

The U.S. Should Not Yet Trust Syria's New Regime

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Articles & Testimony

Even as they celebrate the demise of Assad's dictatorship, U.S. officials should take a "verify, don't trust" approach to HTS, judging the group by its actions on the ground before considering the removal of sanctions.

After a half century of Assad family dictatorial rule, Bashar Assad has fled and Syrians can finally celebrate the end of a horrific regime that gassed, starved and murdered its own people. Syrians have suffered terribly for many years, especially those tortured or disappeared by Assad's henchmen, and the nation's people need and deserve American support now. But the new rebel-led government in Damascus has a sordid history of its own, and U.S. officials must carefully assess how to interact with the new regime, starting with a series of U.S. priority interests.

Long before the lightning events that suddenly led to the end of the Assad regime this week, the United Nations General Assembly mandated an investigation into the use of systemic torture and abuse in its prisons. Released just as the regime was collapsing, the [report \(https://iiim.un.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/IIIM_DetentionReport_Public.pdf\)](https://iiim.un.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/IIIM_DetentionReport_Public.pdf) is hard to read, but the [images \(https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2024/dec/10/syrian-activist-who-symbolised-assad-brutality-found-dead-in-sednaya-prison\)](https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2024/dec/10/syrian-activist-who-symbolised-assad-brutality-found-dead-in-sednaya-prison) that have come out of the notorious Sednaya prison since its doors were opened are infinitely worse.

There can be no doubt that the region is already better off without Assad. Bumper-to-bumper traffic has clogged the roads leading to Damascus as refugees in neighboring countries stream home after years of forced displacement. Arab states should see almost immediate relief from a recent drug epidemic that was fueled by the Assad regime's production and regional distribution of [a notorious amphetamine-like substance called Captagon \(https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2024/11/11/how-syria-became-the-middle-east-s-drug-dealer\)](https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2024/11/11/how-syria-became-the-middle-east-s-drug-dealer).

The fall of the Assad regime is also strategically beneficial to the U.S. and its allies in the region by virtue of removing

a linchpin of Iran's "axis of resistance." This axis was a three-legged stool—based on Iran, Syria and the Lebanon-based group Hezbollah—and it can no longer stand. Syria served as a land bridge across which Iran shipped weapons to Hezbollah for many years. Without Syria, Iran will find it far more difficult to rearm those fighters. And without Iranian weapons and funds, the Lebanese terrorist group faces a tremendous challenge reconstituting itself after being devastated by a series of Israeli strikes have devastated the group.

Israel has capitalized on this vulnerable moment in Syria to destroy a huge number of weapons before they can fall into new hands and be used against Israel or others. Since Saturday, the Israeli air force and navy have **hit more than 350 strategic targets across the country (<https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2024-12-10/israel-targets-syrian-military-bases-and-arsenals-before-new-leaders-can-take-them-over>)**, destroying an estimated 70% of Syria's military capabilities.

The rebel alliance taking power in Syria now is led by Hayat Tahrir al Sham, a designated terrorist group that grew out of Al Qaeda and was first dispatched by Al Qaeda in Iraq, which later became Islamic State. While Hayat Tahrir al Sham has fought both Islamic State and an Al Qaeda splinter element in Syria, it remains a jihadist organization called out by the State Department. In 2020, the U.S. added the group to its list of entities of particular concern under the International Religious Freedom Act "for having engaged in **particularly severe violations (<https://www.state.gov/religious-freedom-designations/>)** of religious freedom" in areas of Syria under its control. According to another State Department **report (<https://www.state.gov/reports/2023-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/syria/>)**, the group now leading rebels "committed a wide range of abuses, including killings, kidnappings, physical abuse, and recruitment or use of child soldiers."

Just in the past year, courts in the United States have **convicted (<https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/russian-national-pleads-guilty-attempting-provide-material-support-foreign-terrorist>)** people of **funding (<https://www.nytimes.com/2024/02/01/nyregion/nyc-crypto-syria-terrorism.html>)** terrorism for raising funds for Hayat Tahrir al Sham. And two Al Qaeda branches, one in North Africa and another in the Sahel, already issued a **joint statement (<https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/b0002y1d>)** urging fellow jihadists to rebuild Syria as a "Sunni entity" ruled by sharia. Al Qaeda branches in **Yemen (<https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/b0002w5r>)** and **South Asia (<https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/b0002x10>)** also issued statements supporting the offensive that deposed Assad.

Meanwhile, social media is replete with images of jihadist rebels in Syria describing their victory there as a first, not last, step. In one, a group of rebels **appear (https://x.com/Levitt_Matt/status/1866287407987118258)** and proclaim: "We entered the Umayyad mosque in Damascus chanting Allah Akbar and with the help of Allah we will also enter the Al-Aqsa mosque and we will also enter the Prophet Muhammad's mosque and the Kaaba in Mecca," referring to sites in Jerusalem and Saudi Arabia.

The U.S. should be cautious about removing sanctions against the Syrian state, the Hayat Tahrir al Sham group and its leader, Abu Mohammed al-Jolani. Such softening should occur only in return for clear deliverables. However, Washington should immediately issue licenses permitting a wide range of humanitarian support to Syria. Removal from the list of known terrorist groups should be earned, not gifted, especially when dealing with a jihadist group in power.

This week, Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken **laid out (<https://www.state.gov/the-syrian-people-will-decide-the-future-of-syria/>)** what the political transition process in Syria needs to look like for the U.S. to recognize a future Syrian government: respect for the rights of minorities, facilitation of humanitarian assistance to all in need, preventing Syria from being used as a base for terrorism, preventing Syria from posing a threat to its neighbors, and ensuring that any stockpiles of chemical or biological weapons are secured and safely destroyed.

Other key U.S. interests implied but not expressly included in this statement include protecting U.S. Kurdish allies in northeast Syria and enabling them to continue maintaining detention camps holding Islamic State fighters, and ensuring that Syria truly breaks with Iran and Hezbollah so that the country will no longer serve as a land bridge to rearm Lebanese fighters. To secure these interests, it will be critical for the incoming U.S. administration to maintain its small but influential U.S. military presence in Syria, which then-President Trump twice tried to remove during his first term.

U.S. officials have reason to tread carefully. On the one hand, Hayat Tahrir al Sham has a demonstrated seven-year record of governance in the parts of Syria that have been under its control, running what it called the Syrian Salvation Government with multiple ministries to govern the territory it controlled. And while in the past the group dispatched suicide bombers in its attacks, it has not employed such tactics in recent years.

U.S. officials need to watch not only how the new ruling rebel alliance governs in the moment, but how it governs going forward. For many, Syria today has very strong echoes of Iran after the 1979 revolution. Back then, many groups of Iranians opposed to the shah—communists, secularists, Islamists—got behind Ayatollah Khomeini’s revolution. The new government in Tehran talked the talk about respecting minority rights and even included secularists in government for a time. Then the theocracy took hold and Iran became a sponsor of terrorism for decades, continuing to this day.

In the U.S., officials in both the outgoing and incoming presidential administrations should celebrate the demise of the Assad dictatorship, but America’s Syria policy going forward should be based not on trusting new Syrian officials’ words but on verifying their actions.

Matthew Levitt is the Fromer-Wexler Senior Fellow at The Washington Institute and director of its Reinhard Program on Counterterrorism and Intelligence. This article was originally published [on the Los Angeles Times website \(https://www.latimes.com/opinion/story/2024-12-13/syria-rebel-regime-american-policy\)](https://www.latimes.com/opinion/story/2024-12-13/syria-rebel-regime-american-policy). ❖

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