

Post-Paris Steps in Syria Could Be Decisive

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Brief Analysis

With the clock ticking on the post-Assad honeymoon period, Washington still has time to acknowledge the realities on the ground by providing crucial U.S. know-how and strategic support to the international aid, recovery, and counterterrorism missions.

On February 13, representatives from the transitional Syrian government, nineteen [Global Coalition \(https://theglobalcoalition.org/en/partners/\)](https://theglobalcoalition.org/en/partners/) states, and four multinational organizations met in Paris and signed a joint statement on the country's future. In the spirit of UN Security Council Resolution 2254, the [Paris statement \(https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/country-files/syria/news/2024/article/paris-conference-on-syria-joint-statement-13-feb-2025\)](https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/country-files/syria/news/2024/article/paris-conference-on-syria-joint-statement-13-feb-2025) called for an inclusive, unified Syria and a national dialogue conference that leads to constitutional reform and elections. It also called on Syrian authorities to uphold human rights, implement transitional justice, end the production and trafficking of Captagon, curtail organized crime, destroy chemical weapons, and ensure that terrorist groups cannot resurge from Syrian soil. For their part, the signatories pledged to increase the volume and pace of humanitarian and recovery efforts and pursue the creation of a long-term "Syrian Transition Support" group to coordinate international engagement.

Perhaps the main benefit of this "big tent" conference was to close many of the wide gaps between coalition allies in Syria, bringing key player Turkey into the conversation without allowing it to [advance \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/new-age-turkish-relations-syria\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/new-age-turkish-relations-syria) its own agenda unilaterally. Yet the United States participated only as an observer and did not sign the joint statement, thereby

missing a **great opportunity** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/paris-conference-syria-coordination-and-roadmap-are-needed>) to shape the conversation. Even so, the conference signaled that the international community is committed to coordinating and prioritizing the stabilization of Syria. Future conferences must address the remaining gaps between allies and lay out the path forward in more specific terms—crucially, with greater U.S. participation.

Also significant was the absence of Russia and Iran, who have long meddled in Syria's politics, as well as China, which could have hegemonic economic interests there post-Assad. The exclusion of these potential spoilers signaled that anti-Western states will not be given the opportunity to fill the vacuum as the new Syria emerges.

Meanwhile, Damascus held its national dialogue on February 24-25. The process was rushed, however—the seven-person preparatory committee organized the dialogue in just a week, the subsequent talks were held with only two days' notice, and the whole process took place just before the start of Ramadan, when much of the government's work will grind to a halt for a month. Such conditions could create longer-term grievances that upset future stability.

A Better U.S. “Exit Ramp”?

The United States has played an active role in leading the Global Coalition to Defeat the Islamic State since its creation in 2014, and the Trump administration has stated that the fight against IS will continue. Yet the president also made clear that U.S. forces will be withdrawn from Syria, though the timeline for this departure remains vague.

Regarding sanctions, the Treasury Department issued General License 24 in early January to allow certain transactions with Syria's transitional government and personal remittances through the country's Central Bank for six months. Since that move, however, the administration has not taken any concrete steps to ease other sanctions. The decision to freeze the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and other State Department programs has led to further uncertainty about the future of American funding and investment in Syria, though many anti-IS projects in the northeast have received temporary waivers to continue their work.

Many allies view this U.S. posture as a barricade to a successful Syrian roadmap, impeding joint efforts to set clear benchmarks that the transitional government can accomplish within a feasible timeline. Washington's approach has also raised doubts among those hoping for U.S. support on preventing the spread of IS in Syria and engaging directly with the country's new leaders.

With the end of the post-Assad honeymoon period looming and Washington keeping mum for the most part, U.S. allies are offering proposals of their own. For instance, Ankara has proposed a regional counter-IS outfit that would pair Turkish forces with contingents from Iraq, Jordan, and Syria. In reality, however, there is little appetite for this mission in Amman and Baghdad, and Ankara does not have the capability or coordination to carry it out alone, despite how tempting the idea may sound to Washington.

European allies have suggested a more feasible alternative: that transitional president Ahmed al-Sharaa ask Operation Inherent Resolve (the military arm of the Global Coalition) to remain in Syria. Baghdad made this request for Iraq in the past; if Sharaa does the same, it would alleviate some of the fears about his faction's former associations with IS and al-Qaeda.

In this scenario, France, Germany, the United Kingdom, and other countries would take over the bulk of the OIR mission from Washington, setting up a joint operations room in Deir al-Zour between Damascus and the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), Washington's main local partner in the years-long battle against IS. They would then pursue a phased approach to internal military rapprochement in the hope of building trust and camaraderie over time. The UK and France **have already operated** (<https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/07/09/britain-france-agree-to-send-additional-troops-increase-syria-us-withdrawal-uk/>) against IS in northeast Syria, and the French

have more resources now that they are no longer active in the Sahel

(<https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/ivory-coast-takes-control-remaining-french-base-french-119002079>). Re-upping OIR could also help Ankara save face by legitimizing Turkish bases inside Syria as part of the coalition effort. In light of these benefits, Washington should consider drawing up transition plans to pass the OIR leadership baton to Paris, with the United States remaining a key partner but no longer leading the mission.

The EU is also pushing ahead on wider sanctions relief without U.S. support, suspending (<https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/eu-suspends-sanctions-against-syria-including-those-energy-banking-2025-02-24/>) restrictions related to energy, transportation, and reconstruction at a February 24 meeting in Brussels. That meeting also produced indefinite waivers on humanitarian aid, lifted asset freezes on five banks, and eased restrictions on Syria's Central Bank, furthering Europe's other efforts to fill the gaps left by U.S. policy. For example, Washington previously granted waivers (<https://www.nytimes.com/2025/02/06/world/europe/trump-usaid-funding-syria-isis.html>) to the NGOs that operate inside al-Hol detention camp, which holds thousands of IS family members in northeast Syria. Yet U.S. officials have not clarified who will pick up the tab in the future, spurring France and other countries to prepare alternative options—from assuming the NGO costs themselves to promoting Syrian reunification efforts in the hope of decreasing the camp's population. In the end, European partners will likely have to face reality and repatriate the rest of their detained nationals (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/syria-crisis-leaves-islamic-state-prisons-and-detention-camps-vulnerable>) after years of delay.

The Next Few Months Are the Most Important

In the immediate wake of the Paris conference, the United States and its allies need to pay particular attention to three issues that could quickly destabilize the situation:

- **The SDF.** Yesterday, Abdullah Ocalan released a landmark statement (<https://www.nytimes.com/2025/02/27/world/middleeast/turkey-pkk-abdullah-ocalan.html?smid=nytcore-ios-share&referringSource=articleShare&sgrp=c&pvid=2B0DC206-06ED-443F-B795-DFD9E946001>) asking the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) to lay down their arms and end the decades-long fight (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/inside-latest-pkk-talks-part-1-kurdish-actors-and-interests>) against the Turkish government. Even before that declaration, Mazloum Abdi—commander of the SDF, which Turkey considers an affiliate of the PKK—appeared ready to integrate his forces into the new Syrian military. Yet the details of this proposal remain unclear, so negotiators will need to press for answers on several key questions: How exactly will the SDF and the new army integrate? How will they handle security for oil and gas facilities in the northeast? Who will control Syria's borders? And how will the new arrangements ensure Kurdish protection from Turkish aggression? Washington and its allies should encourage further conversations on these matters, emphasizing the need to balance Kurdish rights with Syrian unification.
- **Civil society.** The transitional government needs to engage more deeply with civil society inside and outside Syria. Much of its engagement so far has been with local notables, businessmen, religious leaders, and tribal figures, largely excluding the well-organized civil society actors who have an important role to play in the country's transition and reconstruction. The diaspora can assist with this role as well. Such efforts will take time, and transitional justice will be an important part of the process. Through it all, Washington and its allies should ensure that future steps translate into a truly inclusive government.
- **The global jihadist threat.** Damascus must make a concrete effort to join—and, in time, take over—the fight against IS in Syria. Accepting Europe's OIR proposal would be a step in the right direction, as would providing continued intelligence to facilitate U.S. drone strikes against al-Qaeda remnants. Both moves would also assuage those who remain fearful of the government's past jihadist associations (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy->

[analysis/syria-breakdown-episode-four-revolutionary-rebuilding-and-hayat-tahrir-al-sham-hts](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/syria-breakdown-episode-four-revolutionary-rebuilding-and-hayat-tahrir-al-sham-hts)).

The coming months will also require concerted efforts to block potential spoilers in Syria:

- **Russia.** Despite the complications and diplomatic turmoil currently surrounding U.S. policy toward Ukraine and Russia, Washington and its allies must push Damascus to limit Moscow’s influence over Syria’s transition. This might take time and care since Damascus will simultaneously be asking Moscow for help with several key transition tasks, such as servicing the army’s Soviet-era weapons, getting off the UN terrorism list, returning Bashar al-Assad (and the funds he stole) to Syria to face justice, and rebuilding a country that Russian bombardment helped destroy. To address the first need, Washington should urge Ukraine to quickly fill the gap on servicing Syria’s weapons. Kyiv has already been filling similar gaps in the wheat sector after Russia withdrew from most of Syria upon Assad’s fall.
- **Iran, Hezbollah, and Captagon networks.** Damascus has already taken the welcome step of continuing the fight against smuggling networks run by Assad regime remnants, Lebanese Hezbollah, and Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), including Captagon warehouses and weapons caches. Washington should highlight these efforts to the Israeli government, showing that the two neighbors share common adversaries and that the new Syrian government is more of an opportunity than a threat when it comes to countering Tehran’s “axis of resistance.” In addition, Iran could back potential PKK remnants who reject Ocalan’s call and seek to hinder the dialogue between Damascus and the SDF. Washington must coordinate with its partners in the SDF, Turkey, and Iraq to block any such attempts.

Much is at stake, but if Damascus and the international community play their cards right, the post-Paris momentum could lead to a stable future for Syria—one that not only provides for the country’s beleaguered population, but also brings peace to an area that has been at war for too long.

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[Rebuilding Syria May Require Federalism](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/rebuilding-syria-may-require-federalism)

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