

After Assad: Navigating Syria Policy (Part 2)

by [Dana Stroul \(/experts/dana-stroul\)](#)

Feb 13, 2025

Also published in Senate Foreign Relations Committee

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Dana Stroul \(/experts/dana-stroul\)](#)

Dana Stroul is Director of Research and Shelly and Michael Kassen Senior Fellow at The Washington Institute for Near East Policy.



Articles & Testimony

The Institute's director of research testified before a Senate panel on U.S. policy post-Assad, explaining how Washington has another chance for impactful bipartisan action five years after the Syria Study Group.

On February 13, two Washington Institute fellows testified before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. The following are Dana Stroul's prepared remarks; [read Michael Singh's testimony \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/after-assad-navigating-syria-policy-part-1\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/after-assad-navigating-syria-policy-part-1).

Chairman Risch, Ranking Member Shaheen, members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify on the future of U.S. policy toward Syria. Five years ago, while serving as a co-chair of the Syria Study Group, I testified before this committee on the enduring importance of Syria for U.S. national security. Today, not only do developments in Syria remain critical for protecting Americans at home, but they also present real opportunities for the Syrian people, for the Middle East, and for the United States.

In order to grasp the stakes for Middle East stability, and the safety of Americans, it is important to recall how Syria—under the rule of Bashar al-

Assad—was long a base from which terrorism and instability radiated across the region and U.S. adversaries thrived.

Under Assad's rule:

- Syria developed a covert nuclear weapons program, which was eliminated by Israel in 2007.
- Syria developed a chemical weapons program, which to date has not been entirely dismantled.
- Syria emptied its prisons of violent Sunni extremists during the second Gulf war, which began in 2003, and facilitated their movement to Iraq, leading to the establishment of al-Qaeda in Iraq and an insurgency against U.S. forces that killed and wounded thousands.
- The Assad regime used chemical weapons, torture, barrel bombs, starvation, and other brutal measures to suppress peaceful protests by Syrian citizens, sending millions of refugees fleeing for safety across the Middle East and into Europe.
- The Assad regime welcomed Russian and Iranian support, allowing both to gain access to the Mediterranean and use land routes to arm Lebanese Hezbollah and disperse increasingly sophisticated weapons across the region.
- Assad, as Iran's one strategic ally in the Middle East, allowed the use of Syrian territory by Hezbollah and various Iran-backed militia groups to attack U.S. forces and Israel.
- The drivers of conflict related to the Assad regime's brutal rule facilitated the seizure of Syrian territory by the Islamic State (IS) and al-Qaeda affiliates. For years, IS has flourished most in Assad-regime-held areas.
- Assad-regime forces produced and smuggled the narcotic Captagon across the Middle East, utilizing criminal and terrorist networks.

With Bashar al-Assad out and a new transitional government in Damascus, the United States has an opportunity to work with its allies and partners to shape outcomes in Syria that promote regional security and protect American interests, specifically with respect to counterterrorism and counter-Iran objectives. U.S. engagement toward the new Syrian leadership is fraught: its leaders grew out of al-Qaeda and many are designated as terrorists, while others espouse extremist views. But events on the ground and international engagement with the new leadership in Syria are outpacing U.S. policy. America must urgently update its approach to post-Assad Syria, and test the new Syrian leadership to determine the opportunities and risks associated with engagement. The United States retains significant levers of influence: military pressure against IS through its continued presence in northeast Syria; the U.S.-led sanctions architecture, the unlocking of which could facilitate meaningful economic recovery and reconstruction; U.S. diplomatic leadership and its unmatched ability to convene like-minded partners; and U.S. foreign and technical assistance.

A U.S. policy review must address the following issues:

- **Engagement.** What actions and commitments does Washington seek from Damascus's new leaders in order to acknowledge the new government as the internationally recognized representative of Syria?
- **Sanctions.** What actions and commitments are required in order to begin the process of providing expanded sanctions relief and lifting state-level sanctions on Syria?
- **U.S. military presence.** What are the necessary conditions in order for the U.S. military to transfer its counterterrorism mission in northeast Syria without risking the reemergence of IS?

Engagement

The self-appointed transitional president of Syria, Ahmed al-Sharaa, also known by his nom de guerre—Muhammad al-Jolani—is moving quickly to signal his commitment to governing in an inclusive manner, disarming and integrating all armed groups, stabilizing Syria's economy, and reintegrating Syria into the international community. Sharaa emphasizes his commitment to not imposing strict Islamic law on Syria's religiously and ethnically diverse society, and to preventing both terrorist activity at home and Syria serving as a base for terrorist operations abroad. The challenge for the United States is determining if his nascent government is appropriately separated from its al-Qaeda/IS roots and both willing and able to counter terrorism, resist malign Iranian influence, and govern Syria in a manner that does not lead to further cycles of violence.

While the United States has not yet determined if the new Damascus leaders' early moves meet benchmarks for support, an emerging coalition of U.S. allies and partners across the Middle East, Europe, and Turkey is moving quickly to engage him. These governments, however, are not coordinating messaging or expectations with each other or with America; the risk is that Damascus hears mixed messages and does not feel compelled to commit to any program of action that can prevent future instability and violence. It is noteworthy that while the United States has engaged Sharaa only at the assistant secretary level in December 2024, the Qatari emir recently visited him in Damascus, and Sharaa's first trip abroad was to meet with the crown prince of Saudi Arabia followed by the president of Turkey. Sharaa now has invitations to Paris and Berlin, and may attend the Egypt-hosted emergency summit on the Palestinians in late February.

The United States should engage the new government in Damascus at the political level, and set out a series of benchmarks to assess whether Sharaa and his government are willing and able to govern Syria in a manner that does not further destabilize Syria or the region, or threaten American interests. Benchmarks include:

- Holding the government accountable for its own transition timeline of three to five years, including the national dialogue and drafting of a new

constitution.

- Taking appropriate counterterrorism actions against IS/al-Qaeda/affiliates and Iran-associated non-state groups. (Here, the new government's actions to counter Hezbollah-associated networks' operations on the Lebanon-Syria border are an encouraging early indicator.)
- Consolidating security control over formerly regime-held areas of Syria and demobilizing armed groups.
- Working to limit acts of retributive violence outside the rule of law, and enable transitional justice and accountability for all Syrians who suffered under the Assad regime.
- Ensuring equitable representation at the national and local levels in Syria's governance, and fair distribution of resources.
- Upholding commitments that ensure the security of U.S. allies, including recommitment to the 1974 disengagement agreement with Israel.

Sanctions

Before Assad's ouster, U.S.-led sanctions only permitted humanitarian aid delivery to regime-held areas, otherwise blocking all economic engagement or reconstruction. In early January of this year, the United States issued General License 24 for a six-month period to allow certain transactions with the Syrian government and personal remittances through the Syrian Central Bank. It also provided a waiver to the Foreign Assistance Act in order for America's partners to provide aid to Syria without the risk of violating U.S. sanctions. But the U.S. designation of Syria as a state sponsor of terrorism, and other state-level sanctions like the Congressional Caesar sanctions, will reduce appetites for the kind of economic engagement necessary to effect real change in Syria. The United States should urgently initiate a thorough and deliberative process regarding the state-level terrorism designations on Syria and sanctions tied to the behavior of the Assad regime.

In the short term, the United States can do more to ease Syria's economic recovery by getting out of the way: partners in Europe and the Middle East can fill in gaps and provide assistance even if America will not, as long as they are assured of not violating U.S. sanctions. UN technical experts, as well as international financial institutions, can also play a role in stabilizing Syria's economy and setting it on a path to recovery. This will require targeted sanctions relief and waivers, and a clearly communicated strategy. A process should be initiated soon to expand the waivers granted in General License 24.

In the medium-to-long term, more expansive sanctions relief should be tied to the performance of the new government and its commitment to following through on its promising reform and stabilization agenda.

U.S. Military Presence

About two thousand U.S. military personnel remain in northeast Syria under the aegis of the "Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS." These forces are sustaining pressure on the group through unilateral and partnered military strikes, and supporting the Kurdish-majority Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), who maintain custody of nearly nine thousand IS detainees and forty thousand IS-affiliated families in displaced persons camps. The U.S. partnership with the SDF is the main irritant with NATO ally Turkey, which considers the SDF part of the Turkey-based Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK)—an entity designated as a terrorist group by the United States, Turkey, and others. Ankara in turn opposes SDF ambitions to establish a semiautonomous region within Syria, on Turkey's border. The Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (SNA) is currently engaged in a military offensive against the SDF in northeast Syria.

The new leadership in Damascus has stated its commitment to preventing Syria from being exploited for transnational terrorism, a willingness to take over security at the IS detention facilities and displaced persons camps, and an openness to absorbing the SDF into the new national Syrian security forces. But this is a significant undertaking that will require training, equipment, intelligence support, and time. In the near term, there is no viable, combat-credible alternative to the United States and the SDF to take over the defeat-IS mission. Therefore, the U.S. should urgently initiate a political and military dialogue with key stakeholders on the timeline and conditions under which it could transfer the military mission, and underscore its commitment to maintaining U.S. forces in Syria for the short-to-medium term lest all the battlefield gains against IS be squandered.

- With the SDF, the United States needs to back its local partner while facilitating dialogue with the new government in Damascus. The SDF leadership has already acknowledged its commitment to a future within a unified Syria; the U.S. should support the SDF's leaders in seeking reasonable assurances to integrate into the new Syrian national forces and secure commitments for Syrian Kurdish representation in the central government along with a local-level role. The SDF should immediately take steps to separate its forces from non-Syrian fighters like those from the PKK.
- With the Damascus government, the United States is already testing its commitment to countering terrorism by providing operational intelligence against IS threats. If the new government demonstrates the will and capability for targeting IS and al-Qaeda threats within Syria, the United States should begin a multiyear process to transfer the on-the-ground mission and determine how it can still support counterterrorism activities without such a presence. This supporting role could include intelligence sharing, training, and the provision of limited kinds of equipment.
- With Turkey, the United States should initiate a political and military dialogue that takes stock of the Islamic State's ability to reconstitute in Syria, and formulates the conditions and timeline under which America could safely redeploy out of Syria. As part of this dialogue, the U.S. should seek commitments from Turkey to stop targeting the SDF and direct the SNA to cease attacking the SDF and terrorizing communities in the northeast: these actions are threatening hard-fought gains against IS.

- With Damascus and with Ankara, the U.S. must have credible assurances that IS detainees, as well as families in displaced persons camps, will be treated securely and humanely in accordance with international humanitarian law and the law of armed conflict. The U.S. should also reenergize efforts to repatriate Iraqi and third-country nationals from these facilities so that the population is more manageable.

U.S. Foreign Assistance Freeze

Though the Trump administration announced exemptions to the assistance freeze for lifesaving humanitarian aid, the impact of this policy is harming U.S. interests in Syria and further destabilizing a fragile situation. Consider that before Assad's ouster 16.7 million Syrians required humanitarian assistance, the highest level inside the country since the civil war started in 2011. Before the freeze, the United States was the largest bilateral donor for Syria's humanitarian needs, providing \$1.2 billion in 2024 and more than \$18 billion since 2011.

Non-humanitarian U.S. aid goes to Syrian civil society groups like the White Helmets, whose members conduct search-and-rescue missions and clear unexploded ordnance. At displaced persons camps in northeast Syria, American assistance supports water and sanitation services, and administrative management and security. The United States provides stabilization funds, separate from humanitarian aid, to communities liberated from IS in northeast Syria. This kind of support is critical to mitigate conditions that make communities vulnerable to violent extremist propaganda and actions. Another area of U.S. support currently frozen is funding for documentation of war crimes and crimes against humanity. For years, the United States has provided funding and training to preserve evidence of the Assad regime's crimes, which sent an important signal to Syrians suffering from regime brutality.

This committee can encourage the State Department to prioritize Syria in the ninety-day review of all U.S. programs, and quickly make determinations as to which programs make America stronger, safer, and more prosperous based on the criteria articulated by Secretary of State Rubio. Put simply, cutting off programs that help communities recover after surviving the brutalities of either Assad's rule or the Islamic State—without plans to transition funding or continuity in services to non-U.S. actors—risks exacerbating drivers of conflict that could undermine stability in Syria and in the Middle East. The United States is safer if Syria is stable and can address threats rising from within its territory; a more resilient Syria promotes greater security across the Middle East, leading to more stable countries and prospects for widened economic and security cooperation with the United States. A Syria that is not destabilizing, attacking, or antagonizing its neighbors—Israel, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, and Turkey—is also in the U.S. national security interest.

Beyond funding, the U.S. government possesses deep technical expertise and knowledge in post-conflict stabilization and reconstruction. The first Trump administration produced a Stabilization Assistance Review (SAR) in 2018 calling for the selective use of taxpayer dollars and the expectation of burden sharing by partners. It also correctly identified stabilization as an inherently political endeavor, the goal of which is to “create conditions where legitimate authorities and systems can manage conflict and prevent violence.” The SAR identified the State Department as the lead agency for stabilization efforts—it has an entire bureau focused on conflict and stabilization policy—and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) as the lead implementing agency. With the dismantling of USAID and the removal of most of its civil servants, the U.S. government risks losing critical technical expertise in implementing U.S. programs and overseeing the distribution of U.S. funds to local groups.

Blocking Adversaries/Working with Partners

From 2015 until recently, a widely held assumption was that Russian and Iranian backing for the Assad regime was more decisive than any support offered to the opposition by the United States, Europe, or Arab governments. The U.S. has an opportunity to further undermine Russian and Iranian positions in the Middle East, building upon their failure to back Assad, which dealt a strategic blow, and the widespread resentment across Syria of their support for his brutal campaign against his own people.

While the assumption of an unbreakable Damascus-Tehran-Moscow axis has been disproven, the networks that sustained this alliance remain intact, from commercial relationships, smuggling routes, and agricultural ties to remaining Soviet influence in Syria's armed forces and Iran's work to project soft power influence. Tehran and Moscow will look to these networks of influence as they seek to protect their own interests in post-Assad Syria, from retaining Russia's naval base on the Mediterranean to securing commercial contracts to Iran's land route for rearming Hezbollah. Russia and Iran are well positioned to play spoiler to Syria's recovery and reintegration into the international fold. Therefore, it will be critical for the United States to coordinate an approach to post-Assad Syria that can keep Europe, Arab governments, and Turkey aligned sufficiently to deny adversaries opportunities to play this spoiler role.

Aligning with like-minded partners on Syria is imperative. Turkey, a NATO ally, maintains the closest ties to the new Damascus leadership and is positioned to shape the policies of Syria's leaders, but Washington should seek clarification from Ankara on its objectives in Syria considering its well-known support for Islamist and Muslim Brotherhood groups and movements across the Middle East. Even as Turkey maintains significant influence, it lacks the resources given its own fragile economy to fund Syria's recovery. Here, U.S. strategic partners in the Gulf are critical because of their strong economies and assistance pledges. Gulf leaders are already engaging the Sharaa government though without agreement on or articulation of a strategy or vision for Syria and its future role in the Middle East. The United States should be working to convene, organize, and align its partners in the region and outside—particularly in Europe—on metrics and indicators that Syria's post-Assad recovery is on a stable path, while also consistently raising problematic actions that can undermine progress.

Conclusion

Five years ago, members of the bipartisan Syria Study Group argued that the threats posed by the conflict in Syria were sufficiently serious to merit a determined response from the United States. The report presciently argued that the Assad regime had not won the war, and the drivers of conflict in Syria remained. The final report argued that American engagement in Syria can lead to better outcomes for America, for Syria, for the Middle East, and for like-minded allies and partners. The challenge then remains relevant and urgent today: development of a realistic strategy and application of an appropriate mix of U.S. tools, along with prioritization of Syria by high-level U.S. officials with their counterparts. Today's hearing is a critical step toward addressing these urgent goals. ❖

RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Next Steps in Lebanon: From Ceasefire Extensions to Government Formation](#)

Feb 14, 2025

◆
Fadi Daoud,
Makram Rabah,
Efraim Defrin,
Assaf Orion

(/policy-analysis/next-steps-lebanon-ceasefire-extensions-government-formation)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Year Four in Ukraine: NATO Views and Middle East Impact](#)

February 18, 2025, starting at 10:00 a.m. EST (1500 GMT)

◆
Javier Colomina,
Yevgeniya Gaber,
Riad Kahwaji,
Anna Borschchevskaia

(/policy-analysis/year-four-ukraine-nato-views-and-middle-east-impact)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[After Assad: Navigating Syria Policy \(Part 1\)](#)

Feb 13, 2025

◆
Michael Singh

(/policy-analysis/after-assad-navigating-syria-policy-part-1)

TOPICS

[Military & Security \(/policy-analysis/military-security\)](/policy-analysis/military-security)

[U.S. Policy \(/policy-analysis/us-policy\)](/policy-analysis/us-policy)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

[Syria \(/policy-analysis/syria\)](/policy-analysis/syria)