes to U.S. foreign assistance programs and implementation in Syria instituted by the Trump Administration reflect lasting changes to U.S. policy and priorities there. Congress may consult Administration officials, implementing partners, and other observers to determine whether prevailing efforts are aligned with U.S. priorities and interests in Syria and whether alternative approaches are advisable.

Past congressional and executive branch concerns have focused on obstacles to the delivery of humanitarian assistance in Syria, the potential diversion of U.S. humanitarian and security assistance by entities in Syria, and the extent to which U.S.-funded assistance programs may benefit Syrian entities with whom the United States has policy differences. While many of these concerns were directly linked to the antagonistic relationship between the Asad government and the U.S. government, and Asad's exploitation of international aid and recovery efforts, Congress may also consider these issues when examining proposals for assistance programs in post-Asad Syria, and in considering Administration requests for authorities or funds.

Possible questions Members may consider for oversight and legislative purposes include the following:

- What are Syria's post-Asad security, economic, reconstruction, and humanitarian needs? To what extent, and how, are such needs being assessed and met?
- What resources and partners are engaging to provide support to Syria?
- What support, if any, should the United States provide? Using what authorities, resources, and mechanisms? For how long, on what terms, and at what cost?

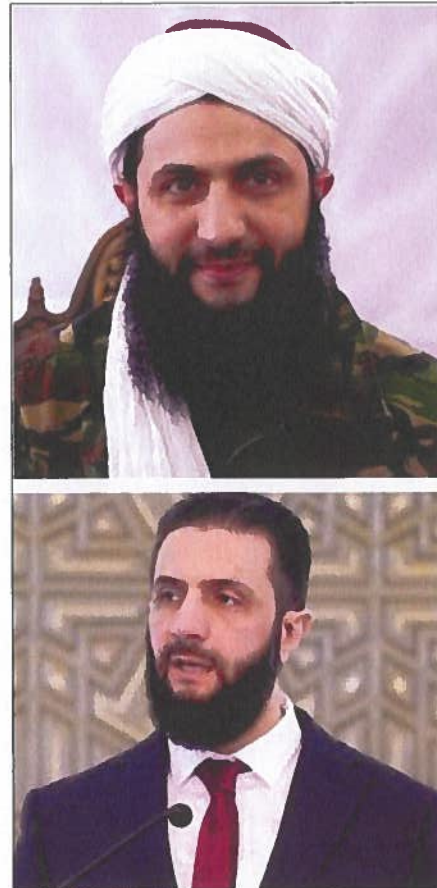
Appendix. Hayat Tahrir al Sham (HTS): Leadership, Insurgency, Terrorism, and Governance

Ahmed Hussein Al Sharaa was born in 1982 to a Syrian family from Damascus.¹³⁶ According to Sharaa, his family lived in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia and returned to Syria when he was seven. Sharaa has said his grandfather was displaced from the Golan Heights amid Israel-Syria fighting during the June 1967 Six-Day War: Sharaa apparently adopted the nom de guerre Abu Mohammed al Jolani/Jawlani/Golani in reference to his family's roots in that area.

Sharaa has said he travelled to Iraq in 2003, arriving just prior to the U.S. invasion, and that, after a brief return to Syria, he again travelled to Iraq in 2005 and joined the organization that would become Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI). Sharaa claims he differed with the group's anti-Shia Muslim sectarian ideology and targeting of civilians, but Sharaa remained an AQI member and, according to a former U.S. intelligence official, he led an AQI cell.¹³⁷ U.S. forces arrested Sharaa around 2005 or 2006, and imprisoned him in Camp Bucca in southern Iraq until late 2010 or early 2011, when he was released.¹³⁸ Sharaa reportedly used a false identity while in Iraq. Sharaa says he used his time in prison to develop plans for toppling the Syrian government. Upon Sharaa's release, he sought out former associates, who were then organized and operating as the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI).

Sharaa has said that after the start of the anti-Asad uprising in Syria in 2011, he shared his plans for waging an insurgency in Syria with AQI/ISI leader Abu Bakr al Baghdadi. Sharaa said Baghdadi agreed to provide limited support, and Sharaa departed Iraq for Syria with funding and

Figure A-1. Interim President of the Syrian Arab Republic Ahmed Al Sharaa



Sources: Above: Associated Press, 2016. Below: Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA), February 25, 2025.

¹³⁶ Biographical and historical information drawn from: *Frontline*, "The Frontline Interviews: The Jihadist," June 1, 2021; Raya Jalabi, "The secret history of Syria's new leader, Ahmed al-Sharaa," *FT Magazine*, March 7, 2025; Aaron Zelin, interview with John Haltiwanger, "What to Know About the Man Who Toppled Assad," *Foreign Policy*, December 11, 2024; Zelin, "Jihadi 'Counterterrorism': Hayat Tahrir al-Sham Versus the Islamic State," U.S. Military Academy Combatting Terrorism Center (CTC), *CTC Sentinel*, February 2023; Hassan Hassan, "Two Houses Divided: How Conflict in Syria Shaped the Future of Jihadism," *CTC Sentinel*, October 2018; and Charles Lister, "How al-Qa'ida Lost Control of its Syrian Affiliate: The Inside Story," *CTC Sentinel*, February 2018.

¹³⁷ PBS Frontline Interview with Nada Bakos, *Frontline*, "The Frontline Interviews: The Jihadist," June 1, 2021.

¹³⁸ Sharaa reportedly was detained while using a false identity.

a small number of AQI/ISI cadres. In late 2011, *Jabhat al Nusra Li-Ahl al Sham* (the Support Front for the People of Syria, or Nusra Front) began targeting the Asad government. According to the U.S. government, from November 2011 to December 2012, the Nusra Front claimed “nearly 600 attacks—ranging from more than 40 suicide attacks to small arms and improvised explosive device operations—in major city centers.” The State Department described the Nusra Front in 2012 as “an attempt by AQI to hijack the struggles of the Syrian people for its own malign purposes.”¹³⁹

Under Sharaa’s leadership, the Nusra Front became a leading actor in the insurgency against Asad, drawing greater support from some other Syrian factions. In April 2013, Baghdadi attempted to reassert direct control over the Nusra Front and announced that Sharaa’s group would be dissolved into the newly announced Islamic State of Iraq and al Sham (ISIL/ISIS). Sharaa said he and his group were not consulted on the change, and they pledged allegiance to Al Qaeda leader Ayman al Zawahiri and said the Nusra Front would continue its operations.¹⁴⁰ While Islamic State and Al Qaeda leaders disputed global leadership of the jihadist movement in 2014 and 2015, IS and Nusra Front fighters clashed in Syria, with IS forces expelling the Nusra Front and other armed anti-Asad groups from large areas of northern and central Syria.

Sharaa announced the dissolution of the Nusra Front in July 2016 and rebranded the group as *Jabhat Fatah al Sham* (the Syrian Victory Front). In January 2017, Sharaa merged his group with some other armed Islamist opponents of Asad and established *Hayat Tahrir al Sham* (the Organization for the Liberation of Syria). Al Qaeda rejected Sharaa’s decisions and accused Sharaa of betrayal. Several Al Qaeda ideologues and operatives left the new coalition. Sharaa later directed HTS security operations against Al Qaeda-linked figures.

By 2018, HTS had become the de facto authority in Idlib province in northwest Syria, coopting some rivals and suppressing some groups’ opposition to its leadership through force. Some Al Qaeda-linked elements of HTS opposed reported HTS security cooperation with Turkey and HTS leaders’ emphasis on local security and administration. These elements split from HTS, forming *Hurras Al Din* (Guardians of Religion). In 2025, U.S. military strikes continued to target Hurras Al Din members.

HTS established the Syrian Salvation Government in Idlib to administer limited services and provide governance. HTS at times clashed with groups operating under the Turkey-backed Syrian National Army coalition, but coordinated with them and other Islamist armed groups under a security mechanism known as the *Fatah al Mubin* (Clear Victory) Operations Room. This network, in coordination with Turkey’s armed forces, resisted pro-Asad forces’ efforts to retake Idlib province. The arrangements were the precursor to the Military Operations Department that launched the “Deterring Aggression” operation from Idlib in November 2024 that seized Aleppo, Homs, and Hama, and ultimately toppled the Asad regime.

¹³⁹ U.S. State Department, “Terrorist Designations of the al-Nusrah Front as an Alias for al-Qa’ida in Iraq,” December 11, 2012.

¹⁴⁰ *France24*/Agence France Presse (AFP), “Syria’s al Nusra militants vow allegiance to al Qaeda,” April 10, 2013.

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