

# Washington Returns to Damascus with High Stakes for Syria's Transition

by [Aaron Y. Zelin \(/experts/aaron-y-zelin\)](/experts/aaron-y-zelin)

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Aaron Y. Zelin \(/experts/aaron-y-zelin\)](/experts/aaron-y-zelin)

Aaron Y. Zelin is the Gloria and Ken Levy Senior Fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy where his research focuses on Sunni Arab jihadi groups in North Africa and Syria as well as the trend of foreign fighting and online jihadism.



Brief Analysis

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## The delegation's findings on key political and security issues will have a major impact on future U.S. engagement with Syria's new leaders, including the decision on whether or not to remove sanctions.

For the first time since October 2011, when Ambassador Robert Ford was pulled from Syria amid U.S. concerns about the Assad regime's crackdown on protesters, Washington is back in Damascus—this time to engage with the new transitional government led by rebel group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS). Earlier today, U.S. officials met with HTS leader Abu Mohammed al-Jolani (aka Ahmed al-Sharaa) to uncover information on missing Americans Austin Tice, Majd Kamalmaz, and others; they were also scheduled to meet with civil society figures, activists, and representatives of various minority communities. The delegation includes Barbara Leaf, the State Department's assistant secretary for Near Eastern affairs; Roger Carstens, the special presidential envoy for hostage affairs; and Daniel Rubinstein, a long-time Arabist and retired ambassador recently recalled to duty. Their visit comes on the heels of a Pentagon announcement that the U.S. military presence in Syria has jumped from 900 to 2,000 soldiers, illustrating concerns about how the Islamic State (IS) might take advantage of the new situation.

The delegation arrives at a momentous time in Syria's transition process, which is officially scheduled to last until March 1. Local sources suggest that the second phase of the transition will begin in the coming days, during which HTS is supposed to open the process to more representatives from all of Syrian society, rather than just the HTS loyalists who have overseen the first phase. Therefore, much is at stake for the current U.S. delegation and Washington's broader efforts to redevelop a Syria policy.

## HTS Consolidating Control

In many ways, the decision to visit Damascus and engage directly with HTS puts a stamp on the transition's first

phase. The group remains a designated Foreign Terrorist Organization under U.S. law, which creates some political discomfort but does not preclude U.S. officials from working with the new caretaker government. Although Washington and its allies have placed many conditions on HTS, the transitional administration has garnered major international legitimacy over a very short period, in part through meetings with officials from Iraq, Bahrain, Oman, Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Italy, Turkey, Qatar, the UN, the European Union, Britain, France, and Germany. Notably, this engagement has occurred far more quickly and broadly than with the Taliban in Afghanistan, another designated terrorist group that gained sudden control of an entire state.

One HTS goal for phase one focused on engaging the UN, Western officials, Arab states, and Turkey to secure their initial support for a Syrian-led transition. The group has also been quick to consolidate control over state institutions and begin implementing its governance structure over much of the country. Of course, HTS still does not control several key areas:

- The northern and central parts of Aleppo and Raqqa provinces, which are held by the Turkey-backed militia umbrella group the Syrian National Army (SNA).
- The southern part of Raqqa province, the eastern part of Deir al-Zour province, and all of Hasaka province, which are held by the U.S.-backed, Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF).

Nevertheless, HTS has already placed the rest of Syria under the command of its governance apparatus, securing sufficient support from local notables and minority communities. It has also begun a large-scale fact-finding process inside former regime ministries, directorates, offices, professional syndicates, labor unions, and so forth. The stated goal of this process is to understand what should be cut, who should be fired, and what the new leadership can do to transform the former regime's corrupt system of entitlements into a more meritocratic system, similar to the Salvation Government proto-state that HTS established in Idlib province prior to Assad's fall. The group has also announced new governors for each of the provinces under its control.

## More Details Needed on Phase Two

According to HTS, preparations have now been completed for launching a comprehensive national dialogue in the coming days. The first meeting in this dialogue is supposed to include all Syrian bodies and communities, from representatives of political groups to civil society figures, academics, scientists, and independents. Rebel military factions will attend as well—a potential cause for concern given that many participants would likely prefer to include civilians only, unless the military representatives attend solely to discuss reforming the army and Defense Ministry. HTS has also indicated that the dialogue will lay the foundations for subsequent phases of the transition process and the mechanism for managing state affairs after March 1.

Like other statements the group has issued over the past few weeks, this all sounds good in principle. As usual, however, the devil will be in the details, many of which have yet to be revealed.

Indeed, phase two will test how willing HTS is to share its newly acquired power with a broader section of society. Phase one has largely been a honeymoon period—understandable considering the group's leading role in overthrowing Assad. Moreover, expecting HTS to have all the answers right away is unrealistic—even the group's leaders themselves likely did not believe they would topple the regime in ten days, forcing them to consolidate quickly. Yet the national dialogue and the discussions about phase three of the transition will compel HTS leaders to truly show their cards, giving Washington a better sense of whether they will live up to recent statements about inclusivity or apply the **[governance model \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/jihadist-governance-and-statecraft\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/jihadist-governance-and-statecraft)** they established in their Idlib proto-state, where HTS largely monopolized power through an elite, male-dominated system. Phase one has seen more of this monopolizing streak; how HTS

approaches phase two will either sow the seeds of a successful transition or spur local backlash.

## Washington's First Visit and U.S. Priorities

Given the short duration of this trip, U.S. officials can focus on narrow priorities now and work up to bigger issues later. The first priorities are clear: the delegation should get more details on the whereabouts of Americans kidnapped, tortured, and jailed by the former regime, and assess the general vibe on the ground by talking with other actors beyond HTS. Sources indicate that the former task is the special envoy's main objective for this trip.

The second priority is clarifying the future of the U.S. counterterrorism mission in Syria. This entails discussions on U.S. force protection, the campaign against IS, the fate of Syrian prisons and camps **holding thousands** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/syria-crisis-leaves-islamic-state-prisons-and-detention-camps-vulnerable>) of IS-affiliated individuals, and the role of the SDF—America's **main partner on the ground** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/supporting-sdf-post-assad-syria>) against IS, and the force that has overseen all of these detention facilities for years. Washington has already been talking with Turkey about the SNA's ongoing attacks against SDF positions and its broader intentions post-Assad; the Damascus trip could help officials better assess how HTS fits into this picture. Namely, is the group willing to take a different stand on the SDF and northeast Syria in general? And will HTS play a constructive role in the fight against IS—for instance, by talking with SDF leaders about integrating their proven counterterrorism forces into Syria's future national army?

The third priority is to clearly communicate what benchmarks Washington will look for when “grading” HTS in the coming weeks. This assessment should focus on how willing and able the group is to carry out several key tasks: maintaining law and order, governing inclusively, working with the international community to get rid of Syria's remaining chemical weapons, and preventing terrorist actors from using the country as a launchpad for attacks against U.S. partners in the region. Early **reports** (<https://x.com/BarakRavid/status/1870169158064967899>) from the meeting with Jolani suggest that he reassured the U.S. delegation on the terrorism point; in return, officials told him Washington would no longer pursue the \$10 million bounty on his head.

Meanwhile, members of Congress are increasingly discussing ways of easing various Syria sanctions related to the former regime. Yet if HTS continues to monopolize power as it did in Idlib—for example, by using a preselected list to limit who takes part in the imminent national dialogue process—U.S. legislators will likely take this as a negative sign and **keep sanctions in place** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/how-hayat-tahrir-al-sham-landed-us-terrorist-lists-and-why-it-should-stay-there-now>) for the time being. Once the delegation returns from Syria, officials will have a much better sense of how the transition will unfold and whether the process will give Washington and Damascus more opportunities to work together, perhaps with fewer sanctions complicating their engagement.

*Aaron Zelin is the Levy Senior Fellow at The Washington Institute and author of [The Age of Political Jihadism: A Study of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/age-political-jihadism-study-hayat-tahrir-al-sham) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/age-political-jihadism-study-hayat-tahrir-al-sham>).* ❖

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## RECOMMENDED

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Andrew J. Tabler

[\(/policy-analysis/syria-breakdown-episode-one-why-assad-fell\)](#)

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[The U.S. Must Not Abandon Syria](#)

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Dennis Ross

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BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Building a Post-Assad Syria: How to Ensure the Process Reflects the Will of the People](#)

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Ibrahim Al-Assil,

Farouq Habib,

Rafif Jouejati,

Mahmoud Meslat

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